



Jack Russell

United States Marine Corps

Private First Class

Pacific Theater

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Roy, UT

Interviewer:

Rick Randle

THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Rick: Will you give us your name and spell your name for us?

Jack: Jack Russell

Rick: Jack, we're honored to come into your home today and talk about your war experiences a little bit. Tell us briefly about your early life in Ogden and growing up and what you felt December 7th, 1941.

Jack: I was born in Ogden in Weber County there and I went to school there, and there I met George Wahlen and he lived about a block away from me off of Grant there and we went to school in the fifth grade. I remember that. Then we went our own way. He moved out into the country and I went into the Ogden School District, through Lewis and Ogden High School and graduated from Ogden High School in 1942, May. But on December the 7th, 1941 on the bombing of Pearl Harbor, I was in high school and I remember at Ogden High the Monday morning when they reported over the loud-speaker system about the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor and the casualties and all of the information about the war.

Rick: Was there a lot of patriotism about the war there?

Jack: Oh yes. Some of the guys went from High School and didn't even bother to graduate. And then a lot of them, as soon as they graduated and enlisted or whatever... In those days you felt like you had to. You were being shot at and your people were being killed and you had to defend your country. It isn't like going out and starting a war somewhere. This is coming to you, and you have to protect yourself, therefore they had no trouble enlisting people in the United States to serve.

Rick: And then you graduated. Tell us about your enlistment.

Jack: Well I worked at the railroad after graduation for a few months and then I got called on into the Induction Center in Salt Lake and when I went down I decided that I want to enlist in the marines instead of going into the army or tell me where I was going. I wanted to enlist. So I went into the marines and by the way, my cousin Russ Nyland enlisted me in the marines. He was a Navy Yeoman at the time in recruiting.

Rick: After you signed up, then did you go right into boot camp?

Jack: Basically they gave me a few days to straighten out my affairs and that was on the 8th of May that I enlisted in the Marine Corps and then a few days I reported to San Diego to boot camp and after that I was detailed to Mare Island, California at the naval prison there as a guard with the prison from around July to the following March. And that March is when I was transferred to Camp Pendleton.

Rick: Well who was in the prison?

Jack: General court marshalled prisoners, U.S. Marines and Navy only. These prisoners were the extreme. They were killers. In fact John Dillinger killed a guard in that prison to get out when he was in the navy... Dillinger, you know the gangster? Well he killed a guard in that prison when he was in the navy.

Rick: Did he escape?

Jack: Yes. And after that I went to Camp Pendleton and that's where I met George again when I joined the F Company, 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines. There is where I met George Wahlen my old friend from Ogden from school and we kind of ran around together a little bit, and from there we went on trainings at Camp Pendleton clear until the time where we were detached from the 5th Marine Division in July of 1944. We went over to Hawaii and it stopped at Pearl Harbor because we were on our way as back-up forces for the 3rd Marine Division, which was fighting on Guam. And as we entered on Pearl Harbor they decided to keep us there rather than send us on to Guam because Guam was

just about secured at that time, so we stayed there and we went over to the big island in Hawaii and up above in the desert area, Camp Tarawa and that's where we remained until the other two regiments joined us later—the 27th Marines later and later than that the 28th Marines. Once we were all put back together as the 5th Marine Division again, we were part of the Fleet Marine Force, which is your combat divisions of the Pacific fleet.

Rick: And then when you shipped out did you know where you were going?

Jack: No. You never know where you are going. They knew we were leaving, but they didn't know where. We did know there was bombing on the island and they kept on dropping bombs and strafing it and that on their way back from Japan and they were sending bombers off from Guam and Saipan and different islands to soften it up for our invasion which we didn't know at the time, but it was all being done. When we did embark we embarked at Heil(?) aboard ships and we went around the island about four times. We circled the Hawaiian island there to throw the Japanese off and not let them know where we were heading and finally they went on through into Guam and at Guam we took on some supplies and we refueled.

Rick: How many ships?

