

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

NUMBER

957

Interview with
MICHAEL PATRICK RYAN

May 2, 1994

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

Interviewer: Richard W. Byrd

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
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Admiral Nimitz Foundation
and
University of North Texas
Michael Patrick Ryan

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Mr. Byrd: This is Richard Byrd interviewing General Michael Patrick Ryan for the Admiral Nimitz Museum and the University of North Texas Oral History Program. I am interviewing General Ryan in order to obtain his recollections of war in the Pacific during the Second World War. The interview is taking place on May 2, 1993 in Fredericksburg, Texas.

General Ryan, tell me a little bit about your background. Where were you born and when?

Mr. Ryan: I was born in 1916 in Osage City, Kansas. I lived there until I was two years old and then went to Leavenworth, Kansas. After grade school, I moved to Kansas City and attended Ward High School and Rockhurst College for one year. Then I went to Texas. I stayed there until 1940, when I went on active duty with the Marine Corps.

I had joined the Marines Corps Reserve. I was a staff sergeant in 1940 when I was commissioned, as we

went on active duty. I did not go to any ROC or reserve officer class because there were no spaces before I went overseas.

Byrd: What was your training like prior to that?

Ryan: Well, we spent a great deal of time on how to get out of boats and things of that nature, and I can still remember how we practiced getting out of motor whaleboats. They are long boats. You go to the front of the boat holding your rifle up and roll out, which is kind of funny, because the first boat we came out of in the war was one that had a ramp and you just ran out. But it was a regular infantry training that we did. We went to Iceland--spent nine months there--and then came back and moved to the Pacific.

Byrd: This Iceland duty--that was in 1940.

Ryan: In 1941 and 1942. It extended into 1942.

Byrd: What was your duty there?

Ryan: I was a platoon commander--a second lieutenant platoon commander--while we were in Iceland. I came back and joined the 2nd Marines for the move to the Pacific. We took off from San Diego for Guadalcanal. We did not land on Guadalcanal. Our battalion landed on two small islands--Gavutu and Tanambogo, in the harbor of Florida [Island] to the north.

Byrd: So, this is on the north end.

Ryan: It was north of Guadalcanal. It was not on Guadalcanal. See, on Guadalcanal the Japanese had left the airfield, so

there was no fighting. On ours, they had retired to caves, and I found out how difficult it was to reduce caves or fortified positions with only grenades and rifles because we would reduce a position and fire would come right out of it again. I didn't know that they had concealed snipers up above the mouth of the cave. On Tanambogo, I didn't land, but I came over after the operation and saw the results, for the first time, of a Japanese suicide attack. They swarmed out a hill, destroyed one of our tanks--swarmed all over it--but their own dead was littered all over the island.

Byrd: How deep were these caves? You said you tried to reduce it.

Ryan: Well, they went into them some distance because the Japanese, evidently, had prepared positions to hide out in, to hold until their Navy came to drive our ships away, and then leave us stranded. After Gavutu and Tanambogo--later on--we went down and spent a number of months on Guadalcanal--mostly patrolling, sometimes some operations, but nothing major.

Byrd: Did you find any more Japanese stragglers or...?

Ryan: Yes. We had to take patrols out into the island of Florida. The natives would come in and tell us that there were stragglers eating out of their gardens. So, we would go out and shoot them or capture them or do whatever.

Afterwards, in New Zealand--we went there from

Guadalcanal--we emphasized training with demolitions and things of that nature to reduce fortified positions.

Our next operation was in the Gilberts--Tarawa--a small island Betio. We were briefed on the amount of the tonnage of explosives--of 1,000 pound-bombs, 500-pound bombs, and naval gunfire--that would fall down on that little bitty island. So, I thought that we would have a very short battle with, hopefully few casualties.

We were landing in a concave beach on--my battalion--Red Beach One. That's on the north side of the island, on the right [gesture] as you looked at it facing from the lagoon. We only had enough amphibian tractors that could go over the reef into the beach to lift the two assault companies--I and K companies. The remaining elements were to come in by boats. Now, I heard reports later that some high command officers expected that high tide would enable the boats to get all the way into the beach.

Byrd: That cleared the...

Ryan: Clear of the reef. However, my orders seemed to indicate that they were ready, if they didn't--because my order was to take the boat wave in as far as we could if we hit the reef and couldn't go any farther--we would wait for the tractors to come back and pick us up, and then we would go in by tractors.

Byrd: So, they would do it in shifts.

Ryan: Yes. Captain Crane, had K Company in the tractors and

Captain Tatum had the company on the left [gesture] in tractors and I as a major still commanded L Company until a major's space came open in the division. My executive officer was Captain O'Brien.

