Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Harry Pearce. Today is December 11, 2003 and it’s approximately 8:07 AM Central Standard Time. We’re again in Hanover, Kansas in Mr. Pearce’s home. Let’s pick up where we left off yesterday. You were arriving via Coast Guard ship going across the Pacific arriving at Iwo Jima. We talked about some larger issues. Let’s talk about the trip over and pick up from there.

Harry Pearce: The trip over was uneventful. Weather conditions were good. The morning of the D-day for Iwo the heavy ships at sea, destroyers, cruisers, battlewagons all cut loose on the island with their firepower. Two hundred and some airplanes were bombing and strafing. There wasn’t anything on the surface to hit. We found out later that everything was underground. The Japanese general in charge of the defense of the island had done a marvelous job of putting everything underground, out of sight and complete firepower of every square inch of the island. No matter wherever they were attacked they could bring firepower upon that point. These things of course we didn’t know. All our photographs revealed that it was an island with a volcano at one end and bare and two airstrips finished and one being completed. But there were no houses, no buildings, no anything to see. On the morning of the D-day we got up at four o’clock and we had our normal condemned breakfast of steak and eggs, all you could eat. Your last meal so-to-speak before you hit the beach.

RV: What kind of preparations did you make the night before knowing that you were going to be invading the next day?

HP: Usual preparations. We were issued ammunition and grenades, whatever it was we were going to take to shore with us. The night is long, the guys sit and talk to one another about home, about family. While they’re talking they’re sitting there sharpening their ka-bar knives and sharpening their bayonets. Of course I think running through everybody’s mind was, ‘Am I going to get it this time? How many are going to be killed? How bad is the battle going to be?’

RV: Do you talk about that?
HP: Yes, but we don’t know. So you’re second-guessing. All you can do is draw from your previous experiences. You know one thing, if there’s anybody there, then somebody’s going to shoot at you. So this is a foregone conclusion. As I’ve said before I think we become fatalistic. ‘If I get it this time I get it, if I don’t get it I’ll make it.’ The appointed hour, around four o’clock we went down into the hold and got into the tractors, amphibious tractors to make the attack. They eventually dropped the bow doors and dropped the ramp. The tractors went out and started their rendezvous. It was at this point that we noticed the seas were becoming rough. Where we had been doing all this jungle fighting with the jungle we now realized there wasn’t any jungle there. So that was all in vain. Where we had been issued summer clothing it was cold enough now that I had on in addition to my dungarees I had one khaki shirt, two wool shirts, a combat jacket and I had stuck some newspapers in between for some insulation. That’s how cold it was.

RV: What was the weather like in general? Was it sunny?

HP: No it was cloudy, cold, dreary and damp. We just weren’t ready for that. I don’t think any of us realized how far north we had moved from the Southwest Pacific. We did our usual rendezvousing and finally the Navy boats got us all in a skirmish line, headed in for the beach and our rocket propelled grenades took off and blanketed the island. Airplanes were strafing it. As we approached the beach I noticed one low flying airplane got shot out with anti-aircraft fire. He just folded up and down he went in pieces. So they shot him out of the air.

RV: Harry, what are you thinking about as you’re in the Higgins boat and you’re going toward the beach? What are you thinking?

HP: Even though it’s like a washtub, like a bathtub and your body is down below the water line. But if you’re looking up, you’ve got your head out you’re like a pumpkin. You could be shot. Most everybody is kneeling in the vessel. There’s one man in charge of each vessel. As you approach the island you’ve got one man that’s firing either a .30 or .50 caliber machine gun at the beach in front of him. Nothing in particular, you can’t see anything, you just fire. Finally the order is given, ‘Fix bayonets.’ So you pull your bayonets out of their sheath and you fix them on your rifle. Those who have rifles that you can use a bayonet on. In the one way, a .30 caliber carbine you couldn’t put a bayonet on. We had men who carried a .30 caliber carbines. So after your bayonets are
fixed everybody’s kneeling and you’re staying in that position until you’re up on the beach.

RV: So you cant really see the beach at all?
HP: No, you don’t want to see.
RV: Right.
HP: Because you will be getting fire from the beach area. In our case, we weren’t getting so much machine gun fire as it was artillery and mortar fire in the water as we approached the beach. Of course when you don’t get hit it blows water all over you. But if you do get hit, well it’s bye-bye. Anyway you roll up on the beach and when the tractor stops, you bail out. These amphibious tractors that we had this time were different from the others in that they had a rear entrance, much like the bow on an LST. They had a ramp in the back that we’d let down. You could walk out this ramp and go around behind the vehicle. If there was any machine gun fire coming at you, you could hide behind the vehicle for a minute before you ran. But it was much easier to get in and get out of with that ramp down than it was to drop over a ten-foot side. When we rolled up on the beach there was a minor amount of fire coming from every direction. The first thing I noticed when I got on the beach was the sand on the other islands had been compacted. This sand was loose. You could stand still and sink in up above your ankles. So it wasn’t quicksand, but it was so soft and pliable and it was black. It wasn’t like the white sand beaches that we’d been on other places. It was just as black as it could be. The next thing was when you start to walk the more you struggled the deeper you went into it. It was absolutely impossible to run. You couldn’t run in it. The next thing I noticed was that there was as series of terraces that rose six to ten feet. Each terrace was that much higher than the one previously. As you climbed over these terraces then you had a little flat area and then you had another terrace. At the base of each terrace looking out, under the sand were buried structures, concrete pillboxes and what have you. As you stuck your head up over that terrace that machine guns had interlocking fire. So that meant that each terrace we had to knock these concreter pillboxes, buried boxes out. Which we did.

RV: Now were you’re in the first wave?
HP: Yes, in the first wave.
RV: In the first wave.
HP: Our company was special so we got the first wave again.
RV: Was Sam with you?
HP: Sir?
RV: Was Sam with you?
HP: No.
RV: He had been taken out of the line?
HP: Sam had been just before we shipped out. Sam was ill so they sent him back to the States so he wasn’t with us. But he trained with us prior, just prior to leaving.
RV: What was your main objective personally? You went out the back of the boat of the tractor, you came around. Did you try to just get down and get cover or did you try to get up on one of the terraces?
HP: Well, I went up over the first terrace until I realized we were being shot at. From then on it was hunt and peck. You looked before you moved and you hoped after you moved that they weren’t going to hit you. One of the problems was the interlocking mortar and artillery fire. They had something there that we hadn’t seen before. They would give an overhead burst of yellow picric acid smoke. Wherever on the island their artillery and mortars were they would concentrate their fire on this picric acid. There were five rounds fired, four in a square pattern and the fifth round would come right down the middle in between the four. So whenever you saw a burst of picric acid if it was over your head you better get ready, because here they’re coming. Sure enough there would be five rounds come in. There was so much of this that there was no place to hide. You couldn’t dig a foxhole because as you dug the sand it would fall right back in on you. It was impossible to dig in. There was more sand than you could shovel. These buried pill boxes at the foot of each terrace would interlock and fire and caused a lot of problem. We knocked them out and moved up to them.
RV: How’d you knock them out?
HP: With bazookas and flamethrowers and concentrated machine gun fire. We knocked them out and moved on only to find them reoccupied behind us, which meant the guys that were facing them now couldn’t shoot because we were on the other side. It caused a lot of problems. What we had to do was back up to where we had been, look in
these damn pillboxes and send a man inside. What we found inside were walls coming
towards the center and it would be divided in three or four sections. You throw a grenade
in there or you shoot satchel charge off in there, you killed the man just in that. Like a
wedge of a pie you got to those guys right there. But behind the wall were other fellows.
That was part of it. The other thing was they were interlocking. You get into one and
you could travel down the hallway to another one and travel down the hallway to another.
All this stuff was all underground. This was the first time we’d ever seen anything like
that. Kind of like cave fighting, but one cave connected to the next cave, connected to
the next one (phone rings). That’s my fax machine.

RV: Okay, so we’ll continue.

HP: Our objective for the first day was to take the airport. This was the thing that
we worked toward. We hit the beach probably eight-thirty or nine o’clock or something
like that in the morning. By ten o’clock I was within sight of the airport. The planes that
the Japs had had been caught on the airport and blown apart. They had pushed them off
the end of the runway ramps and down over the side. They just looked like a bunch of
wrecked planes. But what we didn’t know was underneath those wrecked planes were
some more pillboxes. This was camouflage over the front of them.

RV: Let me ask you a question Harry. When you were making your way toward
the airport were you traveling in groups of two or three or four or one by one?

HP: One by one. In other words you had to get up enough guts and enough nerve
to jump up knowing a machine gun was going to start shooting at you and run forward
and drop. You may only take two steps, you might get five steps, you might take ten.
But you can bet your sweet cookies that somebody was going to be shooting at you. So
your progress forward is slow.

RV: What was happening around you?

HP: Around you all the time are artillery shells or mortar shells going off. So the
guys that weren’t moving out were in fear of their lives for fear they were going to get a
direct hit. And they were. There were body parts blowing in every direction. The
amount of firepower that the Japs were delivering is just hard to imagine. But we were all
concentrated in a small area. Three thousand yards of beach and forty thousand men
laying on it.
RV: I imagine it was very loud.
HP: You couldn’t hear yourself think. You’d shout and just barely hear anybody.
RV: Do you remember what it smelled like?
HP: Well the cordite from exposure was very strong and of course there’s a lot of smoke and dust and sand blowing every direction. You just get to where one shell would hit and blow sand all over you and here’s come another one and blow. You just hoped it wouldn’t blow you. As long as you’re flat on the ground or in a depression any shell that explodes it goes off at right angle to the explosion. We found out it’s much like an inverted umbrella on the ground. When the shell goes off or the grenade goes off, it mushrooms upwards. So you can lay right along side of the thing flat and not get a piece in you. It might blow you from here to hell and back. It rolled you like a billiard ball, but you wouldn’t have anything in you. It would shake you, leave you stunned and what have you from the force of the explosion. But as far as having an arm or a leg blown off, you’d be fairly safe. If you were standing up you were a dead duck, it just cut you down.
So wherever you looked there were Marines laying face down. Eating sand, eating dirt, eating whatever to get a little lower. I was laying in a slight depression; in this depression that I was in behind me was a Marine that I don’t know who he was. Behind him was our first sergeant for the company. I heard him yell ‘Pearce, move out, you’re holding up the invasion of Iwo Jima.’ I know he was being facetious when he said it. But I turned around to see who had called my name and who was yelling. I saw it was a first sergeant and I said, ‘Are you ready to move out?’ He said, ‘Yes, I’m with you.’ So I jumped up to run forward and when I did I hadn’t taken two steps and was looking at the base of the ramp where the airplane had been pushed. I saw this Jap raise his rifle right by the wing of an airplane. He raised his rifle. If his Kentucky windage had been any good, I’d have been a dead duck. But I was bent over running forward carrying my rifle. When he shot it hit me in the right shoulder and passed clear through me, which I didn’t know. And the bullet came out of me, expanded, hit this young Marine that I don’t know who was behind me in the elbow and took his whole elbow out. It was hanging just by the tendons in the front of the forearm. I didn’t see the first sergeant. I don’t know whether he ever moved or not. But the force of the blow was like being hit by a sledgehammer. It turned me three hundred and sixty degrees in the air. Just ka-wack and
I lost my rifle. I knew I’d been hit. I can’t say that it hurt. I just knew it knocked the
hell out of me.

RV: This is in your right shoulder?

HP: Yes, but it came out below my shoulder blade in the back. I knew I’d been
hit so I can’t lie out here in the damn open where everybody can see me. I’ve got to get
somewhere. Those first two or three steps that I took I could see a shell crater in front of
me from where I was. I finally got up on my feet and I ran forward and got in this shell
crater. It was a big one. It was probably forty feet across and maybe twenty feet deep in
the sand. Well I haven’t any idea how big a bomb that one of ours had made the shell
crater. I was the only one in it. My shirt began to fill up with blood. I took all these
papers out that I was using for insulation and finally got down to the skin and I could see
the blood coming out of my shoulder. What I didn’t know it was coming out my back at
the same time.

RV: What did it feel like? Did it hurt?

HP: No.

RV: Nothing?

