

*National Museum of the Pacific War*

*Nimitz Education and Research Center*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

Recording of

**Mr. Leonard Skinner**

Date of Recording: \_\_\_\_\_

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Recording in progress.

Mr. Skinner: This is Leonard Skinner recording by remembrances of World War II for Bruce Petty. I was born in Oregon and grew up in the southern part of the state – a very rural community during the Depression years. I graduated from high school in 1941 and just shortly after that...on December the 7<sup>th</sup> of that year, of course, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II.

I was very patriotic like most of the young boys my age; I was eager to join. My folks did talk me out of it for just a little bit, but the following month in January I went ahead and enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and my folks did sign the papers for me because I was still just seventeen years of age. It was about a couple of months before I was called up; that was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March of 1942 and I was sent to Portland where I was officially sworn into the Marine Corps then sent by train to San Diego to boot camp where my training began.

In those days, they wanted man power in the field as soon as possible, so our recruit training really didn't take very long. We had three months out at the

rifle range which I enjoyed, but I was a good shot already having grown up in the city that I did. The rest of the time we spent marching and learning close order drill and various other Marine Corps procedures. We graduated from boot camp and I was sent to K Company of the Third Battalion, Second Marine Regiment, Second Marine Division which was stationed in Camp Elliott in southern California. The Second Division at this time was really scattered. A division consisted of four regiments; the Second Regiment that I was in was in California; the Sixth Regiment was stationed in Iceland; the Eighth Regiment was in Samoa; and the Tenth Regiment which was Artillery was scattered between those three locations. We just couldn't have been any more widely separated and remain on this same world!

It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June when I actually entered K Company, and the company was on standby then for shipping overseas. So we didn't have really any training to speak of in the month that I was in the company in the States because on July 1<sup>st</sup> we were onboard the SS President Adams and we were on our way overseas; our destination to people like me were unknown.

After several weeks of sailing, we did reach Fiji where we had practice landings and did join the rest of our convoy which was mostly the First Marine Division which had just come up to join us from New Zealand. We then sailed on and discovered our destination was the British Solomon Islands – a place that most of us frankly had never really heard of before. We arrived

there on August the 7th, 1942 and this was the beginning of America's first land campaign of World War II.

We were in reserve that first day; at least our battalion was, and those landings on Guadalcanal which were supposed to be rather ferocious didn't turn out to be much. The Japanese fell back and our troops there just went right in toward Henderson Field and took it.

On Tulagi where the rest of our regiment landed there was quite a bit of fighting, but on the little bitty islands of Gavutu and Tanambogo which is right near Tulagi, the fighting was very severe. The paratroop regiment had landed there and they needed assistance, so the following morning in Diboswan (sp?) our battalion was sent ashore on Gavutu landing under fire. We proceeded to the top of the hill on Gavutu where we could open fire on Tanambogo, and that's where one of our own planes bombed us by mistake because we were still under the Japanese flags that were flying on the hill. I was wounded but not very severely. I was carried to sick bay, but (unintelligible) a little bit that I was able to rejoin my outfit; made a bayonet charge over on the Tanambogo that afternoon; we took it the following day and then we remained on these two islands for six weeks before going over to Guadalcanal where the fighting had gotten *very* severe.

We spent several weeks there and by that time our outfit was getting pretty well shot up...plus we had no food to speak of at all the first three or four months...just what we could find to eat, and we were in extremely poor physical shape. Our Navy had been chased off the night after our landings...originally on August the 8<sup>th</sup>, and they hadn't come back in any strength at all because the Japanese navy was very superior in size to our which was so suffering greatly from Pearl Harbor.

To make a long story short, we were in the Solomon Islands for six months, and then we were finally relieved and told we were going to go to New Zealand for a rest and recreation. That was great news to all of us and we arrived in New Zealand a little later on...yeah.

I just looked at my notes and it was February the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1943 when we actually arrived at the harbor in Wellington. We boarded our train to our camp which was out of town at McKay's Crossing in Paekakariki. The camp consisted of four-man huts, and even though there was just room enough for four cots we thought this was really luxurious living after what we had been living in for the six months up in the Solomons. Also the weather was so refreshing; the Solomons was so hot and sultry! And having been so long in the jungles and all, and we were in extremely poor physical condition...plus our casualties had been very high in the Solomons and we were really in...in pretty sorry shape when we got to New Zealand.

Things really seemed good there. We did have our sea bags for us and so we dug our (unintelligible) dress winter uniform because it was rather cool for us there and had liberty just a couple days after our arrival. The first I did was like most of the other fellows...caught the train bound for Wellington.

