

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR  
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Interview with

HENRY TROWBRIDGE  
U. S. MARINES

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

HENRY TROWBRIDGE

This is Eddie Graham. I'm with the Admiral Nimitz Museum and today I am interviewing Henry Trowbridge. We are at the Hilton Hotel in San Antonio, Texas. To begin with, Henry, tell us where and when you were born.

MR. TROWBRIDGE: September 26, 1925 in Oakland, California.

MR. GRAHAM: And where did you go to school?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: I went to school at University High School and upon graduation I went directly into the service.

MR. GRAHAM: What were the names of your parents?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Helen and Delger Trowbridge.

MR. GRAHAM: Do you have any children?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: I have three children.

MR. GRAHAM: And their names?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Scot, Jason and Karen.

MR. GRAHAM: Where were you and what were you doing on December 7, 1941?

Well, I had been to a party and spent the night at a friend's house. I got home at an early hour of the morning and thought my parents were going to be upset with me, but together with my brother they were clustered around the radio listening to the news about Pearl Harbor. So, I escaped a tongue lashing, but sharing this experience brought us together as we were all afraid of what was going to happen next. My brother was older than I and we knew he would soon be going into the service. Anyway, it was a very emotional time.

MR. GRAHAM: Explain to us how it came about that you ended up in the Marine Corps.

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Well, one day in high school a marine recruiter in his dress blue uniform came to speak to our senior class, and he told us they had a program whereby you could join the Marine Corps Reserve right away. This was in 1943. If you qualified, you would be selected for officer training. We would be called to active duty some time after graduation. In the meantime we could go ahead and apply to college because they didn't know when we would be activated. I went to San Francisco and passed the physical examination. Then I applied to the University of Oregon and was accepted. However, I received orders to report for active duty just a few days following graduation. They sent me to Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas along with many other recent graduates. We joined the marine detachment of the Navy V-12 program and started our training that consisted of college and military classes. This was in preparation for going to Officer Candidate School at Quantico, Virginia.

MR. GRAHAM: So you didn't take any other basic training, you went right to Georgetown and started with academic as well as military program.

MR. TROWBRIDGE: The V-12 program was developed for both navy sailors and marines; our detachment consisted of about one-third marines, two-third sailors. The college portion of our training was condensed so that in a little over a year we received almost two years of college credit. We had day and nighttime classes as well as classes on Saturday mornings. Then we went to boot camp (basic training).

MR. GRAHAM: Where was that?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Parris Island, South Carolina, and from there we spent several weeks at Advanced Infantry School at Camp LeJuene, North Carolina. They were waiting for openings at Quantico so they could feed us into OCS. I did get into Quantico after a

considerable wait and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. By that time the war in the Pacific had ended and I thought I wouldn't see much action. I was kind of disappointed, as I had worked so hard to become an officer. I was working at the time for a lieutenant colonel who ran a transient camp for marines coming through on their way to be assigned to elsewhere. One day he said, "I'm going to be leaving because I'm taking a draft of marines over to China and I'll have to let you run the shop while I'm gone." I replied, "Can I go with you?" The answer was "yes, but the problem is that you would have to stay there and I'm coming back." I said that would fine with me so he made me his assistant draft adjutant and we went off to China together. I don't know if you want to stop at that.

MR. GRAHAM: No, go right ahead. Tell us what happened.

