

TRANSCRIPT – DICK WHITAKER

Interviewee: DICK WHITAKER

Interviewer: CHRISTOPHER SAKMAR

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CHRISTOPHER SAKMAR: Today is March 27, 2013. We're here at The Citadel working on the Oral History Project. My name is Christopher Sakmar; I'm sitting here with Mr. Dick Whitaker. We are interviewing him on his service during World War II—he served as a Marine in the Pacific Theater. Well sir, I thought I would begin by asking you if you could tell me a little about your childhood and where you grew up.

DICK WHITAKER: I was born and raised in a small town in the Hudson Valley, about a hundred miles north of New York City. One high school—I went to the same high school K through 12. We had one theater and a couple of drug stores—it wasn't that big. And it had been hard-hit by the Depression. There were two paper-mills, actually three paper-mills, and four cement plants—all closed during the depression. So my father had a tough time supporting just my mother and myself. I never had any brothers or sisters, and I think that was mainly because of the Depression.

CS: Okay.

DW: School was an idyllic place to grow up: We fished, we hunted, we swam. We did all the things—It was like Tom Sawyer; we had a great time.

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: When the war began in 1939, I was what? 13 years old, so—And I really didn't

know what was going on over there. My father read the newspapers, and I'd hear him discuss it with my mother. (Coughs.) Excuse me, and a neighbor who used to come over at night, and they would discuss the war. But I never really became cognizant of what was going on until I entered high school. Then it began to dawn on me because some of my friends were enlisting, and I thought that—In fact, I asked my father if he ever thought I would be in the war, and the only thing he said was, “I hope not.”

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: But, anyway, by 1944 I had graduated from high school and entered the United States Marine Corps.

CS: So, can you describe the process of getting into the Marine Corps?

DW: Well, in my case the route was somewhat unusual. When I was 17 years old and would turn 18 years old on March 13, 1944, it dawned on me that I would be drafted. Because everyone that was in high school was deferred until they graduated—and then you were just gone, everybody went. (Coughs.) Excuse me.

So I wanted to go into the Marine Corps, because I had some friends that had gone into the Marine Corps, and I just thought it was a great idea. On my Christmas vacation in 1944,—uh I'm sorry 1943 Christmas vacation—I took a bus to Albany, New York, where there was a Marine Corps recruiting station in a post office building. And I presented myself to the Marine Corps to enlist. Went to the physical and was accepted, and I thought this was it—I was in. And I was given a handful of papers for my parents to sign before I could go in. So I rode back in the bus with the idea that this was going to happen and I was going to convince my parents—because I knew they would not be happy with this. But as it turns out, they were not only unhappy, they were very unhappy. (Both laugh.) And they got the principal of the high school

involved and the minister involved. I finally just buckled. I said, “Okay, I’ll stay and graduate.” But at that moment I made up my mind that I was going into the Army, because that’s where everyone was going when they would graduate. So, I graduated in mid-June got my notice, draft notice, about a week later. And about a week after that, got on the bus with a little duffle bag and I was off to wherever.

Went to Albany, ended up in that same building. I was going down a hallway, and I had to go past that recruiting station.

CS: The Marine recruiting station?

DW: The Marine recruiting station. A Marine Sergeant was standing there, and I recognized him—and he recognized me. And I really didn’t want to talk to him. (Both laugh.) He said—he went back in and came back out, and he said, “Whitaker?” And I said, “Yes.” He said, “Do you still need to get?”—No, he said, “What happened to you?” And I said, “My mother and father wouldn’t sign.” He said, “Do you still want the Marine Corps?” And I said, “Yes.” [He said,] “Come with me.” We went in there. There was another kid there, about the same age. I later learned it was the same set of circumstances. The Sergeant closed the door and said, “We’re taking two Marines a day out of the draft. You two are it for tomorrow. We’re going to give you some chow tickets for the YMCA and a pass to get a bed there for a night. Be here at 8:30 tomorrow morning, and you will be sworn into the Marine Corps.

Well, we were both very happy with what had happened. We didn’t go out anyplace. We ate out of the vending machine. Really didn’t sleep that much—talked a lot. Next morning, got there at 8:30, and by nine o’clock we were sworn in. And by ten o’clock I was on a train to Yemassee, South Carolina—

CS: Okay.

DW: Where the Marine Corps station is located. Actually, the Marine Corps station is on Parris Island, but Yemassee is the last land which has a rail—train on in. So that's where we all disembarked.

CS: Okay.

DW: And that was early July, 1945, or '44.

CS: Okay, so at the young age of 18, what were your impressions of Boot Camp and Paris Island?

DW: Well, first of all let me tell you that everybody on that train was 18 years old, maybe 19. Every town in America had been cleaned out of all its young men—there were no young men left in Saugerties, New York. Then when I left, if the war had continued, the next class that would have graduated from Saugerties High School would have probably been in the service. But I just got in, in the last possible window to be involved in actual warfare. And some of the people, who were delayed for some kind of school, missed it completely. Because if I had gone into the Marine Corps three months after I did, I probably would have never fired a shot.

CS: Wow.

DW: It was that close.

CS: Yeah.

DW: But anyway, Paris Island is everything you have ever heard about it, everything you have ever read about it. It is a very unusual place.

CS: Sure.

DW: Before you can become a Marine, they have to create something that is acceptable to change. And that's what they do; they are setting you up to undergo a great transformation. And they do it by a very strict discipline, by exhausting drills, and—and sort of maneuvers, and

harassment, getting up at three o'clock in the morning and doing close-order drills. And in the Marine Corps if the platoon, which was 75 people, if we were marching down the street, and we didn't look good and it was because of one guy, we all did it until he got it right. So, you can imagine what that was like.