Jack: This was a fleet of personnel and cargo ships, destroyers and aircraft carriers and everything. We all met on Iwo Jima to soften it up and after we left Guam we went into a hurricane, which really rocked the boat real bad. In fact I fell in the mess hall and slipped clear across in the galley and food was spilt and everything. When I finally did get up I was lucky not to get hurt and I made it out.

Rick: So you didn't know you were going to Iwo. When did you find out?

Jack: After we had left Guam and were on our way there they opened the sealed orders and then while we were still aboard ship we all found out where we were going. I'd never heard of the place, but anyway we were several days yet out and during the time before

we embarked off of the ship, we were deloused and they took powder and pumped it down out clothes and they put that on us for delousing us for lice before the landing. Then when we disembarked off of the ship, we went down over the side of the cargo nets, about ninety feet, and down into the landing craft and they were coming up and down and it's night and dark and we get into their and then they pull out and they go up to a certain point and then they start to rendezvousing around in big circles, about three of them—all of these landing craft, one in back of the other. They went around and around in three big circles like that. What they're doing is getting ready and at the signal of the command ship, which the admiral is aboard, they will say when to flag the waves in. They eventually start getting the word and breaking it up and the first thing you know they line up in a solid line and they're facing their invasion and then at a given signal from the admirals command ship, he tells them to go and that's when they head on in.

Rick: On that first wave, how many of those landing craft vessels were there on Iwo?

Jack: I couldn't tell you how many were in the wave but there were a lot and each one of them carried several guys... I'd say forty-five or fifty guys.

Rick: Can you explain what was going through your mind when that landing craft stop circling and headed for shore?

Jack: Well, all you could do was hope. When we hit the shore and the front dropped down and you get out of there as soon as you can, we hadn't gone far until there was a ledge and right on top of that ledge was a dead marine lying on his face and I remember that we were catching fire at that time and I remember that I looked at that guy and I just turned sick to my stomach. I didn't know whether to heave or cry or just what. It was just something I'd never experienced and I thought, "Gee, I just can't see myself in that position." I just said that to myself and from then on I was alright and I went.

Rick: How much did those packs weight?

Jack: About seventy pounds with everything in it.

Rick: And then you had to carry a Browning automatic rifle?

Jack: Right. It weighs with a magazine in it, it's thirteen pounds and then I have a belt with twelve magazines, six pockets of two magazines each with the one in the gun and that will be the thirteen. And then we carried spare bandoliers across our shoulders this way. There were a half a dozen here and a half a dozen there, and then I have an assistant who takes over the gun. When that gun is out of operation you're hurting, so he's trained to take that over the minute something happens. If you have a casualty or anything happens, he takes it and takes the ammunition and goes on with it. When we hit the beach, I remember we had 500 and something rounds of ammunition. We were not going to be short. And there was a little Italian guy named Pergolini from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. He was the best little partner you could ask for, but he took the gun after I was whacked and that was it.

Rick: Now you had seventy pound packs and that BAR and ammunition, so you were carrying over 100 pounds? Amazing! Can you describe what a BAR was.

Jack: Me and my assistant were carrying 530 something rounds of ammunition. We each had our own pack that we had to carry which consisted of clothes and a shovel and various things we had to have, plus we had a couple of grenades each and a container of water. It was a lot of weight we had with us.

Rick: Tell us about the rifle. What kind was it?

Jack: It was a Browning Automatic Rifle, a BAR. It shoots about 600 rounds a minute. It shoots twenty rounds.... "pllllllllttttt" just like that. It will just empty all once. I took mine apart and I had mine rigged so that I could shoot a single shot. That's so it wouldn't give my position away because if I wanted to really use it, I'd flip the lever and I'd use it full automatic.

Rick: What happened the first couple of days on Iwo after you got there on the beach?

Jack: Well, the first casualty that I knew of was our top sergeant, our Gunny Sergeant Fullmer. He got hit and lost the calf of his leg and that was within the first hour or so. After that our Executive Officer was killed. He was a First Lieutenant and eventually all of the platoon leaders, which were Second Lieutenants were all killed. We lost, by casualty either killed or wounded, 100% of our officers. The only one that I know of that came out of it without being wounded was Captain Caldwell, he was our captain. The rest of them, Lieutenant Gilshannon was killed. Clark was killed and the other guy from the first platoon was also killed.

