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Interview With

RAY HECHLER

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

Interviewer: William J. Alexander

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Ray Hechler

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Mr. Alexander: This is Bill Alexander at the Nimitz Museum. I'm interviewing Mr. Ray Hechler in order to get his experiences while he was serving on the light cruiser USS *Helena* during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. After Pearl Harbor, Mr. Hechler also participated in the Solomon Islands Campaign and the amphibious assault on Peleliu Island.

All right, sir, what I'm going to ask you is where and when you were born.

Mr. Hechler: I was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, on February 3, 1919.

Mr. Alexander: What were your parents' names?

Hechler: My father's name was Garland Elwood Hechler.
My mother's name was Eleanor Irene Hechler.
Her maiden name was Burlow [?].

Alexander: Were they immigrants?

Hechler: No, they were born and raised here. My
father's father came over from Germany and
settled in Richmond, Virginia, when he was, I
think, ten or twelve years old or something
like that.

Alexander: What about brothers and sisters?

Hechler: I have one sister. She's still alive.

Alexander: She was the only other sibling? Did you have
any brothers or other sisters?

Hechler: No, just one sister.

Alexander: Did you grow up in Bayonne?

Hechler: No. I only lived there one year. When I was
one year old, my parents moved to Pompton
Plains, in Morris County, New Jersey. It's
in the northern part of New Jersey. I grew
up in Pompton Plains and enlisted in the
Marine Corps from there.

Alexander: That's where you went for your schooling.
What high school did you go to?

Hechler: I went to Butler High School. After high

school, my buddy and I enlisted in the Marine Corps. We went to New York City and joined the Marines.

Alexander: When did you get out of high school?

Hechler: That was in 1938.

Alexander: You and your buddies got your diplomas and said, "Let's join the Marines."

Hechler: We decided that we'd join the Navy. That was in January, 1939. We went over to join the Navy because it was pretty hard to get a job anywhere, and we thought that we'd see the world. We passed our tests and all, and the Navy told us to go home and wait, and they'd call us.

We waited four weeks, and the Navy never called us, so we thought we'd join the Marine Corps. We took the tests, and they told us the same thing. We went home, and I waited two weeks, and the Marine Corps called me up to New York. They put another fellow and me on a train...

Alexander: Not your buddy?

Hechler: No, not my buddy. He was called in a month after I was.

Alexander: Into the Navy, or was he in the Marine Corps, also?

Hechler: Yes, the Marine Corps called him. I didn't see him until six months later in Quantico, Virginia. I'll tell you about that (chuckle). This other fellow and I went on the train to Port Royal, South Carolina; and then we took a Navy motor launch over to Parris Island. We went through boot camp for two months, I guess it was. We spent four weeks in what they called the "East Wing," and four weeks on the rifle range. Then I was stationed there for four or five months, doing guard duty at the main gate, mainly.

Then I was transferred to the President's Guard Detachment at the Marine Barracks at 8th and I Streets in Washington, D.C. That was in December, 1939.

In June--in fact, I think that it was on June 12--the first sergeant came through the squad room and said, "I have a transfer, if anybody wants it, to go to sea duty." I said, "I want it," because that's what I thought I'd be interested in. He said,

"Well, here's your orders. Go down to Union Station, get a train, and go to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. That's where the ship is. It's a light cruiser, just built." That was on June 12, 1940.

Alexander: What ship was this?

Hechler: The USS *Helena* [CL-50]. So, I went aboard the ship. In those days, a Marine usually had to be six feet tall before he could go to sea school. I put in for sea school when I got out of boot camp, but they told me I wasn't tall enough. I was only 5'8". When I went aboard the ship, I was the shortest Marine in the Marine detachment for about four months.

Alexander: Had she already had her shakedown cruise when you went aboard?

Hechler: Yes, she already had her shakedown cruise, but they hadn't had the trial runs. We went off of Rockland, Maine, and up to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and whatnot. We had our trial runs off of Rockland, Maine.

In November, I think, we went down through the [Panama] Canal and out to Long

Beach, California, for two weeks. Then we went out to join the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Alexander: How did you like the cruise through the Canal? Was that interesting to you?

Hechler: Going through the Canal, before we went through it, we were supposed to take all the cameras we had and turn them in. I kind of failed to turn my camera in (chuckle). When we were going through the Canal, I went up to the forward range-finder. On the forward range-finder, which was above the bridge, there was a little hatch you could open up and get in, but there was also a porthole in the back about [that big] behind it.

Alexander: It's about three-and-a-half or four inches in diameter.

