

**Robert S. Shetler**  
**Narrator**

**Robert von Hasseln**  
**Interviewer**  
**Wayne Clark**  
**Videographer**

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**Syracuse, New York**

**Q:** Interview with Mr. Robert Stanley Shetler on 30 March 2001, Syracuse Armory, Interviewer Lieutenant Colonel Robert von Hasseln, Videographer Mr. Wayne Clark. Mr. Shetler, tell me about where you were born and when.

**RSS:** I was born January 20, 1924 in Syracuse, New York at the old Good Shepherd Hospital.

**Q:** Did you grow up in Syracuse?

**RSS:** Yes, I was in Syracuse all my life up until I went away in the service in WWII. Graduated from high school here in January of 1942 and a week later I was eighteen years old and a month later I enlisted in the service. But if you really want to go back to December 7<sup>th</sup>, I think we should. I worked at a drug store. I was what they called a soda jerk. It was a soda fountain. Every drug store had a soda fountain back in those days. Four or five stools at the counter. December 7<sup>th</sup> was not my normal day to work with my employer. Generally I worked with another druggist. But they had switched jobs that day. We used to open nine to twelve, and then close until 5:00. We closed at noon and I went home to eat and we heard the news about Pearl Harbor at that time. So when I called my boss to wake him up at about 4:30—we open at 5—I told him, “We’re at war.” Well he didn’t believe me and nobody else did. But that’s all the talk, the conversation was that night when people came into the drugstore. In fact I had a few so-called friends who volunteered to go down and enlist me the next morning, and I told them, “No, I can do it myself.”

But that’s where it started. I got out of high school then in January and the following month decided what to do. We knew eventually—all of me and my friends—that we would probably be going in the service. I tried to talk my parents into signing for me to go in the Marines, but they refused. They finally compromised and they signed for me to go in the Navy. It was quite a shock to them, though, later on—I’m going to skip a few years—when I was in the Navy Hospital Corps, I was transferred from the Navy to the Marines. I wore a Marine uniform and greens and khakis. I wore navy blues and whites, too, and they couldn’t understand. Nowadays nobody else can understand exactly what it is,

and some of the Marines deny it, but they are part of the Navy. Marine Corps, Navy Hospital Corps, Navy Nurses Corps, Navy Chaplains Corps, all different corps. We were transferred just like going from one ship to another from the Navy to the Marines.

But I enlisted and my folks finally signed for me to go in the Navy. I went from Syracuse to Albany, New York where I had a final physical and then they sent me back to Syracuse to wait for an opening at Newport, Rhode Island where the recruit training was located. Then they called me in several weeks—back to Albany. I got there, but Newport was filled. They sent me right back to Syracuse, to Great Lakes, where I went through boot camp. After boot camp I was lucky, I did get about ten days leave. Some of the fellas in my boot camp company went right to sea. Then I went back to Great Lakes where I went to a hospital corps school where they gave us training in first aid and things of that nature—also, specifically what can happen to you if you are in an Army group or a Marine group, wounds you have to take care of and things of that nature.

After corps school when I graduated I went to Charleston, South Carolina to the Navy Yard Hospital down there, where I served duty in the laboratory and I was there all the summer of 1942. I knew afterwards what was happening. They were preparing for the invasion of North Africa. Quite a few of us Corpsmen were transferred from there to Norfolk, Virginia and were assigned to ships. Well, I was one of the lucky ones. I didn't go to North Africa. I went to Portland, Maine where I went aboard the USS Relief. I think it was the USS Relief that was the original Navy hospital ship. At that time in Portland, Maine it had just come down from Argentia, Newfoundland and it was painted a battleship gray camouflage. We went from Portland to Boston to the Navy Yard, where all this gray paint was chipped off it. It was painted white with a green stripe around it, big red crosses on the side, and then floodlights were hung over the side.

After all this work was done we went from there through the Panama Canal to the Southwest Pacific, specifically the area of Espiritu Santo and New Caledonia, where we took in casualties—a floating hospital is really what it was. Quite a few of the fellows on some of the islands there had malaria or dengue fever or things of this nature besides war wounds. After my term down there, I came back to the States, where I was transferred to the Fleet Marine Force. Now as I said before, the Fleet Marine Force is a part of the Navy. At that time I went through what they called Field Medical School. This was more specifically serving with troops in the field. Things we had to do with these troops—not only in combat but also in rear echelon areas—setting up mess halls, toilet facilities, physical exams, all of this nature. After going through this Field Medical School, then I transferred from Camp Pendleton in California to the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division in Hawaii. Now, while there with the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, we went through some further training. They were regrouping—coming back from a tour of duty at Saipan and Tinian and

so forth. There were quite a few other Navy Corpsmen that joined me at that time.

Then, I think the date was exactly—I am quite sure about it—December 31, New Year's Eve almost—we went aboard ship in the island where we were located—Maui. We didn't know it at the time, but we were preparing for the invasion of Iwo Jima. We were onboard ship for a month and a half until the middle of February. The date, depending upon where you were at the time, was either the seventeenth or the eighteenth, depending on which side of the line you were on. My outfit—the 23<sup>rd</sup> Marines—we were not a reserve outfit, we were second. I am trying to think of the exact word, we were part of the invasion, but we weren't the first line, we were the second group. I was with a battalion aid station and luckily for me I was only there a couple of days when I got my Purple Heart. What some of the fellas went through, I'm glad I didn't have to go through it. But I was evacuated after being wounded and I went aboard a hospital ship that took us to Guam where we were supposed to pick up transportation from Guam to Pearl Harbor. When we got there, though, we found out that Pearl Harbor—the hospital—was filled up. They put us on a transport ship and took us back to the States. And of course we didn't do any crying when we found out we had to go back to the States—back to San Francisco. And then from San Francisco we were transferred to various hospitals in the State. I was transferred to the Camp Lejeune Marine Base where I went through several operations and also had a chance to go home on leave from the hospital.