Rick: Did they appoint regular GI's to fill those positions?

Jack: Oh ya. We would step up and take the position. In fact there at the end of the operation after I had evacuated and left, one of my co-buddies in the third platoon took over the platoon as a private. He ran the platoon, which were the existing men that were brought in as relief men and everything you know. He ran that. When the operation was over with, he got a congressional medal of honor for that act of taking charge of the platoon when he was just a private. So there were actually two in my company that got that medal and that was George with the navy, our corpsman and Frank Zeigler and he was from New Jersey.

Rick: Tell us about some of the action you saw on Iwo after you got there and some of the experiences and the code word that you had with the Navajo guy and stuff like that.

Jack: We had code words that we had to use whenever you were out at night. You had to know the code word for that day and they usually had some kind of a word with an "r" in because the Japanese couldn't say "r" so we would purposely, this particular day I had in mind, we had the word "Chevrolet." Well when we were traveling up through a ravine there at night, we were at the time taking ammunition up to the front lines. We'd take

turns going to the front and the back and trade off. This time we were taking ammunition and supplies up to the front guys and it was at night and I remember the flares were shooting up in the air and they'd come down in parachutes and whenever a flare lights and you're in the middle of a step you just hold it like that and don't move an eyebrow because if you do, you give your position away. We were going up this ravine and heard three guys coming down off of the side and this BAR man that I knew, a friend of mine Murray, he challenged these guys and they didn't say the right work and he hacked them right there because they didn't say the word right.

Rick: Were they Japanese?

Jack: Oh ya. What they were doing is trying to infiltrate into our troops and that was when they'd do it, at night.

Rick: Tell us about this Navajo Code Talker.

Jack: Well I never knew it at the time, but at the time this happened there were a couple of my buddies that were in a foxhole this night and we were in for the night and we were always told not to be running around at night because that's where you get yourself shot. All of a sudden this guy came along in the dark and left a command post to give somebody the word—one of the company commanders—he jumped into this foxhole with these two guys. Well him being at night with dark complexion they had a knife right at his throat ready to slit it until they asked him the codeword and he was so scared he almost didn't say it, but he did and they let him go because they said he was a Navajo Talker. So we knew what he was then. But that's the first that I'd ever seen one. We ran into them then

Rick: Jack you had an experience of kind of trapping the Japanese. Tell us about that.

Jack: Well our company was told to charge and go up about five hundred yards to fight our way to the one position. Then when we got there, it was all pre-organized, we'd turn

around and run as fast as we could back and so everybody at the same given signal turned and ran back. Well that left the area where we were at all sighted in with artillery and mortars, which we had sighted in for distance. When they came after us, that's when all that busted loose on them. They took the bait and that's how we tricked them in other words.

Rick: Did you do that more than once?

Jack: Well, that was the main one that I can recall.

Rick: Lead us up now prior to the time that you got wounded, which was day seven.

Jack: Well I was sent with my outfit company across the island to cut it across to... we were suppose to take over the airfield and we got over there to the airfield and I recall seeing a guy with a flamethrower on his back going end over end up in the air. He had been hit apparently with a large mortar or artillery shell that hit right at his feet or something and it just blew him end over end. He was about a good half a block away and I could see him right there dangling through the air. That's one thing that was strange and hard to believe, but it did happen. Another time I was going along and I saw inside of a great big shell hole laid there that they'd administered help to and front his waist down he was gone. They'd stuffed big wads of stuffing up in there you know, gauze stuffing to try to save him but there wasn't enough left of him to save and I remember seeing that. He was dead when I saw him. Another time I was about ten feet away from a friend and about the time that I got hit with a hand grenade, before it happened, this friend of mine caught a burst across his chest. It was about four rounds and it whacked him here with a nambu machine gun. It hit him there. His name was Joseph Moran. He finally died.

Rick: Tell us about how you got wounded.