Hechler: Yes. I took my camera with me, and when we were going through the locks, I took a couple of pictures through there. I still have them at home. I don't think anybody ever knew about it, and I didn't hurt anybody.

Alexander: It was very secure in those days.

Hechler: Yes. We were supposed to turn our cameras

in. We had liberty in Panama City, and then we went up the coast to Long Beach; and then we went out to join the Pacific Fleet.

We operated out of Pearl Harbor in November, 1940. That's when we joined the Pacific Fleet. It was about then. I know that I have a menu at home with the names of everybody on the ship at that time in the Marine detachment and everybody else. The menu is for the Christmas dinner that we had on Christmas Day on the ship. I think it was in November when we got there, and we operated out of Pearl Harbor.

We went back to the United States once, I think it was. I know that I remember going under the San Francisco Bridge two or three times.

Around December, 1941, about a week or two before the attack on Pearl Harbor, we went out to sea. We went off the southern tip of the big island of Hawaii for drills and gunnery practice.

Alexander: What was your duty on the ship?

Hechler: Oh! I had all kinds of duties! I stood

quarterdeck watches all the time with different officers. My battle station at nighttime was at a searchlight. We had two big searchlights on there. We had the number three main battery turret, and we also had two .50-caliber water-cooled machine guns on top of the bridge, one on each side of the forward range-finder.

Anyway, we were out for gunnery practice. I think on December 4, which was a Thursday, we came back into Pearl Harbor. We tied up with the other Cruiser Division ships, like, the *Honolulu*. We had the *Boise*, *Phoenix*, and *St. Louis*, which was our sister ship. On Saturday morning, we went over to Ten-Ten Dock and tied up there. [Editor's note: Ten-Ten dock was so-named because it was 1,010 feet in length.] The flagship of the Pacific Fleet then was the battleship USS *Pennsylvania*. She was there. She was spotted by Japanese spies and subs that were in Pearl Harbor before the attack, but they listed us as the flagship of the Pacific Fleet: "The *Pennsylvania* is at Ten-Ten Dock."

So, that's probably why we got the first torpedo. That's what I've always figured. But that's where we tied up. The USS *Pennsylvania* was up about 400 feet ahead in the dry dock. The destroyers *Cassin* and *Downes* went in first, in front of her. They were both heavily damaged by bombs, and we tied up at Ten-Ten Dock.

That afternoon, the old minelayer USS *Oglala* tied up to our starboard side. Our port side was against the dock. We were facing toward the dry dock, where the *Pennsylvania* went. Now, that was on Saturday afternoon.

We had moving pictures aboard the ship that night. You'd never guess what the name of the movie was--*Hold Back the Dawn* (chuckle). [Editor's note: Featuring Olivia de Havilland and Charles Boyer, the film is the story of an American spinster taken advantage of by a gigolo who wants to emigrate to the United States.] Really! It really was! Of course, we didn't realize that until the next day. When the attack was

over, everybody said, "Hey! How about that movie last night, *Hold Back the Dawn*?" That was a strange picture to show the night before the attack on Pearl Harbor, but that's what it was.

Anyway, after we tied up, I went on liberty that night with my buddy. We met when he joined the Marine Corps with me. He was in the 3rd Marine Defense Battalion. When I saw him the last time, it was when he was transferred from boot camp at Parris Island to Quantico, Virginia, where they formed the 3rd Marine Defense Battalion. Then they moved out to Pearl Harbor. I found out he was there, so I looked him up. We went on liberty in Honolulu the night before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Alexander: You went into town. Did you come back that night?

Hechler: Oh, yes! I was in bed by 11:00 p.m. or 12:00 a.m., I guess. I had breakfast about 7:15 a.m. on Sunday morning. About 7:45 a.m., I finished breakfast and went up topside. I walked aft on the port side, which was up

against the dock. I went a little past the number five main battery turret. The color guard--the Marines who had the duty--were on the fantail, waiting to raise the flag. I stood there, and I was looking over to Ford Island. It was a nice, sunny, beautiful morning.

All of a sudden, I saw these planes coming down on Ford Island, on the Navy base. I thought, "My God! Having bombing practice on a Sunday morning!" (chuckle), much less over the Navy base! But the lead plane pulled out, and I saw the red suns [Rising Sun insignia] on the wings. When the lead plane pulled out, he dropped a bomb on a PBY patrol plane that was on the cement ramp there by the water.

Of course, as soon as he did that, they sounded General Quarters on the ship. When they sounded General Quarters, all the watertight doors were automatically shut. That was a good thing, because as after the torpedo hit, we only sank about three feet on one side.