After that time, when I was discharged from the hospital, I was transferred to Norfolk, Virginia again where I served duty for several months at the Fleet Service School which was as good a duty as you could get because at that Fleet Service School there was Baker's School and things of that nature. They practiced on you doing their baking. It was very good. [Laughs] That is where I was discharged in December of 1945.

When I got out of the service, I stayed in the inactive reserves for a while, and then transferred to the active reserves. When I was transferred to the active reserves I was transferred to what they called the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion at the old Syracuse Airport. There were about ten of us Navy Hospital Corpsmen there and around 500 Marine Reserves. I picked the wrong time to transfer to the active reserves because in August of 1950 we were all activated. I think it was the 20<sup>th</sup> of August—we had a reserve drill on a Sunday and that's when they handed us our orders to report back the next morning for active duty. And we were on active duty at the Old Syracuse Airport. And I believe it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of September we left Syracuse—two trainloads for the west coast. I got to the west coast—at that time by the way my wife and I had a boy, just a year old—I was informed that they were going to keep me there at Camp Pendleton as an instructor at the Field Medical School they had there, which sounded good. So I sent for my wife and my oldest

son and they came to California. The bad news, though, is that while they were on the plane I heard that I was leaving the States and going to Korea.

In fact they were in California for two weeks and two days when I went aboard ship in San Diego and I went to Japan. It was quite a hectic trip over through the North Pacific because it was rough at that time, but we got to Japan and went through some further training there. In fact, some of the Marines that were with us went out on a rifle range. It was the first time they had ever shot a rifle. Here these were reserves that were called back in and I was helping them learn how to fire a rifle because I had done it when I was at Camp Pendleton during WWII. Finally on November the 4<sup>th</sup> we went aboard ship to go to Japan. Well I got a kick out of it because the Gunnery Sergeant in charge of us, I said to him, "Gunny, I'll see you, I'm going home." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "November the 4<sup>th</sup> my enlistment is up. Good bye." He said, "I have news for you." Of course, it was at that time the President had extended us all here and I knew it too, but I got to kid this guy a little bit.

But I didn't go home. I went aboard ship and we went to Wonsan in Korea. The Corpsmen—there was, as I say, about forty of us Navy Corpsmen. They issued us all, I think it was, twenty rounds of ammunition for our carbines. They put us on a train of supplies going up to Hamhŭng, Hŭngnam area. We were supposed to be guards. I don't know how many of us knew how to really fire a weapon. At that time they were having trouble with guerrillas who were raiding some of these trains. But they saw so many troops and they didn't know how good we were, but so many troops were on board this train, they didn't bother us. Then we joined the Navy Corpsmen. We joined the medical battalion at Hamhŭng. Then they split us up into different groups. Well I was assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Marines. That was another auspicious day, November the 10<sup>th</sup>. Every place I went—the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, the 5<sup>th</sup> Marines, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the Company—all had Marine birthday cake and they wanted to know, "Doc, do you want a piece of cake?" Well I won't repeat here what I told them they could do with their cake. [Laughs] Because I had to kid these Marines a little bit. But I joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon of Easy Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines. They call it Echo Company now but in those days it was Easy Company.

From there, we went up to the Koto-ri Hagaru-ri area. Thanksgiving Day my outfit was on a hill just outside of the Chosin Reservoir outside of Hagaru-ri. The following Monday, the date was November 27, they pulled us down off the hill and there was an Army outfit that relieved us. I should know it but I can't tell you which one it was. We passed through the 7<sup>th</sup> Marines. At that time I saw a fellow from Mattydale just right outside here who was one of the Navy Corpsman with 7<sup>th</sup> Marines—he was alongside the road. Dick Hall. Dick Hall is deceased by the way now. That was the last time I saw Dick—when we were passing through the 7<sup>th</sup> Marines. My company went to a place just outside of Yudam-ni. I always

