

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Kenneth Harrell

Date of Interview: January 21, 2007

National Museum of the Pacific War

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with Mr. Kenneth Harrell

Interview in progress.

Interviewer: This is January 21, 2007. My name is Larry Rabalais; I'm the interviewer here. And we're at the Bush Gallery of the uh, National Museum of the Pacific War. I'm interviewing uh, Col. Kenneth Harrell and this interview is taking place here in the conference room in the Bush Gallery itself. The interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to this site. And that takes care of the paperwork. So then I'll turn it over to Ken Harrell and let him start from the very beginning and we'll let 'er rip.

Mr. Harrell: Well, I was born in Rosebud, Texas, July the 25th, 1925. About the age of 2 or 3 we moved to south Texas to a little town called Beeville, Texas. And I was raised there and went to school there. And the question is, "Where did I learn about Pearl Harbor?" I was sitting out at Yonkins (spelling ?) Drive-In with a little girl that uh, we'd started to school together. Her name was Marjorie Malone, and we were listening to the radio and they broke in to tell us about Pearl Harbor.

Interviewer: So you have a specific memory of that moment?

Mr. Harrell: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Okay, alright.

Mr. Harrell: And then my dearest, dearest first cousin, a guy by the name of Joe Ramos, Jr. was drafted and he went to uh, the west coast. And I couldn't stand it that he was gone and I wasn't. (laughter) So the next year, in 1942, I convinced my family that I had to go into the Marine Corps.

Interviewer: You were pretty young then.

Mr. Harrell: I was 17.

Interviewer: You were 17 – barely of age? Did they have to sign for you?

Mr. Harrell: Yes, they did.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay, I thought so.

Mr. Harrell: And uh, I don't think they were ever sorry they did. They were scared lots of times but never, never sorry. Uh, I joined the Marine Corps August the 7th, 1942; went to MCRD San Diego; was trained out there in, and further training up in Camp Pendleton. I went to radio school and became a CW Operator, and uh, went back to Camp Pendleton and was chosen to become a member of the dearly beloved Amtrak outfit, and they scared me to death. I went across 101 to uh, what's now called Camp Del Mar and they put me in an Amtrak and we went out in the Pacific and the waves were rolling and it damn nearly rolled the thing over.

Interviewer: Now is that the thing that's sorta called an Alligator?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, well the Alligators were the first, and uh, they progressed from there.

Interviewer: They didn't go real fast.

Mr. Harrell: No. And that's what we carried the troops in and supplies in and things like that.

Interviewer: They were pretty thin-skinned vehicles. I think we have one out here in our combat zone, and it looks like its just sheet metal.

Mr. Harrell: I'll tell you more about that.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: Uh, when I was sent overseas in June of the following year, June of '43, I went to Pearl Harbor; saw the devastation there; and from there we got aboard an LST which I had never seen before, and ...

Interviewer: Do they roll as badly as they say?

Mr. Harrell: Well, they had these flat LCIs mounted one on each side of the thing, and we carried those all the way down to Australia. We landed in Melbourne and I joined the 1st Marine Division down there.

Interviewer: Now that's not 1st Amphib; that was 1st Marine Division?

Mr. Harrell: 1st Marine Division, and then I went into the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion; joined them just before the operation that was to take place at Cape Gloucester.

Interviewer: Were you actually an operator of the amphibian, of the Alligator or you were just...?

Mr. Harrell: No, I was the radio operator.

Interviewer: You were a radio operator, okay, alright.

Mr. Harrell: The uh, we made our first landing was a practice landing on Goodenough Island right off of New Guinea.

Interviewer: And that was the name of it, Goodenough Island?

Mr. Harrell: Goodenough Island.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: G-o-o-d-n-o-u-g-h.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: And the island did have several Japanese on there which we proceeded to chop up with uh, our 50 caliber machine guns that we had mounted on the thing. And we were told there weren't going to be anybody there. Anyway, we did our practice landing and then we made our landing at uh, Cape Gloucester on December the 26th.

Interviewer: I think Gloucester is part of the New Guinea...?

Mr. Harrell: That's cor..., no, its part of New Britain.

Interviewer: New Britain, yeah, okay.

Mr. Harrell: Which is right off by...almost attached to that uh...

Interviewer: Go ahead, I've got a little map I'm gonna bring out to help myself over here.

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

Interviewer: Uh, but you can go ahead and continue while I look at the map.

Mr. Harrell: Well, the landing that we made at Cape Gloucester was relatively an easy landing and we didn't have too much trouble until...