CS: Absolutely.

DW: Anyway, we learned I think the basic technique they use is close-order drill. It teaches you to be a part of something that you may have never been part of before: an intricate part of a group of men drilling and turning left-ruff flank and right flank, halt, forward march. You all have to be together. And that was the basic lesson of the Marine Corps: You were all together. And that lasts you through your entire career as a Marine. You identify with the people around you, and you don't want to let them down, and they don't want to let you down. It a— close-order drill is a good technique.

CS: It's where the camaraderie began?

DW: Yeah. We also had lectures. I'll tell you a little story about a lecture. We were all issued little green books, notebooks. And every couple days we would have a lecture by our drill instructor, Curtis Blackburn. And it could be on almost any topic about training or how to do things, and we were supposed to take notes. So, I was bunking—I had top bunk—and a young man under me had bottom bunk—I think he was from Alabama. We got to become friends because we were together. So one day I was in there reading my notes, and I saw I hadn't written down something or I had forgotten it, and I yelled down to him, "Hey, pass me up your notebook. I want to check something." He said, "No." And I said, "What the hell do you mean no? Let me have it!" Because we were really buddies.

CS: Right.

DW: And I said, “Let me see it!” And he got it, and I opened it, and it wasn’t a single word written in it. And I said, you know, “Why?” And he said “I can’t read, and I can’t write.”

CS: Wow.

DW: I was—was stunned. Anyway, I said, “Well, you’re going to be in big trouble because they’re going to take these notebooks up exam them and see what we did.” And that happened, and as soon as they found out he couldn’t read or write he was gone. And then, if you were sort of washed out of your platoon, for any reason, you went to a casual platoon—it was called. You lost your platoon, that was the terminology, and you went to a casual platoon where you did it and did it and did it until you got it right. And then they could start you over again in Boot Camp. I assume he was taught how to read and write at Parris Island.

CS: Was it common for members, in the training, to be dropped into the remedial platoon?

DW: I would say of the average Boot Camp platoon of 75, I would say the graduating class would be more like 65.

CS: Okay.

DW: Blisters—uncontrollable blisters from walking, and if your in the hospital propped up in bed you’re missing a lot of training—and that would put you in a casual platoon. If you were some kind of psycho and suddenly decided that you didn’t like the Marine Corps, there were lots of ways to try and get out of the Marine Corps, but there was no successful way. (Both laugh.) But a lot of people didn’t know that.

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: We had a fellow in our platoon who jumped off the roof of our building with a fire-bucket full of sand in each hand in an attempt to break his own legs. Instead of breaking his legs,

he just screwed himself up. He went to the hospital, and he was gone, because of lost time. But Boot Camp is—is an experience that you once you've been through it, you have a special feeling about it. Even though at first, you think they're trying to kill you. When you reach—when you think it over if they kill you in Parris Island, then they can't get you, kill you on Iwo Jima or Okinawa. So then you start to think, well, maybe there's some humor in this. And if you can get to that point and get your mind right about humor, it's going on all the time. These drill instructors are just putting you on; they're also punishing you at the same time. Roles such as—I'll tell you a story.

About the second day, we were introduced to our locker box—wooden box at the foot of each bed, double-decker—and it was explained to us that we would be given padlocks. And this is what we should put in it, and this is how we should put it in, your shoes here all that stuff. And we were given two keys. The instructions were very specific.

CS: Okay.

DW: The off—drill instructors were very talented in this particular area at giving instructions. You couldn't possibly make a mistake if you just listened. But the instructions on the two keys were, "You put one key on your dog tags. You take the other key with your name on it, and you give it to me," the drill instructor. And he didn't say what he was going to do with the key, except we all knew he had the key to our locker.

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: And (Laughs.) the third day—we got our boxes on the second day—and the third day some kid couldn't open his locker box because he had lost his key. This is the key that he was told to put on his—The procedure for requesting an audience with your drill instructor was to knock on his door; he lived at the end in the Barracks.

CS: Okay.

DW: And you never knew what they were going to say to you, but the instructions were, “Sir, PFC Whitaker—no Private Whitaker—requests permission to speak to his drill instructor.” And then they might come out and send you around the building one million times running, just for asking him a question. Anyway, this kid went in there and there was the usual uproar, you could hear it going on, and he came out white as a sheet and he picked up his locker box—it was about half-full, I thought it probably weighed forty pounds, handle on both sides—put it on his head. And he walked around the building saying, “I’m a shit bird from Yemassee; I locked my lock and lost my key. I’m a shit bird fr—” He went around and around and around and finally POW. It was July—

CS: (Sighs.) In South Carolina heat.

DW: It was wicked. He just passed out, so they said “Go get ‘em put some water on him.” So he recovered, (Laughs.) and we went back to doing whatever we were doing. But, Parris Island, as I say, is a very, very unique place. The last week you’re there—it was eight weeks of training; now it is something like eleven weeks but then it was eight weeks. And the week next to the last week, we went to the rifle range. And there you—twenty-four hours a day—you live with your rifle: and you used your rifle, you practiced your rifle, you took it apart and cleaned it and put it back together again—blindfolded. We all had to put that M1-Grand together blindfolded.

CS: That was a test?

DW: Yeah, oh yeah!

CS: Wow.

DW: Anyway, on the last few days you shoot for a record, and that’s a big deal—you’re

shooting at 500 yard some of the targets. The M1 is a great weapon. There is an interesting story about the M1. I think there were a little over 5 million of them made, and they were used in the Korean War and World War II. And it was designed by man named John Grand. Guess what he made after his patent produced 5 million rifles? Nothing because he was employee of the armory, the Springfield Armory, which was a government-owned armory.

