

EM: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 22nd of August, 2008, and I am interviewing J. L. Bell, Jr., in San Antonio, Texas, at his home. This interview is in support of the Center of 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.

Let me start out Mr. Bell by thanking you for spending the time today to share your experiences with us and let's just get it rolling by having you introduce yourself. Tell us when and where you were born, maybe a little bit about your parents.

JB: O.K. Well I was born in Frost, Texas, Navarro County, in 1923. June 18th, 1925. And we went to the Valley...

EM: Did you say Frost, Texas? Where is that located?

JB: Frost, Texas. That is up south of Dallas.

EM: And what did your Dad and Mom do for a living?

JB: My Dad was a farmer. He was a farmer all his life. And then later on in life—my mother passed away while I was aboard ship going to Hawaii—he went into the real estate business. He passed away, in the real estate business.

EM: So when did you guys move to the Valley?

JB: In 1923.

EM: You were still in diapers.

JB: I was about two years old when we moved to the Valley.

EM: So you grew up in the Valley?

JB: I grew up in the Valley.

EM: Brothers and sisters. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JB: I have two sisters and four brothers. Five boys and two girls.

EM: So were you the oldest?

JB: No, I was the fifth down the line.

EM: So your Dad farmed in the Valley.

JB: Oh, yeah. Cotton farmer. Grain farmer. Corn farmer.

EM: And you went to school down there in the public schools?

JB: I went to school at San Juan when I first went to school. And then we moved over to McAllen. And I went to school in McAllen. I finished school in McAllen.

EM: So you were in high school in McAllen?

JB: Yes sir.

EM: Were you out of school before the war started or were you still in school?

JB: I was out of school.

EM: So what were you doing? Working on the farm?

JB: I had my own farming business. When I went into the service, I was farming two hundred acres of vegetables. They would come by the packing shed, the service would, to pick up the vegetables. They froze us on the farm. They wouldn't let us go. And finally a bunch of us boys got together, five of us got together, and we went and talked to Mr. Conway at Mission. He was the head of the draft board. We told him that we were going to go. He said, "Well, We don't want you to go. You are down there. You're doing what we need for you to be here doing. I don't want to release you." So we said, "Well, we're going whether you release us or not." And then I went into San Antone and got inducted in.

EM: So, now, when was that? 1944?

JB: 1944.

EM: Early in the year?

JB: Well, it was...I have my dog tag here and it will tell you. I carried that...

EM: There is your dog tag. Type O blood. U.S. Marine Corps. 8/44. So that is August, 1944. So, tell me how you ended up in the Marine Corps rather than the Army or the Navy?

JB: There was a fellow, an old-timer—he had been in World War I—and he was picking out the people that he wanted up in San Antone at Fort Sam and he pulled me out right quick. I had gone with one of his cousins from Brownsville and I think he had it out for me.

EM: So, he decided you looked like what? A Marine?

JB: Yeah, he said, "You are going with me." And I did.

EM: So, why do you figure he did that?

JB: Well, I think. .. I was a strong man at the time. When I went into the service, I didn't weigh but a hundred and thirty pounds but I was tougher than a damn mule.

EM: Where did they send you for basic?

JB: We went to California.

EM: On a train?

JB: On a train—a damn cattle train.

EM: So it wasn't too luxurious.

JB: No. We were on a cattle train.

EM: Were you going with some buddies who had gone into the service at the same time that you did, or were you alone?.

JB: No. There were five of us. There was a boy from McAllen who went in at the same time. And then there was a Mexican boy that went in at the same time. And there was another guy from McAllen that was in the Border Patrol that volunteered and went in. There were five of us that went in.

EM: So, this would be your first trip to California?

JB: Yes, it was my first trip to California.

EM: Had you ever been on a train before?

JB: Oh, yeah, I'd been on a train.

EM: But not for that long a haul.

JB: Nope.

EM: So, what was Basic like?