liked to say that name. I always told students in school, "I'm not swearing, this is the name of the city." We set up a place they called Easy Alley, Easy Company, as a form of defense. When we were doing this late in the afternoon, we had what they call friendly fire come in. Our weapons company was zeroing in their borders and they dropped WP—white phosphorus—almost in the middle of our area. Nobody got hit luckily. And of course they were told to adjust their weapons a little bit, which they did. Then we set up, so along in the afternoon our Lieutenant yelled, "I'm hit," and he's lying on the ground. And the Captain yelled over, "You are not." They had a little rivalry going on who was going to get out of Korea first. Then there was the brigade when they landed at Inchon and the Lieutenant yelled, "No, I'm not." The other Corpsman on the ground said, "Yes, he was hit. A sniper got him in the leg." They evacuated him out at that time. Our Platoon Sergeant took over then. His name was Bogar Manerio and he had a big red beard. By the way, the Gunnery Sergeant had a big black beard. Both these fellas were from the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and had been in Guadalcanal. I'll tell you, that night was when the Chinese hit us and I was glad these old timers were with us. These fellas knew what they were doing. I can remember the Gunnery Sergeant trooping the line at night in the dark. You didn't know who was where. When he came up near me he'd say, "Who's that?" and I'd tell him, "It's Doc." He'd say, "Okay, Doc." That night the other Navy Corpsman was wounded and we had one Marine that was killed that night. In fact he got the Silver Star for what he did that night. We had that one killed, the Lieutenant was wounded and also the other Corpsman. The next morning about half of our platoon couldn't walk. Frostbite—it went down to between thirty and fifty below zero that night. The issue we had—what they call shoepacks. They were like an overshoe and they had a felt liner in the bottom of them. I had two pairs of socks on besides these and your feet would sweat so much you'd take them off to change your socks and the socks would come off inside the boots, frozen inside. That's how cold it got. I think I heard that since that time they changed it. I don't know, I can't tell you. I know I was after the men all the time. I carried extra socks inside my shirt drying out. In fact, you might be interested. I had a pair of summer underwear on, a pair of long johns—winter underwear— a pair of Marine green trousers, Marine utilities, a parka with a hood on it, a helmet and a pair of gloves.

It's funny, I went to a reunion a year ago in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and one of the fellas at the reunion said to me, "Hey, Doc, you tagged me over in Korea," and I thought, "What's he talking about? I didn't remember tagging anybody over there." I don't think I really tagged him because it was so cold you couldn't write. I think I know I looked at fellas—I took care of them. I remember taking my gloves off, putting them on, taking them off, putting them on. You couldn't put bandages on anybody or dressings on with a glove on. And also I remember one time taking care of somebody and this Marine had a pair of pearl handled matched 45's. I don't know what was wrong with him, but I remember putting

him on a truck and he handed me these pearl handled 45's. "Here Doc, you might need these. I don't anymore." Well after that time I lost those 45s—it was when we hit a road block along the way, I was taking care of somebody and I heard them call 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon out to take care of that road block. When I got up to where the road block was, the platoon was halfway up the hill, and I heard a fella—who I thought was a company runner—and he said, "Wait a minute Doc, I'll go with you." And I just threw everything off except my first aid kit and my rifle and he went up the hill with me. Well, halfway up we hit a roadblock or a [unclear] I guess it was, and just getting close to it a Chinaman came out. And this Marine that was with me shot him. I didn't even realize or see this fella. He saw him. That was my experience going on.

Go back to Yudam-ni, the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, that would be after the Chinese hit us. They had us all down in formation. They told us what we were going to do—1<sup>st</sup> Platoon and 9<sup>th</sup> Platoon went up on a hill, and we were cover for the rest of the Division. We put all the dead and the wounded on different trucks and we stayed up there until all the rest of the Division—the 5<sup>th</sup> Marines—had pulled out and then they called us down off that hill. We brought up rear guard from there going into Hagaru-ri. I can remember going into Hagaru-ri. Also before that, this frostbite was affecting everybody and an awful lot of us could hardly walk because our feet were so bad. I can remember probably every man in the outfit one time or another saying, "Doc, can I have a ride?" My answer was, "When you see me get on a truck or get in a jeep, then you can get in." But we got to Hagaru-ri and there was a perimeter of defense set up and we went through this defense perimeter and just inside was a mess hall set up where they were serving hot chow. And these fellas standing in line—I remember hearing them shake their mess gear. And they said, "Here comes the rear guard." Well our Lieutenant who we had at that time said, "Doc, do you remember that?" I talked to him a few months ago on the telephone. I said, "I remember that." Every one of these guys that couldn't walk, they walked in step, in formation. Of course I told him that they were out of step and I was the only one in step. I was kidding the Lieutenant and he chuckled on that a little bit. But we were told also we could go through the mess hall and get some hot chow. It was probably powdered eggs. I don't even remember now but I am quite sure it was powdered eggs and probably some corned beef hash or something like that. But it was hot chow and we'd been on rations for I don't know how many days before that. We had strict orders—one time through the mess line and only one time through. Well, one time through didn't fill me up so I turned around and got back in line again, and who is standing alongside of me but the Lieutenant. [Laughs]

Then we were set up there at Hagaru-ri for a couple of nights for a perimeter defense. You know I can't remember time—there's one thing right after another. Just like these fellas that said I took care of them—well, I don't remember that. I

know it was cold. I know when we stopped somewhere and sat down I changed my socks. I had extra socks inside my shirt where I carried a can of beans. That's something else by the way. Did you ever eat can of beans—open up a C-Ration can of beans? You know how to eat it? You take a bayonet and you'd pull one bean out at a time because they are frozen solid. Some of the cans of fruit we had over there, they would thaw out inside out your shirt. If you ever take a can of beans though, and put it in a fire, be sure to poke a hole in the top of the can— otherwise the can will explode. You know when you hear a can of beans exploding everybody figures it's a hand grenade and everybody hits the deck. Eventually I remember coming down to the pass, going across the bridge that they had to rebuild, and getting down to the foot of the pass and there were trains waiting for us. They put us on trains and took us to the seaport.

And this is something—so many times we hear about what happened to civilians over in Korea. This No Gun Ri incident where supposedly many of them were killed—I don't know how many. But when we were evacuated from Hamhŭng, on board the same ships there were 100,000 Korean civilians that went with us out of North Korea and this isn't played up an awful lot. But I can remember seeing them on some of the ships.

