Sanford "Sandy" Berkman
Narrator

Mike Russert
Wayne Clark
Interviewers

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Sandy Berkman **SB**
Mike Russert **MR**
Wayne Clark **WC**

MR: This is an interview at the New Scotland Historical Society on the 26th of September, 2007, approximately 3 p.m. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

SB: Yes. My given name is Sanford Berkman, everybody calls me Sandy. I was born October the 6th, 1920 in Cohoes, New York.

MR: What was your educational background before you went into the service?

SB: I completed high school in Dover, New Hampshire, and I did one semester at the University of New Hampshire at Durham. I went to Albany Business College for a year and completed that course.

MR: Ok, good. Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

SB: Yes. I was in Mechanicville, New York, working for my uncles in the store. It was a Sunday, I remember, and I was, I think, probably just roaming around not knowing what to do on a Sunday. Stores weren't open in those days on Sunday.

MR: Do you remember your reaction when you heard about it?

SB: I was deeply impressed. I couldn't believe a thing like that could happen to our country.

MR: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was?

SB: Oh yes.

MR: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

SB: I enlisted in the Marines, and I enlisted at [unclear], but I actually went into the Marine Corps February the 8th of 1942.

MR: Why did you select the Marine Corps.

SB: I can't give you an honest answer at this point. (Laughs) I thought it was a good place to be, and I thought I would try it.

MR: Where did you go for your basic?

SB: Parris Island.

MR: What was it like there?

SB: Tough. (Laughs) It was nothing like I expected. I left Albany, I was sworn in in Albany by Major McKindless [?]—I still remember his name. And I went to Parris Island. I had a brand new topcoat on at that time—I'll never forget it—and I left it with my uncle. He drove me down. I said "I'm not going to need this; I'm going south." Not knowing—I'd never been south. I got to Parris Island and they put us on a truck to take us to the camp. My God, I never—it was so

cold, it was unbelievable. Well it was so cold, the first morning I woke up… we had two-man tents, in those days there were no barracks, and board sidewalks. We woke up and we had a bucket of water in the tent, and it was frozen—that's how cold it was. And we had these little space heaters, that's all we had in each tent. These old-fashioned little space heaters.

MR: Ok. How long were you at Parris Island?

SB: About eight weeks. They accelerated the course, and it was not easy, but it was a good indoctrination into the Marine Corps. They taught you… if you thought you were the boss, then forget it, because you weren't. The drill instructor was, and you better remember him because he was tough. I remember him, too, his name was Franklin Kirber; he was from Minnesota. He was a regular China Marine.

MR: Why do you remember him so well?

SB: Well, one thing, he had a tent of his own on the end of the walkway, and he had an ironing board. At that time, there were campaign hats, which were carryovers actually. He used to stand there and iron it, iron the brim, so there wasn't a wrinkle in it. When he wore it, it shaded his eyes, and you couldn't see his eyes, but you knew he was looking at you. (Laughs)

MR: Where did you go after Parris Island?

SB: After Parris Island, I went to New River, North Carolina. That was a new installation; also there were tents there, no barracks. We formed the 3rd Marine Division. I went to a radio school there, and I completed the radio school, and they sent me to Quantico for a high-speed radio school. I went to Quantico and completed that. From there, I went back to New River, and like I said before, was in the 3rd Division, a headquarters company. I went from there to California, Camp Pendleton, which also was tents. In other words, at the early stages of the war there was no such things as barracks. They were

just camps that were thrown together to take care of the men that were coming in. From there we sailed for New Zealand, and we went on a ship called… it was one of the Moore-McCormack Freight Lines. It was so fast that we went over to New Zealand without an escort. It took us fourteen days to go from Long Beach, California to New Zealand.

Oh yes, I forgot—I did a small stint in Camp Elliott before we went to Camp Pendleton, and we did a little training there. Then we went to Camp Pendleton, then we shoved off overseas.

We got to New Zealand and we were based in a small town called Matakana. It was about sixty miles from Auckland in the mountains. It was an old sheep farm. We found out the New Zealanders had an army camp there, where we were. It was very nice. The people were exceptionally nice. The country was beautiful; it reminded us of home. It was very much like the United States.