JB: Basic? Oh, we had some tough damn old sergeants that was so tough on us. They made us pay attention. When we got into a little problem with one of the others in there, they put boxing gloves on us and we had to take care of it.

EM: Put boxing gloves on you and let you kind of sort it out?

JB: Yeah.

EM: Did you win?

JB: Well, yeah, most times.

EM: So you are a boxer as well?

JB: Well, I was at one time. Like I tell you, I was a pretty tough old boy back then.

EM: So what kind of things were they training you to be? An infantryman? Or were you in artillery?

JB: An infantryman. They were teaching us to be in the infantry. We were not in very long. Then we went over to the Parker Ranch in Hawaii. We pulled maneuvers over there. And, then, when we left there we went into Japanese territory.

EM: They shipped you right on out. So, how long were you at the Parker Ranch?

JB: I would say it was just a few months.

EM: So, what kind of training were you doing there?

JB: We were right there, laying on the damn ground, working all the different formations, you know.

EM: Digging foxholes?

JB: Well, we weren't digging foxholes. We actually never did dig foxholes, because over on Iwo Jima they had the bombed out places that we could get in.

EM: Instant foxholes. Now did you do any amphibious...?

JB: It was fifteen miles from our camp to the ocean there in Hawaii. And, they would make us go down that thing and come back nearly every day.

EM: Fifteen down and fifteen back up.

JB: Fifteen down and fifteen back up.

EM: Did they any amphibious landing practices?

JB: We did a few, there, that they showed us about getting off of them, you know, getting on them and getting off of them. They were landing ships that they put the nose up on the bank and you get out. Then, the one that I climbed out of the ship. We had some big old ropes and stuff. We came down and go into those landing ships to go into Iwo Jima. We had an old boy from.., a Lieutenant that got on with us. He was in the tank corps and he went in with our bunch.

EM: Now, this was when you went in on Iwo?

JB: That's when we went in on Iwo.

EM: Well, let's go back to Hawaii for a minute. What do remember most about that time at the Parker Ranch other than all the hard work they put you through? Did they feed you ok?

JB: Oh, yeah, we always got good food. And that was some of the best coffee that you would ever drink, that Kona coffee. We were just actually working every day. Then they had a school over there and we would go over and play basketball.

EM: So, what did the countryside look like? That's on the big island, isn't it?

JB: Yeah, it's on the big island. It's more like our country. It had some hills and all and there was a volcano up there on the top, too, that it erupted and threw me out of my sack one night. We had an old gal there that made banana pies.

EM: What kind of pies?

JB: Banana. And I mean she knew how to make them.

EM: She made them and you ate them?

JB: Yeah, and I will tell you a little more about that on down the way. That was the Parker Ranch-- the next biggest ranch to the King Ranch.

EM: I have heard that.

JB: That's where they gave it to us for our training.

EM: So you were there for several months and then, what did they do? Pack all you guys up?

JB: We were there, like I say, three months. And then they moved us over to the island where they bombed it, you know.

EM: Oahu.

JB: Oahu. From there they gassed up, fueled up, and we shipped out of there.

EM: So what did they do? Put you on a troop ship?

JB: They put us on a troop ship. From there we went to...

EM: And you did not know where you were going, did you, you just knew you were going to where...

JB: No. We did not know exactly where we were going.

EM: Was that when they first formed the 5th Marines? Or had the 5th Marines...

JB: No. I don't know just when they formed the 5th Marines.
I know that I was in the 5th Marines and it was abandoned after the battle of Iwo Jima and we were put in the 2nd Marines.

EM: OK. So, where did you land, then, when they sent you out? Did you go to Guam or Saipan or some place like that?

JB: No. We went straight to Iwo.

EM: You went straight to Iwo.

JB: Straight to Iwo.

EM: No sight-seeing tours on the way.

JB: No sir.

EM: When did you know that that was where you were going to be going?

JB: Well, they had told us later on, well, not..., just before we got there, really, they had told us where we were going. But they thought that we were going to be there... They had it planned that we going to be there seventy-two hours. And we ended up thirty-six days.