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Well they formed this draft in a very big hurry. They were grabbing guys who were just out of boot camp with no advanced infantry training plus a large contingent of troops from Camp LeJeune. I remember that on a very stormy night we boarded a troop train bound for Norfolk, Virginia, and we immediately boarded a troop transport. Just on the comical side, I was in charge of one of the train cars and I was told just before reaching Norfolk that I had to list all of the marines on the car. I didn't have anything to write on so I ended up writing it on toilet paper. As I went up the gangplank of the ship I passed it to the personnel officer. It took them three or four days out to find out who they had on the ship because the list was put together so fast. Why the hurry? Apparently someone in Washington, D.C. told the Marine Corps to get the draft over to China as soon as possible because the U.S. forces there were very short handed. We spent a month sailing from Norfolk via the Panama Canal and Pearl Harbor and finally to China. In the Yellow Sea we had to follow minesweepers because of

the danger of mines. We landed at Taku, the port for the city of Tientsin. The bay was so shallow that our big ship couldn't go in to dock so we had to go ashore in landing craft. Today, after dredging a deep channel, the Chinese are shipping a tremendous number of containers out of Taku. We stayed in Taku for a couple of days and then went by railroad to Tientsin for assignment to various units of the First Marine Division. I was lucky to be sent to Peking (now Beijing) and join Headquarters Company of the Fifth Marine Regiment. Most of the company officers were billeted in the old Dutch Legation and that provided us with comfortable quarters. At that time our main mission was to repatriate the more than 600,000 soldiers and Korean civilians of the Japanese reserve army stationed in North China. They were being sent back to Japan in LSTs and they could transport only about a 1000 men at a time, so it took them several months. After repatriating the Japanese we had to repatriate Korean civilians who had been brought to Peking by the Japanese to act as civil administrators.

MR. GRAHAM: You said something about repatriating the Japanese soldiers. What was the process you went through to accomplish this?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: First we gained the confidence of the Japanese officers and allowed the soldiers to stay in their own compounds. We found that they were very cooperative. The Chinese were very anxious to get that property and to get what was stored there. Since we didn't want to secure the compounds we allowed the Japanese to keep their weapons. They saw to it that that the property remained in their hands until they turned it over to the Marine Corps and we in turn returned it to the Chinese government. It was an orderly process.

MR. GRAHAM: Do you remember any special experiences with the Japanese prisoners that still kind of sticks in your mind?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Well, the only thing is when we first landed and hadn't been on the dock in Taku very long before I saw some Japanese soldiers standing around one of the buildings. I was walking over that way and a Japanese officer came over and said, "Hello marine, where are you from?" I told him I was from Oakland, California and he said, "I graduated from UCLA and then returned to Japan and joined the army. Other than that I had very little contact with them, as others were responsible for liaison with the Japanese officers."

MR. GRAHAM: What were your main duties?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: I was in charge of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Post Exchange as well as a variety of duties to which a junior officer would be assigned. I would go out on patrol and supervise the rifle range that kept the troops on their toes. It was sometime after that that our company was ordered to the coal mine at Tangshan, one of the three largest coalmines in China that were supplying the industries in the south with coal. There were no coal deposits down there so all of their coal had to come from the three big mines at Tangshan, Linsee and Chingwantao.

MR. GRAHAM: Let's just stop a moment here and get a little better pinpoint. This is the part of China you were in. You went to the port of Tientsin and this was the southern part of China?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: No, we were in north China, and the language there was Mandarin, whereas in southern China it was Cantonese. There was a key railroad that ran from Peking to Mukden, Manchuria. It was named the Peking-Mukden Railroad and was very important because there were no good roads and everything was transported by rail.

MR. GRAHAM: The main purpose was to get the coal from the mines distributed to different places for power and energy.

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Yes, it was the absolute key, so the marines were given the responsibility of guarding the tracks. The communists blew up the tracks, derailed the trains and harass the railroad as much as possible. They were trying to interfere with the coal shipments to the industries in the south as much as possible. There were marines positioned as all along the rail line and the bridges to protect them from the communists. In spite of the fact that the railroad was well guarded they would sneak in at night and set explosives. As the railroad workers were very experienced they would make the necessary repairs in a day or two so that the trains could be operating again. When are unit moved to Tangshan our job was to maintain a perimeter of defence around the coalmine, principally the pumps. If the pumps could be sabotaged the mine would be flooded with enough water so that it would take the miners two years to pump the mine shafts dry. So, that was our second objective, to keep the mine operating. In addition, we ran patrols out into the countryside just to discourage the communists from getting too close to the city of Tangshan. There weren't enough of us to really run them off, but we all knew what we had to do and we did it.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you something about your organization. You're called a China Marine, is that correct?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Yes.

