



George Wahlen

United States Navy

Mate, 2nd Class

Pacific Theater

Date Interviewed: 5/24/04

Location of Interview:

Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:

Rick Randle

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

Rick: We're very honored to have with us today the last living Medal of Honor recipient in the state of Utah. Could we just get you to state your name and the rank when you retired from the army?

George: Okay, George Wahlen. I retired from the Army as a Major and I might say that I'm the only living Medal of Honor recipient living in the state of Utah – there's two others from Utah still living but not living here.

Rick: Well George it's an honor to have you with us today. Could you tell us a little about your adolescent years and how you ended up joining the service and growing up in Utah?

George: Well yeah, I grew up in Utah, I was born on a farm out west of Ogden in a little farm in my grandparents place and then we moved to Ogden and I stayed there until I was 12 years old then went to school at Lewis School in Pingree in Ogden and then when I was 12 we moved out to a farm west of Ogden again and so I spent that time until I went in the service there and went to Wilson Lane School and then to Weber High. And then while I was at Weber High the government was starting to mobilize military people so they had a program up at Utah State as an Aircraft Engine Mechanic learner's course and I had a chance to go to that. So I dropped out of High School my senior year and I'll always remember the day I was supposed to report up to Utah State – I was supposed to report there on the 8th of December and Pearl Harbor was on the 7th of December so me and my friend were looking for an apartment to live in on Sunday so we wasn't aware of that until we got up to the school the next day. I remember that and everybody was all concerned that we were at war and I remember President Roosevelt declaring war on the Japanese and on the German's at the same time on the radio, so I remember back then.

Rick: And how long after that did you join the Navy? You went into the Navy first I guess.

George: Right. At the time we were up there I remember there was an Air Corps recruit sergeant that wanted to offer me a sergeant grade if I'd go in the Air Corps and I was 17 so I was all excited about that so I took the papers for my dad to sign back down on a weekend and he tore them up and said "*what do you think I let you quit school for, to keep you out of the service*"

so I realized I was kind of stuck there and so I finished the course in three months, I got it down from six months to three months then I went out to Hill Air Force Base and worked there up until I went in the service. I was working the flight test section and I remember working there up until June of '43 and as an 18 year old I had five people working for me so that was quite an experience. So I was 18 but I knew my dad was reluctant for me to go into the service. I could have joined at 18 but I decided it might be better if I just went to the draft board and had them draft me so I went and volunteered for that so my dad wouldn't be upset at me. Then I remember going down to Fort Douglas when I was drafted and there were branches of the service there and so I talked to the Air Corps there and gave them my experience and told them I wanted to go into the Air Corps and they said "*we don't have any vacancies in the Air Corps*" and they said "*go into the Navy, they have a lot of airplanes*". So I went in to the Navy hoping to get into aviation and I went to boot camp down in San Diego in June of 1943 with the idea I was going to get into aviation. Anyhow they ended up sending me to Hospital Corpsman School and I didn't want to go there and I tried to get them to change their mind but in boot camp you couldn't do that so I went to the school and I talked to the Chief Warrant Officer there and he said "*if you do real good in this we'll see what we can do to get you what you want*". So I remember staying up every night until midnight studying and trying to do very well at the school and I remember I graduated quite high in the course I think it's 3rd or 4th in a graduating class of 400 and so I went and talked to the Warrant Officer again about what he had told me to do and he looked at me and grinned and said "*we need you in the Hospital Corps*". So I realized I was stuck. So anyhow I went to work at the hospital there at Balboa Park just out of San Diego. Anyhow I finished the course and then ended up working at the hospital there and I remember asking the corpsmen (the lower enlisted grades there) I asked them how come they hadn't gotten promoted because I'd heard they were giving the test every month and they said "*well you get promoted and you either go to sea or go to the Marine Corps.*" And they didn't want to go to either so I said "*well I don't like what I'm doing so I might as well get paid for it*", so I went and took the test and there were other corpsmen that took it at the same time so we all got promoted and the next month I went and took it again and got promoted again to where I was a Third Class Petty Officer, with bonuses I made third class and I remember one day the nurse got mad at me for something and she told me if I didn't shape up she was going to send me to the Marine

Corps. I told her she wasn't going to send me anywhere and went over and volunteered for the Marine Corps.

Rick: So you volunteered to me be attached to the marines at that time?

George: Yes. I always remember the next morning they told me to be at a certain place the next morning and I was there the next morning with my sea bag and all my belongings and there were 14 of us going to Field Medical School out at Camp Elliot and out of the 14 – 11 of them they'd taken out of the Brigg and they had "*Brigg*" across their white uniforms and we had a Marine MP that escorted us out to field medical training. I'll always remember that experience.

