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**INTERVIEW
WITH
A
VETERAN**

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INTERVIEW WITH A VETERAN

In searching for a figure from the World War II era to conduct an interview with, I wanted to find a combat veteran. The military aspect and the soldiers themselves fascinate me the most about World War II. I wasn't sure exactly where to look, though. My grandmother knew of one who was a friend of hers, but she said he didn't talk about the war much. I'm sure the majority of war veterans in general share the same sentiment. My father, a Vietnam War veteran, taught my brothers and me at a young age not to bring up the subject of his war experiences. Because of this, I knew the combination of a combat veteran who was willing to talk about his experiences was going to be difficult to find. I tried causally inquiring of some of the customers who routinely bank at the branch that I work at to try to find a veteran. I had a few possibilities, but nothing that really seemed like the right interview. I was getting discouraged.

Naturally, after all this frustration, I was surprised when the subject of this interview actually found me when I was on Spring Break in my hometown of Port Orange, FL. He turned out to be a next-door neighbor to my father. My father had never met him until a chance meeting one day as the two simultaneously went out to get their mail. All the houses on my dad's street are on 10 acre mostly wooded lots so it wasn't entirely unusual that this was their first meeting after three years of living almost directly across from each other. The only contact he had with us until that day was him calling the police on my high-school aged brother for having loud parties when my dad was out of town on hunting trips. The conversation between the two started about these disturbances, but evolved to the veterans' war days (the late-night disturbances had recently been curtailed since my brother enlisted in the Navy, so there was no hard feelings on his part). My dad noticed how he was surprisingly open about his combat experiences and commented to the man about my situation. After some deliberation, he said he would allow me to interview him about his war days. He contacted me the next day and we set it up. That is how I was able to

meet up with the subject of my interview, Mr. Roy Potts formerly of the 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Division of the U.S. Army and a veteran of the last major battle of World War II, Okinawa.

Mr. Potts was born on September 18, 1927 in Fulton, NY. He was the youngest of four children, three boys and one girl. Like most World War II veterans, he grew up in the grasp of the Depression. Life became much harder for the family when the father suffered a disabling stroke when Roy was eleven. Both of Roy's older brothers dropped out of high school to get jobs to help support the family. Even though times were hard, the family was very tight, and everyone did what they could to help. The bond was especially tight amongst the three brothers. As the youngest of the three, Roy was picked on constantly. Even though he hated it at the time, he says it made him much stronger in the long run. Roy idolized his older brother, Hal. They were separated by six years to the day. In 1940 when general mobilization started in the U.S., Hal joined the Navy. Roy badly wanted to join up with him, but was only twelve at the time. Roy vowed that when he was old enough he was going to join the Navy like his brother.

This vow was hardened even more firmly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. By this time, things were better for the family as Roy and his other brother, Bill, had found good jobs working in a factory producing leather goods, and Hal was sending money home routinely from his ship in the Atlantic. December 7th shook everything up for the family, though. Bill immediately joined the Navy. Hal kept his job but yearned for the day when he would be old enough to join. He was fascinated by the letters he would receive from Hal about protecting convoys and battling submarines, but Roy wasn't so sure he still wanted to join the Navy. He wasn't very fond of the water and didn't really take too highly of the idea of spending extended periods on a ship. Roy was starting to lean towards joining the Army or the Marines. It was only a matter of time for him.

The time came sooner than expected. Bill had been assigned to the Pacific and was a skipper of an LST. He had piloted boats ferrying Marines onto the Islands of Bougainville and Tarawa among others. Nearing the close of 1943, the family had not received word from him in

nearly two months. On December 11, the family finally received word of him but not from him. His LST took a hit from Japanese artillery as he was returning from dropping Marines on a small island in the Marshall Island chain. Bill was dead. This deeply devastated the family, as well as Roy. Roy made up his mind on that day; he was done waiting and was going to enlist in the Army as soon as possible. He was only sixteen at the time, but he set out on the mission of forging a birth certificate. Against the desperate urgings of his mother, Roy took himself and his fake birth certificate down to the Army recruiting board and enlisted just three days after word of Bill's death. He admitted to me that it was a very rash decision, but above all things he was hungry for revenge, and does not regret his decision to this day.

Just three days after enlisting Roy boarded a train en route to Camp Pickett, VA for basic training. He completed "accelerated" basic training, and was moved to Mississippi where he completed advanced infantry training. At the time, Roy wasn't sure where he was going to be shipped. At this stage of the war, the majority of the new enlistments were being used as reinforcements for battered divisions all over the world. All Roy wanted to do was kill Japs. Roy was developing into a fine soldier worthy of this task as well. He wasn't much for the leadership type, but showed a fearlessness in training that was unmatched. Roy's anxiousness for real combat action was growing by the day, as was his wonder of where he was going to end up. In January 1945, Roy finally received his orders. He would be going to the Pacific Theatre of Operations.

