

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War*

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. J. J. Knaupp

(World War II - U. S. Marine Corps - Iwo Jima)

September 28, 2002

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(WW II Marine Corp – Served on Iwo Jima)**

This is Eddie Graham. I am interviewing Mr. J. J. Knaupp at the Fredericksburg High School for the National Museum of the Pacific War.

Mr. Graham: Mr. Knaupp please tell us when and where you were born.

Mr. Knaupp: I was born in San Antonio, Texas, on January 4, 1926. My family had been in San Antonio since the 1850's. I went through junior school, etc. in San Antonio, and then graduated from high school from the Edgewood High School in San Antonio in 1943. I was the oldest in the family. There were four of us; one sister and two brothers. My father's family were originally from Germany, through Fredericksburg and New Braunfels. My mother's family was from France. Their early time in the United States was in Kerrville. I graduated from high school in May of 1943 and I worked for four months until November 1943 for the Southern Pacific Railroad. What is ironic about that is they sent me out to Marfa, Texas. My job was to check supplied boxcars for the air base that was at Marfa, and the people that were unloading the boxcars were the prisoners of the German Africa Corps. They were an impressive looking bunch of people, even as captives. At that time we were at war and it was still probably debatable as to how it was going to end.

Mr. Graham: Let's go back. After you got out of high school what branch of service did you join, and why did you select that particular branch?

Mr. Knaupp: I joined the Marine Corps in November 1943. I picked it because that was the thing we were going to do. We were "hot shots." We didn't know what was going to happen to us. I never regretted

doing it now that I am here, but there were times when I questioned it – questioned my judgement.

Mr. Graham: Let me ask you another question.. Where were you and what were you doing December 7, 1941?

Mr. Knaupp: We were at home. It was a Sunday of course. I was out in the yard I assume fooling around, as kids will do. The radio reported it and my mother came out and told us.

Mr. Graham: Tell us more about you joining the Marines, how you came about it, etc.

Mr. Knaupp: Well, that was my choice. I was going to be drafted. I wanted to join as soon as I got out of high school, but you had to have your parent's signature while you were still 17. I couldn't get that, but as I got closer to my 18th birthday, they realized I was going to be drafted into the service anyhow, so they signed the papers for me to join the Marine Corps. I did that in November 1943. I left San Antonio in December of '43 and went to the Marine Recruit Depot in San Diego, California. I was there just a few days and they sent us through the boot camp. I got out of the boot camp in March 1944. Of course, as it often was with the training unit, people went to all different branches and all different parts of the Marine Corps. Some to sea duty, some to one thing and another. Several of us were sent to the 5th Marine Division that was forming at Camp Pendleton. They were putting that division together with recruits from the depot and they had a lot of veterans that had been to Tarawa. They disbanded the Marine parachute troops in the Raiders, so we had lots of those fellows in our unit. We were there most of March, April, May and June. The 2nd Battalion was the senior battalion of the regiment, and the senior regiment of the division. So in July, ahead of all plans, it was planned the whole division would go to Hawaii, and then to wherever they needed us.

They were having a pretty tight time at Peleliu, so they took our battalion and sent us as a detached unit to Peleliu. We got there one day, and I can't recall how long it took for us to get there, but we were going to go ashore the next day. However, that night the tide of battle turned apparently and we didn't have to go. The irony of it is our Colonel was crying because he wanted to get his battalion into action. He figured we wouldn't have too many casualties and it would probably pay off later on. I guess he was right. We went back to Hawaii and stayed there the rest of '44. We left Hawaii at the end of '44 and were at sea 52-54 days on our way to Iwo Jima. My 19th birthday was on January the 4th aboard ship on the way to Iwo Jima. It is pretty well historically known, we landed on February 19th '45 on Iwo.

Mr. Graham:

Was this the invasion?

Mr. Knaupp:

Yes, with the invasion, the assault troops. Our battalion, which was comprised of approximately 1,000 men, went ashore about 2:30 in the afternoon. I guess there are not many men left that actually saw the flag raised at Iwo Jima.. Of course I did, it was to our left flank. The 27th Regiment was to our left. I was a gunner on an 81mm mortar. Until we came off of the island we were engaged almost the entire time. Our battalion took some pretty serious casualties. It is written in the 5th Marine Division Book, "The Spearhead," an outlay of the casualties taken. We went onto to Iwo with 990 men and 60 some officers. When we came off, there were two officers and 61 men left. That is "serious" casualties, and I am just lucky to be here that is all there is to it. Some of the wounds weren't mortal, but they reduced our strength by that much.

Mr. Graham:

How long were you on Iwo Jima?

Mr. Knaupp:

We were there from the 19th of February until the 26th of March. It is a short period of time, but it was serious business. After that we

went back to Hawaii and they began to put the division back together again. All of what we have heard today in this symposium about whether there would be an attack on the island of Japan or not, that is what we were preparing for. We were scheduled as an assault unit again, and I'm sure that if they hadn't dropped the bomb I figure they would have gotten me the second time. Fortunately we didn't have to invade Japan. We went to Japan, but as occupying troops. I believe it was September they were signing the treaty aboard the battleship, but just prior to that when we went into Japan, we went in on the landing barges and things. They didn't know for sure what was going to happen. We stayed in Sasebo on the island of Kyuchu for three or four months and then they began the disbanding of the 5th Marine Division. They had a "point" system. I was short one or two points being able to go home with the division, so we were transferred to the 2nd Division at another Japanese city. I believe it was Yamamoto. I don't recall some of the names right away. I stayed in Japan on occupation duty until August 1946 and then went back to the Marine Depot at San Diego. I was discharged and went home in September 1946.