As soon as they sounded General Quarters, I started to run forward on the port side to my battle station. I heard a noise--sort of a roaring noise--behind me, so I turned my head and looked to see what it was. This Jap plane flew over the fantail, and he was only about twenty feet above the flagpole back there. I could see him looking down as he flew over.

Just then, there was a big explosion. I figure that he was probably the aerial torpedo bomber that dropped the torpedo that hit us. The torpedo went under the *Oglala* and hit us because the torpedo was set for deeper water than the *Oglala* drew. She was an old minelayer, and the explosion from the torpedo blast loosened the plates on the *Oglala*, and she started taking on water. There was a tug nearby, I understand, that took the *Oglala* and towed her behind us. I have pictures of the *Oglala* over on her side, up against the dock there. She rolled over after they tied her up. So, we only sank about three feet on that side. I guess that

the tug pulled the *Oglala* away because they thought we could get under way, but we couldn't. Our forward boiler room...

Alexander: Where did that torpedo hit?

Hechler: It hit the forward engine room and the forward boiler room. It was pretty much dead-center, you might say, amidships.

Of course, when the torpedo hit, it threw me. The ship went [like that], and it threw me against the bulkhead. I just got a couple of bruises, and I got up and kept running, but that scared the hell out of me! From that time on, I was more or less a nervous wreck, just like everybody else.

We were up on one of the .50-caliber machine guns above the bridge. I remember that we had eight 5-inch/38 antiaircraft guns. Of course, the main battery guns weren't any good for anything, so the only things firing at the planes were the 5-inch/38s and the "pom-poms." We had two mounts in the back consisting of 40-millimeter "pom-poms," one on each side of the number four main battery turret, and the

two .50-caliber machine guns. That's all we had for firing at planes. I understand that we knocked down five or six planes.

Alexander: I would think that you would have, being able to do that as fast as you did--to get up to those guns. A lot of opportunities didn't happen for the other ships. I think you're right, from what I've heard--that you probably shot down more than anybody else did.

Hechler: What happened was that, when the 5-inch/38s started firing, they couldn't get to the live ammunition lockers. We had been out to sea off of Hawaii for gunnery practice, and they were using target ammunition, which was like a 5-inch gun firing a .30-caliber bullet. That's what they were firing, because they couldn't get to the live ammunition.

Alexander: They still just had the target ammunition?

Hechler: Some of the ships had live ammunition, but we didn't. We were firing 5-inch target ammunition at planes, which was ridiculous. We had to fire something, so that's what we were firing. There was a smokestack right by

Ten-Ten Dock there, about twenty feet in diameter, I guess it was, and about a hundred feet high. We put a hole right through that (chuckle). They must have seen a plane coming down behind it, and they fired at the plane, and it hit the smokestack. We always kidded about that: "We left our trademark at Pearl Harbor." (chuckle)

Anyway, during the attack, there's one thing that happened that I saw. It scared the hell out of me! Over in the dry dock, about 400 yards off our starboard bow, was the destroyer *Shaw*. The *Shaw* was in the floating dry dock, and she got a direct hit on the forward magazine. That blew the whole bow off of the ship. It was a tremendous explosion! A lot of the stuff came down on us. We were up above the bridge, and a lot of stuff came down on top of us. It was little stuff. We didn't get hurt or anything, but a lot of stuff landed there. That's how far it traveled.

That, and the [battleship] *Arizona*, were the two big explosions in Pearl Harbor during

the attack. The Arizona got blown up. It got hit, I understand, with a 16-inch battleship shell that they made a bomb out of. It was armor-piercing, and it went all the way down.

There was an awful lot of excitement. People were firing at everything. Bullets were banging off the side of the ship from everybody else, plus the firing from the planes. I guess we did the same thing. We were firing at planes that looked like they were twenty feet off the water coming up the channel. Those bullets were hitting the water and glancing up. Our bullets were probably hitting other ships, too.

It lasted about two hours, or an hour and forty-five minutes, or something like that, and that was it. They never bombed any of the oil tanks around there, and there were an awful lot of them. They never touched them. We always figured that that was the big mistake they made. They never touched any of the oil tanks. Of course, they were after the aircraft carriers, but the *Lexington* was

out, and the *Saratoga* was in dry dock in the States.

Alexander: The *Yorktown* was out, also.

Hechler: They were supposed to go out to take planes out to Wake Island and Midway. The *Enterprise* launched several planes that night. I guess that they were supposed to come in and land at the Navy base at Ford Island. They came down, and they almost got shot down by our own people. I know that some were shot down, and it was our fault. We were trigger-happy.

Alexander: It was their fault. They were told that if anybody came in from a left pattern, they were to shoot.