HP: I could just feel warm blood running down your belly. Boy I pushed on my
neck, tried to shut the blood off and that didn’t work. Pushed under my armpit and that
didn’t work. I couldn’t think of anything else to do so I stuck my index finger of my left
hand in the hole, to plug it off. That’s the position that I was in. Lying on my back on
the side of the crater. I was probably oh, six feet from the bottom of the crater or
something like that. Suddenly I heard a Jap holler, ‘Bonzai.’ I looked up and here comes
this guy with a rifle with a damn bayonet over the edge of the shell crater headed right for
me and I knew I was in bad shape because I didn’t have a rifle.

RV: Just one?

HP: One Jap.

RV: One Jap.

HP: I think it was the one that probably shot me because when he shot I’m sure
he saw me drop. If he was watching me I’m sure he saw me get up and run so he knew
that I was still alive. But he had his bayonet fixed. Their bayonets were six or eight
inches longer than what ours were. Normally they kept them as sharp as a razor blade.
The ones that I handled I know were extremely sharp. I had as I said before in the
interview I had a government issue .45 caliber pistol that I traded a Jap nambu pistol for.
I had it on my right hip. When he came over the edge of the hole and hollered (dog
barks). Rusty (the dog). Came over the edge of the hole hollering ‘bonzai.’ I
immediately took my finger out of the hole and reached down and pulled the .45. Before
we hit the beach I had put a round in the chamber so I knew all I had to do was pull the
hammer back and it was ready to go. By the time, I got it out of the holster and get it in
my left hand, he was on me. He stuck me with a bayonet and it went in the front of me
here at the base of my neck where my windpipe is. Then he pulled it out and I realized I
thought he was going to stick me in the face is what I thought. So I grabbed my right
arm, which I couldn’t use and I pulled it up over my face in front of me this way.
RV: What did it feel like when he stuck you the first time? Did you feel it?
HP: Yes, it kind of burned I guess you might say. I was aware that I was stuck.
It’s not like sticking yourself with a needle. It’s just a little sharper I guess you might
say. Anyway he jabbed the second time and it went into my forearm of my right arm
here in between the two bones of my arm.
RV: Okay, you’re showing me the scar now.
GP: Went in between the two bones in my forearm of my right arm.
RV: This is your right arm that you had over your face?
HP: Over my face.
RV: So he was going for your face.
HP: Yes, but this time the bayonet got tangled up between the two bones of the
forearm and he couldn’t extract the bayonet. That gave me time enough to reach down
and get the .45 again. He got loose and then the third jab went in at an angle from my
chin, came out underneath my armpit. He tore out this big muscle here in the front of
your arm.
RV: So it was a slashing motion?
HP: Yes.
RV: Kind of right to left across your chest. You’ve shown me the scar of that as
well.
HP: Then he turned and started crawling back up and then he turned and started crawling back up out of this shell crater.

RV: He thought he had killed you?

HP: Yes. Of course blood was flying every direction. I had the .45 in my left hand. I just reached up and pulled the trigger on the damn thing and the bullet went in the base of his helmet. It took the whole top of his head off in just one bang. He just rolled slowly down the sand, down the incline back to the bottom of the shell crater.

RV: Harry, when this guy was first coming at you, what did he look like? Did you focus on his face or on the bayonet?

HP: No just more of an outline. I knew it was Jap from his outline, his helmet that he had on. The way his legs were bandaged around the ankles with what they call their leggings and those split toed shoes that they wore. So I was aware it was a Jap, but as far as who he was or the color of his eyes I wasn’t looking at that. I just knew I had problems coming and coming fast.

RV: Was he yelling at you as he jabbed you those three times?

HP: Yes, there was no question what he was going to do?

RV: Was he yelling though?

HP: What?

RV: Was he yelling at you?

HP: Just the one time he hollered ‘bonzai.’ That’s the same thing as saying, ‘Hoorah.’ So this was anytime they made a charge they would holler, ‘Bonzai.’

RV: Did you say anything to him?

HP: Nope. Conversation was not on my mind.

RV: I didn’t know if you had yelled at him or he yelled at you.

HP: No, no yelling, no conversation. I say there wasn’t. I may have said something but you know if there was I was probably swearing and I knew that I was bleeding to death. But after that I had lost so much blood that my vision was beginning to fade. I knew I was dying. There wasn’t any question about it, I was on my way. I couldn’t stop the bleeding. Suddenly I heard a noise coming from above and behind me. A man came in the shell crater with me. He was a corpsman and his name was Zimmerman. He was a corpsman out of our company. I don’t know how he got there; I
don’t know why he got there. I wasn’t yelling for a corpsman and I didn’t hear anybody
else yelling for a corpsman. There wasn’t anybody else in the hole with me except for
the dead Jap. I’ll never know where he came from. I’ve always said it was an act of
providence. Anyway he came to me and he said, ‘Sarge, you’re pretty well cut.’ I said,
‘Yes, am I dying?’ He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘Well, how come I can’t see you?’ ‘Well,’ he
said, ‘you’re losing a little blood.’ He got out his sulfur powder, which was about all we
had in those days, and he got out some clamps. He stuck those damn clamps in, closed
the wounds up on the front and poured sulfur powder all over them and laid some big
bandages on me. In the meantime I couldn’t see him at all. I asked him again if I was
dying he said, ‘Hell no, you’re not dying. You’re too goddamn mean to die.’ The reason
for that remark was he was in the headquarters platoon that I had charge of on Maui and
he was one man in the platoon that never got up for roll call in the morning. He was
Navy personnel and he didn’t think that he had to get up for roll call even though he was
attached to the Marines. So if I rolled him out of his cot one time, I guess I rolled him
out a hundred times on the cold pavement in the morning. And he disliked me. He didn’t
care for me one damn bit. But as things work out, here he was patching me up and
saving my life. I was so convinced that I was dying I asked him if he would do me a
favor. He said, ‘Anything.’ I said, ‘In my pack you’ll find a Marines prayer book that
had been sent to me by my wife.’ I said, ‘Would you get that out and read me the 23rd
Psalm?’ I asked him again, ‘Are you sure I’m not dying?’ Because I couldn’t see
anything. I couldn’t see outlines, I couldn’t see anything.

RV: Were you in any kind of pain?
HP: If I was in pain I didn’t notice it. I went numb I guess would be the word.
RV: So he actually in the middle of the battle got out the Bible and read you the
23rd Psalm?
HP: Yes.
RV: In this shell crater?
HP: Yes, in the shell crater, yes. He reached out and he patted me on the face. I
remember that. He said, ‘I don’t know how,’ but he said, ‘If there’s any damn way of a
man living, you’re going to make it.’ And he left. I found out afterward that later that
day he got blown all apart. There wasn’t enough left of him they said to pick up with a
spoon. He gave me I don’t know three or four shots of morphine. It was just a question of minutes before that morphine began to take effect. I lost consciousness I guess, I passed out. This was about between ten and eleven o’clock in the morning. I was out then until late in the afternoon. I’m going to say four maybe five o’clock, something like that. What I’m about to say, I don’t think anybody but me will ever believe. Wherever I was, mentally, physically what have you I heard a voice very strong, very clear and the voice said, ‘Harry, rise up and leave this terrible place.’ Twice. I believe that I opened my eyes, I’m not sure. Even though I opened my eyes I know now that I had a poncho over me and it was impossible to see out beyond this poncho. But in my mental state I imagined that I saw a figure standing above me in the air with arm outstretched, dressed in grey commanding me.

RV: Grey robes?

HP: Yes, grey robes and barefooted.

RV: What did the face? Could you make out a face?

HP: Just an oval shaped face. No features, just an oval shaped face.

RV: Any light or anything?

HP: No.

RV: Just a person?

HP: Just a body suspended in air.

RV: And you had a poncho over you?

HP: I immediately at that point came to. I had the feeling of being smothered. I reached up with my left hand over my face and I scratched something and it was a poncho. I finally pulled this poncho down and it had been all covered with sand. Beside me was my rifle stuck in the sand with my helmet on it. This was the mark of a dead Marine.

RV: They thought you were dead?

HP: Yes. On my right probably two feet from me was a live Marine and his eyes were as big as teacups. He said, ‘You, you, you, you’re dead.’ I said, ‘Hardly.’ He said, ‘You’re, you’re dead because the blow flies have been laying maggot eggs in your nose and your mouth and your eyes.’ He said, ‘I covered you with a poncho to keep them off of you.’ I said, ‘Well I’m not dead.’ I looked around and there were probably fifty guys
in this one crater. I had but one idea and that is one shell in the crater and there were fifty
dead guys. So I yelled out, ‘All of you that can move out get the hell out of this crater
before one shell kills us all.’ Some guy on the other side yelled out, ‘Don’t pay attention
to him. He’s been out of it all day long.’ As I said I was lying on my back looking
upwards and I saw the picric acid smoke break right over the crater and I knew what was
coming. I hollered, ‘Here they come.’ I could see four shells coming through the air,
black. They hit on the four sides of this crater and exploded and covered us all with
cordite smoke and picric acid smoke and sand. The fifth one came in and went right
down into the center of the crater. Two Marines were down there next to this dead Jap
body. They had taken their packs off and laid their rifles on them. This mortar shell
came in and broke the stock on one of the rifles, buried itself in about eighteen inches of
sand and never went off. This mortar was bigger than eighteen-inch diameter. It would
have killed every man sure as hell if it had gone off. You couldn’t count ten before all of
those that were able were gone out of that hole. They left five of us wounded in that
hole. There was the guy that had the elbow off that I told you. There was a Marine that
had a neck wound and here was myself. There was a guy with his leg off and a guy with
machine gun slugs in his belly. I looked at the motley crew and I said, ‘I’m going to tell
you guys something. I’ve had orders to get the hell off this island and I intend to do it.’ I
said, ‘Any of you that want to go with me, I’ll do my damnest to get you back to the
beach and get you off the island.’ There wasn’t anybody that said no. So the guy that
had the neck wound and I got the fellow with the leg off. His leg, his stump and been
tied up and bandaged up. It was off just right at the knee, just below. I don’t remember.
We put him between us, just stood up in broad daylight, walked out of that damn shell
 crater. The other two guys followed. All of us walking, we walked over that terrace,
walked right down the face of the next one. Walked over that terrace, walked right down
the next one. I walked in guts, I walked in brains. I stepped on pieces of bodies and what
have you. When we finally got down to the beach as far as you could see left and right
up that beach was nothing but wrecked equipment. There were tanks, there were half
tracks. There were landing craft, there were ducks, blown apart upside down. You
couldn’t get another vessel to shore. There was no way to land anybody else or get
anybody off for all the equipment. Bodies and people every direction that you looked.
What had been first aid stations, complete stations blown up with all the Marines that they had in there. I never saw so much death and destruction in my life. You could hear guys calling for help and nobody to help them. There were Marines that were half covered dead and half covered with sand. Their bodies were, there were some lying in the water, just bobbing up and down like corpses. As we hobbled down the beach we came to a duck. You know what a duck is don’t you? Four-wheel drive vehicle that’s got a propeller on the back that kind of looked like an automobile but you can take it in the water. There was a duck there with the front wheels up on the beach and the back end floating in the water. In between the front wheels was a marine lying on his face. At first I thought he was dead, and as we approached he turned his head and looked at us. He said, ‘You guys better get down. The snipers are shooting down here.’ I looked at him and said, ‘Is this your duck?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘Does it work?’ He said, ‘No it won’t run.’ I said, ‘What do you mean it won’t run?’ He said, ‘It’s just not working right.’ I said, ‘I want you to get in this damn thing I want you to fire it up. You’re going to take the five of us off this island.’ He said, ‘No mister, I ain’t going to do it.’ He said, ‘It ain’t working right.’ I said, ‘I’m going to tell you one more damn time. You’re going to take us out.’ ‘No,’ he said, ‘I’m not.’ So I pulled the .45 and I fired a round about three feet from his head. He said, ‘You wouldn’t kill a buddy would you?’ I said, ‘Get in this son of a bitch and start it and I mean now.’ So he got up, got in the thing, he kept saying over and over again, ‘It ain’t working right, it ain’t working right’. But he started it and the motor ran. Five of us got in this damn thing and we backed off of the beach. Got out about seventy-five or a hundred yards off of the beach and we started to go forward. I found out that he didn’t have a rudder. This is what was wrong with it.

RV: What could you see out on the horizon? Were there ships out there?
HP: You could see ships out. Several thousands yards off the beach you could see ships.

RV: Were they firing?
HP: What?
RV: Were they still firing?
HP: No, most like transport and LSTs.

