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Interview with
CALVIN V. SHAHAN
U. S. NAVY

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

CALVIN V. SHAHAN

Two thousand and five, and we'll let you start.

MR. SHAHAN: My name is Calvin V. Shahan. I was born around Green Forest, Arkansas, and, on graduation from the high school there, I went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for a short while and worked in a defense factory.

DR. LINDLEY: Which factory?

MR. SHAHAN: It was air craft, I can't remember the name of it. I don't have that down.

DR. LINDLEY: What did you make?

MR. SHAHAN: Made airplanes, made a section of them anyway, and my lead man one day said, "I think I'll just get out of here and join the navy." I said, "I think I'll join the navy, too." So I went back to Green Forest and another fellow from Green Forest and I went to Little Rock, Arkansas. We were going to be drafted, it was time. We were going to be drafted anyway.

DR. LINDLEY: What year was this?

MR. SHAHAN: In '44. We were being examined and whatever, and someone came in and said that there were two openings for the Marine Corps. I looked at the other boy and said, "You want to try that?" "Yeh." We didn't know any better. We said we'd do it and went into the marines. From Little Rock we took the train to San Diego boot camp. When I finished boot camp, I went to the rifle range. Being as I was an avid hunter and fisherman down in Arkansas, I made expert rifleman. I wasn't qualified for any other

school. I went to the infantry and went to Camp Pendleton, California, for my infantry training, out in the ocean side there for landing practice, swimming, made combat swimmer. After we got all ready we took off. It so happened to be Guam, went to Honolulu and we had to stay there a couple of days and then we'd get liberty. You know what happened there. We left before that happened and went to Guam. The battle of Guam when we got there was just ending, and that's where I joined the 3rd Division with the outfit I stayed with all the time. As I said, I got in just on the end of it. I think they declared it secure but we set up and made our 3rd Division camp there. That's where we stayed and trained. Every day we went out on patrol 'cause there was Japs thicker than everything still on Guam. We trained, I don't know how long, until we went to Iwo Jima.

DR. LINDLEY: How many of the patrols did you make there on Guam, do you think? Many?

MR. SHAHAN: Many, many, many. And then also we were on guard duty at night around the base perimeter and I remember we used to go out and be set up. At that time I was a private and the corporal of the guard or sergeant would take us around and position us around the area. I remember it was before dark. After it got dark I would change my position in case any body happened to be watching I wouldn't get my throat slit, so that nobody would know exactly where I was. I'd hear things going on, I'd hear rifle fire some place. We weren't supposed to even shoot, some of them did, supposed to use grenades. Anyway, we did that for all the time we were there until we went to Iwo. We went to Iwo Jima. We were supposed to have been in reserve, but after about the second day, first day, they saw that we were going to have to go in and we did on the third day. The first invasion was the 19th and we went in on the 21st. It was just like we were hitting

it for the first time because the beach was still loaded. I don't remember the exact place where we hit but we were in rifle range of Mt. Suribachi. We went up to the first airfield and on up to the second airfield all the way to the end of the island. The first man we had killed was from rifle fire from Mt. Suribachi. It was raining and cold and we were being fired on with mortars and artillery and everything on the beach. Things were still crowded down there but anyway we moved up. I remember one of the big things was a sound that was really weird, a mortar that they had, a huge thing about like a barrel, and they couldn't really control it too well as to the targets. They would just fire it and the sound and, of course, it would explode in the air and shrapnel from that. I remember I heard that thing and I heard it go off and, of course, I hit the deck. There was a huge piece of shrapnel just a little bit away from me and it hit, and I thought, what am I doing here? We went on from there and it was just nip and tuck all the way up, guys falling wounded, dead or whatever; and you just kept going. We kept getting replacements all the way through. Guys would come and go and we never knew them, never got to know them. I was knocked out, concussion, one time and I got a little deal on that. A letter of commendation what happened after that. Then I think the navy declared it secure on the 16th of March. I was wounded on the 15th and I didn't leave. I just got hit in the hand a little bit, shrapnel. We went on up and it was a long time. It was the last of March before we left and before we got that thing secured enough to leave. Then we turned it over to someone else after that. I remember we went down to the beach. Of course, we hadn't had a bath in over a month. They had hot showers fixed up down at the beach before we got on a ship. They didn't want us aboard ship.

