

Artie Aretakis
Narrator

Wayne Clarke, Interviewer
New York State Military Museum

Home Interview
March 15, 2012

WC: Today is the 15th of March, 2012. We are doing a home interview in Latham, New York. My name is Wayne Clark, I'm with the New York State Military Museum, in Saratoga Springs, NY. Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and date and place of birth.

AA: My name is Artie Aretakis. I was born in New York City, 6/22/26.

WC: Now, did you attend school in NY?

AA: I attended school in Brooklyn.

WC: In Brooklyn. And did you graduate from high school?

AA: I didn't graduate. I joined the Marine Corps, I quit at the 11th, in my 11th grade of high school.

WC: And what year was that, sir?

AA: That was in 19... [from someone off camera 43] 43.

WC: Do you recall where you were and what you were doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

AA: When I heard about the attack I was working as a soda jerk in a little coffee shop in Brooklyn. And I just got off the trolley saw, for the first time, a fellow selling newspapers in the street. What did they call that?

UI: A newspaper stand.

AA: No. Extra, extra read all about it.

WC: I See.

AA: And they said it was, Pearl Harbor was attacked. I didn't pay any attention. I didn't know what Pearl Harbor was.

WC: Most people didn't.

AA: Most people didn't know it. And I didn't know until I got home that night and listened to the radio and found out it was, America was being bombed.

WC: Uh huh. Did you find that your life changed at that point?

AA: It didn't change at that point. It changed maybe 6 months later when my first two brothers were, they went to NYU, and they quit going to college to join the Marine Corps.

WC: And your brothers names?

AA: My brothers' names were, George was the first one in. He went to a school for officers, became an officer immediately. When I, at discharge he was a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps, and the other brother was a master sergeant in the Marine Corps.

WC: And his name?

AA: His name was Emanuel. Emanuel Aretakis.

WC: Any idea why they picked the Marine Corps?

AA: No idea.

WC: Okay.

AA: I know that we were very proud when we heard that our brothers went in the Marine Corps. And two brothers followed them into the Marine Corps, and I followed them. After me, a fifth brother, Michael, joined the Army. He only joined the Army because he couldn't get into the Marine Corps, he had a rash on his face. It was the first rash he ever had, and they were very particular at the time about who they were taking, so they refused to accept him in the Marine Corps, so he joined the Army.

WC: I see.

AA: And later on, I went to join the Marine Corps, my mother and father were against it, because of the Sullivan Brothers Act which we had just heard of. The Sullivan brothers were all killed on a ship outside of Hawaii, when the ship went down, and they didn't want to take me because I was the sixth brother. But I was just going to go in. Couldn't have won the war without me.

WC: Alright. So where did you go for your basic training?

AA: I went to Parris Island.

WC: And was that your first time away from home?

AA: It was the first time away from home, yes.

WC: And what was your basic training like?

AA: It was, it wasn't difficult like some Marines say. It was very hot. We came from a very poor family and the food they gave us was excellent. It was good, I thought, anyway. I never had any problems in basic training.

WC: And once you completed your basic training, did they send you to an advanced school, at all?

AA: No. I went right from basic training to another area in North Carolina, for basic training... I was only in the United States maybe... Basic training was, I believe, eight

weeks, and two weeks at the other camp, and then I went right overseas. I went to camp Tarawa in Hawaii. We took a train from NC, we went from NC to Treasure Island which is outside California. We got on a ship and we went and we trained for combat on Iwo Jima.

WC: Do you recall the name of the ship, at all?

AA: No, I don't recall the name of the ship, but I do recall the name of the camp that we were at. We were at Camp Tarawa in Hawaii, in the Hilo, HI area. And I got to know all the people in HI.

WC: How long did you train for in HI?

AA: We trained there for about eight months before I went into combat.

WC: And your first combat was where?

AA: My first combat and last combat was Iwo Jima.

WC: Iwo Jima.

AA: We were there the entire 40 days, 38 days that the combat, I'm not sure if it was 38 or 40 days, but we were there the entire...