CS: Wow! (Laughs.)

DW: He got a lot of publicity because it was a famous rifle.

CS: Sure, it is.

DW: I have one at home, and about once a year I shoot it.

CS: That famous a eight-round clip with the—

DW: Bing.

CS: Bing. (Laughs.)

DW: Sometimes, that bing got you in trouble, if you were in combat. Because whoever you were shooting at, when they heard that, knew you were out. I've never done it myself, but I heard of some guys carry just a clip with nothing in it, and fired two shots and throw it up like that. When it went "bing" the guy opposite of you stands up to take a shot—you got 'em.

CS: Yeah.

DW: But I never did that—that could be Marine Corps lore.

CS: (Laughs.) Just a myth.

DW: Yeah, just a myth. A lot of myths about the Marine Corps.

DW: Chris, there's one thing I would like to mention that occurred to me, or happened to me, at Parris Island. About the fourth day, we went down to the main part of the base, and we were going to have our teeth checked, and there was a big sign that hung over the main road

down there. And I remember reading the sign and it said, “Let no mother ever say that her son died in action because of lack of training.” And I read that and I thought, “Man these people are serious about what’s going on.” It was really a wake up call, because in a way they were telling you “this is going to be tough.” It was going to be tough on you because we didn’t want any mother ever to say that you die because you weren’t trained properly.

CS: Wow, they were preparing you for war.

DW: So much for Parris Island.

CS: Could you tell us about your first combat experience?

DW: Well, let me tell you, we were sent overseas and ended up on Guadalcanal where we were joined—my draft, which was called the 29th Draft, well we ended up being assigned to the 6th Marine corps division, unassigned to any specific unit—we were replacements. And on March 13, 1945, which happened to be my 19th birthday, I got an APA, which is a troop transport, and we steamed off north. I had no idea where we were going. After about a week out, we arrived at the island of Mogmog, which is in the Ulithi group, where we were given all the beer we could drink and baseball bats and softballs and gloves, and we went ashore and had some exercise. Got back on the ship—we were only there for two days—and then hauled anchor and started north again.

Then we were told where we were going, which was the island of Okinawa Shima, the last Japanese stronghold, really, in the Pacific. Okinawa was only 300 miles south of mainland Japan, and it was needed as an airbase. That was the major reason for the invasion. We went ashore on April 1st, which happened to be Easter Sunday and also April Fools’ Day. I went ashore in an Amtrak, which is a track vehicle that is amphibious. In that particular landing craft, [it] opens from the rear door, which was a big improvement from those open that opened

frontally. And when—we are in the second wave on Red Beach Two. And when we went ashore, we didn't fire a shot. I never took my rifle off my shoulder because nothing was going on. The first day had been totally unopposed. The 6th Division had swung north, was on its way. We went ashore and went directly inland, not very far, and dug in on the edge of Yontan Airfield, which was a major airfield, but had already been taken. We stayed there all night, and the next day we went sent back to the beach to help unload ships. There had been no casualties. Normally the landing on island, the second wave, is bad as the first wave as far as casualties.

CS: Sure.

DW: So we went back to unload the ships. You know, it takes a lot of gear to run a war: medical supplies, food supplies, artillery shells, what have you, barbwire, spare rifles, it just went on and on and on. And the landing site was just completely full. It was hard to get through it. There was so much stuff on the beach because they unloaded so fast. They had this opportunity because nobody knew what was going to happen; they just kept unloading and unloading. It also included tanks, wheeled vehicles that they brought up with LSDs, dropped them off, small artillery pieces. But after about three weeks of that they said, "Okay," and rattled off some names. I got on a SIX-BY truck with about seven other guys, about half of them I knew quite well. We were taking up north, and there, that's when I became a member of Fox Company of the 2nd Battalion, the 29th Marine of the 6th Marine Division. I was assigned to a machine gun platoon, and I was in ammunition carrier, a can of 30-caliber ammo in both hands. And that was it, that was your duty: protect the gun, protect the gunner, and keep the ammunition coming as it's needed. I wasn't there for more than four/five days when the order came that the 6th Marine Division was going south to relieve the 27th Army, maybe it was the 24th, I'm not sure of that. Because they became bogged down somewhere near the Shuri (yahnaborro) Line, which was

where that Japanese General decided to make a stand. He, instead of meeting us on the beach, had decided that Marines have never been stopped on any beach they made—they eventually did it. So he decided he would take us on his own ground, where he could have some fortification. And they had an elaborate cave set up down there, and that's where we got involved.

We moved about the 3rd of May, and really didn't experience a lot of heavy fighting. The first night we were there, the Japs must have known what was going on and they really treated us to an artillery barrage. That was like nothing I have ever been in. We have taken over the Army foxholes, which were dug too big and were dangerous. I was in a foxhole, it was about the size of a king-size bed, and that's the worst kind of hole you can be in. You need to be in something that is small, because if a shell falls in the hole with you, you're done.

CS: Oh, okay, that makes sense.

DW: So my best buddy, John Senterfitt, and I were in there, and we couldn't do anything, just facedown, head covered, hands over the helmet, and this stuff just kept coming and coming and coming. I think the barrage lasted—it must've been over an hour, but fortunately nothing—there were a lot of hits around us, the noise was just just awful—but we weren't hit nor were there many other casualties. There were some. So that was our introduction to the southern end of Okinawa. We got organized, and from that point almost every night we moved. You were in a different foxhole every night because we were pushing the Japs trying to take real estate away from them. This went on for about maybe week and a half or so. And on the 17th of May, we received word that we were going to be committed to the Shuri (yahnaborro) Line, which was very heavily defended. And we did; we went down about two o'clock in the afternoon on the 17th of May. My machine gun platoon, which was attached to the 2nd Rifle Platoon and consisted—those two units together consisted of about probably eighty men—tried to assault, well, we did

assault, Sugar Loaf Hill, which had been assaulted 11 times before we got there.