Rick: Tell us about, when were you shipped overseas?

George: Well I went through the Field Medical School and graduated from there and then I went to Camp Pendleton and joined the 5th Marine Division at Camp Pendleton. That was in January of 1944. I ended up as a Corpsman with an Infantry Company with the Marines in January of '44.

Rick: And then did you go overseas in a troopship?

George: Well we trained there for six months when we got orders that we were going overseas and so we kind of thought we were going to Guam or Saipan – I think the battle was going on there about the time we left in June or July of '44 and while we were aboard ship they decided they were going to send us to Hawaii to Camp Tarawa on the big island of Hawaii for additional training. So we ended up training another six months there before we made our landing on Iwo Jima.

Rick: And did you know you were going to Iwo Jima after you left Hawaii?

George: Well that was coming over the radio after we'd gotten aboard ship that they were shelling Iwo Jima and getting that ready so we were notified then that that's where we were going.

Rick: And what are the duties of the Corpsman?

George: Well the duties of the Corpsman are when people are wounded you're supposed to take care of them in combat you know, stop the bleeding and give them a shot of morphine so they don't go into shock and that sort of thing and in some cases they had serum albumin which you gave them if they were really in shock and stuff but we didn't do too much of that in combat.

Rick: Can you tell us what was going through your mind...you've been cited for given many medals for bravery and I know that you serviced marines that were dying and wounded and even after being wounded yourself you continued on – what went through your mind while you were onboard ship?

George: Well aboard ship and my Platoon leader Lieutenant Caste he was kind of briefing us of what to expect and everything and I'd been trained to do all this and all of our training you know, we had simulated casualties and all that during training and we were supposed to do and everything but I remember aboard ship the last week or two weeks and I got to thinking to myself *'am I really going to be able to do this'*? This is when marines are wounded and under fire and for me to go out and take care of them I thought *'am I really going to be able to do this for these marines and my company and Platoon that we used to go on liberty and do things together with'*? And that thought run through my mind and I'd never been very religious up to that time but I think during that time I started praying to the Lord and I said *"if there's anybody up there that can help me, please help me because I'm going to need all the help I can get"*. So for some reason I guess that kind of helped, I kind of felt that maybe the Lord or somebody was helping me at least to do what I was supposed to do.

Rick: Tell us about your first experiences with combat and any harrowing experiences that you had.

George: Well when we first landed on the beach initially we weren't going in on the first wave but the marines that had hit the beach from our regiment lost a lot of casualties so early in the afternoon we got word that we were going in and we circled around out there off of Iwo Jima and finally we went in in a column. I guess they found a place where we weren't drawing fire, then we spread out and hit the beach and I always remember as we came out of these landing boats and everybody hit the beach and was laying down with their rifles and their weapons and stuff and I was not too far from the Platoon leader I remember and we were just laying there waiting for some instructions on what to do and one of the marines of my company was a runner for the Platoon and he crawled over to the Lieutenant and he says he'd lost his rifle when he came off of the landing boat and the Lieutenant told him he says "*there's plenty of dead around here, go get one*". I'll always remember not too far from where we were as this marine rolled this marine off of his rifle and he had been hit right between the eyes with blood all over and that shocked the marine of course he kind of turned white and it shook him up and we soon realized we were really in this thing now and so that was my first experience. I didn't take care of anybody but later on we got word to move up toward the center of the island and we did and we'd drawn some fire but didn't have any casualties up till that time. I remember getting to a big shell hole and was laying there and we could see the tracers going into Mount Serabatchi, it was to the south of us where the fight originated...a few maydays after that but we went in there and there were flares going up and it was almost like daylight so you can see a lot that was going on and I remember that night and finally at one or two in the morning I dozed off to sleep and I woke up to something hitting my hole and I thought it was a grenade because of the noise it made but in the morning I found a big hunk of shrapnel that had hit and had been hot I guess. So that was my first experience there on Iwo. Anyhow we got word the next day that we were moving over to the other side and my Platoon leader with the Platoon had set up a perimeter type defense so the Japanese didn't infiltrate with our lines and I always remember that day, just everything was kind of quite and I wasn't involved in too many fighting or anything but that afternoon a Japanese soldier had come out of a tunnel and shot the Lieutenant right in the chest and I was up to him right away with a couple of marine's and we got him patched up and he was unconscious. So anyhow we got him sent back to the aid station and that's the last we'd seen of him and later on he had died we heard. And we spent that day and they shot the Lieutenant I