They went down to Pusan and Masan in South Korea with us. Other than that the ship was crowded and you had two meals a day on the ship going down there. In the morning, you got in line and after you ate, you came out and the thing to do was get right back in line again because you had that long a wait before you ate supper at night. [Laughs] After that we went down near Masan. We did regroup. Replacements came in. After that we went north to different areas and I was there during the first Chinese Spring Offensive. I came back home in May of 1951. I didn't know it at the time but my mother was quite sick. I had a brother-in-law whose boss had a lot to say with the Red Cross, and they pulled some strings and that's how I came back to the States. My orders read to report back to Treasure Island for further transfer back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, When I got back there, because I had my time in overseas, they kept me there for a couple of months and then transferred me back to Brooklyn where I finally got discharged from the service. That's my time in Korea and WWII both.

**Q:** After you got out of the service, did you go back into the reserves?

**RSS:** After I got out, I stayed in the inactive reserves. In fact I was one of the first ones in Syracuse. There were several of us—our picture was in the paper when we enlisted.

**Q:** What about after Korea?

**RSS:** After Korea—no. I didn't stay in the reserves. I thought seriously about staying because of the time I had in, but I didn't tell my wife that or she'd have killed me. I'm quite sure she would have. I took a test for 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Navy Corpsman over in Korea. I passed the test. I didn't get it. I think they figured

that there's no sense in sending those grades up to the front line because they are not going to use them very long anyway. That 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Petty Officer in the Navy was the same thing as Staff NCO in the Marines which means an awful lot. But I didn't get it. I didn't stay in the reserves after that. I had close to ten years active duty and reserve time in.

**Q:** When you got back from WWII, what did you do in civilian life?

**RSS:** I worked. I had a friend who ran a grocery store and he had just bought it out from his partner and he asked me if I'd come to work for him. That's what I did—I went to work for him. And after that I did work for H.J. Heinz Company and the Keebler Biscuit Company in the grocery wholesale business—I did that. Of course about that same time I got married and we were married for two years when my oldest son was born. He was just a year old when I was called back in 1950. Yes, he was born in 1949. By the way, you might be interested in a little humorous story. They came out to California and Jim at the time had real tight curly hair and he was crawling up and down the aisle of the airplane. Who was on the airplane but Bob Hope, and Bob Hope picked up Jim and he wanted to know whose little girl this was. Well, Jim had a haircut the next morning in Los Angeles. [Laughs] I met them at the airport and took them down to a motel I had reserved for them. I had to go right back to the base. I told my wife, there's a grocery store up at the corner. There's a couple other ladies living here that you will get to meet whose husbands are with the outfit from Syracuse. I had to leave her. That was it—I had to go back. I knew it and I didn't tell her at the time but I knew I was going overseas at that time— she was there two weeks and two days.

**Q:** What sort of civilian employment did you take up when you came back from Korea?

**RSS:** Well, H. J. Heinz Company, I went back with them. They had saved the job for me. I was on the road for them doing service work and selling.

**Q:** Did you have any other children?

**RSS:** Yes, I have a daughter who I live with now. See, I started falling down about seven years ago. The government finally agreed that it's the post cold weather trauma that happened to me. I am on a pension from the government, twenty per cent on each leg. I also get ten per cent for the wound in my ear from WWII. And, I have a younger son who lives in Alexandria, Virginia who I'm planning on visiting next week when I go to North Carolina.

**Q:** Let's go back to a couple of things we talked about. I'm going to go back to WWII. Your life aboard the USS Relief—what was that like?

**RSS:** To start at the beginning, it was just like on board any other ship I would say. But when we got to the South Pacific which is really what we went down there for—the Navy has terms that they call port and starboard, and when port's on duty, starboard's off duty, half and half—the crew. I can remember in New



Caledonia and Espiritu Santo where we would go out and play baseball and maybe get a can or two of beer at the same time. Onboard ship, part of the time, I worked in the eye, ear, nose and throat clinic and did help out with some operations like tonsils and adenoids and things of that nature. I can remember helping out with an appendectomy at one time too. After that I served Ward A, a communicable disease ward. And this was something by the way; going across the Pacific we had an outbreak of mumps and measles on board ship. Of course, mumps can be a serious problem if you are eighteen, nineteen, twenty-five years of age. I think one time we had the ward full of fellows with mumps and we had the measles epidemic too. Where it came from, we don't know. But it just hit us. Probably something they picked up in Panama when they were on liberty there.

**Q:** This was a pretty big ship.

**RSS:** Oh yes, this was a big ship.

**Q:** Operating theatres, wards, clinics.

**RSS:** Right, a big mess hall and the compartments we had. By the way, we had about a dozen nurses on board, besides medical doctors. The medical doctor in charge of us, a Navy Commander—it's interesting about him, he had perpetual seasickness but he refused to take shore duty. Several other fellas, when we pulled the anchor up in Portland, Maine, right away they got seasick. Thankfully I didn't go through that. But I know one fellow from Kansas—he was so glad I guess when he got back to the States or got to shore. But, it was a complete hospital.