WC: So you were aboard ship heading for Iwo Jima... Were there any rumors? Did you know where you were going at that point?

AA: Didn't know a thing until we got to a place called Saipan, which we had just, the Marines had just landed and taken. And I was called by the Captain of the ship to his quarters, and I saw my brother George was stationed at Saipan at the time, and he was a colonel, lieutenant colonel at the time, and he was [unclear], I saw him there before I went to, before we left there. And we stopped in Saipan to pick up ammunition and food, supplies.

WC: How much time did you get to spend with your brother?

AA: Oh, about an hour or two.

WC: Oh, that's all. Okay. So you picked up supplies and you spent the night at Saipan?

AA: We spent the night in Saipan, and we were on our way to Iwo. We spent two days watching them bomb Iwo Jima with the planes and the ships and all. We thought it was a piece of cake. Because, I thought it would be a piece of cake, let's put it that way. But some of the boys that'd been through Okinawa, Guam, Saipan too, other places that we invaded, they told me, it won't be a piece of cake, like it looks. So, and they was right, I was wrong.

WC: So, what was it like from the time you left the ship? How did you get in to shore?

AA: We got in to shore by amphibious Ducks, took us in to shore. And I volunteered, as I always did, for watching the ammo dump that, we had a lot of ammunition that we were bringing on shore for the 155 howitzers, that was in...

WC: Were you under fire there when you were heading for shore?

AA: Oh yeah. We were under fire. And I was given a password, and I don't remember what the password was then, and I don't remember what it was now. That's because as soon as I got started walking around the ammo dump there... But we had bombs coming all over. The Japs were very smart, on Iwo. And that's why we lost... 30% of the Marines that we lost on Iwo Jima was, 30% of the Marines lost on Iwo were all the Marines lost in WWII.

WC: Uh-huh. So your job was to guard an ammo dump as soon as you got on to shore?

AA: Right. I was on duty from maybe about 11 at night till 2 in the morning. I had to watch the ammo dump and make sure the Japs don't confiscate it or blow it up.

WC: Any incidents at all? With the Japanese trying to infiltrate the lines?

AA: No. They were very smart. The officer that was in charge of the Japanese, from what I read later on, gave orders not to fire on the first ones in to the shore there, which was when we landed. We didn't start getting bombed and shot at until about the 10th or 12th wave, which is thousands of Marines already on the island. And when they shot they would kill two Marines.

WC: So you had snipers?

AA: There were snipers all over. We had snipers all over, and I could see all those dead bodies and I couldn't understand why after the second day the Marines would blow up like balloons. After they were shot and killed, and the Japs that I saw that were killed weren't blowing up at all. But then I found out it was their food intake was rice and fish where ours was everything in the world.

WC: Now, what were you doing when you weren't guarding the ammo dump? Were you dug into the beach?

AA: Well, after a while, that's when they had made the roof for us to take our amphibious guns into where they were stationed right behind Mount Suribachi, right in front of Mt. Suribachi. We were facing, I believe, the northern tip of the island. We were firing, we never fired at Mt. Suribachi because Mt. Suribachi was immediately taken over by my outfit, 28th Marines. They took that, they were scaling the mountain of Mt. Suribachi. They took that on the third day, I believe, that we landed and put up the flag at Mt. Suribachi.

WC: Now did you see them raising the flag, at all?

AA: I happened to see them. Again, I volunteered for some duty at, when the first LST ship, Mt. Suribachi, and I volunteered to help them go take off the gasoline and oil tanks, off of there. We were working in a crouch, and I got up like everybody else and started screaming. Happy that we saw the flag going up. And we could hear the Marines on the island that were fighting, and the ones on the boats were all screaming and yelling. And other Marines were yelling at me, "Hey Greek!" Greek was my name in the service, they all called me Greek. They didn't even know my name was Artie! But they were all telling me to get down. And I couldn't care less if it was safe. I was happy they were raising the flag like everybody else, screaming and yelling for joy.

