

Parke Potter

Parke Potter: You know I felt so dog gone happy that I was in the Marine Corps. Fellows that I went to high school with went right straight into the army, and they got very little training, and they went right into Europe, Battle of the Bulge, et cetera, and most of them got seriously hurt. And I was fortunate. The Marine Corps made darned sure we were well trained, not only with our own weapons, but with the enemy's weapons, so that no matter what the circumstances were, we could use whatever was available. And the army fellows didn't get all the training that we did.

Interviewer: All right. Well, let's start with the date. Today is Tuesday, August 8, 2006. We're at the home of Parke Potter in Las Vegas, Nevada. My name is Shannon Berndt, and the cameraman is Ed Feldman. Let's go back before you were in the Marines and talk a little bit about where you grew up and your family.

Parke Potter: My father was the postmaster in Dundee, Michigan, so I grew up there, and I went to high school in the neighboring town of Petersburg, Michigan. And I played football and I was very active in the sports in high school, and about that time, World War II came along and my father, having been a Marine, I had to go down and join the Marines. So I did that right away.

Interviewer: And what were you doing at that time?

Parke Potter: Well, I was really in high school.

Interviewer: You were still in high school.

Parke Potter: And the Marine Corp gave me liberty after boot camp so I could come home and graduate with my class, and they made sure I had a set of Marine blues to use with the graduation ceremony. I think it was a Marine Corp recruiting technique.

Interviewer: So, tell me about your first days in the service. Was it what you thought it was going to be like?

Parke Potter: Well, my father had well prepared me, so I wasn't too surprised, and I really enjoyed the challenge that they gave us in the Marine boot camp. And I always enjoyed exercise and doing things, and in the Marine Corp you were always on a long hike or doing something, so I kind of enjoyed it. I had a lot of fun in the Marine Corp. Made a lot of good friends, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the Marine Corp.

Interviewer: What was your job in the Marine Corp?

Parke Potter: Well, in combat, my training in combat was Browning Automatic Rifleman. And that's a .20 shot automatic rifle, and it weighs 21 pounds, and I carried that everywhere I went,

and it's a wonderful weapon. It gives you a lot of fire power, and people are awful glad to have you around in the evening because they know that with that fire power, things are a little safe, safer.

Interviewer: How long was your training?

Parke Potter: My what?

Interviewer: Your training?

Parke Potter: Well, really, from the time I went in until we hit the beach on Iwo Jima we were trained constantly.

Interviewer: Was it a special type of training?

Parke Potter: Generally, in everything. We trained to work with the Air Corp, Air Forces; we trained to work with the tanks. We trained in all the different Marine Corp weapons, rifles of course and Browning automatics and heavy duty, heavy machine guns, and mortars. So we trained in just about all of the combat weapons.

Interviewer: I was reading a little bit about Iwo Jima and I read that you trained in California and then you went to Hawaii. Is that correct?

Parke Potter: That's correct. Trained at, on Camp Pendleton. When we got to Hawaii, we were up at Camp Tarawa, which is up in the mountains, up in the hills between Moanalua and Moana Kai on the main island, and they had a particular area that they liked for us to work on. It was about 15 miles from camp, but we'd walk out there and attack this little hill. And we'd attacked it from different sides and different techniques, and we thought it was kind of strange until we arrived at Iwo Jima, and we saw Mt. Suribachi, and we realized that was the hill we had been practicing for.

Interviewer: So you, when you headed for Iwo Jima, did you know where you were going at that time?

Parke Potter: No. It was pretty, pretty secretive. We just knew it was going to the South Pacific and we could tell by the equipment we carried that we were definitely going into combat.

Interviewer: What ship were you on?

Parke Potter: The American Legion, kind of an old merchant Marine band, I believe it was an Army owned ship, but anyway it got us there.

Interviewer: And so you landed on the first day, which was February...

Parke Potter: I landed on the, where the first wave, right at the base of Mt. Suribachi, and our job was to cross the isthmus of the island and cut off the volcano, and then to turn to the south and attack the volcano. So on the first day we crossed the island and cleared the route all the way across it. And then the next day we started attacking the volcano itself.

Interviewer: That was pretty horrific for all those, those, the men landing. You couldn't see your enemy and they were just being shot at.

Parke Potter: Well, it's kind of an interesting beach. As I ran up the beach, I found a large shell hole, and there were a lot of bullets flying around, so I dived in that shell hole and I stuck my head back out and motioned some of my friends over. Told them I had found a good spot, and they, several of them jumped in and they started sniffing, and they'd smell (sniff sound). What is this odor? It turns out it wasn't a shell hole. It was a Japanese latrine. (Laughter) And the guys complained, and I said well if you don't like it you can leave, but nobody left too quick. (Laughter) But anyway, we had a lot of fun.