We had our D-Day breakfast of steak-and-eggs, which was normal, and we then watched the gunfire against the beach. On our end of the island--I think that's the western end--there were two coast defense guns--one on each corner. We could see them firing back at the ships, and the ships firing at them.

The tractors, being slow, disembarked first. They had a long way to go to the line of departure, which was in the lagoon. Then we began to disembark into boats. I had the first wave of boats. I had L Company and some heavy machine guns. Then other waves of boats were following us.

It was early morning by the time we started to disembark. As we disembarked the waves were forming around the ship. Well, the ship took off. I heard that they were moving out of the range of the coast defense guns. Well, that increased the distance we had to go to get to the line of departure, which was pretty far off because we had to go into the lagoon. The landing was scheduled for high tide, and hopefully, that would enable us get over the reefs. So, it was full daylight by the time we hit the reef. The sea was very clear, and you could see the coral formations as we went into the lagoon.

But, really, our attention was centered on the island. It was covered with explosions, and we could see planes diving down to deliver their bombs. I was kind of convinced that this was going to be an easy operation. I didn't see how anything could live through that.

But as we approached the line of departure, the tractors had already started in. Then I saw anti-boat shells [imitates sound of shells hitting the water] falling around the boats. But they were hitting none of us because I think they were all aiming at the tractors. As I looked ahead, many of the tractors appeared to be dead in the water, and some were on fire, and troops were leaving the tractors and heading into the beach.

I think this was about the same as in any other beaches along the island that day that were being attacked. It was just a kaleidoscope of destruction. I couldn't see the beach because of the smoke and the dust and things of that nature. As an example of the destruction along the beach, the tractor right in front of me was on fire--it was dead in the water--and two Marines crawled slowly out with their clothing on fire--stood on the side of the tractor, and then slowly--very slowly--fell face down into the water. That's when, if ever I hear the word "deadfall," that brings it back. Many of the men leaving the tractors were wading in, and we could see them. There was heavy machine gun fire coming from the left [gesture].

I was steeling myself to wade into the center of the beach, as my orders were, when O'Brien called from the next boat, and he said, "Hey, Mike!" I said, "What!" He said, "What do you want to do?" [I thought] "Holy cow! I ought to go back to the ship and start all over again." But the incongruity of his question made me look around. I couldn't see the beach, but I could see the troops moving in--being shot in the water, some of them. I noticed on the point of Red Beach One, on the right [gesture], a single Marine jumping over the parapet, so I called to O'Brien, "It looks like somebody is getting ashore over there on the point! So, let's go around that sunken ship [it was hung up on the reef], and we'll wade into the point from there!" So, we did and all the other boats followed us. There was no wave. It was no line; it was a gaggle of boats. We went around the sunken ship to the edge of reef and started to disembark.

We were up to our waist in water, and the beach was, I would think, about 1,200 to 1,400 yards away. The fire that had been directed at the amtracs was now turned on us as we were coming in slowly. I saw a couple of explosions, which I thought were mortars--but only two. The rest was all machine gun fire. As you moved forward, you could see the splashes of the [rounds from] the guns as they were traversing among our troops. We lost quite a number of men in the water, including our battalion surgeon.

When I finally got to the beach--to a parapet--there were two wounded Marines propped up. They had been pulled out of the water by members of I Company, and they told me that Captain Tatum was killed on the beach. He was commander of I Company. "O'B" [O'Brien] came out of the water, crawled up to me, and said, "Hey, Mike! I did my Hollywood act out there!" I didn't know what he was talking about. He said that as he could see the splashes from machine gun fire moving toward him, he would very ostentatiously die in the water and then wait until it was gone. He said that he did it twice. The clips of bullets on his belt were shot off, although he was unhurt.

"O'B" and I went over the parapet and encountered the remnants of I and K companies that had moved forward. Now these men had left those disabled and burning tractors and had waded in past the dead and wounded Marines and then had assaulted the positions on the point. They had shot down an officer and an NCO--Japanese--that were trying to lead a counterattack to recapture the gun on the point. It was the men from those companies that enabled us to get ashore on the point.

It took a long time for the men to filter ashore from the boats. I looked back as they were coming in, and I thought the company was destroyed because only one or two people were standing. The rest were all down in the water. They were trying to stay low--with only their heads above

the water--as they moved forward, to escape the fire. Among those hit in the water was our battalion surgeon.

Byrd: Do you remember his name offhand?

Ryan: I can't recall his name. I remember his assistant, Dr. Warwick, but I can't recall the battalion surgeon. He was picked up--his body floated over the reef. It was picked up by one of the ships and buried at sea.