We arrived in Wellington; I got off the train and started through the station and I was really looking forward to my first liberty in several months when all of a sudden I met two very attractive girls coming my way - two girls about my age. One was a blonde and the other was a redhead. And the blonde especially caught my eye and so I stopped and talked to them and I found that her name was Peggy Serb (sp?), and the other girl was her sister, Pat (sp?) and they were at the train station because Peggy was catching a train to her home in Ohura which she said was about three hundred miles to the north. So the girls didn't have much but we stopped at the milk bar and had a soda or something and they went on their way and I went on mine and I didn't think much more about it for awhile.

Our liberty...uh, life in New Zealand was absolutely the greatest! The people were extremely friendly; of course they had good reasons to be because they didn't know that New Zealand and Australia were the next ones on the list for the Japanese. And the Japanese had been just sweeping everything up until we reached the Solomon Islands. And the trouble was New Zealand was unable to defend themselves as almost all of their men were over in North

Africa fighting the Germans and they just didn't have any troops at home to amount to anything...just a very few men were there. So the Japanese could have taken New Zealand fairly easily had they had the opportunity to get on down there.

Well we got along extremely well with the local New Zealanders and they just bent over backwards to make us feel at home and of course we thought it was wonderful, too, there were girls all around and we hadn't talked to girls in months! And they had plenty of beer and wine to drink. And the climate was so nice and things were just wonderful. In fact, New Zealand...I always have... looked just like Oregon down under...climate and everything was just so similar. And the towns and all were...just like home! So I've always had a very warm spot in my heart for New Zealand and I always will.

A couple of little weeks after our arrival in New Zealand, I got a ten-day furlough. The first several days I spent in Wellington enjoying myself and having some good food and entertainment. But then I decided this was a wonderful opportunity for me to look around a foreign country...and I didn't know where to go though. But I suddenly remembered that blonde that I had met my first liberty! And she said she lived two hundred and fifty miles away in a place called Ohura; well that sounded good to me so I just walked down to the train station and bought a ticket for Ohura. We traveled up the west coast of New Zealand and I did meet a New Zealand soldier on the train who

had just come back from North Africa where he had been severely wounded and he had been sent home. And he and I got quite well acquainted on the train, and he had...he told me...he said he wasn't going to go back in combat anymore because he was too badly shot up. But he knew, of course, that I was just starting in my career in combat. So he took a little ivory elephant off of his neck that was hanging on a cord around his neck and he handed it to me. He said that was his good luck charm and that had brought him through the North African Campaign and he wanted me to wear it. So I did; I put it around my neck and I wore it for the rest of the war. And I guess that luck held good for me, too, because I came through three more years of combat without even getting a scratch!

We did stop quite often; the other train did every little town across...it's like...it...we came to, and the conductor on the train approached us...the New Zealand soldier and I and said everybody on the train was very interested in the two of us because he was one of their first servicemen to get back home, and I was the first American serviceman there..veteran of the Guadalcanal Campaign that had been up in that part of New Zealand...and so the people wanted to hear us talk. So every town we stopped at from then on...this other soldier and I would get on the platform on the back of the train and make a little speech to the people that were present. It was quite an experience there for us!



We had to change trains in Stratford; at least I did and I found out it would be midnight before I reached Ohura, so I didn't want to walk in on this Peggy who didn't even know I was coming at that ungodly hour so I spent the night there. And everywhere I went there people just could not treat me any nicer; I went into the restaurant and ordered a meal and all the cashier wanted was my autograph! She said the meal was on the house. And...when I went outside I knew what I was in for then because there was the Salvation Army band waiting for me on the sidewalk and they played the Marine's Hymn when I stepped out of the door. I then went on up to a little hotel right up the street, and people stopped me every two feet I know the whole way and I got to the hotel and I registered for a room and the manager insisted on carrying my little overnight bag up, and of course the room was free; everything was free. All they wanted me to do was sign the guest book.

The following morning I caught another train and did go on to Ohura and arriving there I looked Peggy up, and you can imagine her surprise when a Marine that she had met for about ten minutes a couple of weeks before showed up on her doorstep. But she and her family were extremely nice; they took me in and I spent about three days there with them before I had to return back to my camp. And they and everyone else who lived in this little town could not have been better or treated me any nicer.