DR. LINDLEY: The navy wanted you clean when you came aboard their ship.

MR. SHAHAN: Boy, it felt good.

DR. LINDLEY: Did you see the flag go up on Suribachi?

MR. SHAHAN: No, in this write up in my Iwo Jima book one of the guys said that they did. Now he was from farther up. He heard the commotion and saw it and it was so far off that he didn't see real well. He got binoculars, somebody loaned him binoculars, and saw it. But we were up along about the second airfield by that time.

DR. LINDLEY: You came in here and came along here. Did you cross this...

MR. SHAHAN: We went to airfield number one and got in on that and on up to number two. The Seabees went to work on that as soon as we took it, filling the holes in and this and that and getting planes ready to come in and they came in before we left. We went all the way to the farthest tip of the island.

DR. LINDLEY: Anything about what you saw or things that you'd like to tell us about.

MR. SHAHAN: There's not much you can say. It was just all sand, ash, rock.

Vegetation was gone if they had any, I don't know. I'm sure they had some with all the bombing and this and that. The Japanese waited, as you know, on the beach. They let them get on the beach before they opened fire on them. They could hit us from the farthest end of the island, they had it all sighted in so they knew where we were. They hit us there. They were that way for all of us all the way through. Then they had little spider traps camouflaged that you couldn't see them. Little holes where individuals come up behind you after you've already gone some distance past them. So you had to watch behind you all the time and at night come out of those little holes and try to get to you. That whole thing was undermined. They had hospitals, food and water and everything under there, but they finally ran out at the end. They had holes in the ground that they

could get to them all the way up to it. Their artillery was in caves and they would run them out on tracks, fire, and get them back in before we could get sighted in on them. That lasted the whole campaign, just about, but little by little with our planes bombing ahead of us, our own artillery finally got in, but the ships were firing, too. We could hear those big shells zooming over us. Some of them got pretty close to us, and the same way with the planes. We'd take an area and the planes didn't get the word fast enough and they'd come and start to dive. We'd have to get a sign out that we were there. We got hit a time or two. You can't help it.

DR. LINDLEY: What was the code that you used to tell them?

MR. SHAHAN: We had a huge kind of like a tarp and it was colored so that when we pulled that out they'd know that was us. I remember that Lt. Henning was our platoon commander. I've known him and I still see him at reunions. He got to be a major; he stayed in. He had that tarp thing that he threw out just in time and this one plane just peeled off when he saw that. We were fortunate that we didn't get hit there. I think that was up on the Cushman pocket, it was scary. Talk about being there, it just so happened that that was where my outfit went and we did what we had to do and left, went back to Guam.

DR. LINDLEY: How many of the men that you went ashore with were able to survive that?

MR. SHAHAN: I don't know. I did know at one time. It probably tells in the book there but I can't remember but maybe my platoon of like thirty, there might have been six or seven left. We stayed around and most of those were wounded but not bad enough to be evacuated.

DR. LINDLEY: Was your only wound in your hand?

MR. SHAHAN: Yes. I had a concussion once and they had me on a stretcher. The doctor had said you just wait awhile and I'd be taken back to the beach and be evacuated. By that time I got to feeling okay and I said, "I'm just going on back up," and I went back up. I had two real good buddies from Indiana and they were five or six years older than me, maybe older. One of them worked for the other in business in Indiana and I don't know how they got to stay together but they did through this. They thought I was their child, I guess, and they raised me. They watched after me and we usually shared foxholes together. One of the funniest things on here, it really wasn't funny at the time, but Bob, Robert Shirley, was a bazooka commander. He carried a bazooka, and Harold Swear from Mankato, Minnesota, loaded it for him. So we came on a pillbox which was actually a tank that had been buried and just the turret sticking out. We got pinned down. Bob was going to knock it out with his bazooka. Swear was loading it and the Nip raised the ??? and threw a grenade and it hit right behind Swear and just riddled his back with shrapnel. Bob turned around and said, "Swear are you hit?" He said, "Yeh, the little bastard got me when my back was turned." That was funny later and I saw it. I saw a lot of them but after the war I visited, talked and visited back and forth with those two guys in Indiana. I never did go to Mankato to visit Swear but we wrote all the time and I sent a letter in to verify his wound. He asked me to, I don't know why, they could see his back. He was under for a long time. I sent him a letter that got him money from the government, got a pension from then on. Something else interesting that I didn't write down there. Our second in command of our battalion, Major Clay Murray, at the time, and I didn't know him. In Tulsa where I live now, have for four years or so, there was a

