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An Interview with

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Copperas Cove, Texas
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31st Seabee Battalion

My name is Richard Misenhimer and this tape was done by Mr. B. C. Peters around 2000. His phone number is 254-547-2093. His address is: 808 Martin Luther King Blvd, Copperas Cove, Texas 76522. This interview is in support of the National Museum of Pacific War, Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Peters

On September 12, 1942 I was taken in as a First Class Seaman. The enlisted grades in the Navy from bottom to top are Apprentice Seaman, Second Class Seaman, First Class Seaman, Third Class Petty Officer, Second Class Petty Officer, First Class Petty Officer, and Chief. I traveled on a train from Dallas to Camp Endicott, which was a new camp in Rhode Island. We were divided into companies there. I ended up in Headquarters Company. We spent about six weeks in boot camp, which was very rigorous training at that time. After boot camp we did some advanced training for several months. In November of 1942 we went to Bermuda. We were taken there on an old ship called the *Orsova*. It was a World War I troop transport, a round bottomed thing that didn't ride the waves very well. A lot of our people got sick. We were escorted there by two destroyers because at that time the submarine menace was very bad along the Atlantic coast. As a matter of fact it was said that one out of every five ships that left the East Coast at about that time was sunk by German submarines.

On the way to Bermuda we were called to General Quarters twice, which is simply an expression for saying, "Go to your compartment in the ship" and they lock you in there and close all the doors. That's where you will be. It sounds a little bit unusual but you can understand the reason why. If a torpedo hits the ship and penetrates the hull, it might just flood one compartment and the rest of the ship would be saved. But it isn't a very comfortable feeling to know that you are locked in there and there is a German submarine out there somewhere. However, the destroyers did a good job and I suppose the Germans decided not to attack our ship.

When we arrived in Bermuda, we took over some barracks that had been occupied by someone prior to that time. These barracks were comfortable but very crowded. They had a company in each one of the barracks and that just filled it from bottom to top. There were double-decker bunks, about 6 or 8 feet

apart which left only an aisle between the bunks of about 2 to 2 ½ feet wide. We were assigned several tasks when we got to Bermuda. I think the three major ones were to build a refueling station that could operate by gravity from the storage tank to the ships. Of course fuel had to be pumped from the ship up the hill to the storage tank and that was the first job I was assigned, jackhammering a trench to put the pipeline in using a 90 pound jackhammer. You can imagine what it was doing to about a 125 pound person. I think I was jumping up and down more than the jackhammer was. Thank heavens that didn't last but a day or two and then they started to form some survey parties. I guess my resume showed that I had considerable survey experience, so I was assigned to one of the three survey crews. At that time it was headed up by a Chief. His name was A.B. Mitchell. Our first task was to set some construction stakes and do some surveys for the construction of a submarine dock at St. Georges, which was on the opposite end of the island from where we were. We did that and that didn't take very long at all. Then we were assigned the task of surveying for a military highway from near Hamilton all the way to the far end of the island. We were told that the highway was necessary because there were so many German submarines operating in that area they were afraid that the Germans would invade the island and establish a submarine base there. Of course that was very close to America's East Coast and could not be allowed. That was a task that took a long, long time. We did all of the surveying necessary and we were working on the plans when they decided that the submarine menace had been gotten under control and they would not build the highway. We came back to the barracks and it wasn't too long after that, I think it must have been in about the fall of 1943 we were taken back to Rhode Island to Camp Endicott. It was a great change in weather between Bermuda and Camp Endicott, Rhode Island. Bermuda was a very pleasant island to live on. The temperature ranged usually from about 40, which would be considered a cold spell in the winter time, to about 80 to 85 in the heat of the day in the warmest part of the year. It was kind of humid, but we certainly should have considered ourselves lucky to be stationed on an island that was that beautiful and had such a wonderful climate. We didn't know it but we found out later that we would pay for that experience by being assigned to a place that wasn't as near as pleasant as that was.

When we got back to Rhode Island we shipped out a whole bunch of our higher graded people because when they formed Seabee battalions, according to your ability, they filled up all the ranks

enlisted from Chief right down to Apprentice Seaman and were assigned so there was no room for promotions. When we got back to Camp Endicott they shipped some of the higher grades out so that allowed some of the people that were lower grades to be promoted. There must have been some slack somewhere because when we got back to Rhode Island I had been promoted to a Third Class Petty Officer. At Camp Endicott we immediately went into some more advanced training. We had a lot of work to do with grenades and I was assigned as Crew Chief of an 81mm mortar squad. After spending considerable time on the advanced training phase of the program, my survey party was moved to a satellite area where they did work ranges and some other facilities. The job that we were to do was to make a topographic map of the area showing all of the buildings and roads and other facilities as well as the contour of the land. We completed that job in about two months, but it happened to come at the very middle of wintertime. In order to make a topographic map showing contours you had to have elevations very close together all over the whole area. The thing that I remember that presented quite a problem, there was snow about two feet deep at the time and the Rodman was always wondering if his rod had reached the ground and wasn't setting on some hard snow. That was quite a job. It was very cold but we got it done and I got some good experience there.