WC: And you had said that you heard the flag had come from your ship?

AA: I heard that the flag came, and the only one who would know that would be John Bradley's son. John Bradley, the son of the corpsman that was one of the flag raisers on Iwo Jima. John Bradley. And I believe that the officer assigned to the flag raising, sent one of his enlisted men down to pick up a new flag, a bigger flag, for posterity, for Americans to have for eternity.

WC: Okay.

AA: This was the first flag that ever went up in enemy territory.

WC: How long were you on Iwo Jima for?

AA: The entire 38 – 40 days, whichever it was, I'm not sure. We were the last ones to leave. First ones to go in, last ones to leave.

WC: Did you have any contact at all with any of the Japanese soldiers, or any of the prisoners?

AA: No, no. The only contact we had was, we did our... our work was to bomb the places that they were hidden in. Soften them up so the infantry could get in there. And they did the best job of all, the infantry, by the way. As far as I'm concerned, they did the best job.

WC: Now, what kind of weapon did you carry?

AA: 155 howitzer.

WC: Did you have a personal weapon, at all?

AA: Oh, I had a rifle, a carbine.

WC: Oh, you had a carbine. Okay. And you were there for the entire period. What kind of food did you have?

AA: Oh, we had mostly k-rations.

WC: Any fresh food, at all?

AA: No. No fresh food the first couple of weeks.

WC: Okay.

AA: I don't think any of us were ever hungry. We weren't thinking about food, or eating at the time. Thinking about surviving.

WC: Sure.

AA: And I was helping my crew, you've gotta understand. When you're in an outfit like we were in the Marine Corps, we only knew about 30 men in our immediate group. We didn't know the other fellows in the outfit at all, because they were with different groups. So we were, the 30 men that we were with, 15 on the gun and 15 off the gun. And we were getting bombed by the Japanese. The Japanese were bombing us constantly. I know we got it, they

knocked our gun out of place there, out of sight. And we had our officer, our sergeant was, we thought was killed. I know I was looking over his body when he was hit with shrapnel. And I was calling for the corpsman who came. And they evacuated him to Saipan. They told us that he died on Saipan. Three years later, when I'm out of the Marine Corps I seen him come into the restaurant that I was working at, which was the surprise of my life.

WC: Oh, really? Do you recall his name?

AA: No.

WC: What were your sergeants and officers like in your unit?

AA: What were they like?

WC: Yeah.

AA: They were all good. I never had a problem with any of them.

WC: They were tough, but fair, huh?

AA: Tough but fair. Tough but fair. Made sure we did our job, you know. I know we had a lot of bad experiences, but everyone did. No one had it easy on Iwo.

WC: No. Were you wounded or injured, at all?

AA: I was lucky. I was one of the lucky ones. Never got hit or anything. I know our gun was knocked out, the ammo was on fire. I know that, I was in the foxhole at the time, it was my turn to go in the foxhole to try to get some sleep. And they called us, because our gun had been hit. And I jumped out of the foxhole, and I jumped into where the gun was and I helped them put out the fire that was on the ammunition that we had there.

WC: Any rounds go off, at all?

AA: No, we were very fortunate. I had boys yelling at me, screaming at me to get out, "It's gonna blow!" But it never did. Didn't blow.

WC: What about tropical diseases? Any problems with malaria or dengue fever?

AA: We were lucky. We didn't have malaria much in some of the islands. The islands that had malaria were mostly Guadalcanal, it was very, the first invasion of the Marine Corps in WWII. So that's where the malaria was mostly.

WC: Now did you have to take, oh what was it called, Atabrine, at all? It was just... to prevent some of that? [Artie shakes his head] No?

AA: We didn't have to take anything - that I remember.

WC: Alright. And once Iwo Jima was over, what happened next?

AA: What happened after Iwo? We got on board ships, LSTs, and what do you call them? Passenger ships. They loaded us on and they took us back to Hawaii. And we landed in Hawaii. The day we were landing was the day that President Roosevelt passed away.