Interviewer: Was there any vegetation on that island?

Parke Potter: Anybody what?

Interviewer: Vegetation? I heard it was...

Parke Potter: Yes, it had scrub brush on it. Sort of like you'd run into on the road between here and Pahrump. It's, wasn't really timber, but it was just kind of scrub brush, oh eight and ten feet high and a lot of open space, and, of course, a lot of rock, a lot of canyons and just generally a desolate, desert type landscape.

Interviewer: Yeah, that seems odd. Since you were in the Pacific you would think it would be a lush garden, green, tropical island.

Parke Potter: Well, it's all rock and sand and there's not much soil there for vegetation to grow on. After we cut off the volcano and raised the flag, why, we thought we were going home because we thought it was a three-day tour, a three-day campaign. Instead, we turned and went north and attacked the airports, and we took the Montezuma Number One and Montezuma Number Two, _____ (7:57), Number One, Number Two airports. And then we continued on north to the north end of the island. I was there for 30 days.

Interviewer: For 30 days? The battle was 36 days. How come you were only there for 30 days?

Parke Potter: Well, I was getting pretty tired and wore out and my shoulder had been banged up and it was giving me a lot of trouble, and finally the medics told me that "you've had it." So they sent me home.

Interviewer: Well, in the newspaper article it said you received some shrapnel.

Parke Potter: You got shrapnel once pretty near every day.

Interviewer: Oh, you did?

Parke Potter: The second day on the island, one of the Japanese defenders, that we assumed was dead, jumped up behind me with a knife, and somebody behind me, one of the Marines behind me, called and said "look out." I turned around and here this guy came with a knife. I threw my arm up. He stuck the knife right through my arm. And, of course, that was the end of him. But they wrapped that arm up and put some band aids on it and a whole bunch of gauze so it looked like a foot ball. Left... I stayed, and then several other times you got hit with flying shrapnel, but usually you'd just pull the shrapnel out and wrapped it up, put a band aid on it and kept right on going.

Interviewer: That was, that was very brave of you.

Parke Potter: Well, not really. When I got that knife in the arm the corpsman told me I could go back aboard ship. I told him I'd been on that beach. I don't want to go back down there. I'll stay. (Laughter) But our corpsman was a Navy corpsman assigned to each Marine platoon, and our corpsman was Arky Williams, and he was a very good corpsman, very honest, hard working man with a lot of courage, and he was killed there about the fourth day, and he received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his work with our platoon on Iwo Jima.

Interviewer: Did you see the, when they rose the flag on Suribachi?

Parke Potter: Well, I was there.

Interviewer: Oh, you were?

Parke Potter: Our job was...

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Parke Potter: Our job was to get to the top of that hill, and I was there with a few other guys, and we had a flag and my assignment, or I took on the assignment I guess, of covering the guys with my automatic rifle, and they needed some, something to make a flag pole out of, so I and several others scrounged around and found some old pipe, and we drug that back over to the high point, and they wired the pieces of pipe together and made a flag pole and then raised the flag. Well then later they came up with a big ship's flag, and that was a monstrous big flag, and they had to scrounge around and get some more pipe and then they had the raising of the big flag, but that flag made a lot of difference because everybody on the island, I think, let out a big cheer when they saw the flag go up, and we could hear it. And every morning, why, the guys

would look over there on the Suribachi and see that flag flying, and it made them feel pretty good. So that was a very important part of the campaign.

Interviewer: Yes. Yes.

Mrs. Potter: I always tell everybody my husband was right down at the bottom there, ready to raise that flag. He was one of them.

Interviewer: Yes, that's, that's pretty awesome. What was, you know, you were on the island for 30 days. What did you do at night when...?