We left Rhode Island in the late spring of that year and went by troop train to Camp Rousseau in California. That troop train thing was quite an experience. They routed us instead of a direct line to get us to California as soon as possible, they stayed on what was called Land Grant Railroads, which simply meant that the government had given the land to the railroads to build lines on and consequently the government didn't have to pay to move troops along those lines. So, I guess it is about 3,000 miles across the country but we must have gone about 6,000 miles because we would go east a while and then west a while and then north and south and you can't imagine the route we took through there. I tried to plot it one time. It looked like a worm had crawled across the sheet of paper. We stayed at Camp Rousseau for I don't remember how long, but we later moved to a naval base that was called an ACORN Base. It was more Navy and Marine than Seabee. The training was quite difficult at that time. We were getting ready to be shipped overseas and we could tell somebody was trying to get us in real good physical condition.

We were shipped from California to Hawaii on a ship that was called an APA. It was a troop transport ship and it was much better suited than that old *Orsova* that we were on when we went to Bermuda. It seemed like we had a few luxuries. The meals seemed to be a little better and there was a little bit more room. It wasn't quite as crowded on that ship. When we got to Hawaii we landed on what was called the Big Island, the island of Hawaii. We were taken by sugarcane train to a little place. We landed at Hilo and we were put on this sugarcane train and went way up into the mountains where we were put off. Some Marines met us there with stake-body trucks and took us to our tent area. We arrived there just a little bit after dark. Of course, we had been separated from our sea bags and our duffel bags so after we stood around there a while they said, "There are two big piles of sea bags and duffel bags over there and you can go get yours and take it to a certain tent." And they told us which tent to go to. It was in the dark and 1,200 sea bags and 1,200 duffel bags and you were trying to find yours. (Laugh) It was kind of a comedy really. We got to laughing about it, it was so ridiculous. We finally got our stuff moved and got into our tents. There was not much more than Army cots, wooden and canvas cots. We put our bags on that and thought that at least we are in here in we are dry but we had not eaten anything since noon. By that time it was getting to be about 9:00 or 10:00, maybe 11:00. I don't remember but it was good and dark. It came one of those torrential rains and we found out that our tent had a whole lot of holes in the top of it and we were trying to move our cots around so that the water wouldn't run in and fall on us. It was kind of like playing shuffleboard. We finally got kind of situated where everybody was pretty much in the dry. They told us then to go to the mess hall, that they were ready to feed us now. Like I said, that was way up into the night and it was still raining in torrents. The mess hall ended up being a Quonset hut with an entrance on one side and an exit on the other and no place to sit down. When you got to the door there you unfolded your mess gear and walked through the line. I can remember the menu for that night. It was cold salmon and it looked like about a half of a number two can of cold salmon, that each one of us got and they put a great big wad, a heaping tablespoon of peanut butter on the top of it and then a half of a pear right up on the top of that. We got that loaded and they gave us a cup of coffee. We were new to the mess gear thing. If you can imagine how confused you would be trying to do all that. Then they just ran us out the door. There we were out in the rain, coming down as hard as I have ever seen it in my life.

There we were with our mess gear in our hands, raining. I could see salmon juice and pear and peanut butter and everything else, when the raindrops would hit it, it would splash over the side. But nevertheless, we got over there the best we could and ate some of it anyway, I guess enough to satisfy ourselves a little while. Of course, by then the peanut butter had coated this aluminum mess tray and they said there were some GI cans over there with some water in them and a little mop hanging on the side and you were supposed to wash your mess gear out with that. We went over there and the water wasn't hot. We took the little mop and all we did was paint the inside of our mess gear with peanut butter. We finally said, "To heck with it. We will worry about this tomorrow" and we went to bed. Tomorrow started very early I can assure you of that, as did every morning in Hawaii.

The place where we were located at in Hawaii was way up in the highlands. It was desert-like country that reminds me of Texas in a way. There was cactus. It was a ranch, part of the Parker Ranch, a very large and famous cattle ranch on Hawaii. You would have sworn you were out in West Texas somewhere. Very near there was a mountain range, just to the east of us and that was a tropical forest. It rained there. After I got out of the Navy, I read one time that annual rainfall in that place was the highest of any place that they knew about. It was something like 400 inches a year or something. We would go there. These rains would come in on a very regular schedule. They would come in most of the time right after dark. It would rain extremely hard for maybe an hour to an hour and a half or something. Then the sky would clear and you would see the stars again and it would be nice and calm. For recreation, sometime if we had time off and wasn't training, we would walk up into the mountains. We found a beautiful waterfall there. It must have fallen 100 to 150 feet. The water landed in a very clear, deep pool at the bottom of it; a perfect swimming place. We just loved to go up there. We could walk behind the waterfall; there was a little shelf there. I've seen situations like this on TV since then and I always think about that particular place. It was one of the nice things about being there at the time. Another unusual thing that I remember, the food wasn't very good there at the time. We thought, "What we would give for good biscuits and good fried eggs and bacon or something." One day, I guess it was on a Sunday, a friend of mine from Houston, Jack Looss, we decided to walk up some of the country roads there and walked towards the mountain and came to a little grove of trees and there was a residence there. It said restaurant