Hechler: I also understand that those B-17s that came in from the States had all of their guns removed and in cosmoline because they were delivering the planes to the Philippines. When the Japs saw them, they stayed away from them because they knew that the B-17s were heavily armed, and they'd probably get themselves shot down (chuckle). Of course, they didn't know that all of the guns were in

boxes and cosmoline.

Alexander: What was your feeling? I know that you were awfully busy, and you weren't stopping to think too much. But as soon as things sort of stopped and they apparently left, what did you feel like? What did it feel like to have all of this going on and then, all of a sudden, stopping like that?

Hechler: I was in a state of nervous exhaustion.

Alexander: In what way?

Hechler: It affected my nerves so much that I almost passed out. I was very, very exhausted. When we knew that they weren't coming back anymore, the mess cooks started getting busy down below, making sandwiches, chili, and things like that. We started eating, and then I started feeling better.

Alexander: Did you lose any buddies?

Hechler: Yes. I lost PFC Johnson. He was in the color guard raising the flag on the stern of the ship at 8:00 a.m. I think they raised it before 8:00 a.m., because the Japs hit at 7:55 a.m. After they got the flag up and they sounded General Quarters, he ran

forward, just like I did. He was supposed to be up on one of the .50-calibers. He ran forward on the starboard side. I think he was about amidships, where the torpedo hit, and he was killed. I was told afterward that they found his rifle back by the number four main battery turret. I figure that that's where he was probably killed. He was the only Marine we lost.

Our platoon sergeant--Teague was his name--was burned badly. I don't know where he was. I think he was leaving the Marine compartment then, but he was burned badly around the head and neck. I went over to the hospital to see him the next day with a couple of guys. He was in a ward.

There must have been fifty guys in the burn ward. Some of them were screaming. I'll never forget it. I remember one guy. They were peeling the skin off of his arms because it was burned. They were getting the dead skin off, and he was screaming.

Teague was burned around the neck and head. I guess the morphine they gave him was

all right. He didn't seem to be suffering or anything. I saw him again after World War II at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. I just happened to run across him. You could see the loose skin around his neck. You could see that he had been burned at one time.

Alexander: When you were in that hospital, was it kind of chaotic?

Hechler: Well, they were pretty busy. There was an awful lot of moaning. The smell of burnt skin was very bad.

After the attack was over, we went into dry dock the next day. They had the number three dry dock there, and it wasn't completely finished. It was the new dry dock, and we were the first ship to go in there. We went into dry dock, and they let all the water out. When they let the water out, I walked around the caisson. The hole in the side was as big as this room! You could have driven a Mack truck through it! We lost thirty-five guys killed, including Johnson, the one Marine. They had to remove the bodies and clean up the mess, and then

they put a new plate over that. It took a couple of months to get it patched up, just like the destroyer *Shaw*. They put a false front of the *Shaw*. If you were on the bridge, you could look right down to the water. There was no bow. She went back to the Mare Island Navy Yard [California], and they put a new bow on her. We saw it in the Mare Island Navy Yard when we went back.

The first night, I had guard duty around the caisson. Like I said, everybody was trigger-happy. The yard workmen knew this. As you walked around the dry dock, every once in a while you'd come to a place where there were steps that went down to this little platform. I guess that was where water came out and in. I don't know what it was for, but I had to go down there with a flashlight and my rifle. I had to flash the flashlight down there one time, and there were two guys sleeping. I woke them up, and, of course, they yelled: "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" I said, "What the hell are you doing here?" They said they were yard workmen, and they'd

just come off their shift at 12:00 a.m., and they weren't about to try to go home because, if they tried to get out of the Navy Yard, they might get shot. Everybody was trigger-happy, so I didn't blame them. I reported it and told the officer of the day that there were two yard workmen sleeping over there. I told him why and all that, and he told me it was all right.

Alexander: That was a pretty bad night, I'd think.

Hechler: Yes. One time I was patrolling around the dry dock there, and I was walking across the caisson. Everything was darkened out at night. We didn't know if the Japs were coming back or not. I walked across the caisson and in back there, and some guy yelled out: "Halt! Who goes there!" I heard the click of his safety, so I said, "What the hell are you doing out here?" It turned out that they had brought in Marines from the States. They had the new M-1 rifle, the new helmets, and everything. As soon as they got there, they put them on guard duty all over the place, but nobody told me about it.

Nobody would think to tell me, and I was patrolling around the dry dock. I almost got myself shot! That surprised me when I saw him. I said, "Jesus! Why didn't your sergeant of the guard tell somebody about it?" In those days, with the situation where it was, everybody was making mistakes right and left, one after another.

