

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War*

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

*Mr. Evan Aron Roberts, Marine
Served: Okinawa and Iwo Jima 1953*

**Interview with
Evan Aron Roberts
February 18, 2005**

Mr. Rabalais: My name is Larry Rabalais. Today is February 18th, 2005. I'm interviewing Mr. Evan Roberts. The interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, in support for the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Park and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site. And the way we will operate this is to have you go back in time basically, and start at the beginning and give us your name, date of birth and what brought you to enlist in the Marine Corps. And I'll let you take it from there.

Mr. Roberts: Certainly. Thank you. My name is Evan Roberts, born 25 November, 1933, Coryell County, Texas. Enlisted in the Marine Corps at 19 years old after I graduated from Gatesville High School, at the Marine Corps Reserve, Naval Air Station, Dallas, Texas. I chose to go active in 1952.

Mr. Rabalais: This was during the Korean War then?

Mr. Roberts: The Korean War was essentially over. For all practical purposes at that time the Korean War was actually just a military holding area along what we now call the DMZ. Which is not the 38th parallel but it approximates the 38th parallel. A lot of people think it was struck across the 38th parallel, that's not true. It was near the 38th parallel. In any event, after Marine Corps basics in San Diego, and Camp Pendleton for advance infantry training, Pickle Meadows for cold weather training, I was shipped with a replacement group to go either Japan or Korea. My particular group went to Japan. We were never deployed to Korea. We were stationed at South Camp Fuji, near Gotemba, Japan, on the southerly slopes of Mt. Fujiama. In 1953, early 1953, we were deployed to Iwo Jima for the purposes of clean up on the island, as well as training in maneuvers. At that time there was an air force

detachment on Iwo Jima that was within a fenced area and were not allowed on the island because of the amount of unexploded ordinance and other hazards on the island. The marines, my detachment of Marines, were assigned to clean up the island as well as to learn what we could from the remaining artifacts that were there.

Mr. Rabalais: Did y'all detonate the ordinance, or was it stockpiled?

Mr. Roberts: We detonated very little ordinance. There was some of it detonated, but most of it was buried. My particular job was to go into the Japanese fortifications, many of them were caves, determine what the content of the cave was, not a rigorous determination, but an over all determination. In other words mainly food stuffs, mainly ammunition, mainly medical supplies. Whatever...document what ever was in that particular hole.

Mr. Rabalais: Some of that stuff was still in there?

Mr. Roberts: Oh almost all of it. Virtually none had been removed. In fact, as a matter of interest I brought out cases of chocolate, and gave them to the troops. There were cases and cases of rifles.

Mr. Rabalais: Japanese?

Mr. Roberts: Oh yeah they were Japanese. It was good stuff, cases of rifles, pistols, Nambu pistols, Ariska rifles, many, many things. And we then would then just simply place a charge and detonate the hole or close up the hole. So the materials in the Japanese emplacements are still there today. As far as I know it has never been removed.

Mr. Rabalais: You probably obviously ran across some bodies. Or had all the bodies deteriorated or been removed?

Mr. Roberts: As far as I could tell, all the American bodies had been removed and properly taken care of.

Mr. Rabalais: I mean the Japanese.

Mr. Roberts: Japanese bodies, yes we found a number of Japanese bodies. I personally found two Japanese bodies. One was partially buried, maybe six inches deep. I inadvertently dug up the body one morning. The other one was on the surface. Of course, he had been dead eight years. There was nothing but bones, but he was yet within his uniform with his web gear and canteen and his rifle and so forth. And he was down beside a tank trap, up toward the northerly end of the island. And our group did not handle the bodies in any way whatsoever. We simply marked the location and advised others. Other people took care of the bodies and I'm not aware of what treatment was given the bodies. That was not part of what I did.

The majority of my work was around Mount Suribachi, and around the area (*pointing at the map*) of the southeastern beach area. I was all over the island but this was where I worked particularly.

Mr. Rabalais: Was the sand a coarse granular black volcanic sand?

Mr. Roberts: That's correct. It was a coarse, black volcanic sand, very loose, had extremely poor engineering qualities. It was not compactable. I can understand why the invading force had such a problem because it was impossible to dig a hole that would ... the angle of repose was very poor.

Mr. Rabalais: And the footing on that was pretty bad in the beach area.

Mr. Roberts: That's correct. In the landing beach area, which is this area right along here, there were numerous gun emplacements that were still there when I was there in 1953. There were crashed air craft, and I saw one Japanese aircraft that was in pretty good condition still lying on the beach there. And there were numerous pieces of landing craft and so forth. There was also a ship beached in this area over here.

Mr. Rabalais: That's on the west side.

Mr. Roberts: Yes, that's on the west side. There may have been others, but I only saw one. It was a large ship but apparently a supply vessel of some sort.