Parke Potter: Well, you tried to catch some sleep, but it was, you found a shell hole or dug a fox hole or something and curled up and, it wasn't cold. It was quite comfortable, and we took turns staying awake. And if you had two men in a fox hole, one had to be awake, and if you woke up when the other guy was supposed to be on duty and he was sleeping too, that was bad news. You ran him off. But Marines did not move at night. You settled down in your hole or your, wherever you were going to be, and you stayed there. You didn't come out at night. You could shoot anything that was moving in the dark, because you knew it wouldn't be a marine. We had kind of an interesting thing as we went up the west coast of the island, we came across a large gun emplacement that was shooting at the Navy ships off shore, and this thing was dug into a big revetment. And there must have been a lot of people in there, but anyway, the guy would have to stand up and spin the breech open, it was threaded. He'd spin this breech open and then another guy'd jump up and they'd pull the casing out, and then they'd stand up and they'd put a big three-inch or a, well I think it was a five-inch, shell into that breech, so it took two men to put that big shell in there, and then the guy had to get back up again and spin this thing and close the breech, and then they got one shot at the Navy. Well, we were trying our best to put them out of business, but they had too many people. We, we could shoot the ones that stood up, but that wasn't good enough. So we waited until they opened the breech and we fired our rifles right down the barrel of the breech, the back of the breech, and that wrecked the threads in there so they couldn't close it. So they could swing it closed, and then they had to start the screw process of threading it. And now there's got to be two guys there, standing up, trying to thread it, so we had a regular shooting gallery, and we put them out of business with that shell, with that gun simply by bugging the threads in the breech.

Interviewer: Wow. That's smart of you guys. Tell me about your most memorable experience.

Parke Potter: Well, I don't know as there was any. We just, everything was quite exciting, quite thrilling, and everybody in the Marine Corp on the island were all trying to do the same thing. There weren't any slackers or there wasn't anybody quitting. There wasn't anybody who was looking for a way to go home. They all came there to fight, and they wanted to stay until the fighting was finished.

Interviewer: Did you fear for your life?

Parke Potter: I don't think we had time to worry much about that. We, try, it was kind of like a hunting exercise, you know. We were sort of counting our enemy that we might have gotten, but as far as being afraid, I don't think that was part of our psyche at all.

Interviewer: Do you feel it was a brotherhood, like they say? The Marines?

Parke Potter: It certainly is and still is today. There's a number of Marines here in town that I get together with. One group _____ (15:32) goes along and we have breakfast Sunday morning, and there's another group that meet at a restaurant every Thursday at 1:00, and it's just a bunch of great guys and we have a lot of camaraderie and fellowship and we have a lot of things in common. We don't have to impress each other. We don't have to kid each other. We all, we were Marines and we've all been there and we know what it's all about.

Interviewer: If my understanding is correct, you were honored at UNLV a couple of months ago? Is that correct?

Parke Potter: Yeah, that's correct. They, it was a surprise to me, but they honored several of us that had been on Iwo Jima and had fought hard on that island, and it was, there was a nice article in the paper and we were very impressed. Didn't expect it.

Mrs. Potter: I think there were three of the fellows.

Parke Potter: Yeah.

Mrs. Potter: Three fellows.

Interviewer: In the newspaper article that you gave me to read, it said you were the last person in your, was it platoon?

Parke Potter: Well, we had 21-man platoons, and of course one man was the Navy Corpsman with us, and we had a high casualty rate, and at one, at some point I was about the only one of the original left, and we got a lot of replacements, almost daily. So my job was to, unassigned job, was to write down the name of the replacements, and sometimes the casualty rates were so high that those replacements were casualties before I ever even got a chance to write down their name. But that's just part of the campaign. That's the way the Marine Corp fights.

Interviewer: So you, what about at night, in the evenings or whatever, did you have time to eat?

Parke Potter: You ate whenever you could. You certainly didn't cook anything or warm anything up, but we had K rations, which are military rations in a box about the size of a Cracker Jack box, and we had C rations, which were a little better. They had a little canned meat and

that sort of thing, and so we survived on, on that, and of course once in a while we'd take over a Japanese kitchen, so then we got to eat some of their rice and some of their food, if we could get it without spilling it.

Interviewer: Where did the Japanese, it's my understanding that they had caves and tunnels underneath?

Parke Potter: They had been on that island for many years, and they had tunnels completely all the way over, under that island, so we would think we had them cleaned out in an area and first thing you know, they're behind you. They've come through the tunnel and popped back up and they were behind you. So they had tunnels all over. And of course we had high explosives and we were all trained to use the TNT blocks and other high explosives, so when we did see a, find a tunnel or cave, why, we would blow it. But it was, it was a honeycomb underneath that island, and they knew the route and we didn't.

Interviewer: Right. And I was surprised that, you know, they bombed before you guys landed, right, on Iwo Jima? But it didn't phase, phase the island that much.

Parke Potter: Well, they were pretty well dug in. They were underground in their abutments and caves and that sort of thing. And it didn't appear to do too much damage to them. The Navy laid off shore with battleships and pumped the large rifles right into Mt. Suribachi, and there was a cave that looked off to the east and they, the Navy shells, had opened that up until it was as big as a large barn door, and they would fire a round of 16-inch shells right into that cave and you'd see the fire and the smoke come rolling out. As soon as the smoke cleared, little Japanese would run out there and set up his machine gun and others would set up their mortars, and they'd start firing. And then all of a sudden, I guess, they'd check their watch and they're run back in the hole and then the Navy shell'd hit again. So they must have had some turns back there they could get far enough back in the cave and around a corner or two so that the concussion didn't hurt them. But they were pretty hard to dig out. They had a lot of courage. They really defended that island.