Interviewer: Was the beach uh, vegetated or was it a sand beach or was it...?

Mr. Harrell: No, it was sandy and it uh, it was vegetated also. There was lots of underbrush and uh, the rain down there is just...absolutely made the whole island a quagmire. It did have a pretty good size air field there which we...

Interviewer: The Japanese have that?

Mr. Harrell: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Ah, so we utilized that.

Mr. Harrell: And they...the reason that we went there was, I have since found out, was to furnish an area where they could attack Rabaul which is...

Interviewer: The big Japanese bastion in that area.

Mr. Harrell: Right. Uh, there was a Col. Chesty Puller who had the 1st Marines.

Interviewer: Familiar with him.

Mr. Harrell: Needed uh, some radio operators to go on a walk across Cape Gloucester and fortunately, I was a CW Operator, and he chose me, or somebody did. I went on the uh,...

Interviewer: Was he himself going to go on this walk?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Chesty was?

Mr. Harrell: Absolutely.

Interviewer: He was a pretty tough dude I gather.

Mr. Harrell: Yes, he was. He had a little breast just like a chicken, you know, just...we uh, spent quite a few days out there and I got my first wound; got shot in my left arm right...

Interviewer: So y'all were uh, it was just like illusive Japanese patrols that were just sort of probing...?

Mr. Harrell: No, they were way up in these...get way up in these coconut trees and other big trees that were there.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Mr. Harrell: And most of the fire was sniper fire which we were able to get rid of them right quick.

Interviewer: That was 6.5mm, I think it was, small caliber...

Mr. Harrell: Yes, like a 223.

Interviewer: Yeah, uh-hum.

Mr. Harrell: And uh, when we finished up the operation there, we went to a new place in the Russell Islands called Pavuvu.

Interviewer: I've heard of that.

Mr. Harrell: And Pavuvu was the new headquarters for the 1st Marine Division; it was on a coconut plantation. And there was coconut trees every 20 ft. You could put a 16 ft. perimeter tent in between four of them...

Interviewer: So it had been occupied and was...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, French mandate.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Harrell: We uh, soon as I got there they transferred me over to the 1st Amtrak. No, I'm sorry, they transferred me to the 6th Amphibious Tractor Battalion which was across the Pavuvu; I don't even know what the name of that island was. I think it was *No Name*. And uh, we formed a new unit over there to make the landing in Peleliu.

Interviewer: Now were you at uh, in a squad; were you uh, attached as a radio man, were you attached to different ...?

Mr. Harrell: No, I was attached uh...

Interviewer: CPs maybe or to a command post?

Mr. Harrell: No, I wound up in the command tractor before the landing for Bravo Company and not the battalion. And uh, I was in Baker Company and I didn't know anyone. So we took off and we had all the practice landings at Guadalcanal.

Interviewer: At Guadalcanal – it had already been taken.

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: And so it was more or less stabilized there and so y'all just practiced there.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, and we made a couple of landings there. Uh, and from there, we went on and made a landing at Peleliu. And at Peleliu we were in the second wave had just gone in on Orange Beach 3 and dumped our load and we were backing back out; got about 50 yards off of that thing and it was a big gun right on the flank of us on a little strip called *No Name Island*. And they proceeded to put two biggies right through the side of our Amtrak and it blew up the back end. Fortunately, we had nobody back there but two machine gunners and it killed both of them. And it went through and I immediately hit my seat button, and up the seat goes and I hit the thing to get the lid open and I stood on the top of that thing and jumped out into the water.

Interviewer: So, so the Alligators are not open to the top? I thought they were open to the top.

Mr. Harrell: Not, not in the cab.

Interviewer: Oh, that's right, there's a cab in the front; I remember seeing that.

Mr. Harrell: Uh, none of our Amtraks had tops on 'em until after the 50s. And this was not an Alligator; it was a Water Buffalo – what they called an LBT-4 which is the same thing as you've got over here. Then uh, I crawled around on the reef out there and I was bleeding pretty bad and I didn't...

Interviewer: So it sank the uh...?

Mr. Harrell: Well, no it didn't sink; we were sittin' on about that much reef. And I was cuttin' my hands all to pieces and my knees by trying to crawl because I didn't have any shoes on.

Interviewer: It blew your shoes off?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, and uh, oh I had little pieces of metal all over me.

Interviewer: Uh-hum. Now how far from the beach itself were y'all?

Mr. Harrell: About 50 yards; we were backing out.

Interviewer: So you had water sorta deeper in between so...

Mr. Harrell: Well, the water from the edge of the reef to the beach couldn't have been more than a foot and a half.