RV: What was the weather like at this point? Was it sunny?
HP: Still rough. Still cloudy and still rough. This was between probably five and
maybe six o’clock or something like that. It was beginning to get dark. When we tried to
go forward, we couldn’t go forward. We went in a big circle. The picric acid broke
overhead and here come the mortars and the artillery shells trying to hit us. The water
was blowing all over us on one side and then the other. They weren’t getting any hits. I
think some of them came close, but didn't hit us. In the middle of all of this a Higgins
boat showed up with two young Navy boys in it. One of them jumped over on to our
vessel and tied a rope around the davit and started dragging us out to sea. We got out I
don’t know maybe another thousand yards and we took the rope loose. We transferred
out of the duck into the Higgins boat. I don’t know what ever happened to the duck, they
just left it float. Then the Navy boy that was driving the Higgins boat said, ‘There’s an
LST and a barge over by Mt. Suribachi. We’ll take you over there.’ He said, ‘They’re
taking wounded.’ By the time we got there it was getting pretty black. We pulled up
along side the barge and there was Naval medical officer standing there. He told the two
boys that were driving the Higgins boat, ‘I can’t take any more.’ He said, ‘The ship is
full, the barge is full. We just don’t have room for them.’ He said, ‘Take your wounded
out to the transports.’ So we left there and headed for where the transports had been.
What we didn’t know was they got a red alert. All the ships at sea had split and left. We
wandered around out there in that ocean probably from ten thirty to a quarter to eleven
and we couldn’t find boat one. Finally one of the boys said, ‘Then we don’t have any
other choice except to take you back to the barge.’ In the mean time we were all bleeding
again and all vomiting. All of us were sick. We got back to the barge and this one Navy
boy had a .38 pistol on him and he jumped off his boat onto the barge. This same doctor
was standing there. The doctor said, ‘I can’t take’ and that’s as far as he got. This young
Navy boy shoved this .38 into his belly and said, ‘I have men that are dead, bleeding and
sick and I’m sick and I’m going to vomit.’ He puked and it went all over this doctor, it
went from his head clear down to his feet. This doctor looked at him and said, ‘Put your
pistol away swabee, you’ve made your point.’ So they took us. They gave everybody
morphine shots immediately to knock me out again. When I came to it was morning of
the second day and I was under the cook stove in the galley on the LST. Some time
during that morning they took me out and put me back on the barge and I noticed
somebody had put a little green tag in my jacket, lapel of my jacket.

RV: What was that for?

HP: I don’t know. Tag to tell you about the wounds or how sick you were or
something like that. I couldn’t read what it said. I just knew I had this big green tag
hanging on me. I went aboard a Higgins boat and they took me over to a transport and
lifted me up the side of the transport and as I got aboard this transport ship there were two
Navy corpsman standing there and they both gave me shots of morphine and knocked me
out again. When I came to I was in the portside, forward anchor room by myself on a
cot. There wasn’t anything in this but the huge, big links of the chain for the anchor that
holds the vessel. I don’t know how long I’d been there and a corpsman came in and he
said, ‘How are you feeling?’ I said, ‘Oh great. I’m ready to go to a dance in a day.’ He
said, ‘Anything you need?’ I said, ‘I’m thirsty and I’ve got to take a leak.’ He said,
‘Well I’ll get you some water.’ He said, ‘When I get back I’ll help you stand up.’ He
said, ‘Just piss all over this anchor chain. You’re not going to hurt anything.’ He
brought me a drink of water and that’s what I did. I sat back down on the cot and he said,
‘Big news today.’ I said, ‘What’s that?’ He said, ‘They just raised the flag on Mt.
Suribachi.’ I said, ‘My god, they did it fast.’ He said, ‘Well this is the fourth day.’ So I
had been out a lot longer than I thought I had. I hadn’t had anything to eat, but I finally
got a cup of water. I said, ‘I wonder if I could get you to do something for me.’ He said,
‘I’ll do anything I can gyrene.’ I said, ‘I want you to write my wife a letter.’ I knew they
were going to be sending her a telegram and I didn’t want her to worry. He said, ‘I can’t
get a letter out of here. There are censors and we just can’t do it.’ I said, ‘You write what
I tell you and we’ll try it. Because if we don’t try, we’ll never know.’ So he got up and
went somewhere and got a paper and pencil and came back and I told him, ‘You just
write that “I can’t tell you where I am but I have seen your husband. He’s been wounded,
but he’s going to make it. Thought you’d like to know” and you sign your name.’ That
letter went through. I’ve still got it in my files. An oddity happened. At the same time
my wife was working in Topeka, Kansas she was staying with her folks and she was
working for an insurance company. She ran a billing and posting machine for it. The
morning that I got hit, she had just gone to work and set down at her bill and post
machine and fainted. Just fell off her chair right on the floor. They picked her up and
took her into the women’s room. When she came to, the first thing she said is, ‘My
husband’s been hurt.’ That’s an oddity, you don’t know what. Probably that afternoon
the fourth day I was moved to the side and taken down over the side and put in another
boat and I was moved over to a hospital ship called the U.S.S. Solace. As I came up over
the side, there were nurses and doctors standing there and I got morphine shots again
which knocked me out. When I came to I was in the next top bunk. A bunk on there was
like a bunk on a transport ship. There were nothing but pieces of canvas stretched
between the metal frame and stacked five high. I was next to the top one and I don’t
know what deck, whether I was forward or aft or first deck or third deck or which deck I
was on. All I could hear was guys calling out wanting a corpsman. I heard the guy
above me call out and ask for a corpsman. There just wasn’t enough to go around. There
were just too many patients. This guy would take a leak, he finally couldn’t hold it any
longer and he cut loose. It drained through his canvas cot down onto me and drained
through me, over me and drained on the next guy went down and spilled out on the floor.
I imagine this was probably happening all over the damn vessel because there was just
not enough aides to go around for all the wounded.

RV: Did you say anything to him?

HP: No, I knew what his problem was. The boat began to move and I had no
idea what day it was or anything. That evening we pulled up off of Saipan. It was the
sixth day. So I’d gone six days with a drink of water and no food and no medical
attention other than morphine. We were unloaded and put in meat wagons and taken to
Army hospitals that had been set up on Saipan?

RV: How were you feeling? How was your shoulder and your throat?

HP: I had no use at all in my right arm, just hung like a limp piece of meat. I
don’t think there was any great deal of pain associated with the thing. I just knew that I
wasn’t well. My get up and go had laid down and went. They unloaded us in these
Quonset huts. The Navy and Army both had nurses in these Quonset huts. As I look
back I think there were probably fifty guys in cots in each Quonset hut. The front
entrance there were two entrances, one end and then the other end. But the front of the
thing was the nurse’s quarters. They always had a couple of nurses on duty and two or
three ward boys, corpsmen if you will, that took care of the wounded. Those of us that were unloaded and put in these Quonset huts and the doctors came through and looked at us. This is when they began what I called the experimental stage. They were all young docs. Some were Army, some were Navy. The first thing they decided that I needed was what they called a wrist cock-up. They put my forearm in a cast and pulled my wrist in a vertical position and tied rubber bands at the ends of my fingers back to a post in the cast, so that my fingers were extended in an upright position. I was told to try to close my fist. Well, I couldn’t even lift my damn arm, let alone close my fist. So I went around with this thing stuck up in the air. After about a week, we found out that wasn’t doing a damn thing so another doctor came in and said, ‘What we need is a half body cast.’ So they wrapped me up like damn mummy up to my neck and down to my waist. They put my whole arm and my upper torso in this damn cement cast. Another wrist cock-up on the side of that. This time the whole arm was suspended with a metal rod. Well, the first thing that began to happen, they couldn’t clean my wounds, they couldn’t doctor me at all and gangrene set in. I began to smell like a dead oyster. During this period the nurses, we always tried to have a little fun with the nurses at night. The little nurse we had on the ward, her name was Lucy Tompkins. She was from Florida. I don’t know why I remember her name, except that she must have made some kind of a hit with me. She was a night nurse. At night she’d come around and she’d slap you on the ass and stick you with a needle. The Marines were always cutting up with anybody they could. They would yell out, ‘You can’t get that big thing in me can you?’ And just scream it. There was one night she came with the biggest damn syringe I’ve ever seen in my life. Probably an inch and a half, two inches in diameter with a needled probably ten inches long, it looked like a wood gouge. You could hear a pin drop (laughs). All the Marines said was, ‘Oh, ow.’ Another fellow and I, one night we had to take a crap. They had outhouses, which were probably a hundred yards form the front of the building, right at the edge of the jungle. A man on crutches and myself went to the crapper. I stopped by the nurse’s quarter and got a five-shell flashlight off of her. The crappers were nine holers. We were setting there on our cans in the crapper and it was quiet and both of us heard sticks breaking like coming through the jungle.

RV: This is the story when the guy came in and you hit him and it killed him?
HP: Yes.
RV: Where did you hit him with the flashlight? Was it in the face?
HP: I hit him right on top of the head.
RV: This other guy hit him in the crotch?
HP: In the face.
RV: In the face.
HP: In the face as he came in the door, the two of us hit him.
RV: No charges were ever brought?
HP: No charges. The security came in and wanted to know what happened. Both
of us told our story and that was the end of it. You go all of your life regretting that you
killed somebody you didn’t need to kill but then on the other hand you’ve got to
understand and know that this is the way you stay alive. You can’t afford to take that
chance. As far as we were concerned we had determined he was Jap. Had he had his
helmet on, rather than carrying it under his arm, had he walked out of the jungle whistling
or singing ‘Yankee Doodle’ we would have been alerted that it was an American. But his
movements, his methods, his leaving his post when he shouldn’t have left it, we didn’t
know that he was on guard duty. All we knew was there were Japs on the island, that
they were still killing people. Here came one carrying his helmet. You can’t afford to
give him a chance. There was no investigation outside of what they asked us at the time.
I was eventually taken out of the half body cast and they started giving me penicillin
shots. There’s a reference in the Bible to forty days and forty nights. I had forty days
and forty nights of penicillin, every four hours in the hind end. My hind end got so hard
that the nurse couldn’t get a needle in to the meat. The needles would bend or they’d
break for all the shots that I had been given. It was called a miracle drug in those days of
what it could do. It and sulfa were the two things that we had for combat. I was
ambulatory and walking around and my wounds healed up if you will. But the muscles
in my right arm are completely useless.
RV: Even to this day?
HP: No, at that time. It was evident that they couldn’t do anymore for me out
there so they said they were going to transfer us back to Hawaii. One night just at dark
they picked a group of us up and took us down to the airport. There converted B-29s to
carry patients on the thing. All of them on stretchers. As I remember twenty-three or 
twenty-five stretchers they could carry on one of them with a nurse. They loaded this 
things full and I got left on the ground. They didn’t have room for me, which was a 
disappointment. The next night they take me down and the same damn thing happens 
again. Instead of getting first on board I was the last man. This happened five nights in a 
row. I was thoroughly convinced that I was going to have to go back to duty again and 
make one more damn island that I was going to heal up. I was not going to get to go 
home. They had a point system for rotation supposedly to go back. I had enough points 
to get ten guys back home. That didn’t work either. On a Saturday night they took me 
down and they loaded the damn plane, all except for one guy. They picked up my 
stretcher and lifted me up past the wing and ready to go into the door of the plane and a 
voice down below said, ‘Bring that patient back. We’ve got an Army lieutenant to take.’ 
They pulled my stretcher back and laid me down on the ground and here was this young 
Army lieutenant, second lieutenant standing there. There wasn’t anything wrong with 
him. I don’t know, I flipped. I got up off the stretcher and I was about a head and 
shoulders taller than this second lieutenant. I said, ‘Lieutenant, I have been out here for 
damn near fourteen months. I’ve been in four major operations. I’m about one of 
probably four or five guys that are left. I don’t know how many are left out of my 
company. The rest are all dead or wounded.’ I said, ‘I’ve been waiting all this time in 
hell to go on. If you think for one goddamn moment that I’m going to let you get on that 
plane while I stay here and go back to war again, you’ve got another think coming 
because you’re going to be one dead bastard.’ He just smiled and stepped back and he 
said, ‘Well I guess I could take the next plane.’ So they loaded me aboard the plane and 
when I got on board the nurse said, ‘You know you could be court marshaled for the way 
you talked to him.’ I said, ‘Lady, you’ve got your damn priorities mixed. You spend 
fourteen months in hell and you’ll have a different outlook.’ So we took off and we went 
to, I think it was Makin Island or Johnson. I don’t remember what. We landed one place 
and then made a second landing and we had some aircraft engine problems. I’ve got a 
mental blank because of those islands. Anyway they had a lot of gooney birds and we 
were there probably for six hours while they made engine repair. I got to see my first 
gooney bird. They’re like an albatross. Their wings are probably six to eight feet across
but their legs are little. In order to function they’ve got to have their wings out and they
catch every little breeze and they can stay aloft without flapping their wings for hours and
hours and days and days. When they go to land it’s like an airplane. They’ve got to land
coming against the wind. They set their legs out and when they hit the sand they go ass
end over appetite and their little legs won’t hold them up. When they get ready to take
off they try to run on these little legs and flap their wings and unless there’s breeze
blowing they can’t get off the ground and they go ass end over appetite and roll all over
the ground. They’re kind of funny to watch landing and taking off. Anyways we took
off and we came into Honolulu the next morning, probably at six or seven o’clock in the
morning, we made our landing there. There were five of us in this group that were
ambulatory and could walk, the rest of them were stretcher patients. When we got off the
plane there was little building along side the airplane there right at the airport that was
painted blue and had a red cross painted on the side of it. So we went in this hut and it
was like a little restaurant. There was a woman in there. She said, ‘Good morning, boys.
What would you like to eat?’ One of the Marines said, ‘Well what have you got?’ She
said, ‘We’ve got everything: ham, eggs, milk, coffee, cereals. Whatever you need we’ve
got it.’ All we had were our hospital gowns, a little ditty bag and slippers. That was all
we had to our name. So I remember I ordered ham and eggs and hot cakes, and milk, a
quart of milk. She got all this stuff together and set it up on the table and she was
standing in front of me and said, ‘That’ll be two dollars and seventy five cents.’ I said,
‘What?’ She said, ‘That’ll be two seventy-five.’ I said, ‘We’re Marines. We just came
from Iwo Jima. What you see that we have on and these little ditty bags is all we have to
our name. We don’t have any money.’ She said, ‘Well,’ and she started picking plates
up off the thing. She said, ‘No money, no food. We’re not in the business to give
everybody that comes through the door free food’ and she took all the food off the table.
Well, needless to say that went over like a turd in a punch bowl. To this day, I don’t
think the Marines contribute to the Red Cross. We went from Higgins Field; we went to
Aieha Heights Hospital, Naval Hospital. We were unloaded at the main hospital and
examined there. As I said I was ambulatory and probably three or four day later I was
transferred out of the main hospital down the hill to a Quonset hut. These were Marines
that were waiting and Navy personnel waiting to be transferred Stateside. Everybody had
to do something if you were ambulatory. They didn’t care what you did but you were
given a task, a duty to do each day. My job was to deliver messages on foot from the
Quonset hut at the bottom of the hill up to the main hospital, maybe once or twice a day
I’d carry handwritten notes and papers and what have you up there.