Anyway, we went back to the States after we got patched up.

Alexander: How long was that?

Hechler: We were there, I think...I didn't keep track of it, but it took about two months to get the plate put on to patch it up.

Alexander: So that it was seaworthy. Is that what it did?

Hechler: Yes. We went back to the Mare Island Navy Yard, and we were there until July. The ship went out in July, all re-armed. They took the machine guns off and put 20-millimeter guns on there. They put twelve of those on. And they fixed up the bridge differently. They patched it up and all.

In June, my two-year hitch on the *Helena*

was up. A Marine usually only put two years aboard ship, and then they'd transfer him. My two-year hitch was up. My buddy, whom I see every two years...he retired as a sergeant-major after thirty years in the Marine Corps, and three wars. "Lucky Nick," I call him. He never got a scratch in three wars. He was even on the *Helena* when she was sunk in the Kula Gulf battle. [Editor's note: The *Helena* was sunk off the coast of Kolombangara Island on the night of July 5-6, 1943, in the Battle of Kula Gulf. She fired 1,000 rounds of 6-inch shells from her fifteen main battery guns in nine minutes, leading to a Japanese post-battle report claiming the existence of a 6-inch machine gun.] He came on board the *Helena* a month after I did, at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. So, he missed out being transferred in July because the ship went out to sea. He had to stay on it, so he put in an extra year aboard the *Helena*.

But I was transferred. They transferred me for about one month at the Marine Barracks

at the Mare Island Navy Yard. It's in California, about forty miles north of San Francisco. Then they sent me down to Camp Elliot. It's closed now, but in those days it was an infantry training school. Boot recruits just coming out of boot camp in San Diego were sent up there for two months of infantry training and whatnot. I had a platoon there for two months--sixty-five men in all.

Alexander: What did you have on your shoulder by then? Were you a sergeant?

Hechler: No, I was a corporal then. The sergeant transferred in from Sitka, Alaska. Sergeant Hoff, his name was. The two of us had these sixty-five guys out of boot camp from San Diego for two months.

After the two months were over, they put us all aboard a ship. They sent the whole bunch of us to the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal [Solomon Islands]. That was at the end of the Guadalcanal Campaign. That was in November, 1942. They landed in August, 1942. I was transferred off of the

Helena in June, 1942.

Our regiment left in November and went down to Melbourne, Australia. Our executive officer, who ended up being our commanding officer, was [Lieutenant Colonel Eugene] "Chesty" Puller. You've probably heard of him. One of the Navy Crosses that he got should have been the Medal of Honor. He got four Navy Crosses, but that's another story-- my relations with "Chesty" Puller. Anyway, we went down to Melbourne, Australia. A lot of the guys were knocked out with malaria. I wasn't. I got malaria twice in Cape Gloucester, New Britain. That was our second campaign.

We went from Melbourne, Australia, to Finschhafen, New Guinea; and then we went to Goodenough Island. The 71st Australian Wing Headquarters was stationed there on Goodenough Island. Our regiment, the 1st Marine Regiment, was there for four or five weeks. Then we jumped on LCIs [landing craft, infantry] and LSTs [landing ship, tank] and hit Cape Gloucester, New Britain.

My unit--K Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment--was the point company when we hit the beach. There was a dirt road going up the beach about two miles up to the airfield at Cape Gloucester, which we took. It took us two days to cover the two miles to get to the airfield. The Japs had bunkers all along that dirt road going up, which was about 100 or 200 feet in from the beach. It wasn't much of a beach because the LSTs and LCIs went up and dropped the ramps. We didn't use "amtracs" [amphibious tractors] or Higgins boats to land. We landed from LSTs and LCIs. Our company, K Company, took the airfield.

We had no sooner taken the airfield when the Japs counterattacked with tanks and infantry around this grassy knoll at the other end of the airfield. Those tanks came across the airfield. We had a guy with a bazooka, and a Sherman tank came up, which we were following most of the time up that dirt road, knocking out those pillboxes that we came across. He came up--and I'll never forget this broadside--turned the gun around,

and opened up with that 75-millimeter gun on those tanks. Everytime he hit a tank, it blew the tank wide-open. They had light tanks, and that 75-millimeter gun blew them wide-open. I think there were six or seven tanks that came at us. They were figuring on breaking through because a lot of Japs were on back of them. They figured on breaking through our lines and picking us off from the rear or something like that, but they never got within a hundred yards of us.

Alexander: Thanks to that Sherman tank.

Hechler: And the bazooka. The bazooka worked very well. That happened just as we took the airfield. We weren't even at the airfield yet. We were just up to the edge of the airfield when they counterattacked.

