

**Herbert Altshuler  
Veteran**

**Mark Ostrander  
Interviewer**

**January, 2009  
Hudson Falls, New York**

**HA:** I was sworn in Orlando, Florida. And then Parris Island for boot camp.

**Q:** What year did you enter the war?

**HA:** Well, let's see, my papers show I went in at four twenty-nine forty-three. So that was April 29, 1943. And I went to Parris Island and went through boot camp training there. And then, because of the fact that I had some specific training, I went up to Camp Lejeune, where they put me into a class for surveying because I had been doing surveying in Florida. So they had this course of about 15 guys who took the course, and there was a lieutenant who gave it, who was an engineer. And when it was over, they awarded, rather they were given different stripes. I think they gave out about five PFC stripes and a couple of corporal stripes and one sergeant stripe.

And I was very fortunate, I became a sergeant after going to survey school in Camp Lejeune. And because I was a sergeant, they assigned me into the engineering battalion to be in charge of recruits that were coming in for engineering training. This was part of the engineering training group at Camp Lejeune. And I think it was every eight weeks or so, I got a new lieutenant and a new corporal and a new platoon of recruits. And I was kind of their mother, to keep them all together. I slept in my own room in the barracks, and they had one wing, and I was in charge of them 24 hours a day. And what I did was, besides getting them out in the morning, giving them physical training and marching them to meals, or to the mess hall, I marched them to these different classes. Each week they would have another specialty, one might be heavy equipment, one might be demolition. Although I had no expertise in these areas, I learned a great deal by just sitting in and marching these guys around. And it was quite an experience. And I did that for quite a while. And it was very enlightening and very good because, you know, when you're teaching and training [it's] a heck of a good opportunity for yourself to become stronger and better, whatever you do.

**Q:** So were you anxious to go to war, or did you really not want to go?

**HA:** Well, actually when I first got to Florida, I was in a rooming house--a boarding house--with a bunch of guys. We'd eat breakfast together, about maybe fifteen guys and they would all get up and go to work. I went to Tampa U[niversity] and I was taking a survey course, and I was there when Pearl Harbor

was bombed. And I think that was in December seventh [of] forty-one. Half of those guys got up and went and signed up right then and there, right after it was [attacked]. And I went to work and I was there. But, you know, soon I was going to get drafted, and I didn't want to get drafted, so I decided the better thing to do would be to—

**Q:** sign up?

**HA:** make it worthwhile. And I wanted to become a Marine, if I was going to do it, I was going to do it all the way and so I went and signed up. At that time, you know, it's very different, the attitude of the public and the people and the environment. You know, it was a world war, they were fighting in Europe, and then we went into the war. Not only did you feel patriotic, but you really felt you wanted to do your share, because all of us were, even if you weren't in service, you were all committed to this process of winning the war.

**Q:** So, when you first found out that you were going to Iwo Jima, what were your first reactions?

**HA:** Well, you know, what happened was, after I had done this training duty in Camp Lejeune, they apparently were preparing--they prepare way beforehand--for personnel. So, I was shipped from Lejeune. I boarded a troop ship at San Diego and then went up and went to San Francisco, we were docked in the bay there waiting for a convoy. And we took a convoy from there to Hawaii, and that's where I joined the 4th Marine Division. And at that time, again, being a sergeant--it's very funny--once you get a rank especially, you can be anything in the Marine Corps as far as specialty is concerned, but when it comes to doing stuff, you just do it, stand watch, board ship, the sergeant of arms.

And at Camp Lejeune, I was part of the--actually, there was a group being formed to bring reserves in behind and I had a platoon of people that I took care of--but I stood guard. I remember the New Year's Eve before--it was either Christmas or New Year's Eve--before we went to Iwo [Jima], before we boarded, they let everyone out of the brig. Just everybody on that island that was locked up--for minor things, of course. I don't think [unclear] would have been released--but they let everybody out of the brig. And that night I was sergeant of the guard. And it was funny because the place went wild, and then we shipped off, and I, again, being a sergeant, I can remember lying in a cot on that boat, going over and reading my platoon's mail. That's one of the things they'd give you to do, censor your own platoon's mail! And I was very acclimated. I had no anxiety about it. I knew my...I felt very confident. I knew I was doing my job. And I don't remember being anxious at all. In fact, I can remember before we left Maui, and that's where the 4th [unclear] Division was, we were given things like the procedures of hitting the beach, where the flags would be, the colors, how you performed, where you went. And I remember having my platoon--which was a reserve platoon--and giving them instructions. I remember a commanding officer coming by, he says, "that's what they should be doing". And, you know, that gave you a great deal of

confidence to know that you were doing the right thing. And so I felt very, very confident. Not gung ho, but just knowing to do what you had to do.