When I got back to camp shortly after that, I...I did get promoted to Pfc which was about average; I'd been in the Marine Corps then for...oh, close to a year. But most of the people...the fellows in my outfit were in very bad condition; everybody had gotten malaria up in the Solomons except me. For some reason, I was just born immune to malaria. The doctors told me that about one person in a thousand seem to be born immune; they don't know why. But the rest of the fellows in my outfit were just having one malaria attack after another. They couldn't do very much with us as far as giving us any training because any exertions would bring on a malaria attack for them, and our fellows were just constantly going to and from the hospital...except for myself. I was in great shape when I was in New Zealand, so I especially had a good opportunity to enjoy things there.

A typical day for our...most of the time that we were in New Zealand...we would get up in the morning; have roll call; have breakfast and breakfast was always very good because, for a change, we had all the food that we could eat which was really a treat after having starved actually for so long up in the Solomons for...the situation had been very bleak. In fact, Ed even told us at one time on Gavutu to prepare to make a second Corregidor...because they didn't see any chance of bringing any supplies or reinforcements to us, and the Japanese were sending more men every day down in there....and many of them on Guadalcanal, and we couldn't even prevent them.

But to get back to New Zealand which was a much happier thing...after breakfast we were given liberty almost every day. And we'd catch the train then at the station right there in McKay's Crossing go into Paekakariki...on into Wellington...and things just really...like I say couldn't be any better. We had a hotel room there in Wellington that...about four or five of us had gone together on...so we had a meeting place to go to and while I was there I...I met a girl. I could see her working in her office from the window of the hotel room and she looked pretty nice to me, too, so I waited until I had an opportunity and I met her when she was leaving work and we got acquainted and she was an extremely nice girl. And I went with her most of the...rest of the time...in fact, all the rest of the time that I was in New Zealand. She could not have been nicer; it was...she was just a very lovely girl. Her name was June Pierce (sp?) and she lived out in Miramar district of Wellington. But we'd...we'd go to the movies; we would go out to her home; her folks were just very nice. I...I would eat dinner there with them almost every night; made my stay in New Zealand extremely enjoyable. The only bad part about the liberty...we had to be back at camp in the evening, so we did have to catch the train there late night to return to camp. We didn't have overnight liberty at all.

On another occasion while in New Zealand I had a three day liberty. This was very unusual as we just had this...we had liberty every day, but we had to come back every evening, you know. So having three days in a row...full

days...was quite unusual so I took advantage of that and again went up to see Peggy. It was a real fast trip; it was one day up on the train, and a day up there with her and her family and a day coming back. But that was the extent of our acquaintance there really in New Zealand; it was very brief but it was one that...amazing how long it has lasted because it now about sixty-four years later and we still in contact with each other all the time. We have visited her over in New Zealand a couple of times. When I say we, I mean my wife, Joyce, and I. She has been here to see us a couple of times. A number of years ago, her daughter who had just completed nurse's training and was just twenty-two came over to stop by to see us on her way to England and we just fell in love with her; she was a wonderful girl. Her name was Marie and she was just a marvelous human being! She went on to England where she become married and had a little baby over there. And a little later on we visited her there and we timed our visit to match the one that Peggy was making from New Zealand. So Joyce, my wife, Peggy and I all three got together at her daughter's home with her husband and her little nine-month old baby and we had a very good time in England driving around; looking around and they showed us around to their part of...of England where they live. Although of course, with a little baby, Marie wasn't able to do too much, but it was just a very enjoyable time there. And it...it...just say it's surprising what a short meeting with Peggy Harbottle (sp?) which her name is now and was at that time because of course she'd gotten married, too, and we just...been such good close friends ever since...her family and our family

both. In fact that little girl that was nine months old when we visited her in England...when she was sixteen years old, and she was living in New Zealand then, and she was sent to our place for a month for a visit. That was her sixteenth birthday present; she spent a month over here with us in the States and Joyce and I just really enjoyed her and showed her around and she is now living in Australia. We haven't been over there to see her, of course. The last time I was over there, my son and his wife was...along with me...and because of course, they have (unintelligible) family there, too, we...I...have been so close...it's just amazing what a brief contact started. Peggy and I did correspond throughout the war, but the actual times that we've seen each other was just a couple...until well after the war when we started traveling back and forth and visiting. But it's been very enjoyable. The other girl in New Zealand that I'd mentioned that lived in Wellington...she also wrote to me throughout the war, and she was just a very warm and loving girl, too, and we had an excellent relationship. And so after the war, well, I got married of course, and she did likewise in New Zealand, and I have lost contact with her. I hope that she had as good and enjoyable life as...as I have had...been fortunate enough to have here.