Interviewer: Oh, is that all?

Mr. Harrell: And uh, I got out to the edge of the reef and was picked up by LCBP and they took me over to the command boat that was controlling the entry of all of the various LBTs and LCBPs into there. And my executive officer happened to be on the thing. So he asked me if I was hurt, and I said, "No." He said, "Well, what's all that blood about?" And I said, "I don't know." And they proceeded to give me a T-shirt to wear and then they gave me a gunner's helmet from their 40mm gun tubs and they had a great big red dot on it.

Interviewer: That's those great big helmets...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, red dot and handed me a Thompson machine gun and several clips of ammo and said, "You need to get back on in there and get with your unit." So they put me aboard another LBT that came by and...

Interviewer: So your unit was ashore then?

Mr. Harrell: Well, some were, some were not, some were...some we never found.

Interviewer: Let me stop and ask you, let me, let me stop here.

(end of Tape 1, side 1; side 2 didn't have anything on it)

(beginning of Tape 2, side 1)

Mr. Harrell: And it was a 75mm gun sits up there, and they were able to fire right straight down the beach. And they...I have no idea...we lost somewhere over 200 Amtraks in that landing.

Interviewer: My goodness! Well now, in the Amtrak that y'all were in, you were up in the front cab compartment as a radioman?

Mr. Harrell: Right.

Interviewer: Now were there some troops in the back, other than the gunners?

Mr. Harrell: No, we had already landed on the beach and they had all taken off and we were backing back up. And our procedure was that we had to back off the beach and with the ramp still down.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: And we got about 50 yards off the beach and that gun hit us right in the middle of the Amtrak.

Interviewer: So you'd already discharged your cargo? Let me stop and test this...okay, so uh, you'd just been hit and two gunners in the back?

Mr. Harrell: Well, had one.

Interviewer: So, one and he was killed probably?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yes.

Interviewer: Now did the shell detonate inside the...?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, it did. There was a compartment, an air-tight compartment; one on each side and when it exploded inside, it had gone through the armored plate on the outside and exploded inside the other. And that killed the guy immediately. Now I truly don't know what happened to the driver. I have never been able to find out. They show him that he was dead but I don't how it happened.

Interviewer: Did you get some shrapnel on you, obviously?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

Interviewer: So were you medivaced...were you taken back for treatment there or you went on into the beach?

Mr. Harrell: No, I got out of the Amtrak just as quickly as I could. They had a means for you...the seat would jack up and then you would open the lid on the top the thing and you would stand up and then get out of there.

Interviewer: Bail out over the side.

Mr. Harrell: Right.

Interviewer: I think you said previously the water was pretty shallow there.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, it was very shallow; this was a solid reef for about 300 yards and I crawled out to the edge of that thing and I cut my hands, my knees and...

Interviewer: That stuff is sharp!

Mr. Harrell: Oh, that stuff is really bad. And there was a little boat picked me up and took me over to one of the uh, little DEs that was out there and when I got aboard, well my executive officer was still on it...or he was on there. And so they proceeded to clean me up; give me some clothing to wear since I didn't have anything left really, and they put new pants on me, a new T-shirt and a great big old gunner's helmet that had a big red dot on it; handed me a sub-machine gun, a Thompson machine gun, and said, "Go back to the beach."

Interviewer: Oh my goodness; no mercy on you there.

Mr. Harrell: Wasn't for anyone, really.

Interviewer: Now this was totally a Marine operation from what I understand.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so you went back to the beach. Now they defended at the beach pretty (unintelligible)...well it was a pretty small island, I mean, and since I've talked to you, I've gone on the website and looked up some aerial photographs and they did talk about the fact that they did not realize that it was really that hilly and pock marked and rocky.

Mr. Harrell: That's right.

Interviewer: And it was hidden by vegetation so the aerial photographs did not give the correct indication. It looked pretty flat and it wasn't.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. Oh, I will assure you it wasn't.

Interviewer: So they were in caves and...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, they mined for phosphorous there anyway. And they had those mines and then they found that since they could do this...they'd been digging holes in that darn thing for years and years and years. The Germans used to have (unintelligible) on Palaus (spelling?) and the Japanese picked it up right after World War I. And they had all that time to prepare for something.

Interviewer: On the island itself then as you advanced further inland and y'all cleaned out different areas, was that over fairly quickly or...?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, it sure wasn't.

Interviewer: They thought it was going to be.