EM: Didn't work out just according to plan, did it?

JB: No. They had trenches under that thing that went under that island from one end of the island to the other. Some as many as they said five trenches.

EM: Five?

JB: Five trenches. Where they could come up behind us, you know, just as good as come in front of you.

EM: So, you are a rifleman. Is that right?

JB: Yes sir.

EM: And so you are in with a bunch of other riflemen and there's a mortar squad and a flamethrower with you guys?

JB: Yeah, we had all that. And then we had the tanks behind us.

EM: Describe to me D-Day. Landing Day. Did they get you up early in the morning, or did you sleep any the night before?

JB: Well. We were a little..

EM: What was on your mind?

JB: Getting on that island.

EM: Without getting shot.

JB: We had an old boy, a Lieutenant, that got on our boat, and he told that coxswain, he said, "you are not going to drown my boys." I was in the second wave.

EM: Second wave?

JB: Second wave. And he said, "You are not going to drown my boys." A lot of them, they would dump them too early, you know. He said, "You are going to put this up on sand and if you don't put it up there, I'm going to put it up there."

EM: What was his name?

JB: I can't remember what his name was.

EM: Well, at least he was looking out for you guys.

JB: Yeah. And, after we hit shore, we starting jumping in these damn holes, that they'd bombed and all, you know

EM: What was it like going in?

JB: Well, they kind of let us get in. Then they started putting their ammunition against us.

EM: So there wasn't a lot of resistance until you actually got on the island.

JB: That's right. And our bunch, they had started putting the bulldozers and stuff over there, because it was a real sandy, sulphur deal. They put bulldozers over there, they were setting over there, and they said, "Does anybody know how to run them?" Well,"Yeah, hell yeah, I'll run one of them." And I got on one and they started bringing that metal stuff they put down on the sand so that they can get all the equipment in. And I pulled that damn stuff up and put the strings, you know. I did that the first day I was over there.

EM: So at this point, you weren't under fire?

JB: Well, yeah, hell they were killing us all over the place. I lucked out and I am sitting on a damn bulldozer. I don't know how I missed it. But I did. I did that first and then I went back to my company and that's when we started going up toward the mountain.

We were on the Red Beach. They had all of our helmets marked in colors where we were supposed to go in. Ours was Red Beach. And we went in on what they called Red Beach and we were on the outside echelon going up the mountain. After we took that, we turned around and took the airstrip. The boys in the Second Battalion did the same thing and that is where this boy Harlan Block that helped put the flag up was killed two days later. He was killed taking the air strip.

EM: So, which battalion was it that actually put the flag on Mt. Suribachi?

JB: One of the companies in the Second Battalion. There are four companies in a battalion. He was in one that put it up.

EM: And where were you when the flag went up?

JB: Well, we had already turned around. There was a guy from Minnesota that had gotten up there and put a little flag up. He found a piece of pipe and put a little flag up. But Rosenthal got a big flag brought off of a ship and they put the big flag up. And I didn't see it when it went up.

EM: You were headed north then, working your way up the island?

JB: Yes sir.

EM: So, when did you run into the most severe resistance by the Japanese?

JB: Our company, and some more companies, tried to take the command post. And they were killing us off like flies.

EM: Where was the command post?

JB: It was on up from the air base. I don't know. Let me get something, I might have some stuff here. I might..

EM: I'll turn this off while you look.

JB: I still don't have anything good about the Japanese.

EM: I understand. Alright, we were talking about where you ran into the stiffest resistance and you said you were working your way back up the island towards the Japanese command post. Is that correct?

JB: That's right.

EM: So tell me what happened.

JB: Well, after we got up there, we took that, we turned around and we came back down and we worked on taking the air strip. We got the air strip taken and then we had the command post, which was directly in front of us from the air port. They were just killing us off like flies.

EM: So you were trying to storm that command post?

JB: Yes sir. Old Skinhead Sheppard. He was the head of our battalion.

EM: What was his last name?