on it, so we walked in and looked around and asked them what they served. They said they served breakfast and they had a lunch meal for noon. I don't know if they were open in the evenings or not. That didn't interest us too much anyway. We did find out that if we got up about an hour before everybody else and walked that two miles over there we could get eggs, bacon, toast, and biscuits or something like that. We did that quite often and I remember the first time we ordered, we ordered two eggs. They tasted so good that after we had that kind of meal for a time or two we would order four eggs. By the time we got through, and before we left there, our breakfast consisted of eight eggs and toast and biscuits, or a biscuit and bacon or something like that. My how you remember that. It seems to me now that if somebody sat me down to eat eight eggs for breakfast, I think that would be a heck of a meal, but it didn't give us any trouble to consume that much at that time.

We did a considerable amount of training there. Our mortar squad would train there for I guess nearly a month under all kind of situations. They spent an awful lot of time on our physical conditioning. We would have forced marches of 20 miles or something. I remember one day the company commander, who was a football player for Michigan State – a real physical specimen, he was going to take us out on a forced march. We went out there and we would march about five miles and then do a little bit of double-time and then march further. There was a stream there. He would tell us to fall over into the stream and march up the stream. The stream was more than from ankle deep up to maybe knee deep. I tell you that if you walk a few miles upstream in water, you get tired pretty quick. That was nearly an all day thing. We got back into the camp late that evening, pretty well played out. They did a lot of things to toughen us. I will have to say this; they knew what they were doing because we would need every ounce of energy and stamina that we had when we got to the island. It took a pretty strong person, a person in good shape to be able to do the things you had to do there.

One afternoon when we came in from training, late in the afternoon, they had people carrying messages to all of the companies and squads saying, "Go to the mess hall right away and eat your meal. When you get to your tent, you are restricted to the area. You can't leave the area." Of course that was something different and we knew something was about to happen. We had no idea what it was. But we did that. We went and ate and came back to the tent. We were just sitting there wondering. Everybody had

an idea of what was going to happen. None of them were accurate. About 9:00 we were just all sitting on our bunks and they said, "Roll up your bedding; put it in your duffel bag and pack your sea bag and we will give your further instructions in a little while." So we did that and of course all we could do then was to lay on those cots without any bedding on it but we didn't figure we were going to be there very long anyway. Sure enough sometime after midnight they marched us out to a place. There were a bunch of stake-body trucks there to haul us away. We knew we were going to be shipped about by that time.

I remember one thing. I always think about it because in a way it was so sad. There was a man in our tent, his name was Bob Carter. He played in Jimmy Dyke's band. Before he came into the Navy he played trumpet with a very famous big band called Les Brown. He was a very good trumpet player. When we were rolling up our bunks, he just got his bedroll rolled up and was ready to put it in his sea bag. I looked over at him and he was just crying away. I said, "Bob, what is the matter?" He said, "Well, I don't know. I just feel like maybe this is the beginning of the end." We assured him, "Bob, it's going to be all right. It's going to be all right." He said, "Okay, I'm ready. I will do what they tell me to do." We said, "Well, you have no choice (laugh), so it's a good thing you came to that conclusion by yourself." But I always remember what a sad look that boy had on his face, and he was such a nice boy. Maybe he had been with big bands but he acted just like common folk with no particular talents or anything. We all liked him very much.

At about daybreak that same day we were put on trucks and instead of going down the hill, along the coast, and going back to Hilo, which was the biggest town on the island of Hawaii at that time, and I guess it still is. That is where the ships docked and that is where our ship was waiting for us. Instead of taking what you would think would be the route to take, they took us by Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, two snow capped mountains. That surprised me to find snow capped mountains on the island of Hawaii. But these are some of the tallest mountains in the world when you consider how far it is from the bottom of the sea. Above the sea they were about 14,000 feet high, which is about like Pike's Peak in Colorado. A lot of that road was over lava beds. It really wasn't a road; it was kind of a trail across there because you couldn't do anything with the lava beds. They were extremely hard rock. They way the lava had flowed and cooled, they were also extremely rough. After jostling in that stake-body truck, people began to need

to relieve themselves and they would try with the truck moving but the movement of the trucks and everything just didn't make your plumbing work. (Laugh) I saw some of them standing, trying, with tears in their eyes. (Laugh) Finally we got to a smooth enough place to where everything worked out alright. I hope you are not offended by me telling that part of the story, but it is a true story.