From there we shoved off and we went up to Guadalcanal. The engagement was over at Guadalcanal, and we just did some mopping up, cleaning up so to speak, and making sure everything was secured, and we stayed there…. I was recommended for a commission while I was there. I'll never forget I went in before the Colonel, and the Colonel says "You have two options. You can get a commission here, overseas, and we'll transfer you into another outfit. Or we can give you six months back in the States." I looked at him and I said "You are kidding, aren't you?" (Laughs)

So naturally I took the State side duty, and went to Quantico and went into what we called Reserve Officers School. That was divided into two segments. The first part of the training to become an officer was book work. And of course most of us… I was a corporal at the time, and we were out of school. We were thrown in with a bunch of what they called V5s or V12s—they were fresh out of college, getting commissions. They posted a list and the eight of us that went were on the bottom. Well, it didn't sit very well, but there was nothing we could do about it. I was called in and they made me the spokesman,

and the commanding officer wanted to know why we were on the bottom of the list, being exposed to the war at that point. I told him "Well, we've been out of school. We can't compete with these kids. Why don't we wait until after the second phase of the courses and see where we are?"
Needless to say, at the end of the second half when we actually became second lieutenants, the eight of us were on the top. Because, mostly, that was field work, and things that you had to do in actual situations, and so we wound up on the top. So it was a different ballgame at that point.

Then I went from Quantico back to New River at that point. They made me a training commander. We were going to the West Coast, replacements. I had the good fortune of leaving with three hundred men in my command and arriving in California with three hundred men. I had a little talk with the boys on the train before we left, and I pointed out men that were stationed along the way, and I said "You see those fellas there with the rifles?" They all nodded their heads. "Those guys know how to shoot, and they shoot pretty fast. So if I were you, I wouldn't try to take off." And I didn't lose a man. I was the only one that didn't lose a man, and of course, that went into my service record.

From there we went to Hawaii. Now we're talking late 1944, because I was commissioned in June 1944. We got to Hawaii and we went into training, and I was assigned to the 5th Division, the 26th Marines. And in the Marine Corps what you did originally, forget it. I was trained to be a communications officer, but I wound up in a machine gun platoon. Now, I admit I didn't know a lot about machine guns, but I had a gunnery sergeant that was a regular Marine, and he was pretty sharp. He gave me a crash course, and I learned pretty fast. I had to, I had no choice.

We shoved off from Hawaii January 1st, 1945, and we were part of an invasion force—not knowing where we were going at the time—but we found out later that we were going to Iwo. Everybody wanted to know where Iwo Jima was, no one had even heard of it. There had

never been a white man on that island, only the Japanese, they owned and controlled it and lived there. We were aboard ship over forty days. It was the largest convoy of the war; there were over 700 ships in the convoy. We landed on Iwo February 19th, 1945, and our division was part of the assault. Needless to say, it was a very, very tough operation. Very costly in human lives. You couldn't move. It was all volcanic ash. We had poured some 18,000 rounds of ammunition into the island from the battle wagons that were out there. And they sat there and laughed at us, they were dug in. The intelligence was not good. It later came out, and they admitted that it wasn't. We lost a lot of men. I lost a good deal of my platoon early. I lasted four and a half days. I got hit on February 23rd, about 30 minutes after the flag went up on Suribachi. Part of my outfit went to Suribachi, and the rest of us went to the airfield. We had to secure the airfield—that's the way they broke us up. I got hit with a mortar shell.

MR: Did you see the flag go up on Suribachi?

SB: Not actually see it, but it was up probably, seconds, then I did see it. I happened to turn to the left; I was lying there waiting to pull my platoon up into a flank, and I looked over and I saw the flag up, and it was a wonderful sight. I saw the first flag. There were two flags that went up. Then they put up the second flag—they staged that one, that was the famous photograph. About thirty minutes after that, I guess they got a little mad at us, because we took the [unclear], I mean we got everything thrown at us, and I got hit. The corpsmen came and picked me up.

MR: How were you hit, with what?

SB: It was a mortar shell, all across my back. And I had eight pieces, they found out later, that hit me. So they took me off the island, put me on a hospital ship—

MR: What kind of aid were you given as soon as you were wounded?

SB: I gave myself a shot of morphine. The officers were allowed to carry it, we were the only ones that could take it with us. And I had morphine, so I gave myself a shot to ease the pain up a little bit. The corpsmen saw me, and they came and got me, and they took me out on a stretcher and they took me down to the beach, and then I went to a hospital ship. From the hospital ship, I went to Saipan to a field hospital, and from Saipan I went to Hawaii to a field hospital. From Hawaii I went to San Francisco, and from San Francisco I went to St. Albans in Long Island. They tried to get you as close to home as they could. I was at St. Albans until June of 1945. Then they transferred me to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and I was with the Marine Corps there at the Yard and they kind of made me the officer in charge of the Marine detachment there. Then I became the post exchange officer because I had had some mercantile experience. The captain that was the post exchange officer, he got out, so they asked me if I would take it and I said yes. So I took that until about October. Then I had more than enough points, when the point system came out, to resign my commission. They asked me if I wanted to stay in, and I said no, I want to get out. So I got out.