MR. GRAHAM: Is this an official name or just something you've sort of adopted from the people who served in the area?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: No, this organization was formed at the time of the First Marine Division reunion in 1989, and some fellows said, "Well, how many of you served in China? Some hands went up. It was then decided to form an organization, the China Marine Association, and have a reunion the next year. I believe it was in Washington, D.C., and

by that time the organization had grown to about 2,000 members. Advertisements were placed in all the publications marines were likely to read. Marines who served in China at any time were invited to join , including those who had been stationed there before World War II. The last marines left China in 1947. Now of course we are dying off and the membership is getting smaller.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, let's pick up. You were guarding the railroad and the mines. Then, what happened after this?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Well, that is pretty much the story. I can't think of much more that would be exciting. You know, we were just running patrols. We used to convoy trains by following them on roads that ran parallel to the tracks. We did get shot at by communists hiding in the cornfields. Because most of us were reservists we were gradually being sent back to the States and being replaced by regular marines. In September my turn finally came. I got home the day before my twenty-first birthday

MR. GRAHAM: Well, let me ask you, of all your experiences, is there any one experience that you still think about more than the others?

Mr. TROWBRIDGE: Well, I remember what Peking was like. Actually Peking has had three names. When we were there it was called Peking, then it became Peiping, and finally Beijing. It's hard to remember why there were these change in names. When I first got there it was like a magical city. It was full of temples and virtually no motor vehicles, just pedestrian and rickshaws. I particularly remember the sights, sounds, and language being spoken. It was a very different culture than any I had known, so it was very exciting. For a twenty-year-old to experience that was just magical to me.

MR. GRAHAM: Was it in pretty good shape or was it torn up from the war?



MR. TROWBRIDGE: No, it was in pretty good shape. I think the Japanese were more destructive and killed more people in places like Nanking. I think Peking was taken by the Japanese fairly early in the occupation and left pretty much intact.

MR. GRAHAM: When you went out could you go into most of the restaurants to eat?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: There were no restrictions on what we did at the time at the time I got there; we felt safe. Things became more dangerous as the communists grew more aggressive. We took a wonderful trip to the Great Wall. The Marine Corps organized the trip for us in passenger cars, and I think that everyone who wanted to did go. I rode with our chaplain and several of my friends. It had just snowed and were few inches on the Wall. It was an awesome sight.

MR. GRAHAM: While you were there were most of the people very friendly?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Oh, yes, we got along fine with the Chinese in spite of the fact that we couldn't understand the language. They were very grateful to the U.S. for liberating them from the Japanese. They were bringing out treasures that they had hidden away for years. If anyone knew the value of jewelry or artifacts they could have made a fortune. Most of us were just naïve young folks and didn't appreciate the potential value. I remember that I bought a Japanese handmade silk obi for about \$20.00. Many years later I donated it to the museum of the University of Pennsylvania and was given a \$5000 tax credit. As soon as we came in they felt safe and trotted out German cameras and other valuable items that they had kept hidden. So it was a real adventure to go out shopping and see what was for sale.

MR. GRAHAM: Well, before we close is there anything else you would like to add?

MR. TROWBRIDGE: Not really but every chance I get I thank our government for the G.I. Bill. I think that many of us that served during the war owe our later success to the

education the G.I. Bill afforded us. I was fortunate in being sent to China and think I did an important job, had a wonderful experience, and then I was able to go to college.

What more can anyone ask for?

MR. GRAHAM: Then on behalf of the Nimitz Museum let me say thank you for sharing these experiences. We will find that they will add more depth to our library. Thank you once again, Mr. Trowbridge.

DR. TROWBRIDGE: My pleasure.