JB: Sheppard. He said, "We can't take it this way." And they relieved him of his command and put a Major in to command. And we did it about like Mr. Sheppard said to do it.

EM: How did he say to do it?

JB: He wanted us to go around them and come in their back side.

EM: And is that what you did?

JB: And that is what we basically did.

EM: Tell me how that went.

JB: Well it went a lot better. We killed a lot less boys. Anyway..

EM: Were you out in the open when you were doing this the original way?

JB: Yes. We were in the open. You might say they had us pinned down. But, anyway, we got to the command post and then they escaped out of there, the command post. And then we just kept on going on to the end of the island.

EM: Did you actually go into the command post after you took it?

JB: No, I didn't but some of them did.

EM: None of them surrendered?

JB: None of them surrendered. That was a no-no. They were supposed to kill themselves before surrendering. And we found lots of them that did kill themselves.

EM: So that was the toughest part of it for your company?

JB: That was the toughest part that we had. But we had another air strip that another company was taking and we got both air strips taken. Then we went off to the end. Like I say, it was supposed to have been seventy-two hours and it was thirty-six days.

EM: Who do you figure thought it was going to be seventy-two hours? I guess it was all the Generals and Admirals.

JB: They thought we'd just.. ,you know. They didn't realize they'd undermined that thing with trenches. They tell you in some of that literature that there were some of them were five foot deep, I mean five different layers of them.

EM: Like an underground city.

JB: Yeah. And they had places, little old holes, coming up, some of them, they'd jump up out of there and just kill off a bunch of us and then jump back in and go down.

EM: I guess the flamethrowers helped a lot on that.

JB: Oh, hell yes. That's what got me out. I didn't wake up until I got back to the aid station. I got back there and come back to.

EM: Tell me what happened.

JB: Well, what happened, I was picking off way down the road there, probably a thousand yards, which we could not reach at the time, but the Japs were running back and forth over there. And anyway, well one popped up out of a hole and he got five of us just like that.

EM: Five of your guys right there on the spot?

JB: Five of us right on the spot. Yes sir.

EM: And popped back in before you could do anything about it?

JB: That's right. Before we could do anything about it. But we brought the flamethrower up there and they had that on a.. . Anyway, they brought it up and they burned the spot. But he'd already escaped. Hell, there was no telling where he'd gone.

EM: Now, you don't know whether they got him or not.

JB: No. Hell no. There's no telling whether they did or not. The boy that went with me from McAllen was a football player. He never smoked in his life. And his name was Wayne Jackson. And he got up out of the foxhole, or one of those craters, and light a cigarette up for a boy who got wounded and they killed him. And two days later on the seventeenth was when I got hit.

EM: Tell me how that happened.

JB: That happened just like I told you. Taking after them damn Japs running over there. And I was just raised up enough to where this guy popped up out of a hole.

EM: Now, you've got the helmet here with us while we are doing the interview here. And I can still see the red mark on the helmet which was the mark of you going in on Red Beach.

JB: That's right.

EM: And I see two quite distinct holes in this helmet, one on the side, kind of above your right temple and I guess this one in the back.. is that the exit?

JB: That's the exit. I bent it back down. What it did, it cut the helmet lining. It knocked me out cold.

EM: Just like a boxer knocking you out.

JB: I just went out and I did not wake up until I got to the aid station.

EM: So you never know what hit you?

JB: No.

EM: And you woke up at the aid station, is that right?

JB: That's right. I spent the night there. And then I went back to my company the next day.

EM: So all they did was put a little iodine on you and a patch.

JB: They didn't actually put any iodine. They just cut a little of the hair off the side of my face.

EM: So they gave you a haircut?

JB: Yes.

EM: You are a very fortunate man.

JB: Well, I felt very fortunate. But you know, I had some of the boys there with us that they said, "Well, today is my day. They are going to get me today."

EM: Is that what they would say?

JB: Yeah. And I'd think, "You are crazy as hell. That slant-eyed son of a bitch is not going to kill me."

EM: Yeah. They shouldn't think like that.