Enough of my reminiscing around; let's go back to my time in New Zealand again. It is now the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, 1943 and I had been in New Zealand about five months. And one late afternoon we were...had the company...was assembled, and the names of fifteen men were read off and were told to report

to the Company Commander. And this was an usual procedure...but it usually meant bad news...but I didn't know what I'd done that...that would be considered wrong at all...but the fifteen of us did report in his office and scowled at us for a bit and then he smiled and he says, "The fifteen of you are all on the list to go stateside leaving early tomorrow morning." He said, "Does anybody...*don't* want to go?" And you could have heard a pin drop when he said that, and he then grinned and said, "I can see that none of you are too patriotic!" But this was a complete surprise because there had been...no mention at all of anybody getting to go back home. And it was always, you know, lots of rumors and all going around but there just hadn't been anything on this; it was a complete surprise. But the reason for it was that we were getting in fifteen replacements the next day and he was told to take the fifteen men in his company that was in the worst physical condition and send them back home. Well actually I was in no better shape in my life than I was in New Zealand, however most...of my original company, like I say, were so bad off with malaria but they were in the hospital, and in order for him to find fifteen original company members, he had to include me. So the other fourteen were veterans alright; they had malaria and deserved to go home, but with me it was simply a fluke. So I got to come home from New Zealand and I was three and a half months in the United States before I went back out overseas again for the rest of the war.

Unless I got time overseas, I went first to Hawaii where I rejoined the Second Marine Division; only this time it was in the Eighth Regiment and I was assigned to headquarters in Service Company. We trained for awhile on the big island of Hawaii and then went on to Saipan where we were on D-Day; made the initial D-Day landings. I was in the third wave on Saipan. Our casualties were very heavy on Saipan and did go through the rest of that campaign there.

After a little break we then landed on Tinian. Also on D-Day...made the initial landings there on the first day and we went ahead and took that island. Our casualties on both Saipan and Tinian were extremely heavy.

We then went back to Saipan for our where our camp was set up. We stayed there for a few months getting built back up to strength.

We then went on to Okinawa; was there on D-Day; underwent kamikaze attacks, but things went so smoothly at the first of Okinawa that they sent us back to Saipan because they wanted to hold us up for the next campaign which was going to be on the main island of Japan. So, after...oh, about a month on Saipan things had started going real bad on Okinawa then, so we were sent back in that area landing first on the little islands of Ieashima (sp?) and Amerishima (sp?) and then over onto the main island of Okinawa where we were at the very end. Fact is, my regiment had the distinction of firing the

last shot on Okinawa before it was pronounced secure. An incidentally, the regiment that I was in at the beginning of the war, the Second Regiment, Second Marines, had the distinction of firing the first offense land shot of World War II. So I was in on the very first campaign of the war, as far as the United States was concerned anyhow, and on the very last campaign. I was extremely lucky to have survived all of those because the casualties in the Second Division during the time I was in there ran close to three hundred percent. And that was of course being built up, you know between landings...oh (unintelligible), I should have said about two hundred and something percent...it wasn't three hundred (unintelligible). But we had extremely...cas...heavy casualties for the war.

Just a couple of corrections on this side of the tape. I should have said our total casualties for the Second Marine Division during the war was a hundred and fifty percent; that's a seemingly impossible figure, of course, is arrived at. The fact that the division had been built back up to strength several times during the course of the war.

Another little error I made toward the beginning...I mentioned a paratroop regiment that had landed on Gavutu...I should have said the paratroop battalion...in case you use that. That was the Second Paratroop Battalion of the Marine Corps.



That about does it for this side of the tape then.

(end of tape 1, side A)

One reason New Zealand was so nice during the war was the fact that money went so far. Our pay had gone up to fifty dollars a month at that time which compared with the civilian population and the States wasn't any great amount of money, but the New Zealand serviceman wasn't paid anywhere near that much even. Our fifty dollars did go such a long way. Our favorite meal when eating out, for example, was steak and eggs and that would cost us one shilling, six pence or, in our money, about twenty five cents. The same time beer was only a thrupence a glass – big mug full and wine was a six pence a glass. So everything else was comparable in price do the cost...that way...of food and drink.

We've been back to New Zealand, of course, since and both my wife and I have enjoyed traveling pretty much all over the whole country. We've been all the way from Cape Reinga in the north to Bluff in the south. Of course on almost all of our travels around that country our good friend Peggy accompanied us the whole time. It's been a lot of fun there traveling around with her. That was a little aside; go back to...up in the Solomons before traveling to New Zealand.