RV: How was your arm at this point?

HP: Still just a limp piece of meat. My fingers had completely closed up. I had a
fist that I couldn’t open. I had an elbow that I couldn’t bend and I had an arm that I
couldn’t raise. It just hung there like a broomstick.

RV: Had you made friends with anybody that you had traveled across the Pacific
with in the airplane?

HP: There were several guys in the hospital out of our company that I saw. I can
tell you about that one guy that had his lower jaw shot completely off. You can’t imagine
what that does to your face because your nose is sticking out in the front, your upper lip
is sunk back where your jawbone is. There isn’t anything, that’s all loose skin. When
you look at a person’s face you see the roof of their mouth and their tongue is like a big
piece of meat hanging in that messed up place. This guy’s name was Trembly. He came
by the bed one day where I was at the main hospital. He was writing. He couldn’t talk.
He had a nurse aid pushing him. He saw me and he wrote a little note he said, ‘Hi Sarge,
how ya doing?’ I didn’t know who it was. I didn’t even recognize him. But you don’t
tell somebody, ‘I don’t know who you are’. I let on like I knew who it was but I just
didn’t recognize him. They took his short ribs while I was there and made him a jawbone
and wired them to the back part of his jaw. They did skin grafts and from his enlistment
picture they restored his face so that he had one little hole on one side and one about the
size of your thumb on the other side, scars. They put him right back to where he looked
just exactly as he did before he was hit except for the two holes. There was another guy
that got his thumb shot off on his left hand. It was shot off between the hand and where
the thumb comes out of the hand. They cut the meat on the front of his stomach and
sewed the back part of it and made a roll. They opened the end of his wound and inserted
that in the fat of his stomach. Every week they would cut a little of that fat off and finally
closed it off. They had a piece of meat grafted on to the skin of his hand for a thumb.
They took a short rib and made a bone and wired it into his hand. So now he had a fatty
thumb with a piece of bone in it and he could move it forward and backward and up and
down but he couldn’t bend it. There were no kinks in it. He was in the bed next to me.
One day I heard him hollering, ‘Ow, ow, oh.’ I looked over and he had a pair of tweezers
in his hand. The hair from his belly started growing on his thumb. And he was pulling
the hair out so he wouldn’t have a hairy thumb. There were no nerves there but every
time he pulled one he hollered, ‘Ow.’ He ended up with what looked like a thumb with
no thumbnail on it. That’s what they did for him. So they did some miraculous things in
the hospital. I better let him back in again (referring to Rusty, the dog). As I was in the
Quonset hut down at the base of the hill there at the hospital there came a day when they
sent a team of doctors down to examine us before we were released from the hospital. It
was a young doctor and an older doctor and a couple of nurses. The younger doctor
examined me and he said, ‘You’re fit to go Stateside.’ I was standing there and the older
doctor put his stethoscope on and started listening to my shoulder. He called the young
doctor over and put on his stethoscope and made him listen and the next thing I knew
they had me in bed and had me sandbagged from head to foot and I was not to move even
an eyelash. I heard the younger doctor say to the older doctor, ‘I’m sorry I was in a
hurry. I guess I missed it.’ I didn’t know what ‘it’ was. All I knew was they had me
back in bed and sandbagged. They left and the nurse that was on the Quonset hut ward
that I was in came over and I said, ‘What gives? Why am I being sandbagged?’ She
said, ‘I can’t discuss your case with you.’ I said, ‘Well, you can tell me what the hell is
wrong with me, can’t you? I feel all right.’ She said, ‘Well, let’s just say that you have a
bruit.’ I said, ‘What’s a bruit?’ She said, ‘I can’t discuss your case with you.’

RV: B-r-u-i-t?

HP: Yeah. The next thing I knew the meat wagon showed up with six guys and
they lifted me very carefully off my bed onto a meat stretcher and then they take me up to
the main hospital and I’m sandbagged again. And the nurse up there comes by and I was
trying to be real clever and I said, ‘Can you tell me what a bruit is?’ She said, ‘Yes, it’s a
blood clot,’ and went on. That’s the first time that I knew that I had a blood clot. Later
on that day a full captain in the Navy came in. He sat down on the edge of the bed with
me and introduced himself and he said he had got his training in Boston. What’s the
hospital there?
RV: John’s Hopkins.

HP: In the John’s Hopkins hospital and he was a neurosurgeon. He said, ‘I want to discuss your case with you.’ I said, ‘Well, fine.’ He said, ‘I would like to operate on you but I have to have your permission before I do it.’ I said, ‘Why? Nobody else in the damn Navy or Army has ever asked me anything.’ He said, ‘Well, you’re on the critical list.’ I said, ‘For what?’ He said, ‘Well, you have a blood clot. Both the artery and the vein have been severed below your clavicle. We call this thing an arterial venous subclavian aneurysm. We’ve got to go in there and patch that thing up because if it moves and goes to your brain then you’re dead. You may go all your life and never move. On the other hand you can jerk your head one way or the other and you’re dead.’

RV: How did it come about? Did he tell you the cause of it?

HP: Well, it just happened in my wounds. It didn’t go in, it was just severed. Both of them were severed and this blood clot had formed at the point of junction of these two. He said, ‘I have to tell you we’ve had some others in here just like it. I’ve lost every one of them on the operating table.’ I said, ‘What’s the problem?’ He said, ‘Well, we have to machines to circulate the blood while we’re operating. They haven’t made those yet. All we can do is give you transfusions and let the blood flow. The heart beats the blood out faster than I can get it in and they died on the operating table.’ I thought to myself he was the most encouraging bastard I’d ever met in my life. It was hell if you do and hell if you don’t. If I don’t let him operate the blood clot could move to my brain and I’m dead and if I let him operate I’m going to die on the operating table. He said, ‘I can’t touch you without a signed permission from you to let me operate.’ I said, ‘Well, Doc, you’re just real cheerful. You give me a lot of hope. What makes you think that I’m going to be any different than the others you lost?’ He said, ‘Well, I reason that I haven’t been able to get enough blood in so we set up more hangers with blood and we inject more blood to you in different parts of your body while we’re doing it. We’ll just give you more at one time.’ Well, that sounded kind of reasonable. I said, ‘Well, how do you feel about it?’ He said, ‘Well, I think that’s the answer.’ I said, ‘Well, you’re the doctor. You don’t give me any choice. If you think you’ve got a whip and you’re ready to do it let’s get after its ass. Don’t waste any time.’ So they scheduled me then for the next morning for one operation. In the meantime they sent a wire to my wife telling her I
was now on the critical list, which before she had gotten a letter from a Navy boy saying that I’d been wounded, that I was all right, and now suddenly I was on the critical list, which upset her. But anyway, they started this operation in the morning and I was on the operating table seven and a half or eight hours, something like that. When I came to it was in the afternoon and there were, I don’t know, four or five nurses down at the foot of the bed I was and two or three ward boys sitting along side the bed and all of them laughing. The nurses were just as red in the face as they could be. This one Navy boy said, ‘Man, do you have a hatred for the Japanese.’ I said, ‘Oh?’ He said, ‘Yeah, you’ve been cussing for thirty minutes and you haven’t said the same damn word twice. These nurses have learned all kinds of new words.’ I went from there and eventually got to be an ambulatory patient again. During this time they were giving a lot of penicillin shots and in order to rest at night they were giving us Nembutal. I didn’t know a damn thing about drugs. I didn’t understand them then. All I knew is we cut up with the nurses every night. This one night a little short nurse we had, a night nurse we had on the ward, she cut up with the guys and she came to my bed and went right by me where normally I’d bet a penicillin shot and a Nembutal pill. I thought, ‘Well, she’s cutting up with me tonight. I’ll wait a while and get even with her.’ The lights went out and she still didn’t give me any so I got up out of bed and walked over to the nurses’ quarters and I said, ‘Did you forget me tonight?’ She said, ‘No. You’re Sergeant Pearce.’ I said, ‘Yeah. You didn’t give me a shot and you didn’t give me any Nembutal.’ She broke out the needle and gave me a shot of penicillin and I held my hand out and she said, ‘What do you want to do, shake hands?’ I said, ‘No, I want my Nembutal.’ She said, ‘You don’t get any.’ I said, ‘I get one every night.’ She said, ‘You don’t get any.’ I said, ‘You don’t understand, honey. I get one every night.’ She said, ‘No, you don’t get anymore. You’ve been taken off of it.’ I said, ‘Well, how am I going to sleep?’ She raised up on her tiptoes and she took two fingers and tapped me on the chest and said, ‘Sarge, I’m going to tell you something. When you come to me and you start fussing and raising hell with me because you didn’t get a Nembutal, you’re hooked. I’m not going to have anybody hooked on my ward. You get your ass back to bed and you wrestle, you twist, you turn, you walk, you do whatever you’ve got to do but you ain’t getting no damn Nembutal from me,’ and I didn’t get any more. And it was several nights before I got
where I could go to sleep. She was right. I was hooked on sleeping pills. Eventually I
was taken out again and put back down in the ward down below in the Quonset hut. I
was down there one day and the nurse came and she said, ‘You have a visitor.’ I said, ‘I
don’t know who it would be.’ She said, ‘All I know is he’s in the Army.’ About the time
a guy came down the Quonset hut and it was a fellow I had grown up with who I went to
grade school and high school with from Moline and he was a first lieutenant in the Army
and stationed in the Hawaiian Islands. He said, ‘I want to take you on liberty.’ I said,
‘Hell, fellow, there ain’t no damn way I can go on liberty. I don’t have any clothes. All
I’ve got is what you see on me.’ He said, ‘We’ll fix that.’ About fifteen minutes later I
had a new khaki shirt, new khaki trousers and some underwear and socks and a khaki cap
but no shoes. We didn’t have any on the base, on the hospital base. He somehow
wangled a pass for me and so he has a jeep and a driver and we get in the jeep and take
off and the first place he goes is his quartermaster corps in the Army and he goes in and
buys me by first pair of cordovan dress shoes, Marine dress shoes, and I’ve never
forgotten it because I’ve kidded him all his life about the old story of, ‘I met a man who
had to shoes and I felt bad until I saw the man that had no feet,’ and so I thanked him
over and over again for buying me my first pair of shoes. In fact, I’ve got a picture of the
two of us in my book there. But he had an Army nurse that he was dating and they’ve
since married and they’re still married to this day and they live in Topeka, Kansas. We
went on a picnic and I had forgotten what peace and solitude and picnics were like in all
this time. We sat on the beach and had a nice picnic lunch and was taken back to the
hospital and eventually I was transferred out of the hospital on a B-29 and was taken to
the U.S.