knock on my door and a guy says is this where a Cal Shahan lives? Yes. He told me who he was, it was Clay Murray. He went in the same time I did. He was the second in command of our battalion. (paper rustling) This is the right place here. You can see all these people got wounded. One would take over and the other one would get knocked off and then Clay got shot through the mouth, knocked all his teeth out and one of his hands messed up so he was evacuated. Anyway, he came and knocked on the door and introduced himself. That's been over a couple of years ago and so we visit a lot with his family, too. We have breakfast together. His wife died with Alzheimer's some time ago and I didn't get to meet her. I knew about it at the time. My two buddies in Indiana are dead and the one in Minnesota, so not many left. I did have one I went through boot camp with, Larry Schneider, we went through training together. We got split up before we went to Iwo. I'm not sure whether he was in the 3rd Regiment offshore or not, can't remember, but we wrote back and forth after that, too, and he's still alive. Lt. Henning, as I said Major, is still alive and I've seen him at a 1st Battalion reunion a time or two.

DR. LINDLEY: After Iwo where did they take you?

MR. SHAHAN: I went back to Guam and we went back into training after we cleared the brush out from camp, and went through the whole course of training again with all new people. When we got back, it's in this little piece here, I think. I was going to make corporal but then I think everybody had their same rate. You were in charge of this and that, I think I was lieutenant in charge of mortars for a little while until we got people in from the States with rates. They didn't give out rates real easy in the Marine Corps.

DR. LINDLEY: Then after that...

MR. SHAHAN: Anyway, we went through the training and we were all packed and ready to hit Japan when they dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and so forth. We got word on the radio that the war was over. I had enough points to come home. Some of them went to Japan for occupation. As I said, I had enough points to come home and had to wait. No planes then to carry anyone, you went with ship, so I had to wait. I don't know how long for a ship, so we just guarded our company area. I got to ride around in a jeep instead of walking so that was nice, big deal.

DR. LINDLEY: How was the food?

MR. SHAHAN: Well, reasonable. We had C rations and K rations in combat and in training. We had a mess hall when we were in camp and everything was dried or powdered or this and that but it was pretty good. Every once in awhile we would have something really nice shipped in special. It was pretty good food, enough to keep you lean and mean. I don't think anyone got fat.

DR. LINDLEY: Did you get any or have any problems with any illnesses over there, malaria or...

MR. SHAHAN: I had I think malaria and maybe dengue fever. When I came back home to Green Forest I was in the post office one day. We had two doctors in this little town of about nine hundred people and he said, "Cal, did you get malaria?" I said, "No." He said, "Yes, you do I can tell by looking at you." I guess I had showed signs. I never did miss any duty because it wasn't that bad. These two guys, my friends, after we got back to Guam were always trying to get me to go to sickbay. When I was knocked out on Iwo Jima I went back in and these two guys, they called me "Chick" because I looked so young or something, said, "What the hell are you doing back up here?" I said, "Well, I

thought you guys needed a little help.” “Well, you should have gone on when you had the chance.” And I said, “You wouldn’t have.” “The hell I wouldn’t.” They wouldn’t though, they wouldn’t have gone. A lot of them did when they had the chance. I remember a guy called “Bulldozer. He was big and he was strong. When we were working on Guam during the camp and everything, we had him push the wheelbarrow full of rocks and everything. He got a really bad hit on shoulder and his arms. We were in a foxhole and he came walking by all bandaged up and smiling. “I’m going home guys, good luck to you.” People left were pretty glad to leave but it was scary every minute, there was no lull.

DR. LINDLEY: Twenty-four hours?

MR. SHAHAN: Twenty-four hours. Night and day you were in the foxhole, one of you would sleep and the other one stand watch and it was that way night and day for a month.

DR. LINDLEY: Did you have a sniper rifle or did you use...

MR. SHAHAN: No, just a regular M-1 rifle. We had a little guy in the outfit that had a BAR, Browning automatic rifle, semi. He was smaller than me but he loved that thing and so on a march we would help him carry it because that thing weighed a bunch. So we’d trade off with him, he’d carry the rifle and we’d carry his BAR for him. He always wanted to be in the point when we were on patrol on Guam. He always wanted to be in the point so that when we ran on them he could shoot them.