JB: Yeah, but that is the way it was. They just decided that they were going to get killed.

EM: And some of them did.

JB: Some of them did.

EM: So many of your friends did you lose there during the battle?

JB: Oh, I can't tell you. We ended up, the truck drivers and everybody came to help because there were so many of us killed off.

EM: Really?

JB: They abandoned the 5th Division after Iwo Jima. There weren't enough left to be in the 5th Division.

EM: Is that right?

JB: That's right.

EM: So, they disbanded the 5th after Iwo?

JB: There was no 5th left. They had killed so many of us, there was not a 5th left.

EM: Who took it the hardest, do you think, the riflemen, was that where most of the

JB: There's where most of them got killed, was the riflemen.

EM: So, after you were wounded, and then you were back in action almost immediately,

JB: I was wounded on the 17th and I think we finished it on the 26th.

EM: So there was still work to be done then and so you kept pushing toward the northern end of the island?

JB: To the northern end. And we went plum to the northern end. And then we circled around and all the Japanese they were jumping off of cliffs because they didn't want to be captured. They didn't want to be captured and they just jump off a cliff and commit suicide.

EM: Were these the Japanese soldiers or was it some of the civilians?

JB: Soldiers. They had gotten most of their girls out, and women out, and there was just the men. The old boy that was the head of the thing, well, he committed suicide.

EM: Did you actually get to go into any of the underground bunkers that they had had?

JB: I wouldn't go into one of those damn things if you...

EM: No thank you, huh.

JB: Some of the boys that did that, they cut their pricks off, their ears off. They did stuff that you can't imagine, the torture they put in to the ones ...

EM: These are people that they took prisoner? GIs they took prisoner?

JB: The ones that tried to go into one of those bunkers. One of those caves, really. They tortured them. You can't believe how they tortured them.

EM: How does that make you feel about...

JB: What we'd do, we'd take dynamite, and blow the front end of it plum up, roll the dirt at the front of it.

EM: Just seal them off?

JB: Yeah, seal them off.

EM: So how do you feel about the Japanese after that?

JB: Well, this is the way I feel about it. I had a friend here the other day say he was going to buy a Japanese pickup. My son told him, he said, "You're going to lose one of your best friends if you do." He backed off.

EM: Did he really? I probably should not have come in my Toyota today, should I?

JB: We have let them take over and do anything they want to over here. I don't believe in it. They did this on us, the surprise deal, and I don't think we ought to cater to them. But that's my opinion. Now we can go on to something else.

EM: No, I understand. So, at the end of the campaign there in Iwo, you got back on a troop ship and they took you guys off the island and took you back to Hawaii, is that what I heard you say?

JB: That's right. I spent ten months in Japan.

EM: So you were in Japan?

JB: Yeah. They took us to Japan and what we did in Japan was we were companies out at different locations. And most of them, well, we had the location, we had was the Japanese had places that they trained in. So we took those places and all that ammunition that Japan had piled up in those caves, we took those Japanese and worked them, take that ammunition out of those caves and put them on barges and take the ammunition out to sea and dump it off in the ocean

EM: OK, so let me make sure that I understand here. After the Iwo Jima campaign was over, you went back to Hawaii and you were there when the war was over.

JB: That's right.

EM: And then you went to the occupational forces in Japan?

JB: We went back to Hawaii and they came in, the Second Division, came in and joined us and we were put in the Second Division in Hawaii. And then the 10th Army came in and we were spearheading for the 10th Army. And we did that for several months. When they dropped the A-bomb, well that was when we went to Japan.

EM: OK. So there was Okinawa after Iwo Jima, then the bombs and then Japan surrendered. Do you remember VJ day when they surrendered?

JB: I sure do.

EM: Tell me what you did that day.

JB: I drank a lot of beer, I think.

EM: So everybody was in a pretty good mood for a change.

JB: Well, we were happy boys.

EM: So you were in Hawaii when that happened.

JB: Yeah, we were in Hawaii when that happened.