Interviewer: They didn't want to be taken prisoner did they?

Parke Potter: No. The Marine Corps told us that if we need any prisoners we'll tell you. But we never had the chance because I never saw a Japanese try to surrender. We did have, on the north end of the island near the end of the campaign, we had a large cave that we knew was just full of Japanese. We figured there were probably at least 400 or 500 in there. And they had a Japanese colonel that they had captured, and they brought him up and told us not to shoot him. He was working for us, so he went back in that cave and tried to talk them out. And he'd come back to the mouth of the cave and shrug his shoulders, signal that he just couldn't work, couldn't do, and they'd motion him back and he'd go back in there. He'd be back in the cave again for maybe five or ten minutes. He'd come back out and shrug his shoulders, so they took him away and went ahead and used Napalm in the cave, and that sealed that cave. That ended that problem. When you get a tank, you know, a regular tank rolls up there with

probably a thousand gallons of Napalm and he puts his barrel right in the mouth of that cave, he's going to burn out everything in there. So that was the way we solved that problem.

Interviewer: So is that what you did for, did you go into the tunnels after?

Parke Potter: No, I never went into the tunnels. We were instructed not to because they could be booby trapped or could be problems in there, and we either sealed them or neutralized them in one way or another, but we didn't go in the caves.

Interviewer: What, do you still stay in touch with the people, the friends that you made at that time?

Parke Potter: I'm afraid there aren't many left. That's been a long time ago. There's, there were a couple of Marines here that had been on Iwo Jima. We were good friends. One has moved up to the state of Washington, and the other one's passed away. So there really aren't too many survivors of that campaign.

Interviewer: Yes, it's getting to be a long time now. Did you have reunions?

Parke Potter: Pardon?

Interviewer: Reunions. Did you have reunions?

Parke Potter: Yes. I took Luella to a reunion in Chicago a few years ago, and I told her, now, we won't know anybody there, but we'll go anyway. So we went in. And we hardly got through the door then several guys came over and slapped me on the back and said, "He's the guy that found the fox hole for us on the beach." (Laughter) So Luella found out that was really a true story. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Did you ever go back to Iwo Jima?

Parke Potter: No. No, I never had any desire to go back to that island.

Interviewer: Where were you when the war ended?

Parke Potter: In the hospital up in Oakland, California at the time. My shoulder, left shoulder had been separated and that was a kind of slow healing when you separate a shoulder, and I had a few other wounds they were patching up and so I was just resting up, I guess, when the war was over.

Interviewer: What, what did you do when you were released from service?

Parke Potter: I went back to Michigan and signed up for several things. I joined the, I went to Michigan Tech and studied mining engineering up in northern Michigan, and I joined the

Masonic Lodge, and I worked real hard on my college work, and I followed the mining and the civil engineering profession the rest of my life.

Interviewer: Oh, you did? Is that how you ended up here? This is quite a ways from Michigan.

Parke Potter: Well, Michigan's pretty cold country and it's liable to snow in June and September, so I kind of liked it out on the west coast, so we settled in California, I settled in California, and then Luella and I met.

Mrs. Potter: I think it was snowing when we visited Houghton in June.

Parke Potter: Probably.

Mrs. Potter: When we made a trip back there.

Parke Potter: Houghton, Michigan is a little thumb that sticks right up into Lake Superior, and it's a cold location, and that's where Michigan Tech is and that's where I spent four years going to college.

Interviewer: So, when you moved to Las Vegas were you retired?

Parke Potter: Yes. I had been working for the Federal Aviation Administration. Our office was in Los Angeles, so when I retired, why, we moved over here, and we've certainly enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Well, good. Are you a member of any veterans' organizations?

Parke Potter: Oh, gosh. (Laughter) Yes I am. I'm a member of the DAV and I'm a member of several other groups and belong to many of the different Masonic groups, and I belong to the Experimental Aircraft Association, and we have regular meetings. So I keep up with aviation. And we still own an airplane. It's a 1946 _____ (26:23), and it's a very nice airplane. It has tricycle landing gear, retractable, and it has the canopy that slides back like the canopy on a fighter aircraft. It's a very nice airplane, so we keep it out at North Las Vegas airport.

Interviewer: Oh. Fly it much?

Parke Potter: Well, not much anymore.

