

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

CHARLES CAVANAUGH

This is Virginia Roberts. Today is February the 18th, 2005. I'm interviewing Mr. Chuck Cavanaugh. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Mr. Cavanaugh, you were born where?

MR. CAVANAUGH: In Portland, Maine.

MS. ROBERTS: Portland, Maine, and you were how old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

MR. CAVANAUGH: 1941, I'd have been fourteen.

MS. ROBERTS: Fourteen.

MR. CAVANAUGH: Fourteen.

MS. ROBERTS: My goodness, so it was awhile before you were old enough to join the military.

MR. CAVANAUGH: Somewhat.

MS. ROBERTS: Oh, you got in before you, I want to ask how?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Well, when I was fifteen years old I went to Portland, Maine, and I went to the enlistment place the United States Marine Corps. The master sergeant there told me that I was too young. I had to go home and get my mother and my dad's signature. So I went to south Congress Street in Portland, Maine, in front of the catholic cathedral and there were as I presumed from his general appearance what he was doing, a

drunk there. He had a bottle in a bag and I asked him could he write and he said he could. I gave him the documents that were presented to me by the enlistment sergeant in charge of recruiting office there. I assume he wrote my mother's name down there and perfectly and he wrote my dad's name down. I took it down to the recruiting office and away I went to Parris Island, South Carolina when I was fifteen years old. I got down to Parris Island, South Carolina, and I went to boot camp. Well, at that particular time a marine rifle company consisted of a squad leader and twelve riflemen. They had already engaged in some fighting with the Japanese in the Pacific so they realized they needed a better table of organization a better controlled. So they broke the marine's rifle squad down into a squad leader and three fire teams, fire team leader and a BAR man so I was in a training group. The last man in the third fire team and I went...

MS. ROBERTS: Were you a large young man at that time?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Was I a large enough man? No, I was very young and of course everybody young man in the Marine Corps that didn't shave. They called me "chicken" and that infuriated me. So I was actually a angry young marine but I determined that I was going to do my job. So I got picked as a member of this demonstration or training unit for the Marine Corps for this new ward that consisted of a squad leader and three fire and I did well at it. So they shipped me overseas to Australia to demonstrate to other marines how this new squad worked as for fires maneuver. So while I was over there they discovered I was only fifteen years old.

MS. ROBERTS: How did they learn that?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Well, I don't know for sure how they discovered it but they shipped me back from whence I came, Parris Island. So while I was back there I was in

what they called a casual company. They didn't know what to do with me. They were going to discharge me. I ran into an old World War I marine, an Italian man, I'd rather not say his name. He was an Italian man and a Polish man and I don't know what their connections were in the world but it amazes me today. So I revered these men and they told me, "Well, Cavanaugh you don't want to get out Marine Corps". Course a lot of them found out about the age barrier they were glad to go back home. I didn't want to and they said you don't want to go back home and I said no, I don't want to. I want to stay in the Marine Corps. So they said we'll fix it for you. So consequently I wound up with a new birth date, I wound up with a new serial number, and away I went. Well, lo and behold, I shipped over to Hawaii, Island of Maui, at a place called where the 4th Marine Division was, and I goofed Camp Maui. Then I was still doing this thing with this demonstration. They realized what I was doing so they formed a bunch of these going around various infantry units in the Marine Corps demonstrating how it works.

MS. ROBERTS: Your first experience in show biz.

MR. CAVANAUGH: Yeh, I was down in a place called La Pona Point in a semicircle. They had the people that were observing how we were operating in this new fire team system. The man who was going use us to fire in maneuver he called off our name and what our duties were. Well, he got down to me and I was still the littlest one in the group and the longest(?) one. Somebody said, this is Charles Cavanaugh and up in the bleachers somebody hollered, "Hey, Elton." The only person that knew my name Elton in the Marine Corps, everybody called me Chuck, was a man who I grew with in Portland, Maine, in Rockport, Maine. Frederick Mark Lane and in the Museum I have a brick in the walkway for him. He was killed on the last day of the Tinian operation, a

wonderful man, wonderful human being. I revere him to this day, I honor him. So I went away and I became a member of the Able Company 1st Battalion, 24th Regiment, 4th Marine Division and went on to Saipan and Tinian and Iwo Jima.

MS. ROBERTS: How long did you serve at each one of those?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I went on D Day on 15th of June, 1950 (? Date) on Iwo Jima, and the 21st of July I think to Tinian, completed those operations and then came back to Hawaii, Maui. Then loaded out for the Iwo Jima operation and completed that operation.