EM: At that point you went on to Japan.

JB: Then we loaded up and we went on to Japan and we were stationed there. In fact, our clothes, our sea bags, never caught up with us. They were put on a different ship, and when we got over there, we did not have anything but our field packs. We drew our supplies from the 10th Army.

EM: They didn't make you wear an Army outfit, did they?

JB: No, but some of us stole some of the jackets and stuff when it was cold to wear.

EM: So where in Japan did you actually go to?

JB Well, we went into Nagasaki, where the bomb..

EM: The second bomb.

JB: The second bomb, yeah. And then we also took a rest leave one time and we went up to Hiroshima where they dropped the first bomb. And, they wiped out Hiroshima. I mean it was flattened purely. Nagasaki wasn't quite as bad. But Hiroshima, it wiped it out flat.

EM: So when you were at Nagasaki, were you right there close to town? Where did they put you up when you were in Japan?

JB: We had a little old town out there, I can't even remember the name of it, but it was a little old town...I can't remember the name of that place.

EM: It doesn't matter. But you were a stone's throw from Nagasaki?

JB: Yeah, we were a stone's throw from it, but we were several miles from it. All our companies were scattered all over there, all the places. And we were working the Japanese to throw away their ammunition.

EM: You were telling me earlier that you went in and had Japanese drag their ammunition out of the caves.

JB: Well, what we did was, the boys would take the Japanese people and take them to these caves and take the ammunition out and then they would put it on barges and take it out to sea and dump it in the ocean.

EM: So, did you have to go with them and make sure that they pulled it all out?

JB: At that time we had to go up where this place was where we were, was about eight miles, and we had to walk up to that location because we didn't have any transportation over there at that time. Anyway, and big old pine trees where this camp was, in all, it was a beautiful place.

EM: What was Japan like? It was pretty?

JB: It was pretty. It was pretty.

EM: How did the people treat you guys? What was their attitude?

JB: They all... Some of them would turn their back on us, but most of them that we had working... O yeah, what I was going to tell you, I stood guard the first night. Then next day they needed some cooks, so I said, "Well, hell, I can cook. I know how to cook." And I ended up, I was a cook over there.

EM: You drove bulldozers, you were a rifleman, you were a cook.

JB: I was a cook over there for the company.

EM: Did they have tents? What did they do to house you guys?

JB: No, we had these places that the Japs had left. We had barracks.

EM: So you had the Japanese military barracks.

JB: We had their barracks. We had nice... I ended up, four commanders called us in one time and they asked me if I'd stay in. And I said, "no, I'm going back to what I did before." They said, "well, we'll give you another rating, if you will stay in." And I said, "well, give it to somebody that wants to stay in, because I want to go back home."

EM: Was this while you were still in Japan?

JB: Yes sir. And then we got talking about vegetable farming and all, and they wanted to know how you think they should get these vegetable over here and all this. And we just had a nice conversation, you know, and I told them, I said, "I want to go back home. I want to go back to my farming." So I passed up getting an extra rating to stay over there.

EM: So you were there for ten months in Japan?

JB: Ten months, yes.

EM: Did you notice the Japanese attitude, did it change over that ten months? Did things kind of settle down?

JB: You know, I think they got to where they kind of liked us. Really, I don't think.. There were some of them, you know that... we had to have... some of our boys would take and meet the boats that were bringing these people that were captured, you know, in, and they did not like it very well.

EM: Now, these were the Japanese prisoners of war being brought back to Japan?

JB: Yes sir. I had some work for me there in the cooking department and they were a congenial and nice group of people.

EM: Did they speak English?

JB: No, but they got to where they could understand some and I got to where I could speak a little of their language.

EM: I have heard a lot about the American Allied prisoners of war that were held in Japan. Did you ever get exposed to or become aware of any of the POW camps in Japan?

JB: No. I didn't.

EM: So do you feel like they really did get all the ammunition out of those caves and put them on the barges?

JB: I think they did. I think they did.

EM: They had a lot of ammunition still.