We got down to Hilo and boarded the ship. Sometime that day the ship moved out. We thought, "Okay, now we're on our way." But we weren't. We went out for a day or two and then turned around and came back. We found out later that was deception on our part to keep the Japanese from knowing when we would really go because we did this four or five times. One time we went west for four days and came back. We weren't going full speed ahead. We thought this was something unusual. On about the fourth or fifth day we looked up and there was Maui. You could see the island of Maui. That is where we would go close to the shore and they would have a bunch of landing craft there. They would put these rope ladders over the side of the boat and we would train on climbing over the side of the ship and going down the ladder and getting into the landing craft. That sounds easy but it is not, particularly if, as it is in Hawaii, the surf is very rough. That little landing craft, an LCM I believe it was called, is bouncing up and down about 8 to 10 feet. It would be on top of the waves and then down between the waves, it was just up and down. When you were climbing down the ladder you had to be very careful to time your jump right because if you go down too far and the boat rides the wave up and slams against the ship you might be caught between the landing craft and the ship and of course, you could be very seriously hurt. So you had to make sure that you didn't get below that point, that elevation. It was better when the ship got up to that point, to just jump off the ladder and land in the bottom, straighten yourself up, and get ready to go again. But we did that a number of times. Then after so many times of that we were going out again and we were wondering is this another one and when are we going to go back? But we didn't turn about that time, we just kept going.

We knew that now is the time. We went by the little island of Eniwetok and we went by the dateline and I think perhaps you have seen the little drawing that Art Anderson made; a certificate type thing for crossing the dateline. We stopped at a little island atoll called Eniwetok. It was just sand islands. You were on one side of them on the ship and you just looked across the island and you could see the

ocean on the other side. From where we were, we didn't get off and get on the island at all. We stayed on the ship but it looked to me like it might have been, at the highest point, 10 feet above the elevation of the ocean at that point and probably not over 400 yards wide. They were long and slim and just an atoll out there. We stayed there for a while but from this point on, every time we stopped, instead of there being one or two ships, we would look out there and the next time we looked out there, there would be 30 or 40 ships. Every time we went by some place like that on our way to Iwo Jima, more ships would join us. By the time we got to Iwo Jima or right before we got to Iwo Jima, there were ships about as far as you could see in every direction. I never saw so many ships in all my life. On the morning of February 19, Jack Looss, who was a good friend of mine, the boy from Houston, he worked for Shell Oil Company, he and I weren't sleeping, so we got up and walked on the deck. It sounded like thunder real close. We walked out and we could see flashes of light to the west of us. What that was, was really the cruisers and battleships and maybe the destroyers, and possibly some smaller ships that used rockets. They were there bombarding the island. We found out later that they had bombarded that island for 87 straight days in preparation for the landing, hoping to have disrupted the Japanese and killed so many of them that the invasion would happen easier, (*skip in tape*) light up a cigarette and do whatever they were doing before. But history says that it was 87 days and it probably shook them up and kept them in their holes a whole lot of the time but it didn't kill hardly anybody.

We really didn't know exactly where we were going until we made the last stop. I forget what little island that one was. They broke out the relief maps and put them on the deck of the ship and they put us in groups. They had a whole bunch of them. It was a relief map of the island of Iwo Jima. They said, "You are going to the Bonin Islands." I guess Iwo Jima is one of the Bonin Islands, an island group. It was a relief map and showed the contours and all the elevations on the island. They would point out, "This is Red Beach and this is where this unit is going to be," and so on and so forth, and "Here is Suribachi up here," and so forth. They were telling us kind of what we could expect when we got to Iwo Jima.

When the invasion convoy reached the island it stopped quite a ways from the shore. Immediately they began to put LCMs, or landing crafts, into the water. As they did this, they would pull alongside

troopships and they would load troops into them. The troops would go over the sides of the ships on nets as I described earlier. As soon as they were loaded they would not go ashore. They would go out and circle around in the water a ways from the island, until many, many of those LCMs got ready to go in as a wave. It looked to me like there were hundreds of them but I don't know how many there were. They finally formed a more or less straight line and they all approached the island and the landing beaches in a row. The Japanese General had decided that his strategy would be not to keep them off the beaches, but to let them be on the beaches and keep them confined there. When the beaches were loaded with people, then he would have his artillery and other types of weapons to fire on the beaches. That is exactly what they did and they killed many, many, many people before they ever got off of the beach. They were killed right on the beach. Progress in toward the interior of the island was hard because there was a terrace that looked to me to be about 10 to 12 feet high of black sand. It might have been where the tide came in at high tide or something that helped stack the sand up there, or it might have been blown up there by winds, I'm not sure. But it made it nearly impossible for vehicles even tanks. It was impossible for jeeps and vehicles like that to get up there. They made several attempts to put down pierced steel planks and let the vehicles go up on that but the sand was so soft underneath that it would curl up the pierced steel plank and make it look kind of like a pretzel or something. Finally, they just had to take dozers and cut wedges and holes in this terrace so that vehicles could move on inland.

That was a very, very costly time during the invasion because so many people got killed right at that point. I didn't know it at the time, but I've read since that 7,000 people were killed, and 22,000 were wounded. That is an awful lot of people to be killed on a small island. Its longest way was less than five miles and its widest place was two miles. My guess would be that it would average a mile by five miles, or five square miles. We had three Marine divisions on it and the divisions each had somewhere between 15,000 to 20,000 in it. The Japanese must have 25,000 to 30,000 people but I don't know but I understand that their casualties were greater than ours. If we had 29,000 casualties, there must have been 30,000 or 40,000 Japanese on that island. Put all those people on an island that small and you've got fighting all over the whole island. There was hardly any place on that island where you could say that you were safely behind the lines because that was not true. Our artillery could shoot over the lines and hit the furthestest

part of the island and their artillery that was behind their lines could put rounds any place on the part that we had occupied. It was a terrible thing. I have read that it was probably one of the most costliest, most deadly battles in the Pacific during the whole war.