CS: Wow.

DW: And had had heavy casualties. And the first man killed in our platoon was the Platoon Leader, Charles Behan—received the Navy Cross, posthumously, of course.

We were on the top. The Japanese had been there for years, and they had every hill, every spot that you might go to naturally, little high ground, a little open-space, a little water or something. They could put a shell in there because they were watching.

CS: Yeah.

DW: So when we got to the top, not a shot was fired as we crossed the little plane and went up the hill, but when we all got to the top, then it was let loose: grenades, heavy mortars, light mortars, and we never had a chance. We couldn't even see them; they were all under heavy cover in holes. And we started gathering losses, as I said, the Company—or Platoon—Commander was the first man hit. He was hit in the chest with a machine gun burst. Anyway, things weren't going well for us. One of the machine guns in the water jacket had taken a hit, and once the water leaves the gun, he just cooks.

CS: Overheats?

DW: Yeah, overheats. And a Sergeant named Ike Wanamaker, who I did not really know at the time but I knew he was a Sergeant, he just started yelling, "We got to get out here. Pick up the guys, pick up the guns. Let's go!" We went down off that hill and took a beating going down. They continued to rain this mortar fire on us. On the way down, John Senterfitt and I picked up Charlie Louis, who was a gunner on one of those guns. And Charlie had been hit in the stomach going up. We didn't even know he'd been hit; so he was bleeding, and John and I threw away our ammo cans because we couldn't carry them and carry him and we got behind a small hill

called Queen Hill. We didn't know what the name of it was until after it was all over we found out. It was very small. And the rest of our platoon, our attacking unit, was very scattered—they were all over. But they got off, and got the dead and wounded with them. So John and I unloaded Charlie onto an Amtrak that we hailed. And he was gone, and we had no idea of what happened to him.

But after we had got back to Guam, we had learned that he had survived. And about 60 years later, he showed up on at a reunion in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The first time any of us have seen him. A great guy, and we were surprised.

CS: Yes, relieved?

DW: Yeah, but also tragically we have learned that he had died about a month after he had come to the reunion from cancer. And I guess he came there just to see us.

CS: Wow.

DW: Anyway, after we got Charlie on this Amtrak, we found a hole [and] we knew we were going to have to spend the night there. It was not very big, and we tried to make it a little deeper. And we were both digging with our entrenching tools. And John laid down in the bottom of a hole and lit a cigarette. And I finished what I was doing, and I took my entrenching tool, stuck it in the ground, and I put my feet in the hole, and I leaned against my shovel. Took out the cigarettes and put one in my mouth, and my matches were wet. So I was sitting like this, my feet in the hole, John is there, and I go to get a light from John. And while I do, I put my hand on the shovel, and just as I moved, a bullet hit the shuttle handle. I had it like this. Some Jap had been, a sniper, had been eyeing us, and was probably waiting for us to stop. Up until that time there was a lot of motion, and anyway he waited patiently until he thought I was going to stay there. And it was a very scary experience.

CS: Absolutely.

DW: I've never been shot before. The bullet hit the shovel handle. (Pause.) May we have a moment off?

CS: Of course.

DW: (Resuming.) This is an entrenching tool. I happen to have one here. This is not the one I had on Okinawa. This is standard issue, every Marine carries one—even if you're in the Air Wing Marine unit, you still get an entrenching tool. And this is what I carried in my backpack. Looked exactly like this one. And the story I just told, I stuck this shovel into the ground, step on it to make it firm, leaned back against it—and that's when I got shot. Anyway I jumped in the hole with John. This guy had us cold, 'cause if we just got our heads up, he was going to take a shot, and it was beginning to get dark. John—we all—carried a first aid kit on our cartridge belt; it's just a big pad sterile pad and then some sulfa. So John dumped some sulfa on my hand and wrapped it up. I really didn't feel that bad; it stung a little, but it calmed down. We had other things to think about because we were kinda all alone—and that's scary.

CS: Wow.

DW: So the next morning John hailed our machine gun platoon's corpsman, who came over and said, "What's up?" John said, "Take a look at Dick's hand," and I said, "I'm alright." I really didn't want to pay attention to this at this time. And Pete said, "Let's see it." He took it off—God, it was blue. And then I was scared. I just had it wrapped, really wrapped up so I could still hold my rifle. Anyway, Doc Peterson said, "You got to get out of here."

The way they, they evacuate you if you are not on stretcher or something but a walking wounded, you should have a tag on just to show that you're not taking a walk from whatever you don't like. (Both laugh.) The corpsmen carried them. And I walked back about a quarter of a

mile to the battalion aid station, and the doctor worked on me maybe 20 minutes to half an hour with tweezers picking this shovel handle out of my hand which was in there with some lead. And he got it all cleaned out, and washed it and so forth. He gave me a new bandage. I really felt good, and I spent two nights in a Battalion Aid Station, and I slept on a cot for two nights. It was a big tent. And it was the first time—or it was the only two nights on Okinawa—that I slept in anything but a hole in the ground.

CS: (Sighs.)

DW: So that is what the Marines call a “Happy Wound.”

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: With casualties running at 82%, getting a wound like that is a blessing. I got two hot meals; I got to sleep out of the rain, on a cot—pretty nice.

CS: I bet you—you had to return, shortly after that?