JB: They had a lot of ammunition, and everything was dumped at sea.

EM: I guess it's good we didn't have to invade Japan.

JB: Oh, I wouldn't be here.

EM: You wouldn't be here?

JB: They already told us we were going to be self survivors. "You're going to be on our own." Hell, they had, all those people over there who had weapons, you know... I brought back some sabers. Some of those men that worked for me, they gave me some sabers and stuff to bring back. I have a Japanese rifle that I brought back. My son has it now. But I had another stock put on it. It's a pretty little rifle.

EM: So what do you think was the toughest time for you when you were in the South Pacific? When was it the roughest, just looking back on the whole thing now.

JB: The roughest time was when I lost my Mother while I as aboard ship going over there. I lost her, that put a kink in me. And the rest of the time we were in battle. It was just gung-ho, you know, gung-ho.

EM: What was the most heroic act that you saw while you were over there by your fellow Marines?

JB: I don't know that I can answer that because it was all just a nightmare. You know, we just didn't know who was going to be the next day, really. Who was going to be there.

EM: Do you ever have dreams about those days? After you came back.

JB: I did. I had a hard time sleeping when I came back for I don't know how long, but I did have some problems. But, I got over it.

EM: So after your ten months in post-war Japan, your time was up. That was when they tried to get you to stay on and you said, No thank you."

JB: I just told them that I was going back to my farming and vegetable growing and we got into a conversation with them, how can we get vegetables over there in better shape. We got a lot of vegetables out of Australia. We had a lot of Australia boys that came over there and they ran for eight years before they could go back.

EM: Was this after the war?

JB: That was after the war.

EM: So what were the Aussies like?

JB: They were pretty nice old boys. I kinda liked them. They were pretty nice boys. But they had like eight years in the service. And I think most of it was, they didn't get to go back home.

EM: So you went back to the US on a troop ship, or did you fly?

JB: We went back on a troop ship. We went back into California on a troop ship. We didn't have any uniforms or anything and we went over to the recruits and borrowed some of their uniforms to go in to party.

EM: To the party? Tell me about the party.

JB: We went in and we drank a little bit.

EM: Just a little bit.

JB: Yeah.

EM: To celebrate. So how did it feel being back in the US?

JB: Oh, man, it was just like a new world.

EM: So, did you leave the service then, right after you got back to the states?

JB: Yeah, they checked us all out for, health-wise, and all. And, then relieved us. There was some of the bunch that I was with that we got a DC-3 airplane and we paid the pilots and they dropped us off. They dropped me off in Austin. But, it started out in California and went all the way into New York.

EM: You had to pay them to drop you off, or was it just a regular airline?

JB: No, it was just a... I don't know whether it was a personal airline or what, but, anyway, he contracted to take us all, drop us off at each location. And when we got to one place... I had him to stop. And I took all the boys across to Mexico.

EM: Oh, you stopped, like, in El Paso or something like that?

JB: It was in El Paso.

EM: You went across the border?

JB: We went across the border and showed the boys around over there. They had never been to Mexico.

EM: Now, this is the way we do it in Texas.

JB: Anyway, well, they dropped us there. My brother was in the Seabees, he'd already gotten out. And he and his wife picked me up in Austin. And my Dad had bought a ranch up north of Kerrville, Mountain Home. And, we went up to the ranch. My Dad had remarried. And, anyway, I don't know, I just wasn't likeing to it, but, anyway, we went up there and spent the weekend and then went to the Valley.

EM: So, you had not married yet, at that point?

JB: No sir.

EM: So, you were single when you were overseas?

JB: I was single. I had a girl friend, but she got pregnant and got married.

EM: Oh well.

JB: Well, we had an air base down in Mission. All the airplane pilots trained down there. And, there was a lot of older boys running around there dating the girls.

EM: Crazy things going on.

JB: Yeah.

EM: So, when you look back on that experience that you had in the South Pacific, how did that change you as a person?