After we took the airfield, we set up a perimeter defense around it. There were grassy knolls, and then it went down into the jungle. Right after we took the airfield, they claimed that there was a company of Japs that escaped over the hills.

They were back in the jungle there, so

they brought up these amphibious DUKWs [amphibious trucks, pronounced "ducks"], as they called them. This was the first time I ever saw this. They had racks of 120-millimeter rockets. Now, of course, after Peleliu [Palau Islands], they had LCIs and LSTs with them. They just blasted the jungle. You could hear them landing: "BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!" The Japs thought that we had automatic artillery (chuckle). That was interesting to see. That was the first time I ever saw that.

I think it was about a week later--about five days or something like that--when "Chesty" Puller decided to organize a bunch of guys and take them on a patrol across the island.

Alexander: Was he your company commander at this point?

Hechler: No, "Chesty" Puller was the executive officer of the 1st Marine Regiment then. When we hit Peleliu, he was the commanding officer. He made colonel, and he was the commander of the 1st Marine Regiment then.

Alexander: Okay. He's taking this group out now.

Hechler: He was still a lieutenant colonel, and he was the executive officer of the regiment. "Chesty" Puller was a guy who had to be in front, where the action is, all the time. He was wounded four times. He took this patrol, and we went across the island to cut off this platoon of Japs that had escaped. We were supplied by the 11th Marines' Taylor Cub airplanes. They used them for spotting artillery then. They dropped us C-rations, K-rations, ammunition, and all that stuff while we were going through the jungle, crossing the island. We were gone for ten to fifteen days.

When we finally cut the Japs off...they were probably figuring on going to the north coast and walking up. Rabaul was on the other end, 200 miles up. New Britain's 200 miles long. At [this end] was Cape Gloucester, and [up here] was Rabaul. By the time we got to them, they were almost starving to death. They had no food or anything like that, and they were in pretty bad shape. There was no firing. We didn't

kill any of them. We took most of them prisoner. That was "Chesty" Puller. He had to be where the action was all the time.

My first encounter with "Chesty" Puller was when we went to Pavuvu [Russell Islands] for rest. They put up pyramidal tents, and that's where we slept. When we first got there, a bunch of guys went and dug trenches about 100 or 200 feet from the tents for a "head," or latrine, as they call it in the Army. Then they put toilet seats over the whole trench. There were about twelve of them. There were no women on the island, of course, so there was nothing around them-- just the seats.

I sat down there one morning. There wasn't hardly anybody around there, and then, all of a sudden, this guy came over and sat down next to me. It was "Chesty" Puller. That was my first encounter with "Chesty." At first, I didn't know who the hell he was. He didn't have any markings on him or anything like that. That's the way he was, just like a GI all the time. He dressed just

like everybody else. When we were on maneuvers or anything like that, he was right up in the mud with all the privates. Anyway, we had quite a chat there. He started talking to me.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Alexander: We were talking about him being just like a GI.

Hechler: Well, we were on Pavuvu there for a couple months. Then, in September, 1944, they decided to take Peleliu. That was the big one. That was the worst one, I think, that they ever had in the Marine Corps.

Alexander: It seems to me that it wasn't even needed.

Hechler: We went ashore in "amtracs" there, because they had those problems at Tarawa. The boats ran up on the coral reefs there, so we hit Peleliu in "amtracs," and we went right over the coral reefs.

We went in on the first wave. Our outfit, the 3rd Battalion, was in the first wave going in. Of course, "Chesty" Puller was a colonel then. We went into the beach, and before we got to the beach, we had half

of our "amtracs" knocked out. I have pictures at home which I got from a combat photographer in the hospital with me later on. The museums have them now. I found this out when I went to the 1st Marines museum: "Oh! They have the same pictures I have at home." But I got them from the photographer who shot them. Some of the pictures were taken from a small patrol boat. You can see the bow of it, and the whole beach was fire and smoke. You couldn't even see the beach. That's what it looked like when we went in. We couldn't even see the beach. The reason for that was because the Japs opened up. The Navy let up on their bombardment too soon, and the Japs came out of the caves, and they opened up on us coming in. Somebody said that there were sixty "amtracs" smoking, on fire, or knocked out of the first, second, and third waves.

Alexander: Which one were you on?

Hechler: The first wave.

Alexander: You went in on the first wave?

Hechler: Yes! There were some ahead of us. There

were maybe ten or fifteen guys on the beach when I hit the beach. I jumped out of the "amtrac" and jumped into a shell crater that was about ten feet deep and about thirty feet across. There were already six guys in there who'd gotten there before me. Everybody took cover because there was machine gun fire. You could hear the bullets whizzing. Going in on the "amtracs," you could hear the bullets pinging off them. Well, we got into the shell crater there, and everybody was taking cover.