**Q:** Where did you berth?

**RSS:** I was at the water line way forward. In fact the portholes where we were, you could open up and you could look out and see the water there. And if it was rough weather you wouldn't leave them open. If it was calm it was a different story. Also, crossing the Pacific I remember we crossed the equator plus the meridian. They did have services on board ship where we were inducted into the Royal Order Domain of the Deep or whatever they called it at that time. When I came back to the States, by the way, the ship stayed out there. I came back on one of these small Navy aircraft carriers—the fellas on board there hadn't been indoctrinated and I helped do that. We made up some awful sick medicines in the sick bay at that time. You name it; we got it mixed together for them.

**Q:** And you said that you were only on Iwo Jima for several days before you were wounded.

**RSS:** Right.

**Q:** And you were with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Marines?

**RSS:** 23<sup>rd</sup> Marines.

**Q:** And you were working in a battalion aid station?

**RSS:** Well, when I got wounded—by the way, there were four of us. We were taking stretchers—litters—up front going up to get some wounded. The Japs were still on Mount Suribachi. You take four men with four stretchers and we stood out like a sore thumb. They started throwing mortars at us and one of them landed fairly close. One of the Corpsmen was hit in both arms and legs. One of them was knocked unconscious. I had my wound and the other Corpsmen—nothing happened to him. By the way, the first night on shore there, about dusk they closed the beach. There were no more ships coming in and we had no way of taking casualties out. So we had to do the best we could for them along the shore. They didn't dare bring any ships in because they would have had to have lights and lights would have stuck out like a sore thumb and the Japanese would have started firing at them at that time.

**Q:** What were your duties in the battalion aid station?

**RSS:** Well, at Iwo my duties—do what the doctor told me. I have given IVs—intravenous—, shots, physicals. In fact I can remember by the way, when I was with the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion, we had to go through physicals for everybody. Five hundred men and we had to draw blood tests. Most of the other fellas didn't like it. Well, my experience in the laboratory there in Charleston, South Carolina—it didn't bother me a bit. I drew probably 450 of the blood tests for the ten days we were on active duty. In the service, we get a little more leeway than some of the nurses do in hospitals sometimes. First of all, you don't have doctors in every platoon; you don't have nurses at every base either. So they gave us a little more leeway in what we did sometimes.

**Q:** We were talking about Iwo Jima—battalion aid station. Can you give us a picture of what was going on in the aid station?

**RSS:** Well, that's quite a question—pretty hectic because there were a lot of casualties. We had two medical doctors with us and there was a dentist with us too by the way. They would check to see what had to be done to the casualties when they came in. There was no lack of casualties, believe me. Where the Japanese were located on Mount Suribachi they could see everything we were doing. I know from things I've read afterwards about the Navy bombardment stuff, it didn't affect them very much because they were holed so deep. I know I talked with different fellas about what happened after I left there. They were hidden underground is what they were at, and they'd come out when nobody was looking after dark and so forth. This would be behind our lines too; they would come out. We were on the alert all the time. We had to be careful. If it was dark and you saw somebody moving, you wanted to know who they were and they better speak in good English. It was just like probably the emergency room of any hospital—a big hospital where it is busy all the time. Making sure that if somebody is bleeding, the bleeding is stopped or if they need some plasma or blood we could get it to them. Because you see now, on Iwo Jima the weather

wasn't that cold. In Korea, the weather was cold and you couldn't use any plasma—it would freeze. In fact, just the other day I was trying to think what I did for water. I don't remember having any water in my canteen up in North Korea where it was thirty below zero. I know I had these cans of fruit that were slushy like and that's where you got moisture from. I'm trying to remember this and I can't. I remember, though, when the weather got milder I know there'd always be a couple of men who'd go down and get us water or bring up some buckets of water or some cans of water or take our canteens down. But in North Korea I can't remember that.

**Q:** Well let's continue a bit with Iwo Jima. What were you thinking when you were in the aid station? Did you feel like you had been prepared for what you had to deal with? Was it a shock?

**RSS:** A shock? Yes. When can I get out of here? [Laughs] And how soon? Course, this was my first real time with combat. I wasn't happy to be there, I know that. But also, both then at Iwo and also in Korea, when you're so busy you've got things to do, you forget about what's happening. You've got to concentrate on the job that you're doing.

**Q:** So it was like you weren't even noticing? You must have seen some horrendous wounds.

**RSS:** Yes. I did see some bad wounds.

**Q:** Were you thinking about them when you treating these people?

**RSS:** We did what we could to treat them—stop the bleeding. I remember one fella—real bad—you couldn't tell he was a man. You knew he wasn't a woman because they weren't in combat then. He lost all of his private parts. In fact he died shortly after he got to the aid station. He lost so much blood.

**Q:** What do you do in a situation like that?

**RSS:** Give him some morphine to put him out of his pain.

**Q:** What must you be thinking when you are doing something like this?

**RSS:** I'm trying to think—even if I did think anything about it—you try to put it out of your mind, I guess.

**Q:** How do you go through something like that? How do you keep going? The natural reaction would be to turn away and be horrified.

**RSS:** Well you have to keep going. I didn't have too much experience with people that had mental problems. I know that all the services did from Vietnam. I have run across veterans from Vietnam in the Veterans Administration Hospital here in Syracuse. I don't remember—I know not in Iwo or Korea—anybody having a problem with drugs. We just weren't any place where we could get them. I don't know. I know I had morphine most of the time with me. And sometimes I

had these small bottles of medical brandy. I don't remember drinking any of that brandy. Maybe I did. Maybe that is what settled my nerves. [Laughs] I really can't remember on this. Somebody was telling me what to do and you were doing it and every once in a while you ducked because you heard incoming mail. You heard something hit close by. I know that I don't remember ever crawling in one of these holes that the mortars had made because I know fellas that went into them and some of them got hit afterwards too. I think you were safer just lying out on the beach.