Mr. Harrell: Yes, we were told it was going to be a six-day affair or something like that; either six or seven day. And uh, we got as far as the edge of the air field that first night and there was lots of fighting and stuff like that. And then they told me...I had joined the 5th Marines there just...I couldn't find my battalion CP at all. I finally found it the next day. And first thing they did was have us go down to the end of the island in our Amtraks and we would be directly across from a little island called Ngesebus. And we were to be out on patrol there in the evening because the Japanese were landing troops on barges up in there.

Interviewer: Oh, they were still bringing reinforcements in?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yes, they were. And we had the rare opportunity to be able to really clean up on those barges at night. We stayed a couple or three more days and they decided to put some troops across there into Ngesebus. And I...we took

troops across from Peleliu to Ngesebus which was only about 300 yards, 400 yards at the max. And it was a hot little engagement.

Interviewer: They were trying to defend that one, too, huh?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, there was a little air field on this thing.

Interviewer: Oh, really, was big enough for an air field, a little air field?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now you said that I believe you were getting air support once y'all were able to capture the air strip on Peleliu...y'all were getting some air support from some of your planes that were actually landing and taking off there.

Mr. Harrell: Corsairs by the dozens.

Interviewer: Really?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's a good ground support plane.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, tell me! All I can remember was just looking up watching 'em drop Napalm on top of that doggone *Bloody Nose Ridge*. Planes...they would take off ... wouldn't even raise their wheels up; they'd just take off; drop it; next turn come back and land.

Interviewer: I didn't realize they were using Napalm that early in the war.

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah; unbelievable.

Interviewer: Now this would have been in '43?

Mr. Harrell: '44.

Interviewer: '44; that was in '44, okay. Let's see, alright, so you were in and around that engagement for some time then.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, well I was there only five days; I got (unintelligible)...

Interviewer: Oh that's right, you mentioned that.

Mr. Harrell: Stomach and uh...

Interviewer: That was a night action?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: And they took me off the next day.

Interviewer: Okay, and that was a charge; they did a charge?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, we call it Banzai.

Interviewer: Yeah, Banzai.

Mr. Harrell: And they would scream and holler, "You die Marines!"

Interviewer: They actually did that, it wasn't just in the movies; they absolutely did that. And I understand your foxholes are not too deep because it was pretty hard coral and you couldn't dig...

Mr. Harrell: Well, we had these little pickmatics uh, which was a pick on one end and shovel on the other - sit there and pound that damn coral and nothing would happen; like every now and then a chip would fly.

Interviewer: Can't dig a foxhole too well in that!

Mr. Harrell: Nuh-uh!

Interviewer: So I believe you said that you were able to shoot the gentleman that bayoneted you.

Mr. Harrell: Yes I did. I was fortunate enough that he didn't kill me so I proceeded to kill him.

Interviewer: They had...from the ones I've seen at the Museum here, they had long bayonets.

Mr. Harrell: Well, as a matter of fact, this guy didn't do it with a rifle. He had it on the end of a long stick.

Interviewer: Really?!

Mr. Harrell: Yes, and uh, I know that the personnel there, the 5th Marines, picked that thing up and took it with 'em.

Interviewer: I'll be darned!

Mr. Harrell: I was hoping they would send it to me as a gift...(laughter).

Interviewer: Well I know that you've got a couple of Samurai swords on the wall over there.

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, well, the real one is right up there, and I got that later on.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were sent back to a hospital ship eventually and then I believe you said to New Zealand.

Mr. Harrell: Right, I went to Auckland, New Zealand, to a little hospital they had there in the city.

Interviewer: That wasn't so bad there except I'm sure you weren't there under pleasant circumstances.

Mr. Harrell: Well, it uh...they were enthusiastic in trying to help just as the Australians were.

Interviewer: Were they Army medical staff or New Zealand staff that...?

Mr. Harrell: Well, it was New Zealand plus Navy.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: And I believe you said you were there probably for maybe three months or so recuperating?

Mr. Harrell: Well, a lot of the dates have kind of vanished in my mind over the years and I'm not sure whether I was there two months or...

Interviewer: But it was a pretty good while.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: And so the type of wound that it was, was in the abdomen area, so I guess it healed reasonably well enough to put you back.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, as a matter of fact, when I got back I was fine.

Interviewer: You felt okay?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: And so where were you sent once you were discharged from the hospital area? What did they do with you then?

Mr. Harrell: Well, I took a boat...I went down into the Russell Islands which is just south of Guadalcanal, and they discharged me there or let me go there, and I rejoined my unit. I thought I was gonna rejoin my...at the time on Peleliu I was in the 6th Amphibious Tractor Provisional, and that thing had been decimated and they...it was cancelled for the rest of the war, and I rejoined the 1st Amphibious Tractor Battalion.