Word was passed for the fleet to open up again, and they opened up. To hear a 16-inch shell going over your head about twenty or thirty feet is very scary. So, they opened up a new bombardment, and that helped out a lot, and we were able to move in.

Alexander: That really did have some effect, then, on the enemy at that point?

Hechler: Well, yes, to a certain extent. It was surprising how they were in the caves there. You thought you had them, and, all of a sudden, there were always a few left. One

time there...

Alexander: But they didn't pin you down.

Hechler: We were pinned down two or three times. Lots of times there, we had to crawl on our bellies to gain ground. We'd maybe go a hundred feet, and then for a couple of hours crawl on our bellies. We were always going forward because we were under fire most of the time from snipers.

Alexander: What was going through my head was that, after the bombardment, you had a chance to get out and start making some headway, but maybe not.

Hechler: What happened to me was that I was in a foxhole. Everybody was in a foxhole or a ditch or something like that. The one I was in was more like a foxhole because there was only room for me in there.

A mortar or shell landed next to my foxhole and knocked me out. It blew off my helmet and ruptured the artery in my nose up [here]. Of course, I was knocked out until they got me. I was starting to come to when they hoisted me up on a stretcher to the

hospital ship. Two corpsmen took me in. A corpsman, from what I've heard, was nearby when this happened. He pulled me out of the foxhole, and I was covered with coral sand and whatnot. I had blood all down the front of me from my nose. From what I understand, he gave me a shot of morphine and put me on a stretcher. I was dazed, so I didn't know what was going on.

What brought me out of it was that two corpsmen held me under a cold shower on the hospital ship. The reason for that was they had to wash off all the blood and coral sand and sweat. The coral sand was sticking to my skin underneath my clothes, so they had to rinse me off. As soon as the cold water hit me, I came out of it.

Alexander: What did they do? Did they take a stretcher with you on it and go under the shower?

Hechler: No, they hoisted me up aboard the hospital ship on the stretcher; then they took me off of the stretcher and half-walked me under the shower. They held me under there until they got my clothes off. That's where I lost my

K-Bar knife. They held me under the shower until they got me all cleaned off. Then they put a robe on me. They were stuffing stuff up my nose.

They put me in bed. I think it was an hour later or something--I don't really remember--when somebody came up and gave me a bowl of strawberry Jell-O. Man! That was good! Well, I had no sooner got it down when I threw up. I couldn't keep anything in my stomach. It was probably the concussion that affected my stomach. For three or four days, I couldn't keep anything down. Everytime I tried to eat something, I'd throw it up. I lost about ten pounds.

The hospital ship--I don't even know if it was the *Solace* or which one it was--took me over to Manus Island, which was nearby. There they put me up overnight.

The next morning, they took us and put us on stretchers aboard a C-47. It was all fixed up for stretchers. They flew us down to a hospital on Guadalcanal. We almost got knocked out of the sky going down to

Guadalcanal, because I remember looking out and seeing antiaircraft bursts. There was a Jap-held island that we went over, evidently, and they had their guns firing at us. Of course, it was probably only one gun, because I only saw two or three bursts, and then we were out of range again. But I thought: "Holy Jesus! What next?" We landed at Henderson Field, and I was in a hospital there for two weeks.

Then they flew me down to Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, for two weeks. I was walking around then. I remember walking out, and I came across this big log cabin. It was an Elk's lodge. Can you imagine that, way over there? I thought that was strange. That was where I saw [Major Gregory] "Pappy" Boyington. They had an airfield there. I walked down there one day, and you couldn't miss him.

Alexander: When you say "You couldn't miss him," what do you mean?

Hechler: You could always pick out "Pappy" Boyington. He had all these Japanese flags across his

plane to show the planes he had knocked down.

Anyway, they put me on a hospital ship. I was only there for a week or two weeks. We set sail for San Francisco. It was already almost to November, and it was cold. They put us "up patients"--those who could walk--on heated buses and took us up to Oakland, to an old naval hospital. I was there for two weeks. That's where I met that combat photographer who gave me the pictures. Then they transferred me to a redistribution center in San Diego.

Alexander: What was the diagnosis from your hospital stay?

Hechler: It was a concussion, I think. It had to be a concussion. They told me about the ruptured artery in my nose. I didn't even know there was an artery up there; I always thought it was all veins.

Anyway, twenty years ago, I blew my nose too hard one morning, and I ended up in the hospital for five days--a \$4,000 hospital bill! I always like to brag about my \$4,000 nosebleed (chuckle). I haven't had any

trouble since then, though.