DW: I was out two days and came back. The machine gun platoon had been seriously hit in that barrage. There’s a statistic I would like to get to you, speaking of casualties: For the three days that Fox Company was up on that line, the company strength went from 250 men to 62 men.

CS: Wow.

DW: All of those other men were either killed or wounded, or came apart. We had a lot of combat fatigue cases. It had been going on for so long: living in bad—food rations, sleeping in wet foxholes, having to stand watch every night, two men and a hole; one man had to be awake. It could be debilitating. You get so tired that you could hardly move. You just kind of work on adrenaline and habit—you know what to do, you know what not to do. Anything you do can get you killed. You could be just going out to take your morning constitutional and somebody might

shoot you, because there were Jap snipers all over the place. They—a Jap sniper—would wait for a target of opportunity. He might let twenty men go by and then an officer, with a mat case a carbine instead of an M1, that's a target of opportunity, or a priority target. Or, I think that that sniper that shot me, he didn't particularly want to shoot a Private, but it was getting dark and he probably had a bad day. (Both laugh.) He probably thought, "Well, hell, I might as will do this, and then I could get out of here."

But anyway, the casualties were—I can't describe how horrendous it was to see so many men hurt and killed. Our unit went from 250 men to 62 men. Anyway, we were pulled off the line, and went back about half a mile and we had a good area. We dug in. We were just told to take it easy and rest. I had dysentery, most everyone did, I had it so bad that if I laid on my stomach I threw up and if I laid on my back I soiled myself. And you know, you don't have any clothing. The only thing I had extra was a pair of socks.

And the only bath I had, whatever you want to call it, in those 101 days—eventually—on Okinawa: They came up with a water tank, which meant we had a lot of water for a while; so I filled a helmet and I went to a place where I had seen a rock around the little pond. This rock was right on the edge of it. I took a bath water with this water that I just taken. And it was all great, and I had decided to use my last pair of socks that I had in my pack. Threw the old ones, you know want to throw away like this (Holds out away from him. Both laugh.) I put them on, and I'm standing on that rock, and I lost my balance, and I step back in and my right foot went in mud—with my new sock on it. I won't say what I said, but it was a blow.

CS: I'll use my imagination.

DW: Well, where do you want to go from there?

CS: Well, I was thinking if there were any moments when you could escape from the

stress of war and possibly even have fun. If [you have] any memories that stick out, if you wouldn't mind describing them.

DW: Well, one stands out, and it happened in that area I was just talking about. We had a young man in our platoon named Lindsey, and Lindsey was from the hills of—I don't know—Tennessee or someplace. His nickname was "Geechy." I didn't know what Geechy meant, but Southerners use that term a lot to describe a hillbilly. And was he was kind of a hillbilly, but a nice young man. I had a good friend named Jack Crary. Jack was from Cincinnati, or someplace like that. And he was a BAR man, he carried a BAR as opposed to a M1. When we were pulled back off Sugar Loaf, we went through a little town. And Lindsey found an Edison controller, you crank on it, and on of those big horns, and a pile of records. So he takes these back to this area where we're in rather leisurely foxholes. Everybody's asleep or trying to get to sleep; 24 hours a day the best thing you could do was be asleep, resting.

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: Lindsey sits on the edge of his hole, with his feet in his hole; the machine is here. He cranks it up, and he had found a Japanese stringed instrument. It had a head on it, about that (Holds hands out about a foot.) big around, and it had a snakeskin cover. It was really very attractive. A long thing with four strings. Because I looked at it, and it was very nice. Lindsey has the record player going with some Chinese or Japanese music on it, you know what that sounds like, and he's sitting there with this thing and he's playing and trying to sing with it. Now, we're trying to get to sleep. Jack Crary yells, "Lindsey, shut that damn thing up!" and Lindsey just kept right on going. And he said, "Lindsey, I'm going to come out there," and you know. And Lindsey's saying, "Oh bullshit, bullshit!"

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: Anyway, Crary gets up, and walks over with his BAR. He walked right past Lindsey, and the machine is sitting there on the ground. And he empties the 20-round magazine in it, bang bang bang bang bang—on automatic fire. You know, Lindsey—everybody—started to laugh right away because they get Lindsey—that Crary isn't trying to kill him. He just wanted to try killing the machine. Well, the aftermath of that story was immediately we had officers and noncommissioned officers all over the place wanting know the hell is going on. (Both laugh.) Anyway, they heard the story. I guess they got a kick out of it, too, because nothing happened to Crary.

CS: Oh yeah.

DW: And Lindsey, probably, the next day found another one and was doing the same thing. (Both laugh.) But anyway, your general question was “Was there any time to relax and get yourself together.” There really wasn't; it was endless. Every night there was always machine-gun fire, we would hear it, and artillery fire all night long. When we would dig in at night, we'd have sort of a scrimmage line. Two men in a hole. We had the machine platoon back a little, then the mortars were back a little more. And to be out there, at night, when it is pitch dark, and you hear noises. You know that once you fire, they know where you are, cause of the flash. So it's a tossup on how much of this can you take before you start shooting. They would call back for mortar flares, and the mortar platoon was hesitant to do it because you gave their position away. And also those flares were—I don't think they really get us any good. They were just scared to death, because they would go off and the whole landscape had this strange light on it. And because it was falling, the shadows were constantly moving; and it's just another one of the more horrible things that happens to you all the time. And horrible things are always happening.

CS: Yeah.