As the men came ashore--they were just coming in individually--we filtered them into the lines, and they just joined up with I and K Company regardless of what unit they were in. They would move forward, attacking enemy positions. I began to look for the battalion CP [Command Post], which I expected to come ashore at any minute. But the battalion commander was in a boat, a "free" boat we called it--he could go ashore when he wanted to--and he thought we were basically destroyed, which I did, too, so he went to another area and landed. He was later killed in action on Guam.

We had no radios on our end of the island. All of the radios were lost in the water, so we had no way to contact Regiment or Battalion. We couldn't find out what they were doing, and we couldn't tell them how we were doing. So, I assumed command because I was the major on our end of the island, expecting always that the battalion CP would eventually come in.

Now the heavy fire that was directed in the water from

the left of Red Beach One had caused a number of men to drift over to our side, so we became a composite battalion, especially after I saw two Japanese running around the left of our line toward what later turned out to be the Japanese island command post. I was worried that some Japanese might get behind us, so I went back to gather up some men to put in position.

As I was putting them in position, a Marine staff NCO came up to me and saluted. He asked what he could do. I didn't tell him. I said, "I'm putting men along the line." He didn't ask another word. He came and shoved men into position. I think he was wounded in the hip because he was dragging one leg behind him. I don't know who he was. I don't know whether he lived through the operation. He wasn't from our unit. I've always treasured that salute that I got from him.

Since the battalion surgeon was killed, Dr. Warwick set up an aid station on the point, and we moved our wounded there--the wounded we were getting as we attacked these positions. I was concerned with a suicide attack that night. If they were going to come, they were going to then. So, I pulled everybody back to the point and formed a continuous line. None of us slept much that night, but there was no attack.

On D Plus One [the second day], two medium tanks came ashore. A naval gunnery officer came ashore with us, and

he had a radio to the ships. We found an officer from the battalion on our left on the beach with a radio. I didn't know at that time whether the radio was functioning or not because none of ours were.

We had a Captain George Wentzel from the battalion headquarters, who showed up, and he began organizing the evacuation of the wounded from the point. He was later killed with a blast of machine gun fire. Captain Schwabbe from regimental headquarters showed up, and he began organizing the resupply and the evacuation of the wounded from the point.

In a conference before the attack, the company commanders and I were before a two-room blockhouse. My runner came running down the hall saying "I had to shoot him! I had to shoot him!" I found out that he was sitting on a box by a storage room, the second storage room, and he felt someone, or sensed someone; and he turned around, and there was a Japanese standing there. So, he shot him and then he ran down the hall. I said, "Throw a grenade in that room!" So, they did and then about that time someone hollered, "Grenade!" and we could see a Japanese grenade coming out of the other room. So, the company commanders and I hunkered down until the explosion. None of us were hurt, but two Japanese ran out of the room and down the hall and were shot at the end of the hall.

I don't think that those Japanese were very

belligerent. I think they thought we'd kill them if they tried to surrender. I don't know whether the guy that my runner shot was not then trying to surrender. They could have thought that we were crazy because the room into which a grenade was thrown was the ammunition locker for the gun on the point. Why it never blew, I'll never know. If it had, we'd all have been gone.

Our attack was ready to go, and I sent my runner back to the beach to verbally tell the senior officer there, from the other battalion, that if he could contact regiment, to tell them that we were going to attack along Beach Green. He left and after some time he came back. He said, "They said, Hold up! They want to call in an air strike!" I sent him back saying, "We're ready to go! Call off the strike! We're going to go forward!" I sent him back twice. Finally, he came back and said, "They said its canceled." So, our attack that morning was one of the best coordinated that I had ever seen in the war: Ed Bales with his medium tanks up on the front lines; Lieutenant Green, of the Navy, was contacting the ships...

Byrd: He's a spotter--a Navy gun spotter.

Ryan: Yes, a Navy gun spotter. He brought in fire close to us from 5- and 8-inch [guns]. We asked for firing so close to our front lines that General Smith [Major General Julian Smith, USMC] later told me that the Navy refused to fire unless he personally approved it. So, they laid that down,

and when that gunfire was finished, our men swept forward and were soon over those positions that had given us so much trouble the day before. Then we moved to the open space by the airfield. When we did that, I sent word back to the radio on the beach and said "We control Beach Green! The right half is mined. We are preparing to attack along Beach Red to re-establish contact with regiment." The runner came back and said, "They said stay where you are!" So, I stayed where I was.

That night, Bill Jones, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, came in and spent the night on our beach. The next morning he moved through us and went forward. He had two light tanks. I told him about how effective the mediums were, so he asked for them. So, I gave them him the two medium tanks and asked that he return them when he was through, because we were going to attack along Beach Red.

Byrd: You say medium-tank. How big a gun or cannon does that have?