MS. ROBERTS: Were you there for the whole?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Yes, all three of those operations. I got slightly tore up on Iwo Jima but nothing serious but not serious. Then I stayed in the Marine Corps and I came back to the United States. Well, I went to Japan on occupation duty and went to China for awhile and I came back to the United States. I went to the recruit depot as a drill instructor.

MS. ROBERTS: How long were you in Japan?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I was there for about a year and a half in between Japan and China and I went into Kobe, Japan, and Kouhri(sp?), Japan, where the big Japanese Imperial Navy shipyard was. Then they needed marines over in China. That time I was out of the 4th Division and went in with the 1st Division in Tin Sin and Sintau, China, disbanding and distributing surplus military equipment supposedly to the Chinese Nationalists but it was in my opinion it was the one with the ??? Then I came back to the United States and I went to the recruit depot in Parris Island where it all began for me as a drill instructor. Here I was just a young man at that particular time and I didn't have any education to speak of and I didn't think but somebody saw something in there and made a drill

instructor out of me. About that time I was going up to Quantico on about a week or so every month and then at the platoon leaders' school teaching young lieutenants what they're supposed to know. I was still just a young man with...

MS. ROBERTS: How old were you by then?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I guess I was eighteen, Mam. Then the Korean War came along and I went to Korea. I spent over two years in Korea as a company gunnery sergeant over there.

MS. ROBERTS: What years were you there?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I went there for Inchon landing which September, 1950, and I came home in 1953. The Chinamans done a number on me over there and they medically retired me. The thing that I would like to mention is when I left Rockport, Maine, in 1943, I was just a young man and this lady sitting beside me, her name at that time was Joan Thustee, and her uncle lived with my mama and my dad prior to World War I. He went away in the marines and he lived with them shortly and then he married a lady that worked for my mother and my dad. That inspired me, I guess, to go into the Marine Corps. This young lady used to write me in World War II what they called V mail letters.

MS. ROBERTS: I remember that.

MR. CAVANAUGH: V mail letters all folded up like this and and I'd get those letters and when they'd have mail call and I would look for these letters for months. My mother occasionally and sometimes my sisters but especially this lady and I went to school never had a date with her or nothing. Them days in my marine corps days I was a confirmed bachelor but back in those days I had other things interested me rather than young ladies,

young girls, anybody. They used to write to me and it was tremendous, tremendous morale builder. I had not seen her since February, 1943.

MS. ROBERTS: Since your enlistment.

MR. CAVANAUGH: Right, February, 1943. About four years ago my wife passed away. She lost her mate about the same time. We contacted each other, I guess I was calling her every day with tears in my eyes grieving and here we are married.

MS. ROBERTS: What a fortunate thing happened.

MR. CAVANAUGH: All of those things that I went through on this pork chop island and all of that business I try to forget a lot of that stuff. It comes back to you once in awhile but this to me is important in my life now.

MS. ROBERTS: And now you can put that in perspective as part of your past, part of history and it's so important now for young people to understand this.

MR. CAVANAUGH: A lot of people ask me today did I see this flag raising on Mt. Suribachi on February the 23rd somewhere around ten thirty in the morning. I said, "Did I see it?" Of course, I didn't see it, I was somewhere in about right in this area right here at that particular time. We knew that something big had happened and course every marine carries a flag or something around in his helmet something to put on something. I was somewhere in about this area right here at that particular time. All the ships out here cruisers, battleships and everything and all the ones over here they was firing up a storm. All the artillery, of course the artillery was all back in here, marine artillery firing up here in support. The island was just a mass of dust, sirens on poles, ships' whistles blowing out in the water. We knew something had happened but for me in that particular area had I stuck my head up I wouldn't be here talking to you today.

MS. ROBERTS: They were still fighting over in that part of the island. How long did it take for the Japanese to realize that they had been defeated?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Of course as I read history about this and I studied history about it 'cause the man who was in charge of this operation, the marine, was Howling Mad Smith. He wanted more naval gunfire but nobody realized what the general in charge of this thing Kuribayashi had done to this island. Anybody say well, did you see a lot of Japs on Iwo Jima? I can probably count the number of Japs on maybe two hands. Well, I saw lots of dead ones but I didn't see too many live ones because this island was completely honeycombed with the bunks.

MS. ROBERTS: And that's where they were?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Right, they were down under the ground, the island was all honey combed, all honeycombed.