Mrs. Potter: We've flown all over in that little airplane. It's really not little. It's big. I loved it.

Interviewer: So when did you learn to fly?

Parke Potter: I was a pilot before I went to the Marine Corp.

Interviewer: Oh, you were?

Parke Potter: Oh, yeah. I had an interest in aviation from childhood, and so I took flying lessons and got a pilot's license, and when I went to the Marine Corp, I told them I was a pilot, and they said, yeah, just stand over there. (Laughter) I guess they didn't need pilots right then. What they needed was what they called grunts, so I was in the Mud Marines, rifleman.

Interviewer: Well, you were pretty young to have, if you were only in high school when you, you were pretty young to have a pilot's license.

Parke Potter: Yeah, well, as soon as I was 16 I went down and started taking flying lessons in Toledo, Ohio. Flew a J-3 Cub, and that's a motorized kite, really. It has big balloon tires, and we had sand burs on the airport, and the student's job was to get there early and pump up the tires, and all the flights were limited to 30 minutes. The reason was that you had to get back on the ground before the tires went flat. If you wanted to go up again, you had to pump up the tires first. (Laughter) Anyway, I had a lot of fun with it.

Interviewer: Oh, that's great. It sounds like you, you've had a great life.

Mrs. Potter: We have. We've had a good life.

Parke Potter: Yeah, I made my living for a few years throwing rocks in the ocean. I worked for the Army Corp of Engineers, and we were building breakwaters and jetties up and down the coast of California, and then at another time I worked with a group up in Alaska, and we were surveying for different airports up there, and one of my jobs was moose gooser. And in the summertime, the brush is high and the moose like to get the tender leaves on top. Well, the surveyors want to run a line down through, so you'd go through and chop the brush down so you can see through. Then the moose move right in and start munching on those nice leaves that they couldn't reach, so you have to have a guy go down there with a, sharpen up a pole, and try to stick the old moose in the butt. (Laughter) It's like a javelin throw, and if you hit the moose a pretty good lick, why, she'll move. And then the instrument man can see through on the _____ (29:15). And when he, as soon as he can see through, he gives you the high sign so you're all done, but they had to goose the moose to get him off the line. (Laughter) So I've had a lot of interesting jobs.

Interviewer: Yes, it certainly sounds like it. Well, those are all the questions I have unless you have any other memories or stories you'd like to share with us.

Parke Potter: No, the only think I really would like to mention is that when this thing got started here with our recent wars, there was a lot of talk and information in the news media that was kind of anti-military, and so I had never worn my Purple Heart, and I had it in the box. So I pinned it on the lapel of my suit, and whenever I went to a meeting or anywhere else, I wore that jacket with the Purple Heart pinned on it, and I felt like that was my way of showing people where I stood, and they should support and help our government in every way possible,

and there was no room in my world for these people that were anti-military. So I made it a point to wear that Medal of Honor.

Interviewer: Did you also get a medal for just being in World War II? Is it, I forgot what it was called. Service medal.

Parke Potter: Well, no, we got, our group on Iwo Jima was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, and that's awarded to a military unit that does an outstanding job and being a part of that unit, why, I have that citation. But, on Iwo Jima, about the fourth or fifth, I think it was the fourth day, we had finished taking the volcano and we were preparing to move north, and our company commander called a little meeting at the base of Mt. Suribachi, and so all of our platoon leaders, lieutenants, were in this little meeting and they had a map spread out on the ground. The enemy dropped a mortar shell on the map, and we were out of officers at that point, and so we, the officers were the ones that would write the medals up and record some of the events, so we didn't have any officers. We got a few officers later as replacements, but they didn't seem to last too long, too, so we mostly were on our own, and the Marines were well enough trained, and we knew what the objective was, and we went right ahead and did our job, and we didn't let, we didn't suffer from lack of leadership.

Interviewer: Yes, that's one thing that they said about the Japanese were they were so ingrained in having to follow orders and never having a leadership, when they lost their leaders, they didn't know what to do where Marines are taught to be independent and be...

Parke Potter: Yeah, we, if we were, we needed a sergeant, we told somebody you're now a sergeant. (Laughter) If we needed a runner, we'd look around and say, okay, you're the runner. But those of us that stayed there and been all the way through the campaign pretty well knew what to do, and so, we did just fine. We got along.

Interviewer: Well, that's, that's wonderful. Well, thank you so much for sharing that with us. It's been an honor to meet you.

Parke Potter: Well, I appreciate the opportunity. I'd like to have a copy of this if I may.

Interviewer: Oh, certainly. Certainly.

Parke Potter: Thank you.