Ryan: It's a 75-millimeter gun. It's a Sherman tank, and it's a 75-millimeter gun, and they can crank them right down into the pillboxes.

Byrd: Were these Army or Marine Corps...

Ryan: They were Marine Corps tanks. We were just starting to get medium tanks. We didn't have any medium tanks to train with in New Zealand. This company came from the United

States and joined us at Tarawa. I didn't know that they were coming in. I didn't figure that they were attached to our battalion. When Bill Jones moved through, then Ken McCleod of 3/6 [3rd Battalion, 6th Marines] came ashore, and they moved through. After they were gone, Major Cortelew from battalion headquarters came over and assumed command. We moved the battalion forward to meet another battalion that was attacking in our direction. For us that essentially was the operation. But when the company fell in after the operation was over, I was heartened by the number of men who had survived--a lot more than I had expected.

Byrd: Do you think that a lot of them had done that Hollywood act that O'Brien did?

Ryan: Maybe so. I don't know. But all the battalions that had moved across those beaches had suffered pretty heavy casualties that first day, but in the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines one man in two was either killed or wounded, so 50 percent were casualties. That was the end of the operation, and we went on. Their next operation was Saipan.

Byrd: Did you rest and recover, get R and R?

Ryan: Well, we didn't have any R and R, but we were on the big island of Hawaii. We would train six days and be off one day.

Byrd: Did you gain new equipment or new ordnance?

Ryan: We got more medium tanks. We didn't have any light tanks after that--all mediums. We trained with flamethrowers and with demolitions and got ready for Saipan.

Byrd: So, you hadn't had any demolition experience or training beforehand.

Ryan: Not before Guadalcanal. I didn't know how to fuse a block of TNT, but we soon learned. I think by Saipan, then we had prepared satchel charges that we could throw into pillboxes.

Byrd: That satchel charge--is that an electrical thing or is that still a fuse-type thing?

Ryan: No, that was a fuse-type, as I recall it. I don't think we ever had any electrical ones. If we didn't have any, we'd just put a bunch of blocks of TNT together and fuse one of them and throw them or sometimes, you know, with a long pole we'd shove them into a cave or something.

Byrd: Kind of like a Bangalore [torpedo] kind of a thing.

Ryan: Something like that, yes.

Byrd: A jerry-rigged one.

Ryan: Right. Our operations consisted of landing, and we participated in the defense against the counterattack on the night of D Plus One. But 1st Battalion, 6th Marines carried the brunt of that. After that tank attack, we moved forward, encountering groups of Japanese until we arrived at the end of the island, when the Japanese made a major suicide attack, but mostly hitting the U. S. Army on

our left. We could see it...well, you couldn't see it--it was nighttime--so you couldn't really see it. But the next day I went down there, and the Japanese dead were all over the place. I know it was a suicide attack because the two Japanese commanders committed suicide after they gave the order to attack. They didn't wait to see whether it was going to be successful or not. One of the commanders on the island--the commander of the naval forces--had led the Japanese attack on the ships on at Pearl Harbor.

After that we landed we landed on Tinian. At Tinian we didn't encounter as much opposition. We found some as we got toward the end of the island, but not as much opposition for us--our battalion--as there was on Saipan.

Byrd: How long was your training for Saipan? You said you went to Hawaii.

Ryan: We went to Hawaii and I'm going to guess that it was about seven, eight months. I'd have to check on it. I don't even remember the date of the operation. That was essentially the end of the war for me, and I went back to the States.

I commanded a battalion in Korea and, I was an assistant division commander in Vietnam at one time. When I went back the second time, I commanded a division.

Byrd: Which division in Vietnam?

Ryan: The 1st Marine Division. I was an assistant division commander of the 3rd Division. When I came back to the

States, I went to Quantico and worked at the Marine Corps schools, and then I commanded the 2nd Marine Division at Camp LeJeune. Then I went back WESTPAC [Western Pacific Fleet Command] at the end of the war in Vietnam. When I came back, I was director of the Marine Corps Reserve for three years. I retired in 1977.

Byrd: When you were with the Third Marine Division, where were you assigned in Vietnam?

Ryan: Up at Dong Ha--right below the North Vietnamese boundary, below the Ben Hai River. We had some major confrontations there. They tried to take a little outpost that we called Kahn Tien up to north. They came in with flamethrowers and everything else, but they didn't take it.

Byrd: Well, sir. I want to thank you for taking time out this morning, and I appreciate getting the opportunity to visit with you. It's been a pleasure for me. I'd like to have the opportunity of doing a second interview later on. I know you're on at tight schedule.

Ryan: Well, anytime you want.

Byrd: Thank you again.