MS. ROBERTS: Now how did our military go about extracting them?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Either burning them out with flame throwers or throwing hand grenades or set your charges down in the hole sealing them off and a lot of people probably starved to death, sealing them off down there. This part of the island down here was all volcanic ash. When we went ashore it was like trying to dig a foxhole in a grain bin or a batch of corn.

MS. ROBERTS: Kinda mushy?

MR. CAVANAGUH: No, it wasn't mushy, it was dry plus the ground was even warm. If you dig a little bit it was warm because of volcanic islands and if you dug it would fall in all around you. As soon as we got up in this area from where this boat base is moving

up in, it was all rocks, all rocks and cliffs and beams wasn't like terrain on the moon but it was all rocks.

MS. ROBERTS: Were the underground entrenchments all over the island or concentrated?

MR. CAVANAUGH: That island was completely honeycombed.

MS. ROBERTS: How did they do it?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Well, if you see pictures of it there was an article recently in the papers about a marine of a newer generation that spoke Japanese. He was over there. Of course we heard that, and I'm sure they was, I didn't see them. I didn't get to do any tourist activities. The Maudeama(sp?) airfield, this was Maudeama number 1, Maudeama 2, and they had another there. I understood underneath these islands they had complete hospitals underneath there, complete hospitals. I do know that up about this area up in here I got down in a hole with a big Jap down underneath there and had a to do with him. I saw some of it and after he got through with me I wanted out and get some fresh air, so I didn't do investigating of what was down in the ground.

MS. ROBERTS: How long were you there, for the whole operation?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I was there for the whole operation. The 4th Marine Division of two regiments went ashore on D Day and the director and I was here when I was in Division reserve. I went away on a D Day because we tried to get ashore and get communications set up. I went ashore with a company executive officer. He didn't last very long if I remember he got killed.

MS. ROBERTS: So you saw it all the way through?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Saw it all the way through.

MS. ROBERTS: Now how long after the raising of the flags at Mt. Suribachi was there continuing fighting?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Yes, that was only I think probably February 23rd. I think it was about 10:30 in the morning the flag was raised here. By that time I think the Division was probably the 28th regiment of the 5th Division had crossed the island, cut the island in two and they were moving up here. I would think probably after the 23rd of February probably that much of the island was still to be captured because the 4th Division went ashore and swung right.

MS. ROBERTS: That would be the south shore right here and then went to the east.

MR. CAVANAUGH: They went up this way. The 5th Division they come ashore and they went up to the left and then when the 3rd Division come ashore they went up the center. They was held in Corps reserve. The 5th amphibious corps was what occupied captured this island. The 4th Division went ashore and swung to the right and 5th division went across the island and then went up the left coast. The 3rd division when they come ashore they was in the center.

MS. ROBERTS: What were your living conditions on the island?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Nighttime it was cold and sometimes it drizzled. At that particular time of my life I wasn't concerned whether I was hot, cold or different, just stay alive from one minute to the next.

MS. ROBERTS: Did you get proper food?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I think we got, the Marine Corps to me all of my experiences in the Marine Corps from recruit depot to the time I got out of the Marine Corps was most adequate. During the Korean War at the Cho Shin Reservoir we had a turkey dinner

there that the people could have been proud of what was provided for us. Food, I don't think, of course a lot of people would complain no matter what they was fed. The main thing was that location was that to stay alive. If you looked at your watch and it was eight o'clock in the morning and it was nine o'clock in the morning you were thankful you had another hour to live.

MS. ROBERTS: Did any of your close friends get killed in the fight?

MR. CAVANAUGH: In Iwo Jima?

MS. ROBERTS: Uh huh.

MR. CAVANAUGH: A lot of them, I can't tell you specifically numbers. The company that I was in, A company of the 1st battalion 24th regiment, we was down to so few that we merged with C company to just have a few men to fight with, pretty well cleaned out. I believe I read how many were KIA, killed in action, plus how many was wounded in action but it was you got to realize on Iwo Jima they had over 26,000 casualties.

Otherwise a marine division back in them days with reinforced troops was about 24 to sometimes up to 25,000 men, well 26,000 got wounded. One of the three divisions got wiped out but that don't mean they was all killed. I think there was over 6,000 killed on that island, more than one regiment. It was a piece of property that was paid for dearly.

MS. ROBERTS: Yes, it was. Did our forces then take all of the Japanese that surrendered take them prisoners?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Very, very few prisoners was taken on Iwo Jima, very few prisoners were taken varied for a multitude of reasons. If you read the book *Flags of our Fathers* you read that booklet mainly about what they did to that corpsman, what they did to his marine buddy when the Japs catch him and hold him down in a hole, one of the

reasons why. That wasn't the first instance where a Jap had captured marines and mutilated them and threw them out so the other marines could see them. It had the effect that we hated them that much more. Hate doesn't make a good marine but anger and determination to subdue them is a pretty good quality.