DR. LINDLEY: Did you come on to them very often?

MR. SHAHAN: Yep, pretty often, and we’d go out sometimes for three or four days. We’d go to the beach and camp out and watch for Japanese ships. We’d run on to them, then we would go through the jungle from there. We’d run on to them even when we

were out doing that. They always asked us to try to take prisoners. Sometimes we'd find them, I don't think they ever took one, don't think they ever found one that gave up enough. One of the guys went back to camp after our mail one time, and I think two or three of them went. They were going down a trail and they ran onto Japanese. They said you know I'd never fought one hand to hand so he ran him down. They fought and the Jap got hold of an entrenching tool and started to whack him, so he had to shoot him. I didn't tell anybody about that; I mean none of the officers. When we started back to camp he had buried him over here and his rear was sticking out of the ground. He said, "Well, I tried to capture him." It was pretty bad, but we were glad it was over, but we were ready to go. We had our bags packed and sea bags. I don't remember this. One of the other guys said that we were already aboard ship.

DR. LINDLEY: Have you been back over there?

MR. SHAHAN: No, I get letters sometimes saying you have the opportunity to go but I couldn't see any reason to. I remember how it looked and it is different now. They have it all built back up.

DR. LINDLEY: What do you think about the Japanese today?

MR. SHAHAN: Well, it's still tough. I know they're completely different people now than then. Most of them don't know anything about it, sort of like a lot of ours, and I could get along with them just fine. Many years that I wouldn't even care to talk to them or have anything to do with them. I know when I started to college after that and we had one or two in college, and they were nice. I never did have anything to do them. I never would buy anything Japanese. I remember I started working at a hospital, but I went to work for a drug company after I got out of college. I called on a store and a guy brought

a Japanese car and, of course, it irked me. He didn't even think anything about it. He was talking about what a good car it was, so I didn't say anything to him. I still called on him.

DR. LINDLEY: What drug company did you work for?

MR. SHAHAN: I worked for the Fox-Meyer, used to be the Fox Vliet. They started in Wichita, Kansas, and then they came to Oklahoma City. I worked out of Oklahoma City, I lived in Tulsa. Before I went to work for them I worked for McPike. They were a wholesale druggist and they were in Kansas City, McPike. Then I left them and came to work in Tulsa. I worked as a pharmacist in Tulsa for Crawford Drug Stores before I did that. He had nine stores and then I went to work for Fox Vliet. Fox Vliet bought McPike out, so that's how I got started with them. I left the drug store and went to work selling drugs. I did that until I retired about three years. So I've been retired since I guess, I don't know, ten or fifteen years. I miss working.

DR. LINDLEY: Do you have a lot of memories, flash backs of all of this?

MR. SHAHAN: Now and then. Not as much as I used to and it is not for any length of time. For a long time I'd remember about it. One time even on Guam we had foxholes dug. We were stuck on cots after we got back to tents, but we had foxholes in case we were bombed or attacked there. Of course, it rained a lot and you're muddy. One night I dreamed that I was out on the battlefield, and I was naked. Why I was naked I don't know, but I was, and there was a Japanese tank coming after me. I was reaching for my clothes, trying to find my clothes to take off, and I never did find them. So I just took off and I ran into a foxhole and mud just all in it. These two guys were in the tent. "Chick, what the hell are you doing?" I was dreaming and I was in a foxhole. "Well, get back in

bed. Get back on your cot.” So I did. There I was just covered in mud and everything else. The next morning I looked up and my clothes were standing up. That was kind of a funny thing, too. It wasn’t too funny, I was dreaming. It has been several years before I had any real bad ones, bad dreams.

DR. LINDLEY: Have they gotten worse or better over the years?

MR. SHAHAN: Oh, a lot better.

DR. LINDLEY: Do you have children?

MR. SHAHAN: I have a daughter. She’s right here with us. I went to college, the College of the Ozarks which is the University of the Ozarks now at Clarksville, Arkansas, and that’s where I met my wife. That was just right after I got out of service. I graduated in 1950 and my wife graduated a year later. About five years later we had our daughter. She went to college, University of Tulsa. She’s an artist and she teaches art at a little town called Owasso, has for years and years. She got her master’s at University of Tulsa. She’s married, they don’t have any children. She was hired on the job so it worked out fine.