WC: Oh, okay. What was that like? When you got the news about President Roosevelt. He was probably the only president you would've remembered, right? At the time? Because...

AA: The only one we knew. He was a third term, I remember him talking on the radio every week, with my mother, loved to listen to him and with my mother. Was the hero of the family, we always said because she prayed for us six boys that she had in the service, all in combat at the same time. Four on Okinawa, one on Iwo, and one with Patton's Army in Europe. So she prayed every day, and she lit a candle every day, and that's why we all came back safely, because Mom...

WC: Now was your father still alive at that point?

AA: My father was still alive. He had been... prior to that he had been in combat. He went with his twin brother over to Europe to fight the Germans and the Turks in WWI, and his twin brother was killed alongside him.

WC: What was your father's name?

AA: Anthony.

WC: Okay.

AA: We all had the name Anthony as our middle name. It's a traditional Greek name.

WC: So, you were in Hawaii when you got the news about President Roosevelt passing, how much time did you spend in Hawaii? Were you there till the end of the war?

AA: Well, the war ended, and Harry S. Truman became president. He was my favorite president. I've told everybody over the years I love the man. Only because he kept, he ended the war. He ordered the bomb, the A-bomb dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which I later on saw in Nagasaki, how much damage it had done, the A-bomb. And the Japanese surrendered right after we dropped the second bomb, which was in Nagasaki.

WC: Okay. That happened in August of '45, so at that point you went to Japan?

AA: Then we went to Japan.

WC: Okay, your whole unit went?

AA: My whole unit.

WC: So you were part of the Army of Occupation there?

AA: Right. We were Army of Occupation. I was walking around the barracks one day, and I was just a PFC at the time, and a lieutenant stopped me and said, "Aretakis, report to the messhall." I think he called me Greek. "Hey Greek, report to the messhall." Said, "What for?" Said, "You're a chef." We were losing our chefs left and right. They were going back home, they were the old-timers they were getting discharged. And he asked me, he said, "You're Greek, aren't you?" So that meant I'm a chef. I didn't know anything about cooking, by the way.

WC: Oh, you didn't?

AA: Didn't know a thing.

WC: Okay, so they made you a cook then.

AA: They made me a cook, and in six months I was in charge of the Officers' Mess, stayed there approximately a year.

WC: How were you treated by the Japanese people?

AA: They treated us with a lot of respect. Never had a problem with them. They had them working with us in the kitchens, and everywhere else and we never really had a problem with them. I never did, anyway.

WC: What did you do on your time off? Did you get to travel around Japan, at all?

AA: Not too much. We got to travel, we were stationed at first in Kyushu, Japan. We landed in Kyushu and went from Kyushu to Nagasaki. We were stationed the whole time in Nagasaki. Just about a mile from where the bomb hit. We were down low where the bomb didn't affect some of the houses, everything was level...

WC: Did you get a chance to walk through the wreckage, at all?

AA: Oh yeah. The bomb made a big hole about an inch deep, that's how big, how much damage it did. It did damage for 2-3 miles, as soon as it exploded, you could see all the buildings melting away. All that melted away and the only thing that was standing was the frames.

WC: So you spent a little over a year in Japan?

AA: Approximately one year.

WC: And at that point did you go back to the States?

AA: After the year was up, my time was up, they sent me back to the United States and we went back through the Panama Canal and to Cape May was it? Cape May, New Jersey I believe.

WC: Now what rank were you when you were discharged?

AA: I was discharged as a corporal.

WC: Alright. And once you were discharged, did you make use of the G.I. Bill, at all?

AA: Never. Never took advantage of anything. Just happy to get home.

WC: Did you join what they call the 52-20 club?

AA: No.

WC: You went right to work when you got home?

AA: Went right to work. Well, no, I took a vacation because I lost my entire childhood to the service, went in at 17. So I didn't go to work for about a year. I was fortunate to have some money saved. What I had lasted about a year before I had to go back to work.