So, they sent me down to the distribution center. I went in, and there were a couple of officers sitting behind a desk. They looked over my records and said, "We're going to give you permanent limited duty in the States anywhere you want to be stationed." I said, "That's great! I haven't been home in three years. I'd like to get as close to home as I can."

They sent me to Marine Barracks, Earl Ammunition Depot, in New Jersey, which is only about twenty-six miles from home. I thought that was great! They gave me a thirty-day furlough transfer. After my furlough, I reported, and I only had to go twenty-six miles to report for duty.

The second day I was there, a runner came up to my room and said, "Captain Hoover wants to see you." I said, "Who's Captain Hoover?" He said, "He's the commanding officer of the Earl Ammunition Depot. He's a Navy captain." I said, "All I know is the Marine Corps captain here in the barracks." So, I went

down to his office and walked in, and right away I knew who Captain [Gilbert C.] Hoover was. He was the commanding officer of the USS *Helena*. He got the Navy Cross when he was out there with the *Helena*. Of course, I never saw him before, because he came aboard the *Helena* after I was transferred off. But I knew of Captain Hoover.

He was looking at everybody who transferred in. Whether they were a Marine or a sailor, he looked over their records, and when he saw that I was on the *Helena*, he wanted to see me. We sat there for a whole hour talking about the *Helena*. That's how I found out a lot about what happened to the *Helena* in the Kula Gulf battle. I was there for two months.

Alexander: Was she sunk there?

Hechler: Yes. The *Helena* was sunk in a night battle by three destroyer torpedoes. Somebody said that they read in the Navy archives that the *Helena* was sunk by a submarine, but it wasn't. A destroyer got in close because they were firing rapid-fire at nighttime with

fifteen 6-inch/47s.

Alexander: This was in Ironbottom Sound.

Hechler: Well, it's near there. The *St. Louis*, the sister ship of the *Helena*, was there, also, and two destroyers. She got three torpedoes in her at night because they were firing rapid-fire at night, and they couldn't see very well. The destroyer could see the flashes and got in close. Anyway, Captain Hoover wasn't on it then. He had already been transferred, but he told me all about it.

I was there until February, 1945. I think around February, the first sergeant wanted to see me. I went down, and he said, "I just got a letter from Washington, D.C., requesting your transfer to 8th and I Streets Marine Barracks." I said, "Oh! The old spit-and-shine outfit again!" When I went aboard the *Helena*, that's where I was--in the President's Guard Detachment at 8th and I Streets. So, here I was, back at 8th and I again.

I met my future wife there in July. She

was in the Navy WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Service]. She was a second class yeoman in the WAVES. She worked at the Bureau of Personnel, which was over in Arlington. She was from Kingsburg, New Jersey. I met her in a swimming pool (chuckle) with her girlfriends.

On August 1, 1945, they told me that I could stay in the Marine Corps, or I could go out on points. They had come out with the point system by then. I said, "Let me out!"

They gave me an honorable discharge, and I walked out the gate and hailed a cab that was coming up from the Navy Yard, which was only a block down from the Marine Barracks. I got in the back of the cab, and there was a Navy captain in the back seat. The cab had picked him up at the Navy Yard, and he was heading for Union Station, and that's where I was going.

I got in the back, and, Jesus! Lo and behold, I saw that it was Captain [Irving T.] Duke. Captain Duke was a lieutenant commander and our gunnery officer on the *Helena* during

the attack on Pearl Harbor (chuckle). He used to come up to the machine guns, and he'd tell one joke after another and never crack a smile. I kidded him about that in the back of the taxicab.

Alexander: He recognized you?

Hechler: Yes, after I told him. I said, "You got any good jokes?" I asked him where he was going, and he said, "Up to Norfolk, Virginia, to take command of the USS *Missouri*. The *Missouri* ran aground at Norfolk around that time, and the captain was relieved of command. Duke was down in the Navy Yard, and they gave him the *Missouri*. So, that's where he was headed. Thirty days later, I picked up the paper, and here's Duke down in Tokyo Bay! I said to Doris [his wife], "I know who the captain of that ship is!" [Editor's note: The Japanese government signed the Instrument of Surrender that ended World War II on the deck of the *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945.]

Alexander: We're about to run out of this tape, but I want to tell you how much this is going to

mean to the University of North Texas and the
National Museum of the Pacific War.

Hechler: Well, that makes me happy.

Alexander: Thank you again.

Hechler: I'm glad to help.

Alexander: You really have. We appreciate what you've
done, and what you did.