DR. LINDLEY: Any other things that you would like to tell us or any other stories that you can think of.

MR. SHAHAN: I think that pretty well covers what I remember. I’m sure there are other things. I’ve been trying to forget it for sixty years, you know, and those things I wouldn’t tell anyway, even my wife. I see no reason, bad, bad things. It’s just as everyone knows that, as they say, war is hell. No one should start them unless it is absolutely necessary.

DR. LINDLEY: Well, we certainly appreciate your taking the time to come and do this.

MR. SHAHAN: I'm sure it wasn't too much.

DR. LINDLEY: Well, everybody's story is important. Everyone that participated made an impact. You may not know exactly what impact you had, but everybody did have an impact.

MR. SHAHAN: I was glad to do it at the time. There were times, like I said, when that big piece of shrapnel hit, what am I doing here, but I knew what I was doing there. The marines gave you really good training and that's what brought you through a lot of times. And that's the reason you stay with your buddies because you went through all your training together and they're more family than family a lot of times. I remember when I was going over the side of the ship there on Iwo, there was a sailor. I had two packs that reached from my neck to my rear down past my rear and my rifle, several grenades, ammunition belt across my shoulder, one on my waist, weighed a lot more than I did. I remember going over the side down the net and this sailor helped me over. He looked sorry for me. He looked like, boy, I'd sure hate to be in your shoes. At the time I was glad to do it and I was afraid. As I said I went in '44 and I was in two years and I spent nineteen months overseas, so most of it was overseas. I thought, I don't know if I'm going to get over there in time to help out or not. Then after I got there I thought I shouldn't have been in any hurry. I remember the DI in boot camp. He said, "Cal, watch for those Nips in the trees." I think he had been in combat but he knew dang well I was going. He looked like he had a little apprehension. They tied themselves to trees, up those palm trees, and they would snipe you before you got to them. So you were on the watch out for them.

DR. LINDLEY: Did you see...

MR. SHAHAN: No, I never did see any. It was something else. There will probably be a lot more to think about but that's pretty good, pretty covered. Of course, I remember what Lieutenant Poin said, "Once there was a guy that said he was an atheist so a mortar hit close to him and just blew up in the air. He said, "Lord, help me." And the lieutenant said, "Did you see that?" I said, "Yeh, I didn't know if you did or not." He changed in a hurry. I don't think it killed him either.

DR. LINDLEY: Were there chaplains there at Iwo?

MR. SHAHAN: I'm sure that there were. I don't remember, maybe right at the start or right after. I was thinking, I have a picture here of (lots of paper rustling). This is Herschel Woody Williams who is going to be on our program Sunday. He got the Medal of Honor.

DR. LINDLEY: Did you see him when he did that?

MR. SHAHAN: No, he was a flame thrower man and he took him out. I might be alive today because of him. He knocked out a bunch of pill boxes and this and that. What I started to say was, he was just a regular marine and wasn't overly religious as far as I know, fact is, I'm sure he wasn't. He goes to church like the rest of us, his wife and his kids. After the war he went to church and one day he got religion and he became the chaplain of all Medal of Honor winners. I think he is about one of three or four left. We invited him to one of our 1st. Battalion reunions and he came upon his ??? one time. Anyway, I remember him playing a guitar sitting on a sack on Guam. He left some time after we got back to Guam, they took him back to the States. These two guys I was telling you about my friends from Indiana. This one worked for this one and he had a filling station and he also had the leadership for the gas people and sold gas stations

around. Then he got to be a builder and he'd tear buildings down and replace them, sell brick, he was a go getter. I visited them several times in Indiana, but they're both deceased.

DR. LINDLEY: We certainly thank you for spending the time with us and letting us do this.

MR. SHAHAN: I could do better.

DR. LINDLEY: You did just fine.

MR. SHAHAH: I didn't think I'd do it at all. I hadn't planned, no, I said no I can't do it, I won't do it. My family. You saw everything on there.

DR. LINDLEY: Not everything. That is a wonderful book

MR. SHAHAH: It is. It tells about the different divisions, what it did, and pictures on here about the 3rd Division. There's another, I saw him at a reunion, John McKinnon, a historian here. A lot of it I remember. I couldn't say all that stuff.

DR. LINDLEY: Alright.

Transcribed September 28, 2010, by Eunice Gary.