Jack: Right after that happened on Moran, I saw where this nambu shot from and it was in a big pillbox. There was a slot that you shoot out of. I crawled up there and was going

to throw a grenade, and I threw a grenade and it hit just short and rolled down and I ducked down and let it blow off and turned around for another friend and said, "Throw me another grenade." He threw me one and this time that Jap saw me and threw one right at me, and I saw it coming right at me and I dove off to the side rather than lose any time. I just dove like that off to the side and the thing hit and blew up and it hit me alright, but it would have killed me if I didn't have enough training to get out of the way. So rather than try to mess around and try to pick it up, I just got out of the way and it hit me and hit my leg and arm and it felt like a ball-bat hit me in the back. It really whacked me. Then I took that grenade that I'd asked for and I was so mad. I was so mad I was ferocious and I just ran right up there and threw it right into that hole and that was it.

Rick: While you were still wounded?

Jack: Ya. My legs were numb and I couldn't hardly feel anything, but I felt my legs and thought, well they're still here, so I guess I'm alright, but I hurt.

Rick: Where were you when the war ended and VJ-day occurred?

Jack: In April I was in the base hospital at Honolulu, Hawaii... base hospital 128, the navy hospital.

Rick: Where were you when VJ-day occurred?

Jack: At that time I would be back in Hawaii on the big island still back in training. We'd joined the division again. We were all prepared to go in to Japan proper if we had to. That was it. In fact, we'd done several months preparation and mixing big barrels of gel and diesel oil for the flamethrowers and the tanks and that and they were really effective.

Rick: After VJ-day did you ship out from Hawaii and go back to the states?

Jack: VJ-day... no. After that happened, we landed in Sasebo, Japan on the 22nd of September, 1945. So we occupied Sasebo, which was the second largest navy base in Japan. We were there where the kamikaze pilots were trained, at that naval base.

Rick: Tell us what it was like in Japan after the war.

Jack: It was something else. We landed and we were told that the people were going to be completely off of the streets and they were. The only people we saw were the police and they wore these tennis shoes with one big toe, a split-toe thing. It was really funny looking as far as we were concerned. The police were there to make sure that the people stayed in their homes. As we disembarked from the ships and went on up the road and through the town of Sasebo and up on the hillside, we could see where the fortifications were for machine guns and different things. At the top of this road or hill, there was a little small camp of about a half a dozen buildings that had a well there. We found out that they had put machine guns and different ammunition and stuff at the bottom of that well. They had hid it there in that water. They had wrapped it in sort of a wax paper and kept it at the bottom of the well. Then there were a hundred and something steps up to a big coastal gun up on top of the hill. You used to have to walk up to that coastal gun and stand guard on it and make sure it was taken care of. Eventually, we took and blew them up. We blew the barrels up and made them inoperable.

Rick: Tell us about this coin toss.

Jack: This friend of mine, we went to High School together, Marvin Nielson. He's dead now, but he was always wanting to join the Marine Corps and he went down one time and he was about ten or fifteen pounds too light so the recruiting sergeant said, "Go home and drink a lot of malts and hamburgers and just put on the extra pounds and we'll sign you in for sure." So he did and that was about the time that he and I went on down there to Salt Lake. At the time I said, "Well, I'm going into the navy. That looks pretty good to me." And he said, "I'm going into the corps." So anyway, he said, "Let's flip a coin." So we flipped a coin and I lost so I went into the corps and that's the reason I went in

because I lost. He joined the corps too. We went to boot camp together. In fact, he couldn't swim a stroke and after I graduated from my platoon, which is platoon 400, I graduated on and went on to Mare Island. He stayed there and had to re-do the boot camp all over again because he didn't swim and qualify. He had to swim in order to qualify, so on the second tour of boot camp, he went through it and finally he said he walked half of that pool on the bottom to get out of there. The reason why you had to learn to swim is because if you get out in the ocean, and your ship gets hit, you're burning oil and that, you gotta learn different strokes and how to protect yourself and survive, and that's what it's all about.

Rick: Did he survive the war?

Jack: He went down into the Solomon Islands and he got a bone disease and they shipped him back here to Brigham City to the Bushnell Hospital and he finally died in Bushnell. But I was overseas when he died.

Rick: Thank you so much for your time and it's an honor to be here in your presence. We appreciate it very much!