But, you know, when the moment comes, I can remember coming into Iwo [Jima] aboard ship and seeing for the first time, walking by and seeing all these television sets--[I had] never saw television before--of pictures of the island itself. And I remember that morning when light came up and I came up on deck, there was an armada of ships as far as you could see--as far as you could see around the horizon just all the way around--you saw nothing but ships. And you saw these battleships laying in, bomb after bomb after bomb. All the stuff was being thrown at you. You couldn't possibly think, how could anybody be living on this little island when you approached it?

I went in on D Day plus one. And I remember the first night I was still aboard ship, and they brought some casualties back. And I remember some of them didn't make it. And that night we pulled out for a little ways and we had a ceremony aboard that ship where they buried these guys at sea. And that was the first time the reality of what the hell was happening struck me. And the next day, when we loaded to go in, one of the guys slipped on a net, and one of the boats that were being lowered just crushed him. So now I saw two people die right before we went ashore.

And when you hit the shore, what you do is you get down on these nets and you get into these small landing craft and they circle around, and when they get their time to take you in, they take you in. And Iwo [Jima] was nothing but black volcanic ash. And when you hit the beach, you sunk in over your ankles and went up. And of course, our instructions were--at that time--to take my platoon up as far as I could and disperse them. And that's what we did. And we found holes that were there or we made holes. And I remember the first night that I was ashore and this thing--a recon with rockets on the back of it--pulled up right behind me and let go of all of the rockets. And I said, this is the end of me. Because they let their rockets go and they moved off. And so I knew that I was registered if they wanted to, but nothing happened.

And that's what these Japanese were in, they were on both sides of Suribachi and on the hill. And they were just laying in these mortars, large mortars that went... So you had to be lucky. And that is when I was scared. [Both laugh]. When that happened, I was very scared. I can remember lying there and thinking of all the things I hadn't done as a young kid, and all the things I had hoped to do and just might not have yet had the opportunity.

And then you went asleep--I fell asleep--when I got up in the morning, our platoon went, got up, and there was an officer with a checkboard, and he took each one of their names--he had the names--and assigned them where they were going. And a lieutenant brought them up. But when he got to me, [laughing] there was a vacancy--there was a hole--for a tech sergeant who was surveying at

the regimental headquarters. And so I got sent from there directly to regimental headquarters where I joined the surveying group that did the triangulation for the 155 artillery. And then the rest of it was easy for me. The rest, you know, having lived through just that, which was just scary as hell, I then had a very safe place to be. And we were right underneath that first airstrip in the middle.

And the next thing I really can remember--because it was only a month that we were on that island [Iwo Jima]--the thing that impressed me--now that I look back--the scary thing that happened was the guys I knew in that platoon who were the best, they got killed. And the guys that didn't care as much about doing their job--they were doing their job, but they weren't as well trained--they survived. So that's another scary thing that I always remember, that it's a very unfair type of thing to go through. But you do it and you do what you're trained to do. You know, in boot camp, one of the things they do is they take a young man, they give him a rifle and they give him a bayonet, and they run them through courses and have them shout as they stab things at these poles with bags. And after a while, you know, it's the thing to do. So, I look back at it as it wasn't a nice thing, even though I myself felt confident, I went through all the training, I felt I had a good experience--other than that one month on that island [Iwo Jima]--things were not bad for me.

But the other thing that I always remember is that the day or two before we left the island, before we [went] back on that ship, they had services. They dedicated the cemetery on Iwo [Jima]. And I remember sitting up on a hill, looking down, and there was a flagpole. And they had around the flagpole all the dogs that they were burying. These dogs worked with the forward observers to take messengers back. And those dogs that didn't make it were buried around that flagpole--and then off to the side--I remember seeing heavy equipment where they plowed and just laid out bodies. And you can see bodies laid out as far as you want to look. And then you realize that it was not fun and games, and these are the guys that were left behind. And when I got aboard ship, the very thing I remember being amazed at was fresh bread [Both laugh] and the smell of it, and being able to take a shower. Because while you're there, you know, you go in with K rations and C rations, its survival food, that's what it amounts to.