After about three days into the battle, some Marines from one of their regiments took a small flag and scaled Mt. Suribachi. They did this while there were still many Japs holed up in caves and hiding around on the side of the mountain. They managed to get through all the way to the top and raise the small flag and they tied it to long piece of pipe. It looked like plumbing pipe to me, galvanized. I'm going to say it was about 12 to 15 feet long, something like that. But it was not the flag where the famous picture was made. The Marines went back down and reported to their Colonel and he said, "Take this big flag and go back up there and put it on top of that mountain because I want every SOB on this cruddy island to see that flag." That's what they did. That must have been a large morale factor for the Japanese to see that flag go up on the top of that mountain because that was the first land that we reclaimed during the war that has always been and was originally a part of the Japanese Empire. They were fighting for their homeland on Iwo Jima, which was not true on Saipan, Tinian and some of the other islands that they had captured earlier.

Early on the Seabees repaired what we called the number one airfield. It was the one closest to Mt. Suribachi. The Japanese had been using. It was not operational at the time because there were so many bomb craters and stuff on it. But within a very short time our Seabees had those filled up and made the field operational. Of course, you can understand that you couldn't have a big flying operation on it because it was still within range of the Japanese artillery but it was a usable airstrip from that moment on.

While this was going on, we set up shop in foxholes that were kind of on the opposite side of the island from where Red Beach was, where most of the troops landed, and not too far from Mt. Suribachi. Maybe one-fourth of the way up from the south end of the island to the north end, which would make it about a mile from Mt. Suribachi, I suppose. We lived in foxholes for a month or more. I don't remember exactly how long, but I do remember all the sand crabs and other things that we had to put up with when we were trying to sleep at night. It is not easy to sleep when you are laying there and of course you have taken off your shirt and the upper part of your body is bare at least and have these sand crabs, which are

about the size of a big tarantula or something, with real sticky feet walking around on your body. You would say a few curse words and throw them out of the foxholes was about all you could do. We managed that and I guess we were lucky because we came out of it all right.

I do remember one incident when we were still living in those foxholes and some, we called them fly boys, I guess they were from the Army Air Corps moved in right close to us and put up a tent. We all shouted at them, "That's risky. I wouldn't do that." They kind of thought they would be all right so they went ahead and did it. The next morning, there must have been six or eight of them, every one of them had their throat cut. The Japanese had slipped into their tent that night and killed them all. That didn't turn out very well.

At about the same time I remember another thing that touched me greatly. The brigade commander; there were three Seabee battalions on Iwo Jima. There was a commander and I think he was called a brigade commander over those three battalions, with each one having their own commanding officer. Ours at that time was a commander by the name of Dominic J. Emilio. He said that he wanted to go out and pick out a place for the north airfield. The Japanese had started a little bit of construction to try to put an airfield on the north end of the island. He wanted the survey party chief and a rodman and maybe one or two other people to go up there with us and we would make a selection on where this thing should be located. We were walking up through there and at this time, I remember this very distinctly too, we hadn't retrieved all the dead bodies off of the battlefield and we were walking up past some of them. I walked by one of them that was lying on his stomach with his arms up and he looked like he was in a sleeping position. But his wrist was turned up and I noticed an ID bracelet on it. I remember bowing down and looking at his arm and his name was Edwards. I thought he was the finest looking boy in the world and I could just imagine a family at home and maybe a girlfriend or a wife, and what a sad day that was for them. (Breaking up a little.) We proceeded up a little further and this is the second thing that happened on that same trip, within 15 minutes of each other I suppose. We came to a little ravine and there was a Chaplain down there that had turned up an ammo box and he had a box on it. He had probably a dozen people sitting there in that ravine and he was holding a church service. I tell you there aren't any

atheists in a situation like that. (Crying). I made a commitment to myself that I was going to try to live a pretty decent life after that, I'll tell you.

Anyway, we got up there and we did locate each end of where we thought that airfield ought to be. It was kind of a flat area. Later it turned out not to be ideal because of a very unusual thing about steam from the volcano. I'll tell you about that in a minute. It wasn't but a little bit and we were already working on the number two airfield. That wasn't totally my project, my survey. *(End of side one.)*