I had about forty-five days coming to me, so I decided I would take a ride out to Colorado, so I went out there and stayed there for a while, worked a couple of years. Then I came back east, and I was back home again. Older and wiser. (Laughs) It was a great experience. We had a lot of good times, and we had a lot of bad times, naturally. I lost a lot of people that I knew, especially in my platoon. I later found out that we had almost 100 percent casualties in my platoon. It was just a devastating place to be. The island was nothing, really, but we had to get the airfields. There was no question whether we had to or didn't—we had to because by the time we completed the engagement, which I later found out, the first planes landed that were hit, and they would have never made it back to Saipan. We were 750 miles from Tokyo, and we had to take that spot. And they told us it would be costly, and it was. It was the most costly operation in Marine Corps history. In fact, it was actually the most

costly operation in World War II, compared to other engagements that were fought.

MR: What was it like on the beachhead?

SB: It was all volcanic ash; you couldn't dig. You'd dig a hole and it'd cave back in again. There was no such thing as digging a foxhole because it wouldn't hold. You lay there and hopefully you were all right. You see, they could see us, but we couldn't see them. They were so dug in in these emplacements. They had all those years to get that island ready for them, and especially when the war broke out they knew that eventually we'd be going there. And they were waiting for us. There were over 15,000 of them. Probably, in the entire engagement, we landed over 40,000 men. You can imagine on an island half a mile wide and a couple miles long with 60,000 men on there, it was just incredible. Absolutely incredible.

MR: What kind of weapons did you carry?

SB: The officers were given carbines, which were useless. There was not much fire power to them. And pistols, we had .45s. All of my boys had M1 Garands, machine guns were the [unclear]. I had ten guns, originally there were five water cooled and five air cooled, and we traded in the water cooled for the air cooled because they were easier to carry and you could move them. So I had ten air cooled .30 caliber machine guns.

MR: Did you ever make use of the GI Bill after you left service?

SB: No. I never did. I went back to my family. We were in business up in Mechanicville. We had army and navy stores, and I stayed with them a while. This was after I came back from Colorado. And I decided I wanted to do something, and an opportunity arose where I could go into the restaurant business. I bought a restaurant halfway between Mechanicville and Waterford on Route 4, and I was there for maybe fifteen years. From there I hung around for a little while, and then an opportunity arose where I would become the general

manager of the Colonie Country Club out in Voorheesville. The one that was on Wolf Road on the corner. And I was there when we opened it up, and I did it as a favor to the president of the club at that point. He says, "Why don't you try it for about a year?" And I said I will. So the years stretched into fourteen, and I stayed there. Then I got out and I went into the catering business and I was in that a little over 22 years, and I kind of semi retired. It was not for me. So I got a job with the court system here in Albany, and I'm still there.

MR: Did you ever join any veterans' organizations?

SB: Oh, I belong to them all. Marine Corps League, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign…

MR: Are you active in them?

SB: Not really. If I were active in any of them, it would be the Marine Corps League. I've gone to the Marine Ball down in Washington DC; a few years ago my daughter and son-in-law gave that to me as a present, and we went down and we stayed over there. It was interesting. And we went to the Ball, and it was outside of Quantico. I live right out here on Krumkill Road. The girl that I'm with is a lifelong resident of the area. I'm her significant other. We've been together 27 years. (Laughs) We belong in long engagements.

MR: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone who was in the service with you?

SB: Well, I should say yes. There's a man in Albany, he's still around, named Ted Young. He's not well at this point. He went in a little after I did. He was in the Marines, and we became friends. I haven't seen him in some time, but I talked to his wife Margaret and he's not well. He's in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's.

MR: How do you think your time in the service had an effect on your life?

SB: It had a big effect on my life, really. When I went in, I was 22, and like 22-year-olds, no one could tell me what to do, I was my own boss. But I soon enough learned that when you join the Marine Corps, you're no longer the boss, and you better find out quickly, because if you didn't they would let you know. (Laughs) That's the way it was. Like I said before, we had good times and we had bad times, but we had a lot of good times, too. You say to yourself, they compensate for some of the bad times. It was a learning experience.

Young kids come to me and say "Where would you go if you wanted to join the service?" And I say, "Well, I'd want to join the Marines. You might not like it, it's not greatest outfit in the world as far as—you know, you can't get ahead quickly, you're in there a long time before they promote you." I was lucky, I became a corporal and from there I got a commission, but I was probably one out of, I don't know how many that that happened to. But be as it may, it's an outfit that you work hard to get what you get. And that's the way the Marine Corps is, even today. When they say "A few good men," that's about what it is. That's the way they take them.

MR: Well, thank you very much for your interview.