Mr. Rabalais: Well, Iwo is referred to as a sulphur island as a sub name, and that's obviously was volcanic activity and sulphurous. At one time I guess it was active.

Mr. Roberts: It was still active at the time I was there. I did climb the volcano all the way to this area right in here, where I could look into the crater. It was still spewing sulphur. As far as molten material in the crater, I didn't see it.

Mr. Rabalais: But it did have the smell of sulphur?

Mr. Roberts: It did. Sulphur fumes were very strong in the crater.

Mr. Rabalais: You referenced a crater. Was there a peak on the island in referencing the flag raising which everybody is familiar with in the United States. The flag raising, was that on the edge of the crater probably?

Mr. Roberts: The flag raising was right here.

Mr. Rabalais: Oh really? That close to the.... That's why the guys on the beach could see it.

Mr. Roberts: That's correct. It was at the top of the volcanic structure near the east, northeasterly rim, right in this area here. It was easily visible. At the time I was there in 1953 there was a small monument at the location of the flag raising.

Mr. Rabalais: But not a flag pole and flag?

Mr. Roberts: No, just a small monument, no more than a meter tall.

Mr. Rabalais: At that time, was that still considered Japanese possession? I'm not sure of the status of it at that time.

Mr. Roberts: The island was a Japanese island, no two ways about that. And it still remains one today.

Mr. Rabalais: It is today?

Mr. Roberts: Yes it is. It was then and it is today. However, it was totally controlled by the US military. Shortly after we cleaned up the island, the island did revert to the Japanese control and they started a salvage operation. And I understand they were to go in with the salvage crews and cut up the beached ships and salvage the materials that were there.

Mr. Rabalais: Some gun emplacements maybe?

Mr. Roberts: There was one particularly large gun emplacement that could cover the entire island. It was about a 5" gun I think, somewhere between 3 and 5 inches. It had been spiked and the breach had been destroyed with probably a grenade of some sort. But I've been in that emplacement.

Mr. Rabalais: The rock texture of Surabachi itself, is volcanic rock. Was it relatively soft material?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, relatively.

Mr. Rabalais: So they could dig cave there pretty readily, and I'm sure they did.

Mr. Roberts: It was relatively soft. Virtually all the caves were interesting. The entrance to the cave went in about one and a half to two meters, turned to the left or the right anywhere from one to three meters and then would go on back. So they all had a break in the entry area so that it could not be shot into. There was one cave, one of the early caves I went into, when I entered the cave, I encountered something very,

very hard that hit my chest. I got the flashlight where I could see, and it was the nose of a 12” shell that was sticking out into the entry. It had come into the side and had penetrated into the entry way. The fuse block of the 12” shell, the fused area of the 12” shell was sticking out into the entry. And it had not exploded.

Mr. Rabalais: It was probably from one of our battleships.

Mr. Roberts: Apparently. At any rate, that one we did explode because of the danger of an unexploded shell. It was live ammunition. And all we did on that was just to put some plastic explosive on the fuse area.

Mr. Rabalais: In place or did y’all dig it out.

Mr. Roberts: We blew it in place. It was just too dangerous to take it out. We blew it in place. Whenever we came across that sort of situation where it could not safely be removed, it was detonated in place. We didn’t blow up things just irresponsibly. It was all with consideration as to what else would happen.

Mr. Rabalais: Was the airfield still in evidence? I assume it was reconstituted to be in use at the time that you were there?

Mr. Roberts: Only one airfield was in use. That was this airfield here, these two airfields were both there and I’ve seen all three of them. But this airfield was held in use.

Mr. Rabalais: Was that where the Air Force was based in this area?

Mr. Roberts: That’s correct. When we landed on the island, we landed by amphibious equipment on the west side opposite from where the original Marine Corps landed had taken place.

Mr. Rabalais: This map shows an east boat basin on the east side opposite the air port, and that was what the Japanese were using as boat basin primarily?

Mr. Roberts: To the best of my knowledge, that's correct. There was no harbor facility to speak of on the island.

Mr. Rabalais: There was a sandy shelf, but only in some areas and the rest of it went precipitously down into the water.

Mr. Roberts: That's correct. The water was very, very deep right off shore. The beach was very tough for us when we came in on the LCVPs, it was very tough to come up this ridge. It was relatively low angle, gradual slope.

Mr. Rabalais: So I suppose that is why it was selected for a landing beach?

Mr. Roberts: I would think so.

Mr. Rabalais: And the Japanese realized that too.

Mr. Roberts: I would think so. Certainly I don't know, but that would be my best guess.

Mr. Rabalais: I'm not too familiar with the approach, and you might be a little bit more than I do. When they landed, did they push the Japanese off to one end of the island working backwards toward Surabachi? I guess they split the island up is what they ended up doing.