JB: Well, there's a lot of the veterans who have gone back over to Iwo Jima. And, I could go, if I wanted to, but, I don't have any desire to back to that old sulphur place. I've had all I need of it.

EM: Once is enough.

JB: Once is enough. I just don't have any desire to go back over. The VFW and the American Legion, they are always getting a group together to go over, to take a bunch over there some times, you know, but I don't have any desire to go back over. I've had all of that that I want.

EM: That was a tough time.

JB: It was the toughest time I've had in my life...to stay alive.

EM: I know people always ask this question, did you ever have time to be scared when you were in the middle of Iwo Jima over there?

JB: Not really. Not really. We just had a job we had to do and we, just, we did it. We just took care of each other, you know. But they didn't want us to get real close, because they knew a bunch was going to get killed and they didn't want us to get real close. But we did. We looked after each other. We looked after each other.

EM: Kind of like family?

JB: That's right.

EM: Well, what else can we talk about while I've got you on tape here, about the war years. What else would you like to say or discuss?

JB: That's about it, I guess. Oh, I wanted to tell you about that old gal who made her pies. Well her husband had gone back to Japan to visit some relatives.

EM: Was she of Japanese descent?

JB: He was Japanese. She was.

EM: Now this was back on Parker Ranch.

JB: Parker Ranch. They put him in the service. Wouldn't let him come back. And, anyway, before.. I don't know whether it was before we took the command post or when, but he didn't do this to our company, but he held up his hands and surrendered to one of the companies in the 5th Division. And they shipped him back to the States. And he pinpointed all the different things on Iwo Jima.

EM: Was he an American citizen?

JB: No, I don't think so. He must have been at one time. From Japan.

EM: And then he went back to visit relatives and the war started and they put him in the Japanese army and he surrendered at Iwo and came back and collaborated with the Americans and told them where some of the stuff was in Iwo that the Japanese had.

JB: And I'll tell you another story. Ira Hayes, that Indian boy that put the flag up. He walked and hitch-hiked to the Valley. From Arizona. And Mr. Block was out in a cotton field and he came in and he encountered him on the road that he was walking on and he told Mr. Block, he said, "That was your son that was in that flag-raising, and don't let anybody tell you what." Because they pinpointed another Marine as in Harlan Block's place. Mr. Block said, "I want you to come in and eat lunch with us." He said, "No." He turned around and walked and hitch-hiked all the way back to Arizona. And, they made a complete..., some of these stamps and all, well, he was in on that. And they finally threw him out of that, but they made a complete alcoholic out of him. And, he died in a gutter, out in Arizona.

EM: There was something of that story in the movie, wasn't there? Flags of Our Fathers?

JB: I can't remember whether there was or not.

EM: I seem to remember that scene where he went back and went to the father of .. That's an interesting story.

JB: Mr. Block, well, his wife had left and gone with the kids out to California, and moved out there, and Mr. Block was still there in the Valley, and he hitch-hiked and walked all that way.

EM: Well, those are interesting stories. How many more interesting stories can I get out of you while we have got you on the tape, here? You keep coming up with new ones.

JB: Well, like I say, my old mind doesn't work as good as it used to. But that's about... I've covered about all I know about.

EM: Well, let me close, then, by I think speaking for all of us younger generations in thanking you, one more time, for what you and your generation did for our country, and I still don't think we say that often enough, so I just want to say it again.

JB: Well, I'll be over there....if I'm still living in 2010, I'll be over there again.

EM: You'll come up for the Iwo Jima reunion up in Fredericksburg?

JB: Yes sir.

EM: That's good. We'll look forward to seeing you up there.

JB: What are they having over there now? They are having something over there now, aren't they?.

EM: I'll tell you what. Let me turn this tape off now.

JB: I forgot to tell you that the Navaho Indians handled all our radio messages on Iwo Jima. They used their native language so the messages could not be interpreted by the enemy. I think it's very important they be recognized for their enormous contribution to the war.

Tape 2270

Transcribed by:

Robert B. Phelps

New Orleans, Louisiana

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