We located that north airstrip and we contributed some to the surveying and engineering of the middle airfield. As soon as the north end of the island was cleared, and that was some time after 30 days that the island was declared secure, I don't know the exact time but it was around 30 days. But when they say the island is secure, that doesn't mean the battle is over, it just means that the Japanese no longer have the capability to retake it, in other words it was securely in our hands. But there was a considerable amount of fighting after that announcement came out. But when the area where the north airstrip was cleared, we started you might as well say started from scratch because what they had done didn't fit into our plans anyway. We established vertical alignment and took all the level readings and everything to determine what our vertical and horizontal alignments should be, the grade, so to speak, of the thing. We staked it out and then the construction, the earth-moving crew moved in and started right away. I believe that construction crew was headed up by a warrant officer if I remember right, the name Purcell comes to mind. I believe he was in charge of the earth-moving crew. Those people, the earth movers and the paving people worked very hard. Since that time I've been around many contractors, good contractors, people that were paid lots of money and I don't think that I could say that they were any better than the crew that we had there doing that work. It was done in a very professional way. Those boys had worked with contractors and engineers and stuff before they came in and joined the Seabees. They didn't need training in an MOS, they just needed somebody to show them where and tell them what. They were very good.

I mentioned a while ago there was one unusual thing about the location of this number three airfield and that was a point of it crossed a flat that had little miniature volcanoes was what they looked like, maybe 4 to 6 inches, maybe some of them as much as 8 inches high, like a little volcano and steam was coming out of the top of them. We knew that if we built across that the heat would find its way on up

through the soil that we added and that when it came to the asphalt, it would soften the asphalt and we would have a failure on our hands. That problem was solved by getting some perforated oil well pipe and putting it in the embankment across this flat area there with the ends sticking out on each side of the slopes. The steam would collect in those things and be bled out to the side where you would see it coming out to the side of these pipes. It was a pretty unusual looking thing and I had never heard of anything like that before in my life but it worked and many a P-47 took off later from that field and it stood up well. There were no failures while we were there. It held up very well.

The other unusual thing that I remember, the two fighter strips, the number one and the number three, did not have field lighting. But the number two airstrip, which was the big one, which was 10,000 feet long and 100 feet wide, and had a parallel strip on the side about half as long as the other one and it was used to take the planes off the main airstrip on a crossover and get them off the airstrip real quick so they could go over and park or do whatever they needed to do. A lot of the planes, the B-29's that landed there, were damaged and they landed there because they didn't think they could make it back to Tinian or Saipan or whichever island it was that they took off from. But the thing that was unusual there was the material that they sent us to put this field lighting on came in boxes that were two foot square. When you took the top off the box, hanging down in the box was this assembled airfield light. You simply turned it over. It had a transformer under it too. You simply turned it over and bolted it up so the light would be upright and then you buried that thing two feet into the ground. That kept you from doing all of the things you would normally have to do when you put in airfield lighting. Everything was working great until we found out that two feet below the surface, close to the bottom of the trench, in a large part of this area was 8 degrees of super heat, in other words, 220 degrees. The cable that was sent there could not withstand that heat. So we had to get cable from the States or somewhere that was capable of withstanding that heat or the insulation on the cable that was originally sent to us would have melted and that thing would not have worked. After we got the airfield lighting, parallel lighting down each side and threshold lights and everything, they took our survey party up in a C-47 and let us see what it looked like from the air. That was a thrill for us. We were happy about that.

The three airfields were used by fighters and B-29s. Number one and number three, the fighter strips, were 5,000 feet long and 100 feet wide. On number three there was a squadron of P-47s. They were called Thunderbolts, fighters that were very good and tough planes. On number one airstrip there was a squadron of P-51s, probably one of the best aircraft every used in World War II, very fast and maneuverable. They could out perform nearly everything the Japanese had. It seems to me like there must have been about 50 planes in each squadron. I never did ask and I never did count but there was about that many. Then the B-29 strip at that particular time also had a squadron of P-47s and they would not allow any other planes to use the strip while they were taking off or when they were coming back from Tokyo or Japan and wanting to land, there was nothing else on the strip. But for takeoff, rendezvous, and landing when coming back, that strip was for them. One of the considerations, all these planes were flying fighter cover for the B-29s. The B-29s would take off from Saipan or Tinian loaded with bombs and when they came over Iwo Jima, the fighter planes would rise up in to the air and they would be fighter cover for them over to Tokyo or Japan or somewhere in Japan and back. In order for them to have enough gasoline to make that trip, the fighters all had to bolt on wing tanks. They would fly over to Japan using the aviation gas in their wing tanks to get over there. That's when they would expect the Japanese planes to come up in opposition to them and they would drop their wing tanks then to get rid of that weight and all that bulk, to get it out of the way and they would become more maneuverable and could very successfully deal with the Japanese. But in order to do that, shortage of gas was such a thing, the planes couldn't take off and go up there and wait for the B-29s to come along. They had to time it so when the B-29s came there, they had just gotten off the ground and hadn't used hardly any of their gas. Now they were ready to head for Japan. In order to get all the planes off in the shortest period of time, particularly on the big wide number two airfield, they would start two planes down the runway at the same time, side by side. When they got down the runway about 200 to 300 feet, two more would start. So if you looked down that airstrip there would be about six planes still on the ground in three groups of two each and one had just taken off, climbing up into the sky. That was necessary because of the short period of time they had to rendezvous and not use up too much gas. One of the bad things about it was they were loaded with wing tanks and if there happened to be any crosswind, these wing tanks were so heavy they made the wings on