**Q:** There wasn't really much of a place to hide on Iwo.

**RSS:** No. There's no place to hide. And I have—it was given to me at an Iwo reunion we had in Syracuse here—a little bottle of black sand and it's supposed to be sand of Iwo Jima. And, you'd walk around in that sand and you'd sink almost to your knees. Well, you know how hard it is to walk around in snow that deep; well this is a problem, too, in that sand. In fact, I noticed that they brought jeeps in and they were going to use them for ambulances. A jeep is no good in that stuff. They did lay down some track so that vehicles could drive on the tracks and a track vehicle like a tank or something like that could maneuver through some of it.

**Q:** Well that brings up a good point. You would go forward on litter parties and pick people up and bring them back to the aid station. How did you carry somebody that was wounded in that kind of sand?

**RSS:** As carefully as you could, which wasn't too careful sometimes. If they were real bad they probably had been given some morphine already at the front. What I call the front was from here to that wall down there, probably. But they were given morphine and if they were in bad pain, we'd give them some more, too.

**Q:** It must have been very physically difficult to carry anybody in those conditions.

**RSS:** It was; it was very difficult. On open ground or concrete if you're carrying somebody in a stretcher, it's hard to do; you can imagine what it would be like in the sand.

**Q:** And how did you feel as a medic? You know, the combat infantryman he's got to be up front; he does what he has to do. But as a Corpsman, did you feel like you had exposed yourself to any danger?

**RSS:** It's funny that you ask this question in a way. Looking back at what happened at different times, both WWII and Korea, so many times when the fighting is going on you have nothing to do. Just sitting, thinking, wondering what's going to happen. But when you hear that call, "Corpsman", then you've got to go. I know I had other Marines tell me that when they used to call the Corpsman, they'd say, "This guy's gotta get out, he's gonna be a target now."

**Q:** Did you think about that? All the rest of the Marines are hunkered down under fire, and the call goes out for Corpsman, you're expected...

**RSS:** That was your job.

**Q:** Did you feel a particular bond with the Marines you were working with?

**RSS:** I got along good with the Marines. There was a little rivalry also you know. Course I was a swab jockey, I was a bed pan jockey and I had a few names for them, too. You know, jarheads and leathernecks and you name it. The Captain that we had over there in Korea—he finally became Assistant Commandant. I called him and talked to him on the phone a couple of years ago. I don't know if he's still alive. I tried to get a hold of him and I can't. He asked me the same question, "How did you get along with the Marines," and I said, "Fine, Skipper." I said, "Forty jarheads and one swabee, about even odds." He's still sputtering. Four stars he made. I've got a little note from him. I sent him a roster that I had and a little notebook, and he sent me back a thank you and at the top of the stationary were four red stars.

**Q:** Well let's move ahead to after the war. You were inactive reserve, then you went active reserve. Why did you go active reserve?

**RSS:** Well my wife and I had a boy a year old. I was making the fantastic sum of \$65 a week. I think she was making about \$40 when she was working. After the boy was born, her mother helped take care of our son. The Marine reserves—they drilled one Sunday a month but they got paid two day's pay. All day it was. That was good money back in those days. I even forgot what it was we got paid then.

**Q:** We have very little information on the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion in that period. So can you tell us a little bit about what your drills were like—what would you do on a Sunday?

**RSS:** Well, the Corpsmen would go out there and we would run physicals and give shots. It was contiguous and in fact when we were activated we had to go through the whole thing again. Everybody had physicals again. Our commanding officer was a Major Case, and I'm trying to think who the second command was. I can't think of his name right now. The old airport had these old hangers and we had a place inside to go. There were a couple of different companies. I have some pictures at home, by the way, that were taken at a reunion and also one picture was taken in Japan of some of the fellas in the outfit. I just got that recently. I am planning on talking with some of the Marines—we're planning on a reunion. We are in the midst of doing it. I can't do much on it until after I get back from North Carolina. We've been together once that I can remember and that was right after we came out. I don't remember them having any tanks there. I don't think they ever got them and maybe they might have. I don't remember

**Q:** You don't remember any tanks at the old airport?

**RSS:** No. See they were just forming the outfits at that time. I don't remember. Now I've been out here to the Tank Battalion; in fact they had me out about a month ago and I gave a talk to the Marines. There was one Navy Corpsman who sat in on that, too, by the way and I got a kick out of it. I started out with the talk by saying, "You know the last time I talked to a company of Marines it was on certain health things that you fellas should know about, because I am not going to talk about that today." But I enjoyed it. I can't complain. You know, Sir, anytime I came back to the States if I walked into a bar with my Marine uniform on and my Navy insignia, some Marine would yell out, "Give Doc a drink."

**Q:** I am trying to get a better mental image, picture here. So on a typical Sunday you would go to one of these old hangers. Would you be wearing your navy blues or would you be wearing..?

**RSS:** No, I had Marine khakis. This was summertime; we were wearing khakis. I don't think they wear the full khakis anymore, by the way, because when I was out in California the Marines were wearing khaki shirts and green trousers. I think they changed their regulations.