RV: How long did you spend in recovery in Honolulu?

HP: Probably from April until mid-June or the first part of July. I had a mental
blank. We flew into San Francisco and was transferred from the airport there to the
Oakland Naval Hospital in Oakland, California. They called that Oak Knoll. Then we
started a recovery program there and it appeared that again, anybody that was ambulatory
had to have some sort of a job. They had to do something. I was out walking across the
hospital grounds one day and I came to a ball diamond and there was a Navy chief
playing softball with some of the patients and he threw the softball to me and I caught in
my left hand and he looked at me and he said, ‘What’s the matter with you? Why don’t you catch it in your right hand?’ I said, ‘Well, I can’t use my right arm.’ He said, ‘Why not?’ So I told him my story and he said, ‘Well, I can fix that.’ I started laughing and I said, ‘I don’t know what you smoke but what I’m smoking doesn’t give me daydreams like that.’ He said, ‘Don’t be a smart ass. I’m the Navy chief and I’m in charge of the phys ed program here and I know what I’m talking about. These damn butchers that they’ve got here for doctors, they don’t understand the human body. If you’ll come to my place of business I’ll fix that arm of yours in nothing flat. I played along with him and the next day I went to his Quonset hut and the front part of it was just a small office with one desk in it and I couldn’t see the back part of the wall. I couldn’t see what was on the other side of the wall behind him. We talked a little bit and he told me his qualifications as a phys ed instructor. He said, ‘Now, I’m going to take you into the back of the building. If you tell anybody what you see going on back here, I’ll be hung by the balls. I’ll find you and I’ll kill you. Do you understand that?’ I said, ‘Well, I hear what you’re saying.’ He said, ‘All right, let’s go.’ We went through a door and I couldn’t believe my eyes. There were probably eight or ten guys in this back room and on the floor was a piece of canvas with sand on it and there were two guys, one with one leg off and one guy with both legs off and they were crawling with their bare stumps on this canvas with the sand on it. The guy that had one leg, I could still see the blood coming from his stump but the other guy’s stump was as hard as this tabletop and calloused from crawling on the sand. There were two or three guys that were riding kids’ tricycles that had their legs off and had their phony legs attached and over the handlebars and they were trying to pump these tricycles and make them go. There was another guy that had legs off and they had an inclined stairway with the post on both sides and he was learning how to walk up the stairway and down the stairway with his legs. There were guys that had arms off and one of them had a hook in place of his forearm and he was trying to learn how to pick up a knife, fork, and spoon and how to hold a cup with this thing. The guy looked at me and he said, ‘Can you open your fist?’ I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Well, what have you got in it?’ I said, ‘A rubber ball.’ He said, ‘What for?’ I said, ‘They gave me the rubber ball to squeeze.’ He said, ‘Assholes. That’s not your problem. You have two tendons in the wrist that control the tendons of the five fingers to close and make a
fist. You have one tendon on the back of the wrist that makes the five fingers open. Your problem is to open them, not to close them. They give you a damn ball and you squeeze it and every time you squeeze it you shorten those tendons. The dumb assholes, they’re butchers. The first thing we’ve got to do is get that hand open.’ well, it took about a week and a half or two weeks before I could open my fist on the table top. Then the next thing, he took a toothpick and once we got the hand open and the fingers laying flat he started sticking my fingers on the back of my fingers with this toothpick. ‘Can you feel that? can you feel that? can you feel that?’ and one day I began to feel it. Then we had a couple of weeks of, ‘Move your little finger left to right while it’s on the table. Now move the next finger left to right. Move the next finger left to right.’ And it took a while before we could get those fingers to move from left to right. Then it was, ‘Raise the finger off the table.’ It took another two or three weeks to do that. in the meantime I would go to the wall, I’d put two fingers on the palm of my right hand and I’d walk these fingers up and down the wall. The old boy was right. It was just a question of time, muscular exercises and concentration. And since then I have learned that there was a woman that was a Catholic sister. I want to say Theresa but that’s not the name. She used mind over matter in people with arm and let problems, used mental stimulation to make the muscles come back and I can’t think of her name. But this old boy was right. In the meantime I was assigned a doctor and this doctor had me in his office one day and he said, ‘Sergeant, we’re going to operate on you.’ I said, ‘You are?’ he said, ‘yeah. We need your permission.’ I said, ‘What do you intend to do?’ he said, ‘Well, it’s an experimental job but we believe it will work.’ I said, ‘And what are we going to do?’ he said, ‘Well, we’re going to take the tendon on the back of the wrist and we’re going to attach it to the tendons in the front of the wrist and we’re going to take the two tendons in the front of the wrist and we’re going to attach those to the back of the wrist so that you can open your wrist, your hand.’ I thought about that a minute and I said, ‘Well, to me that’s everything backwards.’ He said, ‘Oh, that’s right. When you want to pick up a cup of coffee you think about opening your hand and when you think about opening it will close. Now when you think about closing your hand your fingers will open because those tendons have been reversed.’ I said, ‘The minute you stop thinking about it what happens?’ He said, ‘Well, the cup’s going to fall on the floor.’ I said, ‘Not with this
boy.’ He said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘You are not going to experiment with me one more damn time.’ He said, ‘Don’t be such a smart ass. I have the power to see that you get a general court martial if you do not allow me to do this operation.’ I said, ‘You know something, Doc? Shoot your fucking pistol. I’ve had all of the bullshit and experimenting that one guy wants. We’re not going to play these games anymore.’ He said, ‘You’re going on report.’ I said, ‘Fine, shoot them.’ In the meantime I told this Navy chief where I was and what was happening. By that time I had been able to raise my wrist up off the table. I was able to bend my forearm and I was able to raise my whole arm but I didn’t tell this damn doc that I could do it. So they had office hours for me and there were, I don’t know, five or six other surgeons in the room plus this one doctor that had been assigned to me and the one that had been assigned to me told the other doctors what my problem was and that he had said that he wanted to operate and that I had refused to let him have the operation and he was recommending a general court martial. And the doctor in charge of the review board looked at me and he said, ‘Do you understand the charges?’ I said, ‘I certainly do.’ He said, ‘Do you understand why? You have been in the hospital.’ I don’t know how many months then. It was in the fall of the year. He said, ‘You’re unable to open your fist, you’re unable to raise your wrist, you’re unable to bend your forearm at the elbow and you’re unable to raise your whole arm. If you could do any of these things to show us some encouragement we could not have this general court martial.’ I’m sitting there and I said, ‘Well, what is it that you want me to do?’ He said, ‘Well, we’d like to see you be able to open your fist.’ I said, ‘Like this?’ And I opened my fist. He looked at me and he started to smile and he said, ‘I suppose you can raise your wrist off of the table,’ and I said, ‘Yes, like this,’ and I raised my wrist. He said, ‘Can you bend your arm at the elbow?’ I said, ‘Like this?’ He said, ‘Yes. Can you raise your whole arm?’ I said, ‘Like this? He said, ‘We can discharge you.’ This other doctor was furious. He just turned red in the face, he swore, he got up and walked out and slammed the door. Then they were setting me up to be discharged.

RV: Had you been in contact with your wife?

HP: Yes. I had taken a two-week leave and had gone back to Topeka and was going to bring her out to California. We had a little sixty-horsepower Ford, which you don’t see anymore. They were jackrabbits and we did just fine going west until we got
into Wyoming and into the Rocky Mountains and we were just west of Elk Mountain or
somewhere on Highway 80 and the bearings ground up and dropped down into the can
shaft and froze the whole damn engine one morning and we stopped in the middle of the
highway and that was it. A semi came by and he tied onto us and towed us back into a
little town. Fortunately they had a little garage there. There weren’t any sixty-
horsepower Fords in the Rocky Mountains and being wartime this guy that owned the
Ford garage he wired all over the United States trying to find parts for that little sixty-
horsepower. In the meantime we had about a two-week delay there. Well, my time was
running out as far as my leave was concerned. I got on the phone and called out to the
hospital and they gave me a two-week extension. My wife and I were living in a—

RV: A motel?