the planes kind of sag a little bit and the bottom of those wing tanks that hung off the side of the wings, they were big torpedo-shaped devices, they weren't over about six inches off the ground when they were loaded with gas. If a crosswind or anything occurred that would kind of tilt the plane over to the side, that wing tip loaded with 100 octane gasoline would be dragging on the ground throwing sparks and it would erupt into a big ball of fire right there. The thing about it was operations couldn't stop because that happened. Somebody had to take a dozer and get that plane off the field and everything else just kept going while somebody else dealt with that problem. You have to take your hat off to those flyboys, I'll tell you. The B-29 pilots were brave people and very capable but those fighter pilots it seemed to me were looking down a gun barrel all the time. They were very, very brave people. The saying was, "You didn't have to be crazy to be a fighter pilot, but it sure did help."

I remember one time a B-29 came over and it had been to Japan, had opened its bomb bay, taken an antiaircraft hit in the bomb bay area, and damaged the mechanism that would release the bomb. It jammed and there they were. They couldn't close the bomb bay doors. There was that bomb hanging there that they didn't know if it would drop off or what to do with it. They couldn't land with those bomb bay doors open so they came back to Iwo Jima. They were going crossways across the strip, they would go crossways one time and one person would parachute out. Then they would go out there, make a u-turn, go across the island in the opposite direction and somebody else would jump out. They did that until nine of them had jumped out. It was originally a ten man crew and they said that one man had been killed when that round hit the plane. But after the last man got out, I guess the dead pilot was still in the plane, but they set it on autopilot so it would go way out in the ocean and ditch in the ocean and everybody would be safe. But for some reason, it had memorized this pattern of figure eights going back and forth across the island so it started doing that on its own with nobody in the plane. Each time it came back over the island it would be a little lower. We were all sitting there watching this thing and wondered if it got low enough would it crash into the island there? And with that big bomb on it, that would be a pretty dangerous situation. But it didn't. It got low enough and after the last pass that it made over the island it went off to the east side of the island a ways, nosed up and did a kind of side turn and fell right down into the ocean and the bomb didn't go off and there was no explosion there. At least it didn't land on the island

and kill a bunch of people there. That was an unusual thing to see that unmanned plane making figure eights, going over the island and turning around and coming back over it. Each time it came back over it was a little bit lower. Thank heavens for some reason, I don't know what the reason was, one of the turns out over the ocean, it crashed into the ocean.

I would like to say something about the survey party that we had put together. I was the party chief and I was from Texas. My instrument man was R. E. "Red" Hall. I had two rodmen on the survey party. One of them was Arthur A. "Art" Webb. The other was Jerry Miller. Art Webb was from Pennsylvania and Red Hall was from California, near Sacramento. Jerry Miller was the other rodman and he was from Coeur d' Alene, Idaho and part Indian. He had some remarkable skills. I think it was just a sixth sense that he had, that most of us didn't have. Then there was a chain man, Arky Johnson. I don't remember Arky's first name. I remember he was from Arkansas and that's why we called him Arky. He was the chainman. There was one other chainman was Ralston and he was from North Carolina. In my opinion, that was the best survey party I ever did see. I worked on a lot of them before and since, but if I had to go into that situation again and they said you can choose anybody you want, I wouldn't give it a second thought. I would want those same people. I owe them so much. They were so loyal and they worked so hard. I will never forget them. We were good friends as well as coworkers. I thought an awful lot of them.

During the time we were on Iwo Jima, I got a raise and was promoted to Second Class Petty Officer. I was a Third Class when we came to the island. Sometime after that I was promoted to a First Class Petty Officer and that was the rating that I held when I was discharged.

After Japan surrendered, those people that qualified and met certain criteria, they were going to get them home as soon as they could. I met the criteria. You needed 40 points and I had 44 at the time so I was immediately eligible to go home. But they wanted me to stay and said that I could stay and retire as a Chief. I said, "If it takes two days longer, I don't want it." He said, "It will take much longer than two days." So I said, "Put me on a ship and send me home, please." I did get on a ship pretty quick and this friend of mine from Houston, Jack Looss, he got on the same ship. It was funny how we stayed together all during the war. We met in boot camp and when we would be assigned to a barracks or something, the

Navy did everything by initials and L and P are pretty close together, so we would usually get assigned to the same group or something. Whenever we went into a barracks, if I got in there first I would claim a bunk and then claim the one next to it or the one above it if it was a double-decker for Jack. We just took care of each other that way. We were both eligible so they put us on a ship there. We took the northern route by the Aleutians and came into San Francisco. I remember this about that trip. When we were up in the northern part, we had sent all of our uniforms other than our summer uniforms, tropical uniforms, home. It was so cold when we went by the Aleutian Islands up there we were just nearly dying. Everybody was complaining and hollering and screaming, so they finally broke out a whole bunch of wool sweatshirts and gave each of us one of those. We fared much better after that.