Interviewer: When I was on the internet, I actually looked up the battle and I looked up the site that had all the people that had been killed and wounded and, of course, your name was on there. And it stated that you were in H&C Company...

Mr. Harrell: H&S.

Interviewer: H&S Company, right. Yeah, and I noted some other people that were in there and I tried to remember their names but I forgot now; I thought you might remember some of the names. You know a company is not that big and you would know especially if it was an officer. And there was one officer in particular that I remember, but I can't remember his name. But anyway so, you are listed on the list, that's for sure at that point in time. So anyway, so you were in the Russells now; you're reassigned to a different unit now...a made up unit, I guess.

Mr. Harrell: No, no, it was an existing unit that I had been in for the Cape Gloucester operation.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Yeah, we covered that earlier in the earlier tape.

Mr. Harrell: Right, and we were just preparing...getting ready to go to Okinawa which was April the 1st of '45.

Interviewer: That's right, so from late '44 the wounded ...and that carried over into early '45 and then you were reassigned then. So this is April '45. So the war is approaching an end but there's still a lot of action getting ready to go to Okinawa.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: Were you in the Okinawa operation?

Mr. Harrell: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were still radio operator?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I was a radio operator for the C.O., H&S Company.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: And we landed a little late; there was nothing going on and we were able to pull up to the beach and there was a cliff there that we had to climb up ladders to get up to the top of the thing.

Interviewer: So they didn't resist y'all at the beach?

Mr. Harrell: Not, not...

Interviewer: Not very much.

Mr. Harrell: Nu-uh.

Interviewer: Not until you began to go inland.

Mr. Harrell: That's right. We were on the north end of that thing, and of course when we moved inland, we also turned north and actually there were very...there were lots of troops but not that many. They were having hell down at the south end, so we turned around and went the other direction about two weeks later...something like that.

Interviewer: Now Okinawa is a pretty good size island as compared to what you had been on; it actually had little villages and stuff like that.

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, lots of towns. It uh...Naha was a pretty good size town.

Interviewer: Was there any resistance in Naha at that time?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yes, yeah - couldn't get to it. They had that thing really well covered.

Interviewer: Defended. So then y'all headed south to assist. Now there was some Army units involved in the Okinawa operation also.

Mr. Harrell: I never did run across any, but they were there.

Interviewer: Alright. Uh, any notable action that stands out in your mind in that part after y'all turned south...(unintelligible) those caves?

Mr. Harrell: The Japanese started firing these great big rockets that were unbelievably large and made lots of noise. Sounded like a train going through the sky. And all over the south end of that island, there were tons and tons of little openings into the earth and you'd go inside there and there'd be big urns full of the ashes of the people who had died up there. And we would always go into one of those things whenever we'd get a real big heavy attack. I know my mother asked me after I told her about it, she said, "What were you doing there with all those dead people?" I said, "Well, I didn't want to be just like 'em."

Interviewer: Well that was their burial methods, I guess, of the natives that had lived there for...that was the way they buried...I guess they cremated 'em. And so y'all used those for shelter and the Japanese were firing these, sort of, unguided rockets in the general area and lots of 'em, I understand.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's hard to pinpoint where their launching sites were because I think they were on the back side of the hills and firing over them.

Mr. Harrell: That's right. We had one interesting operation in which I wound up being the guy that told everybody what to do. We went way down the island, down below Naha and down below Kadena air field and made a landing...the Marines were already down there and a lot of 'em were killed and a lot of 'em wounded. And we picked up a complete load; we put these stretchers in there

and they'd go across and each end would be on a bair and then you'd come this way and you could do the same thing.

Interviewer: Now these were LDTs or Alligator or...?

Mr. Harrell: No, no LBTs. In fact these were LBT3s. The 3s had the twin Cadillac engines and one on each side. And we were really proud of 'em.

Interviewer: Now you say...once before you talked about the armor that they had. Now the one I've seen, whatever that is down there in our combat zone...

Mr. Harrell: That's a 4.

Interviewer: Okay, the arm is awfully thin. When you say armor, it didn't hold a lot of armor.

Mr. Harrell: It sure as heck isn't. It will stop a 30 caliber bullet, but that's just about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, so its just relatively thick sheet metal, is really all it is.

Mr. Harrell: The only...I use to laugh...the LBT3 armoreds originally packed 37mm cannons and then they finally upgraded it to a 75mm howitzer.

Interviewer: Mounted inside the...?

Mr. Harrell: Mounted inside the turret.