WC: No, when were you discharged?

AA: I was discharged in 1946. Approximately a year after the war.

WC: Did you join any veterans' organizations, at all?

AA: I joined, the only veterans' organization I joined was the Greek-American Veterans, which did a lot for the mothers and fathers that we had that never became citizens. We got them their citizenship cards, we did a lot of good. It was a nice outfit, we were a good outfit. I became president, later on, of the organization. But that was the only time I ever got involved with anything of WWII.

WC: Did you stay in contact with any of the guys you were with?

AA: My friends in my outfit, there were 32 of us, I believe, most of them were West and Midwest. So I never kept in contact with any.

WC: Out of that group of 32 men, how many were lost? Do you recall?

AA: I recall one, Peterson, was buried right next to John Bradley's, no... that was John Batchelor¹, he was in grave 49 or 50. And the other one was 50. John Batchelor was 50. The grave that they built there was right in front of our gun, we were firing over the grave.

WC: Oh, really?

AA: And to see those there big flies and what have you that they have over there was a horrible thing, and to see the bodies lined up. And they had no time to bury them, with honors and all. Just put sand over the boys, and their crosses with their names.

WC: Okay. [pause] Now you mentioned your sergeant, you had heard he had been killed but you ran into him about three years later.

AA: Three years later, doesn't he walk into the restaurant I'm working? I'm taking care of for my brother while he's at his honeymoon. And uh, I went to North Carolina from New York, it's like a foreign country to me, like Japan, and while I was there, I was taking cash and in walks the sergeant. I says, "Sergeant! Is that you?" I never remembered his name. I didn't know it then, I don't know it now.

WC: So did he remember you?

AA: He remembered me. Just said, "Hi." and... we hadn't really discussed, no one discussed WWII, in my opinion, for about three years after we got discharged. And I, that's when I joined the veterans' organization, got a little bit involved. But until then none of us even discussed the service; what we did, how we survived and what came after life...

¹ Not sure of this person's last name.

WC: Now, how do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life? You went in as a 17-year old and uh...

AA: I went in as a kid, I came out as a man. Without a doubt. Came out as a man and I didn't know a thing when I went in. Didn't care about, wasn't afraid of dying, wasn't afraid of getting shot, and wanted to do all these crazy things and all. Wanted to win the war, like most of us did. I think Tom Brokshaw² had the right idea in saying the greatest generation, because I think we were the greatest generation.

WC: I think so too. Now, you do have a painting of you and your brothers and I'm going to zoom in on that. [camera pans to painting] Can you name them off? From left to right? I know the first fellow was you.

AA: Yeah, the first fellow is me, next is my brother Agamemnon, that's Emanuel, this is Gus, the first one to pass away in the family, this is the soldier, Michael, and this is the colonel, George. George was a very strict colonel, and very tough. I know when I got off the ship I had to salute him. He told me to salute him or else.

WC: Now, did he make a career out of the service?

AA: Yes he did. He was a 20 year man.

WC: Okay, I got the photo. He was a 20 year man?

AA: 20 year man.

WC: And he retired as a colonel?

AA: He retired as a lieutenant colonel.

WC: Okay. And are there any other incidents, or anything we probably, I'm sure we haven't touched on that you might recall that you'd like to add to the tape?

AA: No. Just that war is hell. Nobody likes it. I don't think anybody could like it.

UI³: What's in Quantico, Virginia, dad?

AA: Quantico, VA is... they have a statue, I believe a picture of the six of us that served in the service, five being Marines. I would say that we're, the general at the time told me that he had over six siblings, but they were cousins and uncles that were in the service, but he never heard of five brothers in the Marine Corps. I think we hold the distinction of being the only family that had five in WWII, in the Marine Corps. We could've had six, but five is enough.

WC: Now, when did you get married?

AA: I married 13-14 years after, uh, '46 was it, John?

UI: No, you got married in '59, '58.