Mr. Graham: Let's go back to your boot camp. Back then, did you have any unusual experiences in the boot camp training?

Mr. Knaupp: The whole thing was unusual. I don't know if I did much thinking, I mostly did what I was told. It was strenuous. Probably as good a thing as ever happened to me.

Mr. Graham: You mentioned about leaving Pearl Harbor and going to Iwo Jima, you spent 52 or 56 days at sea?

Mr. Knaupp: Yes, on the troop ship.

Mr. Graham: What did you do mostly while you were aboard the ship?

Mr. Knaupp: Well, a troop ship is a miserable place to start with. There is no question about that. You couldn't stagnate. You trained and

practiced with the mortars even though it was without ammunition, but they tried you so that you didn't deteriorate in that period of time. It was constant training. There is a limit as to what you can do on a troop ship. I guess there were about 1,200 people aboard the ship. I read a thing about three years ago, the former crew members of that ship, that troop transport, held their reunion in San Antonio and called me and invited me to come down to their reunion. That was an interesting thing to see some of those sailors. I didn't know any of them, but the very fact that those were some of the people that I saw running around on that ship.

Mr. Graham: Without necessarily going into the detail about the battle on Iwo Jima, you pointed out one thing, you did get to see the raising of the flag, which was a very historical moment. Were there any other things or occurrences that happened that you still think about?

Mr. Knaupp: That was important because that was a real morale booster. I didn't know if we were going to make it or not. We had so many casualties. There wasn't hardly room for someone to fall down. It was really bad. You saw a lot of things that were horrible. A lot of people don't realize it, but the mortar was a very effective weapon. I read somewhere where, both in Europe and the Pacific, more troops were killed by mortar fire than any other means. What is bad about it is that there is no where to hide. The shell goes up and comes straight down and when you fire, the enemy fires back at you. There were four mortars to a platoon. Eventually all but mine was destroyed. Guys were killed when shells came right into the gun positions. At the end we were too close to the mortar fire. At the very end, what was left we just became riflemen. What was good was to be told that it was over and we could leave and take a hot shower down on the beach. They had set up portable bathing facilities, and that was important. Some of the details you don't

remember. I can't remember eating. There were rations, but I don't remember.

Mr. Graham: When you think back on your career in the Marines, do you have any memories of any special people or occurrences that you still think about?

Mr. Knaupp: I still think about mortar shells coming down and realize that my gun was only closer from here to that wall from the one that had dropped in, and that is enough to get you to thinking twice. I saw where some guy was hit probably by a 5" shell and I keep thinking of hearing about the "grease spot." Well, that is about all that was left – a grease spot. That is pretty horrible. I have never had any particular nightmares. I don't think it kept me from being a productive citizen. Maybe I'm a little cynical, but a lot of times I've seen where sometime the guys that were the furthest from the fire are the ones that seemed to talk about the biggest burns if you really want to know the truth in it.

Mr. Graham: Never experienced it?

Mr. Knaupp: Never experienced it. Very few people did. You know, we had thirteen million people in the service. Maybe less than a million ever fired a hostile shot or were in the heat of battle.

Mr. Graham: Let's go back then, you said that you were left in Japan for occupation duty.

Mr. Knaupp: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Pick it up there and tell us what happened.

Mr. Knaupp: As soon as you got back into the more stable aspect of the occupation duty, back came the pressed uniform, and the routine. It was a long way from the freedom of training, etc., but my biggest job was really administration. I forgot one thing that was interesting. Early in the occupation, we went to China and picked Japanese on reparation. That was an experience because it was a

small ship. It was one of our ships, but more like a big landing barge. It wasn't that far from Japan to the Chinese coast. We put eight or nine hundred Japanese prisoners in the hold of the ship, and our job was to guard them. That was one of the few things that seemed like it made much sense in the occupation. The rest of the time you were just there. I think you were a presence is all that you were. We lived in a compound. There wasn't much of anything to go to, everything was so destroyed. When we went out of Sasebo to the main island, I think we went on a train. We went to one of the cities where the Atomic Bomb had hit just within three weeks after that had been done. That is the only way to get where they were taking us. That was bad. I can't remember which location it was, but the smell was terrible. That really didn't make much difference, whether they fire bombed it or the Atomic Bomb was used, because it was still ashes. It was amazing how much destruction.

Mr. Graham: How long did you stay there?

Mr. Knaupp: Until August of 1946.

Mr. Graham: Then what happened?

Mr. Knaupp: I went back to San Diego and got my discharge. I came back to San Antonio.

Mr. Graham: Mr. Knaupp on behalf of the National Museum of the Pacific War, I certainly want to thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

Mr. Knaupp: I enjoyed being with you.

Mr. Graham: We certainly wish you good luck and God Bless to you.

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