HP: A motel, and this guy that owned the Ford garage was doing everything that
he could for two strangers. One day he said, ‘We’ve finally got parts.’ I didn’t have any
money. I didn’t know how in the hell I was going to pay for these parts. I thought,
‘Well, when he hands me the bill all I can do is tell him that I haven’t got the money, that
I’ll have to pay him monthly as I get my check from the government,’ which I thought
surely he will accept, and the same thing with the gal at the motel. So he said, ‘Well,
your car’s ready,’ and he handed me the keys. I said, ‘Where’s the bill?’ He said, ‘The
bill’s paid.’ I said, ‘It can’t be paid. I haven’t paid it.’ He said, ‘I said the bill was paid.’
I said, ‘Well, who paid it?’ He said, ‘I did.’ I said, ‘Why would you pay my repair bill?’
He said, ‘Well, I haven’t said anything about it but I lost a son in the Marine Corps in
Guadalcanal. I want to do something for you in his memory.’ I said, ‘Well, you’ll never
know how much I appreciate that.’ I went to the motel and I asked the woman at the
motel for the bill and she said, ‘It’s been paid.’ I said, ‘Who paid it?’ She said, ‘The man
that owns the Ford garage.’ So we left out of there then and we managed to get through
the Rockies and through the Sierra Nevadas and got back to the hospital. When we got
back to the hospital, as I said, everybody was ambulatory and everybody had a job and
the job they had for me when I got back was I was put in charge of the Marine guard at
the hospital. It seems as though they had a few problems. The only one that I had to
answer to was a captain in charge of the hospital, a Navy captain, or the Marine General
of San Francisco. The hospital was having problems. Somebody was stealing dope out
of the nurses’ quarters, morphine and other dope, and they were bringing in too much
booze on the base. I told the captain, I said, ‘That can be solved. There’s no problem.
And I had probably twenty Marines in the security force and they were young guys right
out of boot camp so I had some on the main gate and I took two of them and we had one
ward in particular where they’d been stealing the dope and I put them in there as patients
and first thing they did was they found two Navy ward boys who were stealing the dope,
not for their own use but for sale back to Marines. So we put a stop to that. The people
coming through the gate with booze was another story because nurses’ aides, nurses, and
Navy personnel, men, were bringing their booze on. The girls were putting half pints in
their braziers and in their underwear and the men were hiding it in their jackets and inside
their socks on their legs. The young boys I had on the main gate were getting a free feel
and the nurses and nurses’ aides, they objected to it so the next thing I got was some
WAV, Navy women. They gave me six of those and I used two of them at a time on the
main gate to search the women and I got that taken care of. We told everybody when
they came through the gate if they had booze they could go across the road. They could
sit down and drink it, take it over there and bury it in somebody’s yard, but you’re not
going to bring it on the base so we stopped that. The Marine brig we had there was one
big bullpen in the lower level and behind it we had a series of steel lockers like you put
your clothes in at school. The lockers were various heights and in the front door of the
locker there was a spot with two holes cut in it where you could stick your hands through.
For an incorrigible prisoner we’d strip him down to his skivvies. If he was six foot tall
we’d put him in a five foot ten locker to where he couldn’t stand straight up and was
crammed into this thing with both hands stuck through the door and we’d put handcuffs
on the outside so he couldn’t pull his hand back in and behind we had radiators. We’d go
behind and turn the radiators open full blast and every hour we’d take them out of the
oven and we gave them what we called piss and punk. We’d give them a piss call and
give them a drink of water and put him back in. They couldn’t sleep, they couldn’t stand,
and they perspired like hell. With twenty-four hours of this they’d be crying like a kid.
‘Just let me out of this damn place and I’ll never come back.’ One of the problems that
we had was we had a post on the bachelors’ officers quarters, the BOQ, and we also had a
guard on the Navy nurses and the Navy women aide barracks. I got a call one night from
one of the women’s barracks that there was a naked man in the nurses’ barrack. We took
three loads of jeeps with Marines in it and we went over to the barracks and the barracks
had called and he wasn’t there but we caught him coming down the back stairway on
another barrack. He was naked and he was a Navy corpsman, a ward boy. He wasn’t
raping, he wasn’t bothering the girls, he just simply came in naked into the barracks. He
would sit down on the bed, pull the covers back, kiss them on the neck or on the cheek or
on the mouth which would wake them up and they’d see his private parts and see him
naked and he’d get up and go to the next bed and do it again, go through the barracks and
leave. I asked him why he did it and he said, ‘Well, it’s fun.’ We locked him up and the
Navy bounced him out two days later and I guess he was given a dishonorable discharge.
We got that taken care of. I got a call one night from the BOQ. We had one post in the
bachelors’ officers’ quarters and they had one stairway that went upstairs and the
bachelor officers were not to take women to their rooms. Apparently this big
commander, physically big, had a little Marine on there and just literally beat the hell out
him and took a broad up to his room. The Marine called him and I took the five biggest
guys I could find and we went over to find the commander. He had his door locked and I
knocked on the door and he said, ‘Who’s there?’ I said, ‘The Marine security.’ He said,
‘Go away and leave me alone.’ I said, ‘Open your door.’ He said, ‘Fuck you.’ Suddenly
that door exploded. Six Marines went inside and he decided he was going to whip the
Marine Corps. He found himself flat on the back with leg irons and his handcuffs on and
the woman was naked. We put some clothes on her and took her to the main gate and she
was persona non grate from there on and never allowed back on the base. He was pretty
well drunk. I got him up and put him in one of our favorite little lockers next to the
bullpen and turned the heat up. By morning he was bawling with tears as big around as
your thumb but he was sober and we turned him loose and he went immediately to the
commanding officer of the hospital and put us on report. I had officer hours and ten
o’clock that morning with the base commander and we gave him the full report on it. I
don’t know what, they shipped him off somewhere and the base commander
complimented me and congratulated for the way we handed the thing. He said outside of
the man’s pride being hurt he couldn’t see where there was any harm done. For one thing
he was sober and he was certain he would remember the Marine Corps brig the rest of his
life (laughs). After about a month of this I was finally transferred up the coast to Vallejo, California to the Navy base there. They had two or three buildings there that they were putting the Marines in for discharge and we had about a week, supposed week training on how to be a civilian, how to learn not to kill people. How to be nice, how not to swear anymore, all of these ‘thou shalt nots.’ The second night by ten o’clock I was in the building that had all sergeants, from sergeants on up through master gunnery sergeants. The privates, PFCs and corporal were in another barracks. The lights came on and there’s a major in the Marine Corps standing there and he called us all to attention. He said, ‘We are going down to quartermaster, you’re going to draw weapons, 782 gear.’ I said, ‘We are discharged patients. We are waiting for our final discharge out of the Marine Corps.’ He said, ‘Not right now you’re not.’ He said, ‘You’re the only ones we can lay our hands on and you’re going.’ ‘Where are we going?’ He said, ‘I’ll tell you after you get your 782 gear.’ So we go down and we draw rising guns, combat boots, leggings, helmets, cartridge belts, first aid pack, and canteen cup. They load us in six by trucks and we go up the river from Vallejo to a place called Port Chicago. Port Chicago was a naval ammunition depot. They had piers that went out in to the river where they could bring steamships in and load ammunition for shipmen in to the Pacific. The loading was done by blacks, Navy blacks, fellows in the Navy. Apparently somebody had dropped the shell and it had exploded and the ship blew up a week or so before. The blacks went on strike. They said they’d never again load any more ships. The ammunition was needed in the Pacific and it had to be loaded. They were afraid of full-scale riots so they grabbed the first Marines they could find and that was the ones at the Navy base, the group that I was in. As I said, we all had rising guns. The piers were, I’m a poor judge of distance but they were long enough to accommodate a ship on either side of the pier as it extended out into the river at an angle so it was possible to put two ships up. Then the pier itself was loaded with these explosives and was transferred from the pier into the ships hull with cargo nets. So the sea rowers would manually put the shells on the cargo nets and then they were lifted up by the cargo nets and put into the hole. The Navy would bring the men out to go to work and they were put on the pier, but they couldn’t make them work. The Marines were put on guard duty and the entrance to the pier. We were told that once they were out there, nobody left the pier. They were
allowed to go to chow at noon, brought back out at one o’clock and put on the pier, but
nobody was to leave the pier until five o’clock in the afternoon. It was a challenging post
and a shooting post.

RV: These were Navy personnel?

HP: Yes.

HP: So there’s one Marine at each of the piers. First day that I was there they
brought the Navy sea rowers out and they went out and sat down and that was it. At noon
they left. After noon they came back and went out and sat down. I didn’t have any
problems at all. That afternoon on the pier next to me there was a gunnery sergeant over
there that I had met at the Navy base where we were being discharged. I saw four blacks
get up and start walking toward them. I heard him challenge them. I heard one of the
blacks say, ‘You wouldn’t shoot a poor old black would you?’ He said, ‘I said, “Halt.”’
Return to your former position. You’re not leaving this pier.’ One of them kept on
walking. He said, ‘Are you afraid to shoot?’ He took that rising gun and he cut the wood
out in front of him on the pier and there were four streaks of black running as hard as
they could back to sit down. The captain of the guard came and he was a major, the one
that had picked us up and brought us out there. The guy was relieved of duty and another
Marine was put on and took him in and fined him a dollar a round. For every round that
he fired he was taken back to the Navy base and discharged. When the word got out that
all you had to do was shoot your weapon, you’d be fined and be released. Everybody
was looking for some reason to shoot their weapon. That night, same night as the
incident I just told you about there was nobody on the piers so the Marine guard walked
the full length of the pier, particularly at the opposite end, which was extended out in to
the river because they didn’t want any sabotage to come in from the river. So he had a
post out there, that anybody approaching within a hundred yards you challenged and shot,
they were not to get on the pier. Sometime that night, barges were being pushed up the
river against the current. There was a slight bend in the river there. The boat pushing the
barges was hard pressed to get them straightened out. So this boat comes over within a
hundred yards of the pier. The Marine on guard duty challenges the guy and he doesn’t
hear it aboard the boat. He shoots all of the damn lights out of the running boat. The
barges jackknifed and went into the piers and there was the damnest mess out there you
ever saw. They took the guy and fined him a dollar a round and released him. That
really did it. Everybody was trigger-happy then. The Navy personnel were getting
scared as hell that these gung-ho Marines, that somebody’s going to kill them. The next
night I was put on a jeep and taken inland. There are a lot of hills in that area. We came
around a hill and there was a hill all by itself there were like football lights on poles set
up. There was probably a twenty-foot high chain link fence, with barbed wire
entanglement at the top of it all around this thing, completely around it at the base and
there were two Marines with rising guns walking on the inside. Up the hill maybe a
hundred yards higher was the second fence of the same height and five Marines in there
two of them on machine guns. The rest of them, the other three walking. At the top of
the hill was a third fence. This whole thing had three rows of lights and it was just lit up
bright as day. The top of the hill, there were some crates, wooden crates up there. There
was one Marine and a dog walking. So they changed the guard and I ended up on top of
the hill with this dog. I spent the dog kicking c-ration cans and leading the dog in a
circle, round and round and round. The orders were the lower first row of guard
challenged. If the challenge was not heeded he was to shoot. The second row with five
Marines, no challenge, you just automatically fired. The top row, you kill anybody that
gets through. On the next morning when I was relieved the major came out and relieved
me and got in the jeep and I was sitting next to the major. I said, ‘This is the strangest
damn place I was ever in.’ He said, ‘What’s the matter, Sarge?’ I said, ‘What in the hell
was so goddamn important on that hill that it’s lit up all night long and everybody set to
kill anybody that comes around?’ I said, ‘There wasn’t a damn thing there but a bunch of
wooden crates.’ He said, ‘You know what was in those crates?’ I said, ‘No.’ He said,
‘Atom bombs.’

RV: Wow. When was this?

HP: This was in ’45.

RV: What month?

HP: November.

RV: Let me ask you about the end of the war. How did you feel when you heard
about the atomic bombing of Japan and the end and the surrender?
HP: I think we were all relieved that it was over with. I can’t speak for the Army and the Navy, but I can speak for the Marines that I knew. We were all worried that eventually we were going to have to take Japan proper. We knew the tenacity and the fighting spirit of the Japanese. We knew that it was going to be one hell of a fight. We knew that not hundreds, not thousands, but probably millions of people would be killed. The fact that he ordered the dropping of the atomic bomb, yes there were a lot of Japanese killed and the war ended. Thus there were a lot of lives saved. You’ve got to understand what war is. You can’t fight a war like we’re doing today with one arm tied behind you. You are never going to win a war until you bring the people of that country down to their knees. You can’t just knock their service personnel. You’ve got to bring the civilian population. You’ve got to kill the will for them to succeed which means that civilians are going to be killed. Until you get yourself mentally in that position, you get yourself physically in that position and until you actually do it, you are never going to win a war. We are never going to win a war in Afghanistan. We are never going to win a war in Iraq until we bring the people down. It isn’t the Taliban in Afghanistan; it’s the tribal leaders. You’ve got to get to the people who are causing the trouble. You wouldn’t whip the United States by knocking the Air Force down. You’ve got to get the Army, the Navy, the Marines, the Coast guards and the civilian population beat before you conquer the United States.

RV: Did we learn that lesson in World War II?

HP: Yes.

RV: Then did we somehow forget it during the Cold War?

HP: During World War II we had an expression that the Japanese and the Chinese, the Asian population has to save face. The United States never gave a damn about saving face until after World War II. Now it is how do other people, how do other nations look at us? Who gives a damn how they look at us? We had a president one time whose last name was Roosevelt. He said, ‘Walk softly and carry a big stick.’ That’s exactly what it means. You don’t have to save face with anybody. You treat people as you would like to be treated. But when you have war, you take your guns off and you win. Let the chips fall where they may. So far as Truman ordering the bombs dropped I think he deserves a medal for it, because he damn sure saved a lot of lives. The bombs
took a lot of life but we brought the population down, immediately. Not in a matter of
weeks but in a matter of days it was over with.

RV: How do you think the United States according to what you just said forgot
those lessons when we went to Southeast Asia and to Vietnam?

HP: I think the problem is political. We have three parties in the United States.
You’ve got the Independents and the Republicans and the Democrats. Political greed
will determine what your foreign policies are. Those in power suddenly we find
ourselves saving face around the world. ‘Don’t do this because it won’t look good.
Don’t put an embargo on something because another country won’t like it.’ You cannot
buy friendship. We’ve tried it for years. We give all these countries money, millions of
dollars, when it comes to vote for us and the United Nations, they vote against us. We
turn right around tomorrow and give them another billion dollars. Our foreign policies
leave much to be desired.

RV: Do you think it’s because we have not been faced with this imminent threat
that Japan and Germany gave us in the 1940s? We haven’t really seen that, except we
saw it with the Soviet Union to a point. But we haven’t seen that since 1945.

HP: I don’t know. I still think it’s political. One president will get along with
Russia. Another president will get along with China. It’s what each administration sets
out to do, their capacity and their ability to interpret the nation that they’re dealing with.
We call it information mill. Particularly in Iraq, you can’t get enough information as to
where Sadaam Hussein is and his cohorts. We know they’re there. If they keep hunting,
eventually they’re going to get him if they’re in Iraq. There’s a question in my mind as
to whether they’re even there or not. The al Quaida, all of the leaders have doubles.
Sadaam had four or five that looked just like him. So long as you’ve got doubles and the
population can’t even separate them how in the hell are the Americans going to separate
them? I think it’s a question of time. If we don’t lose track of our objective and keep
working at it, I think eventually we’re going to get him. But as to whether we’re going to
conquer the people and get them to live democratically in a new society, until the people
are brought down and they have no other hope, nothing else left we’ve got people over
there in Iraq right now that know tomorrow Sadaam Hussein’s going to be back. There’s
no question in their mind, they’re scared shitless. He’s going to come back and he’s
going to cut their head off for cooperating with the United States. Until these people are
convinced there’ll never be another Iraq like it was, we’re not going to win. So our
tactics are going to have to change. We’re going to have to do some things that aren’t
popular with the American public. And let the chips fall where they may over there.