² Probably means Tom Brokaw

³ Unidentified speaker off camera, probably Artie's son John

AA: '58, '45. 1958.

U2⁴: You're going to pay for that one.

WC: 1958. And your wife's name?

AA: Angela.

WC: And how many children do you have?

AA: We have three children.

WC: And their names?

AA: Their names are Eve, John and Nicholas.

WC: Any grandchildren?

AA: Oh, six grandchildren. Again, we're very lucky.

WC: Yes.

AA: Again, thanks to Harry S. Truman.

WC: Uh-huh. Alright, well, Did you want to read that?

UI: Do you want me to read it for you dad?

AA: Sure. [hands a sheet of paper to someone off camera]

WC: Yeah, we can add that.

UI: My name is Artie Aretakis. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was 15 years old, living in Brooklyn with my parents who came to this country to make a better life and to raise a family. Within a few months all five of my older brothers joined the military to fight the Japanese and the Nazis.

When I turned 17, I immediately dropped out of the 11th grade and I joined the Marines, where four of my five older brothers were already in. My other brother joined the Army. My father, Anthony Aretakis, had fought during WWI alongside of his twin brother John Aretakis who was killed next to him as they fought side-by-side.

After basic training I went to Hawaii and then fought the entire 38 day battle at Iwo Jima. When I got off the plane in Hawaii, I saw my older brother George on the dock, waiting for me, and I ran up to him to give him a hug. He said to me, "Step back three paces, Private, and salute your superior officer."

AA: That's the truth!

UI: [continues reading] I had a lot to learn and a lot of growing up to do in the next three years. All five of the Aretakis brothers who were in the Marines trained, and were prepared for the invasion of Japan. Because of our military's victories in battles that included; The

⁴ Second unidentified speaker off camera. Female voice.

Battle of the Bulge, where my older brother Michael fought under General George Patton, in Okinawa where my four older brothers George, Konstantine, Emanuel and Agamemnon fought with the Marines, and in Iwo Jima where I fought, we knew the invasion of Japan would be a success, but we were all told that there could be as many as 300,000 casualties in invading Japan, and the odds were that about three of the six of us would be killed.

And then, President Harry S. Truman ordered that the atomic bomb be dropped, first on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki. And all six of us came home to our parents and our sisters, Chrisualla[unsure] and Anna.

Even though all of this happened almost 70 years ago, my entire immediate and future family would be touched and scarred by war. After coming home I waited over 13 years to get married. I was lucky enough to have three great children and now six grandchildren. I hope my grandchildren and their children can someday understand and appreciate what the six of us endured and sacrificed. Every moment of my existence now, as I approach my 86th birthday, is affected by my experiences and the tragedies that I saw and participated in from 1943 to 1945.

I never went back to high school and I sold coffee in New York for many years. And along with my wife we raised our children, first in Brooklyn and then in upstate New York.

My oldest child, a daughter, and her husband have two children in college. She is a senior executive of Siemens of Germany. My older son received a law degree from Georgetown University, that's me, and has just written a book about Joe Paterno and the Penn State scandal. He and his wife are the parents of a 13-year old boy. And my youngest son, Nicholas, graduated from Columbia University and has had a successful business career and has written two books. He and his wife are the parents of three very young children.

Of the eight of us Aretakis in my family, only three are still living, but none of us three Marines have any regrets. We have been called the Greatest Generation, but we just felt that we answered a call. We answered the same call as the patriots in the Revolutionary War and the soldiers in the Civil War. In Quantico, VA there is a plaque that recognizes the six Aretakis brothers, five of whom were Marines. Since I have not seen the plaque, it is as far away to me as the small islands in the south Pacific where so many young men that we came to know fought and died.

We believe we are the only family to have six brothers to serve in battle and active duty at the same time during WWII. Our mother was very religious, and we all always believed that with God's help, and her daily prayers, that that's why all six of us came home safely.

Thank you.

WC: Hey, thank you. Thank you, sir. Thank you for your service.

AA: Thank you.