**Q:** Yes, they did.

**RSS:** I have a picture taken—me, my wife and my oldest son—that has me in those khakis. Probably about the same time we were activated.

**Q:** So you'd go to the hanger and you would do physicals. Any kind of training?

**RSS:** I don't recall too much training as such. Of course we were all working together. We were in training. See we didn't go along with the Marines. I didn't at the time. I was working inside in the dispensary there. Some of the companies I think probably had a Marine Corpsman with them, if they went out on a problem. I don't recall that.

**Q:** And this is before they got the reserve center and the land?

**RSS:** Yes, they deactivated that the month after we were called into active duty and it was after that they came out here.

**Q:** Did you ever go to any summer camps with them?

**RSS:** No, because I wasn't with them that long.

**Q:** You got separated from the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion at Camp Pendleton?

**RSS:** We got to Camp Pendleton. Usually no matter where you are, if you're a Hospital Corpsman you're separated when you're transferred. Now I wouldn't report in to the officer of the day of the Marines. I would report in to the sick bay or the medical section and they would assign me duties there. Like when I came back from leave from Korea I went back to Treasure Island and I was at Marine barracks. But I was assigned duty at the sick bay there—help out with sick call and things of that nature. We didn't have much sick call at the Tank Battalion.

Yes, I know that we had a doctor there. And I guess probably somebody was sick on that date.

**Q:** Where did most of the members of the Tank Battalion come from?

**RSS:** Central New York. They were there from Fulton, Oswego, Auburn, Cortland, Utica.

**Q:** Were they mainly veterans or were there new kids?

**RSS:** Quite a few were veterans but there were some new kids too. In fact did I mention when we were in Japan, some of these fellas had never fired a rifle before. I remember going out on the rifle range there and that was the first time they ever shot a carbine or an M1.

**Q:** Do you know what became of the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion? Did they go to Korea?

**RSS:** Not as a Tank Battalion. They were split up when they went to California. Some of them went to AmTracs, some of them went to tanks, some of them went to infantry. It was all different directions. From what I was reading recently—I didn't realize it—some of the fellas from the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank were on the Inchon Landing. They must have sent them airmail over to Korea. I heard that just recently and I didn't believe it at first. Well, we were activated in August. Probably some of these fellas had been in before. They were called up right away. I think that is what happened.

**Q:** Basically they used them as personnel replacements.

**RSS:** Yes. See, when the Marine Division landed at Inchon it wasn't a Division, it was a Brigade. When MacArthur asked for them they were a Brigade. In fact my first mail that I sent to my wife, my return address was 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Brigade. But after we got to Japan, it changed to Division. They built it up enough,

**Q:** Do you keep up with guys from the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion?

**RSS:** A few of them, yes. As I say, this next week I am going to Jacksonville, North Carolina. It's a reunion of Easy Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines that were in Korea. I went to one reunion about a year and half ago in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They had a reunion last year in St. Louis but I didn't go to that reunion. A fellow that I went to Harrisburg with, he went to it. Now he's not going to this one. In fact this fellow, he was a Marine and we went to Harrisburg together. And he said to me, "Doc, something's bothering me." I said, "What?" He said, "One of my legs." So we got to the hotel and he said, "Feel my legs." Well one leg was warm and one leg was cold. I said, "You better see a doctor as soon as you get back to Syracuse." Well, they wound up amputating that leg after he got back. He won't go this time. He's on an oxygen tank now too. But we're all getting older. Yes, I am very active with the Korean War Vets of Central New York. In fact, I am the Adjutant which is a fancy name for secretary. You name the veterans outfit and I belong to it. I'm a life member of the VFW, a life

member of the Military of the Purple Heart, a life member of the Disabled American Veterans, member of the American Legion and a few others—the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division Association. I belong to them all, I don't know why.

**Q:** Let's jump ahead to Chosin Reservoir. It was just about Thanksgiving that the Chinese hit you.

**RSS:** Thanksgiving Day. I think Thanksgiving was the 24<sup>th</sup> of November that year, if I recall. We were set up on the east side of the Chosin Reservoir. The 5<sup>th</sup> Marines. In fact, Thanksgiving Day, half of the outfit went down to a mess hall that was set up where we had turkey and dressing, you name it. We had a Thanksgiving Dinner. We went back up and relieved them and the other half went back down there. It was the following Monday that we were relieved by an Army outfit and then we passed through the 7<sup>th</sup> Marines going into the village of Yudam-ni. It was starting to really get cold then. In fact when we first when up to the reservoir, we didn't have these shoepacks. We had the old boondockers—from WWII I think they were from—and they weren't the warmest thing, I'll tell you. The shoepacks we got, at least they were a little warmer, but then your feet sweat so much. Like I said you take the shoepacks off and the socks would come off frozen inside of them.

**Q:** It must have been enormously cold up there.

**RSS:** It was cold. I understand there that at that time it did get down to close to fifty below zero, and during the daytime twenty and thirty below.

**Q:** And you had problems with plasma.

**RSS:** You couldn't use it because it would freeze up. Anything liquid would freeze.

**Q:** Ever do anything like put the plasma inside your field jacket to keep it warm?

**RSS:** There wasn't room enough in there to put it. In the platoon I was with we didn't use plasma. That was back at the aid station where they might have a tent set up where they could warm it. I know that at times when it was so cold we did put a tube of morphine in our mouth. Hold it in our cheek that would keep it thawed out or my inside pocket. Like I said, inside my shirt I carried rations trying to thaw them out and socks. Socks got pretty ripe after wearing them for about a month after changing them back and forth. I stunk just as bad as everybody else alongside of me so you didn't notice it.