DW: As I said before, the combat fatigue cases were alarmingly large on Okinawa. Men just ran out of steam. Anyway, after that rest we had, we went back, and we committed but didn't get into much trouble. And then one night or afternoon they said during the night tonight, we're going out to sea in an Amtrak and [will] make a night landing on Arauco Peninsula. That wasn't the greatest news. And that's just what we did: About 10 o'clock or so, we shoved off in Amtraks, with the track wheels going around. Went out probably a mile, mile and a half, and then turned and went due north, and then turned again and started in, which would be westward—and we landed. We had no casualties. We really surprised the Japs; we were behind them. And that was the beginning of end of the Campaign.

It was very intense. My second night there, again John Senterfitt and I, spent the night in together. We had received a replacement Lieutenant that afternoon. He got killed that very night. He was in combat one day. Next morning, we got the word to move out, and there was a little ridge on the right, and there was a road. John was walking on the road—it was more a path than a road—and I was up on the ridge.

I suddenly came to two Americans in a foxhole, and I was surprised because I didn't expect to find anybody up there. When I looked at them I realize what they were, they were Forward Artillery Observers, cause they had the telescopes and the maps. I just stop and we were talking. And I said, "What are you shooting at?" And he handed me the glasses and said, "Look over there about, a quarter of a mile, you see that little rise?" "Yep." He said, "Look at it." So I looked at it, and there were two Japs. One Jap is waving his hands in the air, that is usually is a tip-off that he was an officer. (Both laugh.) And the other guy was doing all the work, which was unfolding a card table and getting it set up with a chair and getting maps spread out. And this artillery guy was watching them. So I watched I said, "Well, are you guys going to do

something?” And he said, “Yeah.” And he was calling in ordinances, and I don’t know what ship he represented—there were a lot of battleships out there, could’ve been one of those. But anyway, we heard shells pass over, and the top of the hill just disappear: card table, Japs—nothing, just a big puff of smoke. And then—I don’t know where this round came from; I always thought it was friendly fire—another round hit near me and knocked me off my feet. It really rang my chimes, and broke my rifle stock—

CS: Wow.

DW: Right at where you grip it. I had a nosebleed, and I couldn’t hear. I was really stunned momentarily, but I but I remember thinking: “I have to get a rifle, ‘cause I can’t use this.” So I started down this little hill, which wasn’t that big, and I came to a group of people, who are obviously medical people, and I recognize the doctor, who was the 2nd Battalion doctor. And I walked up to him and he’s looking at me, and I was sort of dazed. And he was asking me questions, and I couldn’t hear him, and then he realized what was wrong with me. An Amtrak took me out to a hospital ship, I think it was the *Comfort*—there were three of them out in the harbor—put me on board.

The doctor examined me, couldn’t find anything wrong except this bloody nose. I told him what happened, my hearing started to come back and said, “Go down get some food and come back and talk to me again.” I did—I couldn’t eat so I was back, back there in 15 minutes. He said, “Okay you’re all set, you’re going back,” and I said, “Okay, that’s what I wanted to do.” Anyway, I went back, and I would think the elapsed time was nothing more than 25 minutes. In fact, the guys in my company didn’t even know I was gone.

CS: (Laughs.)

DW: Anyway, whenever you go off like that to come back, you have to report to the

Company Commander.

CS: Okay.

DW: I found him. I said, “Whitaker, sir, blah blah blah.” “Okay.” And right at that moment his runner was killed by sniper. His runner carried a walkie-talkie radio and nothing else that would make him look like any other type of person, or a rifleman. But the problem with that was the aerial. Anyone who carried something with aerial on it was a sure target. Lieutenant Sherer said to me, “Whitaker can you run that thing?” The radio was on the ground. I said, “No, but I can learn.” And from that moment on my life changed; I became his runner. And I was all the rest of the campaign back on Guam: I was the company runner.

And when we got to China I was the company runner, and we were there for 3, 4 weeks, and word came to come down and see Lieutenant Colonel Sherer. So I went down, and he said, “I’m going home.” And I said, “Well, that’s good, sir.” (Both laugh.) We had become pretty good friends during that period. He said, “I want to thank you for all you did. It was a pleasure knowing you” and all that stuff; he was very nice guy. He was the only officer not killed or wounded in my company, which included—I think there were about twelve to begin with, and we probably had another 24 come in as replacements. Casualties among officers were very high; they were a favorite target for snipers. Anyway, he said, “I’m going to set you up here, before I leave.” I didn’t know what he was talking about. He said, “I want you to go down report to Colonel Rob’s office.”

At that time we were living in a place called Shandong University in Shandong, China. And not far from us there’s a place called the Grand Hotel. They had a lot of troops in those, no civilians. And Colonel Rob had his office in there. I went down there and another guy was with me; in fact, it was Jack Crary. We went down together and reported, and Rob, he said, “You’re

going to be my orderlies. I'm going to take care and get you some nice uniforms, blah blah." He talked like this. Anyway, we became Colonel Rob's orderlies. And we got white cartridge belts, white holsters, 45s, even got us a few ribbons: I mean we really look sharp. Everybody else was in dungarees. We took a lot of heat from our friends 'cause we got all dressed up to go, where? To go down to Colonel Rob's office, you know. Anyway, our duties consisted of: going down and opening the office, and putting lights on, and starting his kerosene stove—this is in the winter.

After that, when one of us—We had day on day off so there was only one of us there. So he would show up, "Good morning, Whitaker." "Morning, Colonel." He would go in. He had a bell installed over our heads, and he had a button. You would come shagging in there, and stand at attention. The first request was always the same, "Go down to the NCO mess, and give me a cup of coffee." "Okay." No one gave us any shit down there, because we were still PFCs and Privates, and we were still in the NCO mess that we shouldn't have been, but we just walked in and got the coffee (Both laugh.) for the Colonel 'cause they knew who we were. I had that duty for six months. Day on and day off, and the day usually ended at about 11 o'clock. He went off; I don't know what he did, but my Lieutenant Sherer he really took care of me. We became close friends, and I'll tell you a story.