MS. ROBERTS: I think that continues on today.

MR. CAVANAUGH: It does. I do not like to be around Japanese people today.

MS. ROBERTS: Was there ever any estimate of how many were entombed in the underground?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I do not know.

MS. ROBERTS: I've never seen a number.

MR. CAVANAUGH: I would suspect that a great deal of the Japanese that was there was entombed, but a lot of them. To my knowledge from where I was at I do know that in these Moroti number 2 someplace in there they did have some and over in here the last part of it was the 5th Division. They had some of what they called banzai charges, drunken sakey up Japanese come charging out. I saw none of that because terrain would not admit any of it. They did come sneaking around at night time hollering like a corpsman or something like that. They was tenacious people.

MS. ROBERTS: They really were.

MR. CAVANAUGH: They was tenacious people and that was not only on Iwo Jima but every place that the marines tangled with them in the Pacific.

MS. ROBERTS: Where were you mustered out?

MR. CAVANAUGH: I was not mustered out. I returned to the States when they got through with us in China. I came back to Parris Island, South Carolina, and was a drill

instructor and a drill instruction in Washington Quantico and a platoon leader instructor there. Then when the Korean War came along I went to Korea. September 15th was the Inchon landing in Korea. From there we went into Seoul and then we came on down around the coast again and landed north of Wansung(sp?) and went up to the Toesung(sp?) reservoir. A lot of people think we got driven out of there. Well, we did but it was no massacre or nothing. Fact is I think in equipment that we went to the Choesung(sp?), well, we had more equipment than when we got on the ship in Hamhong(sp?) because the army was so disorganized we wound up with a lot of their stuff. Then we came down around and had a little rest in a place that's down by Pusan they called the bean patch. Then we went up through central Korea up to So Yang Gang(sp?) river valley and up as far as a place called hill called 812 and then from there we was transferred over to Panmunjom. I stayed there until the Chinamen decided that they were tired of me and so they did a number on me and they shipped home and medically retired me.

MS. ROBERTS: So you were retired?

MR. CAVANAUGH: Yes.

MS. ROBERTS: And then your life after that?

MR. CAVANAUGH: After that I was so depressed because I wanted to make the Marine Corps my life career. I was so depressed that I went back to Maine for a short period and I had a friend that lived in Australia. I was gonna go down and see him but also had a brother that lived in Panama Canal zone, he and his wife and two daughters at that time I think. So I went down there to see him and say goodbye to him and then I was gonna go on to Australia. While I was down there I met my wife and we fell in love and

I got married. I stayed down there for thirty years, working for the Panama Canal Company and retired from there as a civil service.

MS. ROBERTS: My goodness, you could have gone into the diplomatic corps with all your world wide experiences.

MR. CAVANAUGH: Yeh, I stayed down there and then I retired in Round Rock, Texas, in 1980. My wife and I had a good retirement and she passed away four years ago. That was, none of this experiences here, believe me, Iwo Jima, Saipan, Tinnian, Korea, none of them was as traumatic to me as losing my wife. That's difficult to say but that was a difficult thing. The only thing that kept my sanity is talking to this lady who had lost her mate about the same time.

MS. ROBERTS: You're very fortunate, both of you.

MR. CAVANAUGH: I'm mighty fortunate.

MS. ROBERTS: My husband and I did the same thing. We've only been married be twelve years this year.

MR. CAVANAUGH: I say to her and I think she can concur that when I was young, when I was in the Marine Corps, I was a confirmed bachelor. I didn't want to be around people that was married. I called them the brown baggers and all of this thing because they were wanting us to do this duty and stuff like that. When I got married I was probably not the most prepared person for married life but and I say to this day I wish that I knew when I first got married what I know now, but that's hindsight.

MS. ROBERTS: That's what my children keep telling me. Mom, I sure wished you could do us over.

MR. CAVANAUGH: But life is like that.

MS. ROBERTS: It is and it gets richer and richer, no doubt at all...

MR. CAVANAUGH: I can't tell you sitting here right here in front of you what this lady has done for me.

MS. ROBERTS: Well, I want to thank you for the interview and tell you how much we appreciate your contribution to the Nimitz Museum and know that scholars will be researching information like yours for a long, long time. Thank you very much for your service.

Finalized copy typed May 7, 2013, by Eunice Gary.