RV: Has a lot changed in your mind since?
HP: What?
RV: Has a lot changed in your mind since 1945, ’46 and what’s happening today
with our foreign policy and the way we move throughout the world?
HP: I think our foreign policy from the inception of this country down to date
have been on again, off again. Our enemy one day is our friend a few years from now.
Our friend today is our enemy tomorrow. Again I say to me, it’s all political. It’s
whoever’s in power and what their greed is and what they want. They’re going to
determine what this country does. If we don’t want to do it, they’re going to figure out
how to draw us into it. The government is an extremely powerful organization. It’s like
an octopus. It’s got more arms reaching out around the world than you can shake a stick
at. But so long as the people in this country want to keep this country with its freedoms,
we’ll have it. But when we lose sight of our freedoms we’re going to lose them. If we
do, we’ll end up with a kingdom or with a sultan or with a ruler of some sort. We’ll be
oppressed. I don’t think we’ll ever see the day when another country will invade the
United States because that means transportation of troops across the ocean and a lot of
‘ifs’ come in to mind. I think we’re in a position where we could be attacked at any time
by missiles. Until we get a missile program, an anti-missile program, I think it’s coming.
I think it’s a matter of time probably until we’re able to shoot their missiles out of the
sky, track by radar and intercepted in space. I think it can be done and I think it will be
done.

RV: Harry, tell me about leaving the Marine Corps. What was that like for you?
You left in 1946 when you were discharged?
HP: ’45.
RV: ’45, okay. Tell me about that process.
HP: After this episode at Port Chicago we were taken back to Vallejo and to the
naval base there. We were discharged. I got a hundred and thirty-five dollars. The last
day I had my teeth examined. The dentist looked me over and he said, ‘Well your teeth
are fine. We can discharge you.’ I walked out of his office and put a stick of spearmint
chewing gum in my mouth and took about ten steps and five teeth fell apart. I felt
something hard in the gum. I took the gum out and there were my damn teeth. They had
rotted out from the inside out, no pain, no anything because I had no calcium all that
time. They were hollow, just like a hollow tree. I walked back in this dentist office and
took this chewing gum out of my mouth and laid it on the plate next to the chair. He said,
‘What’s that?’ I said, ‘These are those teeth that you just got through examining that you
said were fine.’ He looked in my mouth and he said, ‘Oh good lord.’ I said, ‘Well, what
do we do?’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I can put a little medicine on them and a cap.’ So he put a
metal cap and a little medicine on the nerves and a little metal cap on them. That’s the
way I left the Marine Corps. I took my hundred and thirty-five dollars and I took my
wife and our sixty-horsepower Ford and I got the hell out of there. I went back to Topeka
where my wife had been staying. My folks were living in Ekrose, Michigan. I take that
back. They were just outside of Ekrose at a place called Grosse Isle next to the Michigan
River.

RV: How do you spell that?
HP: Grosse, G-r-o-s-s-e I-s-l-e. Two words. Grosse Isle. There was a naval base
on Grosse Isle, naval Airbase.

RV: Is this December 1945, you’re discharged?
HP: Yes, November.

RV: In November.
HP: My father was still working for Sawea Process Company but it had been
moved into company offices as head engineer for the company. I found one of my
Marine friends living in Ekrose by the name of Dick Nyslee. Dick had a motorcycle. I
left my wife with her folks and had gone home to see my folks to try to decide what the
hell I was going to do now that I was a civilian. I got with Dick and Dick had a lot of
friends the in Ekrose. There was an Italian wedding that he wanted me to go to. It lasted
for three days. We both got pie-eyed. There was a lot of snow and ice on the ground.
Traffic was slow, snow was probably twelve or eighteen inches with a lot of drifts. I told
Dick, ‘I probably ought to go home.’ He said, ‘Well, we’ll go on the motorcycle.’ I said,
'I’m not riding that damn motorcycle with you down this highway, no way.’ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘we’ll go on the river.’ I said, ‘On the river?’ He said, ‘On the Detroit River.’ It separates the U.S. from Canada. He said, ‘It’s froze over. There’s no snow on that. It’s all blown off.’ He said, ‘All we’ll do is get down on the river and we won’t have any trouble. We’ll come right out to your folks’ backyard,’ which is what we did. Came up over the back by the time we got up to where my folks’ house was, my father was on the back porch. I got off the motorcycle, Dick left and I went in the house and my father looked at me and he said, ‘Now son, your mother and I want you to know that you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to. But I’m going to tell you something right now. You’re hell raising days are over with. The very idea that you and your drunken Marine friend would get on a motorcycle and come down the damn Detroit River on ice which could let you fall through and you drown and nobody would ever find you bothers the living hell out of me. If this is what you intend to do, get out of the house, stay out of the house and don’t come back. But your hell raising days are over with if you’re going to stay here.’

RV: What did you do?

HP: I decided I’d better find some kind of a job. So I got a job in a brass factory doing piecework. In those days the old gas stoves had a make a light handle on them. There was a bolt that went through and a nut on the end of it. My job in this brass factory was to take and make a light handle, put the bolt in it and the nut and then walk up to a machine and screwed the nut up on the bolt. I don’t remember how many thousands of these damn things a day I had to do in order just to break even. If I could do over that amount I got paid extra on my piecework. I didn’t have full use of my right arm. It was very weak and I couldn’t hold things in my hand. So it was difficult for me to hold these damn make a light handles. Every now and then one would fly out of my hand and go across the room. I couldn’t help it. That’s the way things were. They had a young, probably seventeen or eighteen year old boy that was shop foreman. He was a prankster, full of kid shit. When I would fill five or six of these trays I’d carry them down to somebody else who did something else with them. I was walking down the aisle in between machinery and this young shop foreman hid behind one of the machines and I went by. He stuck a broomstick in between my feet, which tripped me, and I went down
with all of these things spilling out all over the floor. When I came up off the floor I had blood in my eyes. I forgot that I was a civilian. I reached out and grabbed this guy by his white shop foreman coat and I lifted him off the floor and gave him a push backwards. I didn’t hit him, I pushed him. But I didn’t look to see where I was pushing him. They had what they call one-man elevators, this was probably a twelve or fifteen story building. They had a one-man elevator that you stand on this damn lift and it takes you up through the floor to the next floor, which you could step off of. When I shoved this guy backwards his white coat caught on one of the steps. I saw this guy disappear through the opening in the ceiling. I guess he couldn’t get his coat undone. It took him all the way to the top and then dumped him out. Just beat the living hell out of him going through the floors. When I saw what happened I knew I’d had it (laughs). I just turned around and walked out, turned my badge in and left. I didn’t even want to get him and the telephone rang. It was one of the people that worked for the factory. Asked me what happened and I told him. Apparently several other people had seen what had happened and they told their story. He said, ‘Well you’ve been here three or four days, where do you want us to send your check?’ Because he said, ‘You’re fired.’ I said, ‘I don’t want the damn money.’ I said, ‘You give it to that poor son of a bitch that went through the ceiling. He’s going to need it (laughs).’ So then I went to another factory and got a job in the drafting department. I’d had drafting in college. They had a lot of Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Bulgarians, working out in the machine shop. Many of them spoke no English at all. It was my job to take a blue print out to them and explain to them what they were supposed to manufacture on their lab. About a week after I was there one afternoon three guys came in the office and said, ‘We’re from the union. We would like you to join the union.’ I said, ‘No, I don’t think so.’ I said, ‘Why not?’ I said, ‘Alright, we’ll be back.’ The next day the same three came back and they started this badgering again, ‘We want you to join the union.’ My father had told me, ‘You’re going to have problems with the union. Don’t get smart ass with them or they’ll find your body floating in the damn Detroit River. These boys play for keeps.’ I said, ‘So do I.’ He said, ‘Well, I’m telling you walk softly.’ The next day these three guys come in and they start this bullshit again about joining the union and I said, ‘No, I’m not going to.’ One of them
said, ‘Well, why not?’ I said, ‘Fellow, you asked and goddamn it, I’m going to tell you.

When I was in the Marines overseas one Thanksgiving we went down to unload the ship
so that we could have turkey for Thanksgiving. We got down there and unloaded this
ship only to find out it was dried, dehydrated potatoes and the reason we didn’t get our
turkeys was some goddamn union on the West Coast was on strike and wouldn’t load
the damn turkeys that we needed out there to eat. And we were fighting for these
bastards and I don’t like the union. I didn’t like them then, I don’t like them now and I’m
not going to join your goddamn union.’ I said, ‘You understand that?’ The boss of all of
us draftsmen came running back to my desk and he said, ‘I’m going to tell you
something, wise ass.’ He said, ‘If it wasn’t for the union, the job that you’re getting paid
forty-five cents an hour for would only be drawing a quarter an hour. So you damn well
ought to join the union and thank these guys for asking you.’ I said, ‘You asshole, I’m
going to tell you something. This fucking job isn’t worth twenty-five cents an hour and
you can’t fire me because I quit when you headed back for my desk. You take this job
and jam it in your ass.’ I went outside to get in my car and all four tires had been cut, flat
as hell. That was my experience with the union. Wife had come back and we were living
with an English couple. They were I think imported from Canada but they had the old
English accent. We had a room and kitchen privileges where we could fix our own food.
They also had a school marm, a girl that taught the second grade. She was living there
and had a room and kitchen privileges. It wasn’t long before the school marm was eating
with my wife and I. We enjoyed each other’s company. On evening we were having
dinner out there and the school marm was talking about some of the kids. In her
explanation of what had happened she said, ‘And one of the little boogers did so-and-so.’
This Englishman came running out of his damn living room. ‘You don’t use that kind of
language in my house.’ We all looked at each other and I said, ‘What’s your problem,
fellow?’ He said, ‘You won’t swear in this house.’ I said, ‘Nobody’s swearing. What
are you talking about?’ He said, ‘I heard what she said.’ The teacher spoke up and said,
‘Well, I didn’t say anything.’ She said, ‘I said the little booger.’ ‘Don’t you use that
word in our house.’ Well come to find out like we learned things about the Japanese I
learned then that a booger in England is just about the worst thing you could say. You
could say, ‘Screw the Queen,’ and that’s all right but don’t say ‘booger the Queen.’ So
the school marm, she got hot underneath the collar and they had words and she moved out that night. I told my wife, ‘I can’t stand anymore of this crap.’ I said, ‘I had this stuff with the Japanese and I damn sure don’t want it with the English. I’m tired of fighting people.’ She said, ‘What are you going to do?’ I said, ‘I’m going back to college, to hell with this noise.’ So I got with my father the next day and I said, ‘Can you get me back into school?’ because all the GIs were going back to school.

RV: Right, the GI Bill had come up.

HP: My father was a graduate of Penn State College in the class of 1910. So he called Penn State, identified himself and said, ‘I have a son that’s just returned form the Marines and he wants to go to college. Can I get him in there?’ He said, ‘He’s had two years of college.’ They said, ‘No, we’re not taking any out of state students.’ So we were living in Michigan so he goes to Michigan University and Michigan State and gets the same report form both of them. ‘Just no way that we’re going to accept any out-of-state students.’ Dad said, ‘Well did you ever think of going back to Kansas State?’ I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘That looks like that’s the only place even if they’ll take you.’ He said, ‘I have a college classmate at Kansas State University.’ He said, ‘He’s head of the Agronomy Department.’ So he said, ‘I’ll call him.’ So he called him and the man he talked to said, ‘We can take him.’ But he said, ‘I’m going to tell you where we have had maybe three thousand students, we’ve now got forty-five hundred.’ He said, ‘There are no facilities, no living quarters for people. I don’t know what he’s going to do for living quarters. But as far as getting him into college, yes.’ The other thing is he said this is mid-semester. He said, ‘I don’t know whether your son would want to join school in mid-semester knowing that there’s half a year that he hasn’t had. Would he be prepared for the end of semester examination?’ My dad said, ‘I don’t know but we’ll see.’ Dad asked me and I said, ‘Hell, Pop, whatever. Let’s do it.’ So June and I took off and by the time we got to Manhattan this guy that was the head of the Agronomy Department had found us an apartment in an apartment building, which was just unheard of. So he must have pulled some strings for somebody.