At one time when we were stationed on Tulagi, there was a squad of us sent over to the island of Floridan (sp?) which is only a short distance away to a little native village called Halava (sp?). Halava was a seaplane base if you could justify calling it that. At the time I was there, we had two seaplanes; one was a PBY which was a twin-engine job. The other was a little single-engine float plane from one of the U.S. cruisers that had been sunk while the plane was aloft and so those were the two seaplanes that we had. They used them for...just observation and to watch for the Japanese fleet as it was heading down to the Solomons on quite a regular basis. There was probably about eight or nine Naval personnel that flew the planes and possibly as many as fourteen Marines that furnished security for the base, so you can see that it was a very tiny base...to say the very least! It was in a very remote area and the main reason it was there is because they could try to pull the airplanes underneath the trees along the beach so they would be hidden from the Japanese bombers when they came over.

Several years later Joyce and I were taking a tour of New England during the fall foliage. In fact it was in 1989, and along with us on the tour we met a very nice man, a Merv Davies (sp?) who was from Auckland, New Zealand; he was on the tour with his wife and he was about my age. So we started talking and, of course, the war came up and he said that he was a radioman and gunner on a small seaplane of the New Zealand navy. He was stationed up in the Solomons for awhile. So I asked him, of course, just where that was

and he laughed and he said, “Well, that was a...places that you’ve never heard of,” he said, “nobody ever has! It was a little place called Halava.” And of course, my reply was, “Know it well!” I didn’t know Merv when he was stationed there because he was sent there just shortly after I had been transferred back to Tulagi.

When you talked to me on the phone, you asked about my opinion of New Zealand, and of course, I think it is a great country; a great climate and absolutely fantastic people. I...I’ve never a New Zealander I did not like, and frankly if I lived anywhere except here, I would hope that it would be in New Zealand.

I also mentioned to you about having my story on the web - the one I had written for my family and then our son had put it on the web because he felt other people would be interested in reading it. I really think if you can bring that up, you will find more information about me that you may like to include in your story; maybe some photos in there even that you would like to include, and if so, you sure have my permission to do so. There’s no problem at all that way.

Thanks to my story on the web, I have met a lot of people that...especially historians from both New Zealand and Australia who have been interested in talking to me and filling out some of the information that they were

attempting to develop. And one of these people, for example, was a...Ewan (sp?) Stephenson (sp?) which is a...he calls himself an archaeologist historian from New Zealand, and another man by the name of Glen Mitchell (sp?) who lives in Paraparaumu Beach...just very close to where my old campsite was. Both his parents and his wife's parents had met Marines when they were stationed there, and had become very friendly with them; and in fact, they still talk to them to this day. And I've been over here to see them and some of them have been over to see them...just very much the similar story that my wife and I have with New Zealand personnel.

Interesting thing about...then I had...I had an email from him...just...oh, about two weeks ago, and his daughter is going to be bridesmaid for an American girl who is getting married about the...I think it's the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> of October of this year and she lives just about, oh, twelve miles...same...where we live, so Glen is going to stop by and see us when he's over here and we will also have a chance then to meet his wife and daughter...in fact, to meet him because while we've exchanged emails for about four or five years, I never have met him, but he seems like a real nice person and I'm really looking forward to it.

(Unintelligible words) and sending him emails...in the first place is the fact that he enjoys going up to the Solomon Islands and diving on ship wrecks and plane wrecks – ships such as the destroyer, [USS] Aaron Ward...I mentioned

in my story. He has stood on the decks of that. That destroyer is sunk a few miles off of the little island of Gavutu, so we have a lot in common even though we are different generations and live just far apart.

I think that about does it for me, Bruce; it's hard to carry on this monologue as you know yourself. I would encourage you to try to get my story, and I think you would, for one thing, find it interesting in just reading it. And also you might pick out more things that you would like to include in your story. And if you have anything else that you would like to know from me, just send me an email. I'd be very happy to try to answer and questions that you have, and I certainly wish you success on your book. I...I hope it becomes a best-seller and you sell a lot of copies! And of course I am looking forward to receiving a copy of that because naturally I want to read it. New Zealand is a...is a country that I am very fond of, and I know the relationship between New Zealand and Americans, I think, has been very good...especially from my point of view I know it has. So good luck on your story, and I wish you a whole lot of success! So, till then...so long!

(end of recording)

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