Interviewer: Oh, the turret?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, it would just look exactly like a tank, and they...poor things, you'd hit them with a baseball bat, you know, they'd just crumble. (laughter)

Interviewer: I guess that's almost too much gun to put on that thing anyway.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, yeah!

Interviewer: Okay, so y'all had helped...not rescued...but taken the wounded troops out of that tough end of the island over there; now were you wounded in any place in Okinawa?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, you were?

Mr. Harrell: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: When did that happen? After that or before that...?

Mr. Harrell: It must have been after that cause we went back to our command post area and there was a seawall right there...a little entrance, a little kind of creek coming out, and it was a seawall and the Japanese had tried to make several landings in there several different nights, and we...

Interviewer: So they were bringing troops around... maybe?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, they were trying to get them higher.

Interviewer: Some pockets?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, and I know we were part of the defense structure there. We put an LBT right behind that thing and we had our weapons just above where we could fire. And early one morning after a wonderful C-Ration breakfast, I was walking down towards the seawall and all of a sudden I saw this Jap pop up and he had...all he had was a hand grenade. And he...was able to attack where you could get him to prime 'em, and he popped it on his own head, you know.

Interviewer: On a helmet or on his head?

Mr. Harrell: No, on his head; he didn't have a helmet. He'd been shot and everything else. Anyway, we had to shoot him, but...and the explosion from the hand grenade did a pretty good job on him also.

Interviewer: Did you pick up some shrapnel from that?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. What distance are we talking about, because I'd heard that some of their grenades were not very effective?

Mr. Harrell: Uh, I might have been as far as from here to that wall; maybe 15 or 20 ft.

Interviewer: Oh, that close?!

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, I understand that their grenades were only so-so effective, but if you were close enough, it didn't matter.

Mr. Harrell: You bet ya!

Interviewer: Okay, so that put you out of action a little bit or...?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, it really didn't. There were just flesh wounds and they weren't deep or anything like that.

Interviewer: Okay, so the Okinawa operation was pretty much it then in terms of combat for you at that point in time. Y'all probably were then preparing for the mainland invasion?

Mr. Harrell: Uh-huh, yes, sure was.

Interviewer: I don't think... after it...was Saipan after Okinawa?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, it was before.

Interviewer: It was before, okay. Now y'all were not involved in Saipan, your particular unit?

Mr. Harrell: No, not at all.

Interviewer: Okay, now for the record, that was 6th Amphibious Tractor?

Mr. Harrell: Not in Okinawa. It was the 1st Amphibious Tractor.

Interviewer: Okay, 'cause I was noticing they were careful about it in that computer listing they had as to listing the 6th and the 1st and the different units.

Mr. Harrell: No, there was a DUKW outfit that the Army sent in and there was also an 8th Amtrak, but I don't know what happened to any of 'em.

Interviewer: But you guys actually...I mean you weren't just riding around in amphibis; you've also had action and fought. You weren't just joy riding around.

Mr. Harrell: They were after us, I'll tell you, 'cause we were packing the troops and the supplies. No, its strange, but the islands were so damn small; Peleliu was small; you felt confined to your area which might be six square feet, you know, that's where I'm living.

Interviewer: I looked at the aerial photograph of that and I was a bit surprised as to the fact that we would commit so many troops to something that seemed so small and so...there was some discussion as to whether or not it was even necessary to have taken Peleliu.

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, it always has been that...

Interviewer: The story ends after the fact, now we see that, you know, maybe it really wasn't necessary.

Mr. Harrell: Well, they didn't need that air field; that's the reason we went there – to get the air field.

Interviewer: It was to support MacArthur, I believe, for the Philippine operations.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now y'all were not directly involved in the Philippine operations?

Mr. Harrell: No.

Interviewer: Mostly Army, I think.

Mr. Harrell: That was *all* Army.

Interviewer: All Army operations, right. Now after Okinawa then, that simmered down, then what happened to your unit or yourself at that point?

Mr. Harrell: Well, they literally got rid of our unit and broke it up and I wound up in the 1st Motor Transport Battalion and they sent us to north of China.

Interviewer: Okay, I remember that, alright.

Mr. Harrell: And as soon as I got there, they transferred me out of that unit and put me at Division Communications Center.

Interviewer: This was in Thin Sin...?

Mr. Harrell: Tianjin.

Interviewer: Tianjin, yeah, alright. Now that's up in more northern part of China; it's colder there.

Mr. Harrell: Yes, it is, very, very cold.

Interviewer: Now how did y'all travel there, by rail, I assume? By train?