RV: What month and year was this?

HP: This was in probably in January of 1946. Yes.

RV: So you got back into college?
HP: I got back into college.
RV: Did you do better this time?
HP: What?
RV: Did you do better this time?
HP: Yes. I wasn’t a straight A student but I think I had a B average. I had As in my geological subjects and a B in the others.
RV: Harry, let me ask you a couple questions about World War II and when you got back into civilian life. You’ve already talked about having these dreams. When did they start? You had some difficulty getting back into civilian life?
HP: Turn that off a minute.
RV: Okay Harry, transitioning back in to civilian life. You said you had some difficulty, when did these things start?
HP: You mean the night problem? I’d say probably a week maybe two weeks after discharge.
RV: They continued. Were they continuous every night or was this?
HP: No, maybe three to five times a week. It could happen if I took a nap at noon. It could happen then.
RV: When did they start easing off and stopping?
HP: I’d say about 1954 or 1955. That would be five or six years.
RV: Did you feel like when you got out of the Marine Corps and went back into civilian life and then back to college, etc. did you feel like your service in the Marine Corps was appreciated by the nation? Did you get a sense that what you had done in the Pacific was something that had really liberated?
HP: If it was appreciated I didn’t know it because in school there were other GIs beside myself. I wasn’t the only one.
RV: Right. Of course.
HP: In fact we outnumbered ‘the civilians.’ Probably 6:1 were returning GIs. In the Midwest there are damn few Marines. Most of them were from the East coast or West coast but there are very few through the mid portion of the United States. I know they had a recruiting table set up in Anderson Hall there at Kansas State sometime after I’d come back to college trying to recruit, get Marines to re-enlist again. I had found one
man out of our company by the name of Joe Fag going to school at the same time I did. My brother-in-law Bob Burton had come back to school. One day the three of us were going through Anderson Hall where our post office was. This desk was set up with a Marine recruiter behind it. They were offering, I don’t remember now what the sum of money was, but if you would re-enlist and attend one meeting a month you got an extra stipend of I don’t know five or ten dollars, whatever it was a month. Well, for attending one night’s meeting that wasn’t bad. But I had a medical discharge and I knew they wouldn’t take me. Joe Fag had a medical discharge and I knew they wouldn’t take him. But my brother-in-law had served his full four years. The three of us came down Anderson Hall and I punched Joe in the ribs and said, ‘Tell you what, let’s re-enlist.’ Joe said, ‘You mean it?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ My bother-in-law said, ‘You both lost your damn minds.’ We walked up to the table and talked to the guy a little bit. I said, ‘Well, I think I’ll sign up,’ and he said, ‘What kind of a discharge did you get?’ I said, ‘A medical.’ He said, ‘Fellow, I can’t take you.’ He turned to Joe and he said, ‘How about you?’ Joe said, ‘I had a medical.’ He said, ‘Well, I can’t take you either.’ He looked at my bother-in-law Bob and said, ‘How about you?’ He said, ‘I did my full four years.’ He said, ‘Did you get a medical?’ He said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Well, you can re-enlist.’ Bob started laughing and said, ‘These sick guys, too sick to get back in.’ He said, ‘I’ll just sign up and I’ll get the money.’ So he signed up and I would say three months later the Korean thing was going full force. They reached out to college and grabbed him and took him into Korea. He was with the 1st Marine division, went all the way to the Chosan Reservoir, had to fight his way out of that. When he was over there I got a letter from him and he said, ‘You son of a bitch, just wait until I get home (laughs).’

RV: Harry, looking back at your service, your own service how do you feel about it today? HP: The part that I was in, I’m proud of it. I’m proud of it. I’ve said it many times, I’m a Marine at heart and I’m going to remain one all my life. I think we did a hell of a job. I think we were needed, we were used and we did what we set out to do, which I think according to Marine Corps history is the history of the Marine Corps period.

RV: When you talk to younger people about World War II and the Pacific campaigns and just in general what do you tell them and what have you told them?
HP: Pieces and bits. Most people don’t understand. Most people aren’t really interested. They don’t give a damn about it.

RV: Why do you think that’s so?

HP: They have other interests. If you had somebody come to you and wanted to talk to you about amebeocytes, and you’re not interested in amebeocytes you’re going to turn a half ear to him. ‘Yes, I heard what you said, but I don’t know what you said.’ I think this is the way it was unless somebody had been in the service. I’ve talked to guys that were in the service that were never anywhere near the front lines and they had no interest. They had no interest in what was going on whether it was Africa, Italy or wherever it was. ‘Yes, it happened and it’s over with. Let’s get on with the show.’

RV: Do you watch movies on World War II?

HP: I have. I’ve got recordings that I have made off of the TV. I’ve got film that I’ve bought but always on the Marines. I’ve never been interested in the European War. I’m familiar with the African and the Italian invasions and the French invasion. I have a general understanding. I know who some of the leaders were and the parts that they played. Of course Eisenhower was a famous Kansan. His brother was president of Kansas State University. So the Eisenhower family I’m familiar with.

RV: Do you have any favorite movies on World War II?

HP: Not really. I have never seen one that depicted combat the way it is. I’m sure that they probably had advisors at the time they were making the movie but they were never able to convey the feeling of combat, the fear. Somebody that’s never feared for their life, how do you act fearful? I think you’ve got to have people that were there. Audie Murphy was supposed to be one of the most decorated heroes of World War II. Not meaning to detract from whatever it was that he did, I saw Marines do things that were every bit as fearful as what Audie Murphy did. Didn’t ever get recognized.

RV: Have you seen The Sands of Iwo Jima, that movie?

HP: Yes.

RV: What did you think about that?

HP: Another John Wayne picture. I think John Wayne made other pictures that were a hell of a lot better for John Wayne than that was. Saving Private Ryan, different naval pictures they would show real pictures for a portion of the movie that were actually
taken at sea. There was a series on TV a few years back and I can’t remember it now that depicted battles at sea, combat at sea, kamikaze pilots and all that. Those were real. Those were things you could sink your teeth into. To me, I appreciated those. As I told you here, last weekend here they had a picture that the service had taken of the Second Pearl Harbor ships that blew up in West Lochs, which I was never aware that they had. These have just been exhibited. I have ordered them from the History Channel to put in the files that I have because it concerned not only the invasion but the regiment and battalion company that I was in.

RV: Do you read books on World War II?
HP: I have a few.
RV: If you walked into a college classroom today or a high school classroom today what would you tell them about World War II if you were asked to speak to them about it?
HP: I look at it maybe differently because you’re a history pro. First you have to determine to me, my idea determine what these children know. What is their elevation of knowledge about the war? Number two what would you like to know? What are you concerned about World War II, the guns, souvenirs, fright, sounds of battle, places, methods of transportation? What interests you? For me to stand up and tell you my version may be the most boring damn thing you ever listened to in your life and go to sleep while I was doing it. I need to know what people want. If I have that knowledge I’m glad to impart it. But to just get up and rattle as we have done during this interview is something that you never know what the results are going to be.

RV: When you think back to your service is there a particularly brave incident that comes to mind? You mentioned that you’d seen many, many things, many Marines do things like that.
HP: Of course I think would be Iwo Jima. A horrible loss of life and mangled bodies, that’d be the first thing probably that would come to mind would be the battle of Iwo, even though I was only there a short time. The men that I talked to that went all the way through and what they went through and what I had been through before was no comparison to what they put up with. I’d say secondly would probably be the battle of Saipan. I don’t think the true story has ever been presented picture wise, television wise,
radio wise. Saipan was a long hard battle. Conditions were terrible, living in mud, mosquitoes, flies, death, caves to fight and clear out. Hills to climb that are almost vertical. Complete destruction of the Japanese military. It’s a story that I think could be filmed and made one hell of a movie out of is Saipan alone. But I don’t think outside of Iwo that there’s anything that really bugs me as much as Iwo did.

RV: What do you think about Japan today?

HP: Think of what?

RV: Japan.

HP: Of course at the close of the war, Japan took an oath that they would never again have military and never again fight another war. I think this is going to have to change. Japan has progressed probably quicker than any other nation in the world. Every move forward as fast as Japan did, they came from the samurai days into the atomic age in the matter of a few years. Economically they progressed so rapidly that it almost jars the mind when you look into it. Sooner or later they’re going to have to back to military. They can’t depend on us to defend them from now to eternity because right now North Korea’s a threat to them. More of a threat to them than it certainly is to us. The short-range missiles will hit Japan, where they don’t have a missile yet that we know of that will reach the United States. Sooner or later they’re going to have to start protecting themselves. They’re capable of doing it. But I think that they have some problems politically like any nation does. I think that people, the nation as a whole has progressed extremely rapidly. I think they’re intelligent, think they’re perfectly capable of doing anything that needs to be done in the world today. Certainly they’re on a position to help the third country nations, both financially and they have enough educated people that they could start education people to help in the education of people around the world, in the third world nations. China is the sleeping giant. There will come a day when Chain gets both legs underneath them. They’re going to walk on everybody. Hopefully they will progress enough where their mentality is going to be that they’re going to want to help people rather than to kill people. But if it goes the other way, the whole world is going to have problems. We’ll have one battle that won’t quit.

RV: Have you gained or regained your respect for the Japanese?
HP: For years after the war I still hated the Japs with a passion that wouldn’t quit. I can remember going to meetings where I went to a dinner one night with an oilman and his investors were all Japanese. It was out of twenty-some Japanese there was one that spoke English. The rest all spoke in Japanese. The oilman and myself. By the time dinner was over it was cool evening and I was ringing wet with perspiration. The palms of my hands were wet. I never spent such an uncomfortable evening in my life as I did that night. I heard them speaking Japanese and I had but one thought, kill every damn one of them. I realized then that this has to stop. These are good people, they’re not the ones that I fought. Even the ones that I fought were probably good people. I just didn’t know. So I’d say yes my attitude on the Japanese had changed. I still think there’s some resentment there, but I think I have control of it. I have no qualms now, visiting or talking with the Japs. If I met any of those that were fortunate enough to have been taken prisoners on any of the islands and they remember the islands as I do, and I met them. I see pictures of the pilots that bombed Pearl Harbor coming back to Pearl Harbor and shaking hands with the Navy guys that were aboard ship that got blown up. That they’re able to make peace, I have to assume that I have that same capacity. I don’t know that I would, but I think that I would. In time, if we put our hearts to it, we have the potential to forgive and forget. How long it takes is another question. Some of us, it may take longer than others. There again I think it’s due to the individual and what type of combat that he saw. If he was in the rear echelon area he didn’t have anything to forget. What else?

RV: Have you found some peace now about this? Do you have peace inside you about it?

HP: I think I’m at peace. I’ve talked to several Japanese and I’ve had fun. I don’t know that they were combat veterans but I had fun joking and laughing with them.

RV: What about for yourself, for your war experience? Do you have peace about it now?

HP: Oh, I think so. I can talk about it. Occasionally I’ll reminisce on something that I choke up, maybe even shed a tear on. But it has to do with individuals that I knew and loved. They’re gone and can’t be replaced, but you remember them. I don’t think it hurts to shed a tear for them. To me it’s a mark of respect. I’d like to think when I’m
gone that one of the guys will think of me and maybe shed one. We do what we have to
do in a way that we’re capable of doing it. That’s life. We had to accept what is. I
remember growing up an old man that I used to work with his favorite expression was,
‘What is, is and what ain’t, ain’t.’ I thought about that a million times how true it is.
Some facts are as they are and some are not.

RV: Well Harry, is there anything else that you’d like to discuss that we haven’t
discussed?

HP: Well I don’t know how far you’re going to take this interview.

RV: Right there’s a lot of life. We could continue.

HP: We’ve only covered the first twenty-some years of my life and I’m eighty-
some years old.

RV: About your war experiences is there anything else that you’d like to discuss?

HP: Boy, we’ve pretty well covered the war. Of course I’m sure there are a lot of
incidences that have not come to mind that will pop up tomorrow or next week or a
month from now. The mind has the capacity to file a lot of crap away. We sometimes
lose it in the file cabinet and we don’t know which file cabinet to look in, but it’s there.

You got any more questions?

RV: Not right now. Thank you, sir. This will end the interview with Harry
Pearce. Thank you very much.