I was in New York City, no, Long Island City, a suburb of New York City, sitting at a subway stop in my car waiting for a girl I was taking out, dating, to get off the train because she worked in New York. I was reading a copy of the *Saturday Evening Post*; it was summertime. So somebody goes—there are hundreds of people coming out of the subway station, you know, stairs. Guy walked by and I just glanced at him, took another glance—there was something about him, it bothered me. So I got out of the car and I started to follow him, and finally it dawned on

me who it might be. And I said, “Hey Scissors.” That was his codename on Okinawa. His name was Sherer, but his codename was Scissors. And he turned around, you know. That night I had dinner with him and his wife. We actually renewed a friendship. You don’t often find a Private and a Lieutenant that become friends.

CS: No.

DW: But this happened. I knew him for, I can’t think how many years, he just died recently [at] 95 or 96. Right he was sharp. In fact the morn—day he died, he called me in the morning. He lived in Las Vegas or Fountain Hills, which is a suburb of Las Vegas. And we had talked, and he told me that he fallen down a couple times on the front lawn, picking up his newspaper he would lose his balance. His wife was also sickly; they were having real problems. And so he finally just passed away.

CS: I’m sorry to hear that.

DW: Thank you. He was a great Marine. He was a Mustang; he came up through the ranks.

CS: He was enlisted first, is that what that means?

DW: Yep.

CS: So, he enlisted first and then commissioned as an officer.

DW: When he got the Marine Corps, which is probably in the end of 1946, he got involved in airlines. I think his real profession was that he was an accountant, and somehow he got connected with an airline, and he moved through several airlines and became controller of one of them. He had a good life. Had some children; I got know them. I still correspond with the son, who is a Marine. He lives in California; his daughter lives in Hawaii. I’ll tell you another story, never told the story to anyone, not even my wife, until I was out of it by Lieutenant Sherer.

The campaign on Okinawa lasted 82 days, and on the 82nd day both Jap commanding generals committed ritual hara-kiri. The word came out that the island was declared secured, that meant that it was over. And Bob, by that time, because of all the casualties, had become the company commander. I first became acquainted with him because he was the machine gun Lieutenant. So he became company commander. So I was always around him, with him.

So one morning, this was not uncommon at all, he said, “Get some guys, we got to go look at something,” which meant we were going on a patrol. And it was one of those usual-suspects things. I had two friends both for runners: Danny Testa, Gene Louis, and another guy, Harry Simes; and I had been out with them before and I could trust them, I said, “Let’s go! We got to go on a patrol.” So there was seven of us, I think, walking down a dirt road—really a dirt path—this island was supposed to have been—The war was over. And truthfully we all had our head up her ass, because when you go out of patrol you had better have your stuff together.

CS: Sure.

DW: ‘Cause it’s just dangerous, your area that perhaps hasn’t been gone over before. Anyway, Harry and Danny, I think, were walking point, which meant maybe 100 yards. Next, was Sherer, Lieutenant Sherer, me and an American Indian who’s a radio operator—big backpack radio that’s called 300 [with a] big, big antenna. And behind us were a couple guys; I have always forgotten who they were. Anyway, Sherer never did anything stupid that would betray him or identify him as an officer; he didn’t even carry a map case. He didn’t carry officer’s pack, he didn’t carry an M1, or a carbine; he carried an M1. He looked just like any other private there. You know, I think that was one of the things that helped him stay alive. Anyways, he carried his maps down inside his skivvy shirt, and he pulls up his map. He is standing there looking at it and some Jap, who hasn’t gotten the word yet that the war was over,

jumped out of cornfield with a grenade in each hand—started running right at Sherer. He had both arms up in the air, ‘cause he was going to—You arm those grenades by hitting them against something hard. He was going to hit them against his helmet. All he had on was a helmet and a jockstrap, type of underwear. And Sherer was carrying his M1 upside down: he didn’t even have a chance to get out. And the radio operator carried 45, which you never know what’s going to happen when you pull the trigger. It’s an awfully difficult instrument shoot, or weapon to shoot comfortably or accurately. And I had at that time a Thompson sub-machine gun, which I had for about three weeks. And I liked it, it worked, never jammed. A little heavy to carry, but—I pushed Sherer when I looked at him and saw that he was in trouble. And he went into a ditch. I grabbed my Thompson, and I started firing as I was still raising it in the air, and I let it walk up and I hit this guy, right here. (Points to his shoulder.) I saw the hits bing bing, and he turns, it was enough to turn him. Instead of running at us now, he was running at an angle. He went right off the road and into a ditch, and both grenades went off— so that solved that problem.

And might I say by my estimation it was nothing, it wasn’t a big event. When you been in combat for 82 days, every time you kill a Jap you probably save someone’s life. And I never talked about it. And then we’re in Las Vegas at a reunion Bob Sherer and his wife were at the bar, my wife and I were at the bar, [and] there were some other Marines. And I heard Bob say to my wife, “You know your husband saved my life?” I heard it, and I really didn’t want to talk about it, ‘cause I didn’t think I saved his life. I just did what I could do, but he saw it differently. I didn’t want to talk about it, and fortunately this fellow Ike Wanamaker came by and started talking, and it changed the subject. I didn’t even talk to Bob about it.