Mr. Harrell: Well, what we did was we landed in a little port called Tanku (spelling?), and they put us aboard the train and ran us inland; I think it was about 20 miles to

Tianjin, something like that. And that's the way we traveled there. You went to Peking, you did the same thing; you travelled by train.

Interviewer: Now this was sorta winter time there?

Mr. Harrell: Well it was September when we got there and by the 1st of November it was starting to get really cold. And then that winter it was just fierce!

Interviewer: Just cold or did they have any snow?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, lots of snow.

Interviewer: Now you said before in our previous tape which I messed up, but we're re-doing this now...that there were Japanese units that tactically had...technically had surrendered but they weren't enthusiastic about it.

Mr. Harrell: That's correct. When I was still with the Motor Transport outfit, we were stationed out at the race course, what they called Mushando (spelling?). And at the race course...we were able to put out in the center of the thing all the equipment that the Japanese had that we were bringing in there. And there was a tank battalion of Japanese brought there. They drove 'em up to the front gates and we let 'em in, and they drove right in and they got out and saluted all of us and then marched over to one spot and leaving their equipment there.

Interviewer: Including tanks?

Mr. Harrell: Tanks, artillery pieces, lots of trucks.

Interviewer: Now you got to see their tanks up close. We have one example of theirs in the combat zone in Fredericksburg; boy, they were really primitive in terms of...

Mr. Harrell: They were rinky-dink.

Interviewer: They are rinky-dink looking things.

Mr. Harrell: I tell you what, I saw a BAR man at Peleliu absolutely almost cut the top off of the tank.

Interviewer: Oh, they had a few tanks at Peleliu?

Mr. Harrell: Oh, absolutely. In fact, if you go there, they still got one at...right there where the darned thing got hit!

Interviewer: That's right; you said you went back many years later, 50 years later or something.

Mr. Harrell: I went back in 2004, and that was the 60th anniversary.

Interviewer: What a great...I guess a great thing.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, I will never get over it.

Interviewer: Now how were you able to get to Peleliu? I can understand that you would fly to maybe New Zealand or...?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, you fly from...we flew to Hawaii and from Hawaii you fly to Guam; and from Guam you start going south and you got to Yap.

Interviewer: By flight?

Mr. Harrell: Uh-huh, by flight. And then you fly from there to a town called Koror which is the capital of Palau.

Interviewer: Which is an island chain.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, its on...the big island is called Babelthuap. We flew into Koror, and from there, they transported us...

Interviewer: By boat?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, we took...there's a big bridge going from Babelthuap down over to some other little island there, and that's where our hotel was that we were gonna stay. And from there each day, we would take a boat to Peleliu.

Interviewer: And not too far?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, it was a good hour and a half trip. But it was great.

Interviewer: How 'bout that?! And of course, vegetation is probably grown over a lot of it over there.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, it doesn't look like the same place, you know.

Interviewer: Of course artillery had pretty much decimated everything when y'all were attacking which made it look pretty bare at that time.

Mr. Harrell: It was bare. (laughter)

Interviewer: Yeah, y'all had cleaned it out! But those coral hills and knobs and what not, I'm sure that's all still embedded in the forest amongst everything else.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, the Palauans, and the Peleliu people in particular have sealed off that island. They won't...you can walk there and you'll see shells laying there; helmets; bayonets...

Interviewer: They probably consider it a national treasure or historic treasure or something.

Mr. Harrell: For them, I guess it is. I know they arrested some guy, took him off the island because he picked up some souvenirs; had gone into one of their caves. There are a lot of those caves up there that are still sealed up and they know that there are a lot of Japanese in there.

Interviewer: They're dead. So they basically are burial sites in a sense.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. And the Japanese have built a great big Shinto memorial thing up on top of one of the hills there, and they really show a high respect for the operation there.

Interviewer: That was a difficult one for them. Of course, they lost almost all their people - killed and, I guess, a few captured.

Mr. Harrell: I think we took six or something like that at one time.

Interviewer: I'm trying to remember from the network site that I pulled up, how many they estimated Japanese were defending the island. It was more than I would have expected.

Mr. Harrell: 10,000.

Interviewer: Yeah, for such a small place, I think the Marines might have underestimated...the Brass, may have underestimated.

Mr. Harrell: Let me tell you, the intelligence overestimated or underestimated.

Interviewer: Yeah, and I know that the few flights they took over there...that they showed actual copies of the aerial photographs, and it just looks like a flat little, few scrub kind of thing island, but that's not really what it was.

Mr. Harrell: I've got a ton of pictures I'd be happy to show you after this is over.