The other thing that I remember about the end of the trip is that right at the end of it we sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge at San Francisco. I guess they had a policy of welcoming troops home. They had a big barge and they had a band on it with a whole bunch of cheerleader type girls. Well, there weren't any cheerleader type girls on Iwo Jima and we hadn't seen one in a long time. So as it came out to kind of meet us, they were on one side of the ship, and everybody on the ship ran to the side of the ship and some of them were climbing as high as they could get to get a look at these pretty girls and the ship began to list to that side. Somebody on the loudspeaker kept telling us to move over to the other side or we would capsize if we didn't. (Laugh) I tell you, it was kind of funny. We were elated to see a pretty girl.

Another funny thing I remember about it is when we got in sight of the Golden Gate Bridge, Jack Looss – this friend from Houston, said, “Pete, we’ve carried these mattresses all over this country and no telling what kind of germs they have on them. They’ve been to the Pacific, they’ve been everywhere. So, when we see the Golden Gate Bridge, why don’t we throw these mattresses over the side of the ship?” (Laugh) I said, “Agreed.” Sure enough, through the fog there was the Golden Gate Bridge, so we heaved our mattresses over the side. He said, “Now we don’t have to worry about germs.” Jack was always worrying about germs. As a matter of fact, we stayed on Treasure Island, which you might say is right under the Golden Gate Bridge and they said, “All you have to do, you can sleep here or not, you can eat here or not, but every morning you had better look at that bulletin board because those are the names of

the people who are going to leave that day. If you miss it, you may go way back to the bottom of the line and there is no telling when you will get home.” We were very careful about watching that bulleting board to see if our name was on it for that day. One night we went to a show and Jack comes up again with this business about germs. He said, “We need to take some type of medicine, laxative, to get rid of any type of germs that we may have accumulated over there.” (Laugh) So we go into a Rexall Drug Store over there and tell the guy what our problem was. He gave us each a little bottle of something. He told us if we would drink it that would do the job. So we drank that and then we went to a show. About half way through the show, I made a trip to the men’s room. When I came out Jack was going in, and for the rest of the show we met each other coming and going. I don’t know what that guy gave us but it was powerful stuff. (Laugh). Kind of naughty but maybe you will forgive me for that. You probably get anything for a laugh. A laugh can be worth a million dollars at the right time.

I am going to quit saying anything now except for how thankful I am that I came back in one piece and how thankful I am that I was able to serve with a group of people as fine as those that were in the 31st Seabee Battalion. They were good people and they were very professional in their skills. I feel like we accomplished quite a lot. I also want to say to Jane and Diane and Tamara and anybody else who has had a part in keeping the 31st Seabee Battalion memory alive, “You have done a wonderful thing for many of us and we appreciate it very much. May God bless. Thank you.”

I am sure that it is very obvious that I did this without any notes or any outline and I have to apologize for that. I just took a recorder and did it without much thought but I did enjoy doing it. Just when I finished, the thought came to me that I didn’t mention one other thing that I think all of us can be very proud of. I know it is one of the things that I think of so much, and that is I didn’t say anything about the construction of the road to the top of Mt. Suribachi. That road had been planned one time by the Japs and I heard somewhere that they had tried for many years to build a road up there and were unsuccessful. It was obvious that they had attempted. When they gave us the job and asked us if we thought we could do it, the old “can do” spirit kicked in and we said we would give it a good try. Lo and behold, 30 days after we started building the road, the road was complete. Admiral Nimitz came to the island, I guess for that occasion perhaps. He was met at the airfield and when he got to the base of the mountain, he told his

driver to move over; he wanted to drive the jeep to the top of that mountain. We were all filled with pride that if he thought it was that important, then I'm sure it was, because it was very important that we get the radar equipment and other things to the top of that mountain. If he thought it was that important, then we feel like we did quite a thing. I remember just about all phases of it but the simplicity of the design criteria is something that I think about a lot. Our instructions were simply to have no curve with a radius of over 50 feet in length and to have no grades over 10 percent. This was necessary because they knew the type of equipment that it would take to haul the big radar equipment and everything to the top of the mountain. That criteria was necessary in order for the equipment to function the way it needed to. We met that criteria. I remember that one very short section, about 200 feet, where the grade was slightly over 10 percent. It performed well and I guess that is probably one of the clearest memories and one of the things that I feel most prideful about from my time in the service was getting to work on that road.

Since I got out of the Navy I worked for 30-something years as an engineer for the Department of the Army as a civilian. I retired in 1975. After about a month I began to do consulting work and construction management and served as City Engineer for our city for one period, about a year and a half. I continued to work until I was 75 years old and then I pretty much retired. I still do a lot of work; I just don't get paid for it anymore. Everybody says, "You are retired now so you can help us with this and you can do that." I'm always glad that I can do it; maybe help the community and my friends some. My health is relatively good. I try to play golf about three times a week and get in 18 holes. I have a lot of fun, but I don't guess a day passes that sometime during the day; something will happen that makes me think of the 31st Seabees and especially that part of it on Iwo Jima. I hope all of you are in good health. I know that we are all getting old and we have a lot of aches and pains. But in our minds, I think we can look back and say that we are proud of what we did.

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