Roy was part of large convoy consisting of about 50 ships bound for the Central Pacific. None of the GI's were told exactly where they were going. The majority had been trained for amphibious landings and jungle tactics. At the time the only sustained major engagements were taking place in the Philippines and the Marines on Iwo Jima. After over a week on the open ocean Roy's transport split from the convoy and made its way for the small Island of Ipil adjacent to the Philippines. Heavy fighting had taken place on the island, but was now in the mopping up stages. Potts and the soldiers on his transport would serve as replacements for the 77th Infantry

Division, the famous "statue of liberty division." They were badly depleted from the heavy casualties they took in securing Guam and Leyte. The division was nicknamed, "The Old Bastards" by the Marines on Guam, and they were in fact the oldest infantry division in the Army when commissioned in 1942. Roy and his fellow replacements looked like young boys to these grizzled veterans, and Roy felt like one too. Roy was naturally inquisitive among the older soldiers about their experiences in the Army. He could tell there was something different about these men, something that he'd never seen before in anyone. In less than a month, Roy would know what that was and would see it inside him.

Amongst the ranks of the enlisted men, rumors swirled about when and where they were attacking next. Roy was still anxious to get into some real combat. He'd only seen brief skirmishes since landing on Ipil. In the third week of March 1945, the 77th finally got its orders for its next major offensive. They were being assigned to the 10th Army and would participate in the battle for Okinawa. Okinawa was strategically important as a springboard for the proposed invasion of mainland Japan, but was defended by over 100,000 fanatical Japanese. When the word came, Roy and most of the new replacements were excited, but he noticed the lack of excitement among the veterans who were quite reserved about the situation. Okinawa promised to be a very hard fight and the veterans had all ready seen enough of those.

The main invasion date was set for April 1, but the 77th division would see action before that. On March 26th, they landed on the nearby Kerama Islands. The islands were being used as a base for Japanese suicide boats. The 77th's main objective was to destroy these boats and mop up any Japanese resistance so the islands could be used for a "ship hospital." The Kamikaze was now taking a more prominent role in the defense of the fading Japanese Empire, and casualties from them promised to increase. The only resistance experienced on the Keramas was by these suicide attacks as well as small pockets of soldiers. It was here that Roy saw his first victim of the Kamikaze, an American destroyer that had three large holes punched in its hull. This wouldn't be the last.

The mopping up on the Keramas was going well for Roy. Three days after they had landed, Roy got his first confirmed kill. It was a sniper that had pinned down his patrol. Roy was an excellent shot from his days hunting in the Adirondack Mountains near his home, and made a clean shot on the unsuspecting sniper from over 400 yards away. It made him feel good that he was exacting some revenge for Bill, and he wanted more of it. Two weeks after the main invasion of Okinawa started, Roy got his wish, but was not nearly thrilled about combat his experience by the end of it. Roy's division invaded the island of Ie Shima, which was ten miles off of the main island of Okinawa, and the site of an important Japanese held airfield. Roy saw some of the most savage fighting he would see in the war on this small island. The fight lasted for four days and it changed Roy for the rest of his life. The 7th lost hundreds of men on the island, as well as the famous war correspondent, Ernie Pyle. Roy saw the monument that the GI's erected for him the day after he was killed. The day was made even worse for him by the loss of Roy's closest friend in the 77th, David Banner. They had me in jungle training on Hawaii and had been in the same platoon since. Roy said that losing someone is hard under any circumstances, but having your buddy getting mangled by a machine gun just a few feet away from where you stand is almost unbearable.

In the next two months Roy would see a lot of the same. The Japanese were determined fighters, and they took a took heavy toll on the Americans on Okinawa before being finally finished. Roy himself would suffer a wound in the attempt to take Shuri Castle, the menacing headquarters of the Japanese military staff on Okinawa. He had half of his pinky shot off while trying to overrun a Japanese position. Roy considered himself extremely lucky for only suffering this wound among the death and destruction all around him. Roy had developed into a very effective soldier and reported of confirmed killings of over a hundred. Roy stayed on Okinawa until the end when the division was then moved to the Philippines to prepare for the invasion of Japan.

The invasion turned out to be occupation duty after Japan surrendered. Roy and the 77th were sent to Hokodale, Hokkaido on the Japanese mainland in October and remained until mid 1946. After World War II, Roy remained in the Army and served in Korea as well. He said being a soldier was something he loved, and something he was made for. He retired from the military a decorated veteran, receiving one Silver Star and two purple hearts. He now lives in Bunnell, FL and I am very grateful to him for granting me this chance to interview a true war hero.