Interviewer: Well, alright, now let's go back to north China now. The Japanese...oh, you mentioned something before in the north China operation y'all also helped to release or helped free French Canadian Marines that were in a Japanese camp?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm curious how in the heck they ended up there.

Mr. Harrell: They were in an Embassy there – the French. See Tianjin is broken up in what they call...I don't know whether I can even remember the name or not, but each area – there was a French area and the English...

Interviewer: I remember the movie.

Mr. Harrell: And all of that, and they had a compound there, there's the...

Interviewer: Different nationalities had their own compound.

Mr. Harrell: And then there was on some of the streets...there were gates that they could close off that particular area.

Interviewer: So they happened to be a unit trapped there, I guess, at the beginning of the war.

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, yeah. Well, actually, they were picked off by the Japanese in the '40s, early '40s.

Interviewer: And so they'd been imprisoned in this camp...

Mr. Harrell: A long time.

Interviewer: A long time; I imagine they were ready to see you guys.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, you bet! And they were absolutely unbelievable numbers of white Russians in there.

Interviewer: Really?!

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, the whole doggone town was just loaded with 'em.

Interviewer: Russia is the nearest neighbor to the north, I guess, in there.

Mr. Harrell: Uh-huh. Once you get through Mongolia, you got it made.

Interviewer: So this would have been in late '45 or early '46 or somewhere in there? Yeah, the winter of '45, '46. And you were there for some time?

Mr. Harrell: Well, I was there until February.

Interviewer: February, okay.

Mr. Harrell: We walked across the ice and went on aboard an LST that carried us over to a ship called the U.S.S. Wakefield; it was a Coast Guard operated ship. And they took the bulk of us back to the United States.

Interviewer: Okay, would that be San Diego?

Mr. Harrell: Uh-huh, yeah.

Interviewer: Now were you discharged at San Diego or...?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I was.

Interviewer: And you headed straight home.

Mr. Harrell: Absolutely! (laughter) Happy to go...to Texas.

Interviewer: Yeah, in February or March, was probably ready to go home.

Mr. Harrell: Let me tell you about some guys that I was with.

Interviewer: That would be good for the record.

Mr. Harrell: I had four great friends that we all went through radio school together. We were all radio operators and uh, one of the guy's name... was from Los Angeles, and his name was Cummings. I don't remember what his first name was. The other guy, who was really my closest friend, was a guy by the name of Joseph L. George. His family was uh, Portuguese and they were fishermen out of San Leandro, California. Then my other two buddies were part of a (unintelligible). One guy's name was Virgil Haberty (spelling ?); he was from Arizona; other guy was John Hall from Oklahoma and the third one of that

(unintelligible) was Ken Harrell, Texas. They called us the Three Haulers sometimes and the (unintelligible) most the time.

Interviewer: Uh, y'all stuck together pretty much through different actions?

Mr. Harrell: Well, we were all together for the Peleliu operation. Lost Virgil Haberty; uh Cummings got shot; I got stabbed in, you know...

Interviewer: Uh-hum. Well the attrition rate in that campaign was pretty horrendous; there was a lot of wounded...I want to say around 6,000 or something like that wounded. And I think 1,700 dead or something like that in that little operation. These are the kind of names that...see when they do...when researchers come in to do trace back, its sort of important. Now have you met up with these gentlemen at any reunions since then?

Mr. Harrell: I haven't seen any of them since then. I have had correspondence with Joe George and he now lives up close to Fresno; he's retired. I think he was a JC Penney manager and retired. No, I haven't seen any of 'em. I don't know if I'd recognize any of 'em or not.

Interviewer: But during that short period of time, y'all's closeness was pretty intense, I imagine.

Mr. Harrell: Oh, it was unreal.

Interviewer: Its amazing. Well, Ken, that covers the war pretty well. This is the second tape in attempt to interview Mr. Harrell in which I forgot to turn the mic on for the second half, uh, the first attempt. But I think we've covered everything on the second one. And between those two tapes together, we have covered pretty much the activities of Mr. Ken Harrell who later on went

on into the Korean War, became an officer and retired from the Marine Corps after a number of years. And with that, I'll close. And again, I'll thank you on the tape for having participated in the National Museum of the Pacific War, Oral History Program. This tape will be made available in a hard back form to Mr. Harrell for his editing and in final processing will be put into the final records of the Museum. Again, I thank you very much.

Mr. Harrell: Thank you.

(end of interview and end of tape 2)

Final copy
CD – #1751 a,b – Kenneth Harrell
Transcribed by: K. Matras
Houston, TX
June 20, 2013