But I got back, and the 4th Marine Division was sent back to the States. But I was only in one operation, so I didn't have enough points to go back to the States. So they sent me out to Okinawa to join a reserve group there that sent me to join the 6th Marine Division in China.

I went to Tsingtao, China, which was on the Yellow Sea. And one of the things that I remember very clearly about that was as we approached the harbor--we were in the harbor, as we approached our anchorage--here were all these little boats to greet us. And I looked out and saw all these little boats greeting us, and I said, "Isn't that marvelous?" It's welcoming. I looked at it as a welcoming group. And then I shortly found out that all they did was follow the boats behind to pick

up the garbage. They were picking up garbage because they had nothing else to eat. I can remember going in Shaolin, coming out of the mess hall, they would have the fifty-five-gallon cans full of hot water, soap water, you washed your gear as you went down and out. It was fenced with a wire fence. I always remember these people hanging on the fence hoping that you would throw them some garbage--something that you were discarding, rather could discard--so China was quite a shock to me.

The 6th Marine Division actually went into Tsingtao. This was after the Japanese surrendered, to occupy the Japanese portion. And it was an interesting experience--other than...and I could tell you stories of what has happened, happened to me, that were interesting--but other than that one period of time, my experience in service was constructive, interesting, and I actually enjoyed it. It was not a hardship other than--because I felt I was doing what I was supposed to do and having a good time and was well trained--other than that one month that was scary and rough, the rest was being a big grown up boy scout [laughter].

**Q:** You talked about the volcanic ash at Iwo Jima. How much more difficult did that make it to take your platoon forward?

**HA:** Well, if you can try to just recall running on a beach of sand, well, this was a few times more difficult than that. Although you didn't run, you tread your way up and you got down [imitating heavy stomping motion]. It was scary in the sense that you know you're in the midst of something, you know that you're in danger, and you're hearing this stuff come by and you just do what you have to do. You just do it almost automatically what you've been trained to do, and you just get yourself up there.

**Q:** When you first came on Iwo Jima, what was your objective? To just keep pushing forward or...?

**HA:** My own assignment was to take this platoon and get them as far up as I could--because we were not on a front line. The front lines were to the side of us-- We came up, we just brought back, and now here we are and we're going to be assigned now to those people that were up on the lines. And fortunately for me, other than that night that scared me with the rockets and the mortars, other than that, I was observing things from a very comfortable place.

**Q:** So you felt very--

**HA:** I was never... other than that 24 hours or so, the first day experience of D Day and D Day one, other than those two days, it was not difficult for me and I was not under any stress at all.

**Q:** So after the 24 hours, you just...not laid back but--

**HA:** Oh, no, no, no. We were doing our job. I mean, the triangle, what they do... what you're doing with the artillery--with surveying--what you're doing is correcting distances and spots and elevations for the artillery from a given safe point, basically. So if you have to be there, it's a good place to be.

**Q:** Yeah, better than actually--

**HA:** being up there trying to get through bullets--

**Q:** So you were very fortunate--

**HA:** Yes, I was--

**Q:** to be given that job.

**HA:** Right, right. And so there are many, many things I could tell you of experiences that were not fighting the war, but living the war. I mean, in China, I used to go to services all the time because it was the only place you could go where people didn't use dirty words and slang and cussing and, you know how fellas talk when they're together--not that there's anything wrong with that--but it's nice to get to hear a language spoken that isn't...

And I was fortunate in being Jewish. I met the chaplain, who then introduced a bunch of us to a congregation in Tsingtao, China, that came from Harbin, Russia, that came down from the north and had lived in a community, and was treated as a community by the Japanese, were given their rations and so forth. They wanted to have a little building of their own--somebody had a storefront or something--and they converted it into a temple. And I, at that time, when I was in Tsingtao, China, I was--because of the fact that I came out of the engineers and was a surveyor--was assigned to the Seabees who were doing the survey at the airfield in Tsingtao, China. And so I had access to the Seabees, and I actually did the carpentry of the interior of the space for them. And the guys back at the shop built things for me, and I built this interior for this congregation. And it was very rewarding, and it was one of the great experiences that I had had there. And Tsingtao was interesting, too--that's where Tsingtao beer is, you might have seen the Chinese beer they advertise here--and it had an old racetrack. And I remember going with some of these civilians...[Interview tape cuts off]