**Q:** What was it like in late November in a defensive position around Chosin Reservoir? At night you'd be in your foxhole.

**RSS:** Well at that time when we were first set up there, we didn't know about the Chinese. We had shelter halves set up and I know that generally shelter halves is half the tent so the two of us worked together to put shelter halves up. And we did have sleeping bags. I remember along the way coming out of the Chosin



Reservoir—if we had a chance to stop I would put my feet inside the sleeping bag up to my waist. I never got in any deeper than that because you might have to get out in a hurry. There were fellows that didn't get out in time that were killed in their sleeping bags. But as far as set up, we didn't know the Chinese were there. In fact in stuff that I've read since then so many intelligence officers had known about this and were reporting it—they were picking up Chinese prisoners—but I don't remember ever being sent down to the line as far as I know.

**Q:** How did things change after the Chinese were involved?

**RSS:** Well, of course we were in combat continuously then. We were supposedly completely surrounded. When we were sent up on the hill there that morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> and told to bring up rear guard and watch the Division out, I can remember at the time saying, "What are you doing here? You went through too much of this five-six years ago. What are you doing here?" Then I thought, "Bringing up rear guard is going to be the worst place to be," but you know the fighting was in the front of us all the time. The guys on the point were doing the fighting. We were bringing up rear guard. Why the Chinese didn't attack little sections of the rear I don't know. They goofed. They had to do that. When we left the village of Hagaru-ri, we weren't rear guard anymore. We were sort of in-between. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment had fought their way up the pass and I think probably the 7<sup>th</sup> fell in behind us then. I'm trying to recall. I think this is what happened.

**Q:** You almost didn't make it out. There was one point where the Chinese had blown the bridge.

**RSS:** Right, we heard the bridge had been blown. There was discussion of whether they were going to go up over the high ground, or what they were going to do. Then they dropped those sections of the bridge. That must have been quite an engineering feat to drop those bridges where they needed them and not down over the pass. I think one of the spans did get lost, as I recall.

**Q:** It did and the remaining spans weren't enough to quite get over the gap. There was an officer who was able to figure out...

**RSS:** I can remember walking across that bridge.

**Q:** What the Army Engineer Officer had to do was actually build a wooden ramp large enough to connect it because the three spans that were left...

**RSS:** I'm glad I wasn't one of the fellows driving those trucks or the tanks going over that because they had to be in just a certain spot.

**Q:** Then you finally made it down to Wonsan.

**RSS:** No, not Wonsan, down Hamhŭng. You see, we didn't walk all the way down. We got down to the foot of the pass. There was a rail then and they put us

on cattle cars. They took us over to the seaport. I can never remember if it's Hamhŭng or Hŭngnam.

**Q:** Hamhŭng. Later on you were back in the line when the Chinese First Counteroffensive took place?

**RSS:** Yes, we went from Hamhŭng down to Pusan where they re-grouped and then we moved north again. Just about 50 years ago this time—Thanksgiving Day will be the

same exact day this year as 1951. I remember going out on a maneuver—raining like today—and coming back to that shelter half soaking wet. I had a can of heat and I lit that and I put a can of rations on there to warm it up and crawled inside my sleeping bag soaking wet just to warm up a little.

**Q:** What was it like when the Chinese attacked again?

**RSS:** We weren't set up like they were on all sides of us. There was a line and they were in front of us—it was combat—there was firing going on back and forth. They didn't overrun us at that time. We were lucky.

**Q:** When you look back on it all, both WWII and Korea—your time in the service—is there something in particular that stands out in your memory?

**RSS:** Well I think one of the things that really stands out is that day I stood up at the top of the hill at Yudam-ni and said, "What am I doing here?" But I look back and I say, "Three times overseas." I've got two sons that never had to go in the service and I am sort of thankful for that.

**Q:** Do you think there is a connection—because you went they didn't have to?

**RSS:** I don't think there's any connection—they were just at the right age they were. The oldest one, he was in college at the time of Vietnam. The youngest one, Vietnam was over with.

**Q:** Did you have any feelings at the time that Korea was like the forgotten war?

**RSS:** I don't think we ever referred to it as that. I know we wondered why we were there. I don't think things were explained to us like they've done since then, but I look back and I say, "Korea, this is it. We stop here. That's it. No more." I'm glad we did that.

**Q:** You mean in terms of the Communists?

**RSS:** Yes.

**Q:** So in retrospect you feel it was important for us to be there?

**RSS:** Yes, I think it was very important. By the way, you might be interested in this—our Korean War Vets—we attended church service at the Korean Presbyterian Church several years ago. Where I attend church, where my wife and I were married, where I attend occasionally now, Onondaga Hill Methodist

Church, they have a Korean pastor. The service is at 9:30 in English and at 11:00 they have services in Korean. They have a Korean group that attends church there too. And I have a niece who adopted three Korean girls.

**Q:** Interesting how things all come together. I know you talk to school groups about your experiences. Anything that we haven't covered that you might want to talk about because someday school children will probably be viewing this? Any final thoughts?

**RSS:** I am glad that I could do what I did.