Mr. Roberts: I can't speak with any authority on that. I believe what really happened though is the landing took place and they cut the island in that general area. They cut it in two. There are a lot of very large gun emplacements that did cover the island and the approaches. (*Pointing to Surabachi*) This is the beach over here and this is the way the LCVPs formed up. For instance you have wave one, wave two, wave three, wave four, wave five.

Mr. Rabalais: More orderly than I had anticipated.

Mr. Roberts: They were very orderly even during our other exercise work, not combat work. But it was just as orderly. It's impossible to tell whether it was one wave has already landed or not but certainly these would be waves. And as a matter of interest, the waves would hold. Here's a destroyer, there's a DE, a destroyer escort right there. That's a DE, this is probably a DD. And they were broadside to the beach because their guns fired broadside.

Mr. Rabalais: I'm noticing now why they would have this end of the island where the flag raising was because there appears to be a higher point right in here that may be where the flag raising occurred in this area. We are looking at a photograph of the landing that day including an image of Surabachi. It is literally at the tip of the island.

Mr. Roberts: The flag raising, if my memory serves me, the flag raising did occur on the highest point there on the north easterly rim of Surabachi.

Mr. Rabalais: How long were you there on the island?

Mr. Roberts: We were there about two weeks.

Mr. Rabalais: Oh is that all. Just two weeks?

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Mr. Rabalais: And was any accidental kill or injury from unexploded ammunition or anything?

Mr. Roberts: No. We were pretty careful. Not to the best of my knowledge. I don't think we had anyone injured. I know no one in my outfit was injured. And other NCOs may have had some minor injuries. The only problem we had was some of the green troops is they found out that the Japanese, I think it was probably a seven millimeter round would fire in the M1 if they loaded them one round at a time. And we had a lot of guys run Japanese ammunition through their M1s. Sometimes they had to pick the brass out with a pocket knife.

Mr. Rabalais: I think their Ariska rifle was a 6.5. The machine gun was a 7 something. That's probably what they were trying to fire in the M1s. It's close but not quite.

Mr. Roberts: It would fire.

Mr. Rabalais: It would fire but probably the casing would swell.

Mr. Roberts: And I think they probably had to pick a lot of them out.

Mr. Rabalais: That's not uncommon.

Mr. Roberts: We issued orders that no one was to try, attempt, or load, or even handle the Japanese ammunition. It was all to be destroyed on the spot, buried or dumped into the sea. And dumping into the sea is where all of the small arms went by the way. No war souvenirs what so ever were brought off the island. I personally had a brand new Nambu pistol, I had brought a case out of a hole and had given them away to the guys. And they took it away from me and threw it over the side. We brought, to the best of my knowledge, nothing off the island.

Mr. Rabalais: I know right after the war guys did attempt to and did bring back quite a bit of material like that, before they began to clamp down.

Interestingly, the Nambu pistol is not a common item. The Ariska rifle is. I understand our museum has sufficient rifles to equip a full company of Japanese if they wanted to. And I'm sure they will be using some of these in a simulation this weekend. But we have had so many of those, apparently many, many were brought home by the servicemen.

And you were in until...when did you exit the Marine Corps.

Mr. Roberts: 1955.

Mr. Rabalais: So you were in for three years.

Mr. Roberts: Approximately three years.

Mr. Rabalais: Were you stationed anywhere else other than Japan?

Mr. Roberts: Well, training of course in the US. And I also did a maneuvers in Okinawa as well as Iwo Jima. I served with Task Force 77 off the coast of China during the Quemoy - Matsu problems. It was a very volatile time. When I came back to the United States I was assigned to the Marine Corps Depot in Barstow, California. And as a matter of interest, my MOS was high speed radio telegraph operator. So I served on shipboard as a high speed radio telegraph operator as well as in the Marine Corps MARS system, and was licensed for the Marine Corps MARS, Military Amateur Radio Service.

Mr. Rabalais: What unit was that in the Marines?

Mr. Roberts: 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, 3rd Marine Division. If you need more than that, it was H&S Company.

Mr. Rabalais: I'm filling out an interview data sheet that we use for categorizing. When academicians come in to do research they will say I want to know everything I can about Leyte, and so we focus on that. Or I want to know about the Marines only, and so forth. So we categorize it to narrow it down.

Mr. Roberts: My rank at the time I was discharged was Corporal, which is an NCO rank in the Marine Corps.

Mr. Rabalais: Okay. Experiences included, wounded, others....I'll put down other. Well, I think that just about covers it. Even I really appreciate your insight on this. This is a facet of the after battle action, I guess you might call it, that people don't necessarily think too much about. What happens after the Marines leave a battle scenario. What happens to all of the ammo, the equipment, to the bodies, so forth. And this is another phase we cover in trying to be thorough about our Iwo Jima

coverage. And again, I thank you for coming in, and I appreciate the insight and this will be put in the historical records of the museum.

Mr. Roberts: Thank you very much Larry.

Transcribed by
Virginia Roberts
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