Then, six months later, I get a call from the historian, a woman named Laura Lacey [who’s researching] the 6th Marine Division. And she had called me about six months prior and

wanted to know—she was writing a history, she said— “Do you know any people you think that would be an asset to a book?” And I said, “Well, Bob Sherer, he was the only officer not killed or wounded. Great guy, everybody liked him, blah blah,” and she said, “Thanks.” Now Laura Lacey then talks to Sherer, and Sherer outs me. And he told her the same stuff he recited at the bar. And she calls me, “Can you tell me about it?” I said, “No, what about what?” I didn’t know that she knew. And finally fessed up; I knew she knew, and I said, “No Laura, I’m not going to do anything, and I don’t want to talk about it. It happened, and I’m flattered, pleased, and so forth that that’s how Bob feels, but I don’t really think I did anything very special that day—it was just another day at the office as far I was concerned.” But anyway, I finally, when [I got] my head straight about it, I thought, “This is an interesting story.” And I actually wrote little a piece called the “83rd Day,” and identified all the people in the patrol.

I found that once I stopped work, where I was involved in public relations and funding of a school, when I finally had the time to think about where I’ve been and what I had done and had time on my hands, I decided to use some the skills I had in my 28 years of fundraising and public relations on how to find people. I had put together the survivors of my platoon, which as of this morning 26 out of 361 men. We will reunion this year at Quantico, Virginia. And I also got interested enough in the battle of Sugar Loaf Hill to find out why the hell we are sent up there in the first place, after 11 assaults.

CS: Yeah.

DW: And it turned out that Lieutenant Behan had a good friend named George Thompson, who was an officer. George Thompson was killed that morning during a briefing, when all the officers were together. His best friend Thompson was killed, and he was hit in the face; in fact, when he came back to us, he was bandaged and had trouble talking. And he said,

“Let’s go.” We did know where we were going, and we got behind a little hill called Charlie Hill. He said, “That’s Sugar Loaf Hill we’re going up, let’s go. Follow me.” That’s the kind of officer he was. He had played football for the Detroit Lions. I do not know where he went to college. But anyway, that assault was just awful it was a disaster. It was taken the next day, when they finally got some tanks and they went around both ends. Then they had fire; they could put fire on the backside of the hill. That got the Japs out of there, because they knew it was a lost cause. And that really broke the back of the defensive effort. We killed about 110,000 Japanese soldiers took about 7,000 prisoners.

Prisoners became a problem in the closing days; they would try sneak to through the lines dressed as civilians. The island came down to a point; we were here (Points.), the 1st Marine Division was here (Points.), everything was converging. The civilians—many, many hundreds and hundreds of civilians—had retreated with the Japanese and there were living in caves. They took a beating. There are some statistics that over 250,000 Japanese civilians were killed—I mean Okinawan civilians were killed. I don’t know whether that is true or not, but there were heavy civilian casualties. First time in the Pacific that that had happened.

CS: Well in closing, looking back 68 years on your experiences as a young 19-year-old Marine, what would you like to comment on and add or explain about all those events?

DW: Well, as you could probably guess, a person’s attitude changes over time. When I came off Okinawa and got home—I got home Memorial Day, 1946 to a small town. I had been away for twenty-two months. A lot of guys just out of the service there, we just enjoyed our time together. And I never really thought much about what I had just been through, because I assumed that all these other guys—whether it was the Army, Air Corps, Coastguard, or Navy—had gone through similar experiences. And we didn’t sit around and talk about WWII, that’s what I’m

trying to say. Then years and years later, I read something that said in the Marine Corps for every man that exchanged shots with the enemy on a close basis, there were fourteen other guys that were support. That number staggered me. I thought that all Marines did what I did. Then I also read some statistics about the Army, and the ratio there was greater than the—Then that made me become curious about what had really happened. I did a lot of reading and changed my mind a few times.

I still can't explain the assault on Sugar Loaf Hill. At its worse, it was an emotionally charged lieutenant who just lost his friend—and decided he was going to take on the Japanese Army by himself; we were going to go with him. But still he deserves the Navy Cross, and it's hard to examine just because of that.

As far as the people I was with, they were a great bunch of people. Some were from the country, some the city: it was a slice right out of the ass of America, as far as who we were. We were just put together and through Boot Camp, and our other experiences we became a very cohesive—Band of Brothers. That's what it's called. And as time was available, after I retired, I started to put back together the people I was with. Because of my duties on Okinawa as a runner, I knew a lot of people you normally wouldn't know. I was moving around a lot. And they all knew me, so the group was sort of easy to put together, good fun. Last night, guess who called me? John Senterfitt. Just last night!

CS: Wow.

DW: He had moved from his house—his wife had died about five or six years ago—he moved from his house and is now in a total care facility. He never did explain why he did call me, but we just kept talking, you know. I tried to get him to come to a reunion, he said, “maybe, maybe.” But he's an old Texan. He was the only guy in my company who was married.

CS: At that young of an age?

DW: Yeah, well he's 90-something now.

CS: Okay, so he's a bit older.

DW: He was maybe 22 years old, and we were all 18, 19. In fact, we all called him Pop.

(Both laugh.) But John's a great guy. That's a coincidence, 'cause as I said he just called last night.

As far as an overall comment, or whatever: if you're going to go to war, try and be a Marine. Because it's a good outfit to be with, and I'm proud of my service. I'm proud of the Marine Corps, and probably some people hate me for that, but that is it. I love the Marine Corps. And thank you for this time, Chris. I appreciate it, and if there is anything else I can do, please call upon me.

CS: Will do. Thank you, sir. I want to thank you for taking the time, sharing your life experiences, and I know that some of them were very difficult, and I can't thank you enough and can't show enough of my appreciation for your service for this country. Thank you, sir!

DW: Great Pleasure!

—END OF INTERVIEW—