think basically this Japanese soldier did because he was up kind of inspecting the troops and seeing where they were dug in and everything and he realized that he was the leader. Anyhow the next day my Platoon Sergeant Joe Malone, I'll always remember him he was an ex-paratrooper with the Marine's and he took over the Platoon and I remember him leading the Platoon and we got word that we were going to go north where the fighting was and he was leading the Platoon out and we were kind of spread out and an artillery shell hit right by him and actually blew him in the air. I wasn't too far from him and I was up to him almost immediately and I got to him and one of his legs had been blown off and part of his hand and part of his face had been blown away which is a terrible sight to see. But I was up there almost immediately close to him and put a tourniquet on his leg and on his arm and gave him a shot of morphine and bandaged his face up and shortly after the litter bearers are up there with litters and got him evacuated back. And so my Platoon had moved north from where I was at so I tried to catch up with them. I'll always remember that and I got up to where one of the marines was at that had a flame thrower on a hillside and I crawled over to where he was and I asked if he knew where the rest of the Platoon was and at about that time a Japanese soldier came out of a hole in the ground and charged him and I'll always remember him opening up with his flame thrower and this Japanese soldier dropped three or four yards from where we were at and burned right to death. It was a terrible thing to see even with the enemy and I remember that. Anyhow he told me where the rest of the Platoon was so I went on up the hill and I always remember coming across a Marine who was laying there groaning and moaning and so I went over to him to see if I could help him and pulled his jacket off and he had been hit in the stomach and his intestines had just kind of come out. It was a terrible thing to see but we'd been trained in what to do so I had a large battle dressing and I wet it down and put it over his intestines to keep them moist and gave him a shot of morphine and went on down the hill hoping that the litter bearers would pick him up. I went on down the hill and got involved in taking care of other casualties that happened down there and getting them evacuated and about three hours later I got to thinking about this marine up the hill and we got a break and I went back up to where he was and he hadn't been evacuated so I got some of the litter bearers to evacuate him. That was I think my second day on the island experience so we did keep having quite a few casualties.

Rick: George what was going through your mind, you had to be risking your life helping these guys and how did you cope with all of that danger?

George: Well I didn't hardly think about it I guess. I had it set in my mind I was going to do whatever I had to do to take care of these guys.

Rick: You made your mind up before hand?

George: Well that's kind of aboard ship, that was more important than anything. Anyhow we continued to have casualties and take care of them and my sergeant had read that one of the other Platoons had had 14 casualties at one time so I got word about being hit pretty hard so I went over to take care of them and there were 14 casualties out in an open area. So I was out there and started to take care of them and got them evacuated and one was a good friend of mine Eddie Macjarus who was a Medic Corpsman and he had been hit in the chest and the stomach and I'll always remember him and we got him patched up and taken care of and we got them all evacuated and I'll always remember that particular time.

Rick: Were you wounded? Had you received an injury prior to taking care of those 14?

George: No I hadn't. It was after that time when I was advancing up a hill a day or so later and the Japanese opened up with machine gun fire on us and all marines in my Platoon all hit the ground and we finally got word to withdraw so they pulled back off the hill but two marines had been hit on my right flank and so I felt it was my responsibility to go out and see if I could do anything to help them. So I crawled out to both of them and both of them had been killed outright. I remember I started to crawl away and something hit right to the side of me and I recognized it was grenade before it went off but it went off about the time I recognized it and I got some fragments right in my face and I was partially unconscious for awhile, for a few seconds I guess and finally felt my face and felt blood there and my right eye was partially closed so I got a battle dressing out and put it around there to stop the bleeding and started to draw back and somebody on the other flank was hollering for a corpsman so I started to crawl over that way and I could see where the grenades were coming from so I hollered at one of the

marines down the hill to throw me a grenade because I was a corpsman they didn't let me carry grenades so a couple landed beside me so I put one in my pocket and started to crawl up to where these grenades were coming from because I knew I had to probably get rid of that in place to take care of the marine. Anyhow I crawled up to it and there were grenades landing behind all the time so I was catching grenade fragments in the back of my legs and my butt. They didn't do too much damage except they stung like the devil, so I got up to where this place was, where these grenades were coming from and I was still getting overhead machinegun fire all the time and as I got up close to it I grabbed my grenade out of my pocket and went to pull the pin out to throw it in there and the ring came off and the pin stayed in. I'll always remember the shock of what I was going to do but I got my knife out and straightened out the pin and pulled it out and crawled over by this big hole that was there where these grenades were coming from and there the Japanese soldier was down there and he had an interlocking tunnel, he was down there throwing these out about as fast as he could. So I was close enough to him I could have shot him with my 45 but now I had an armed grenade so I pulled the pin off and I let the spoon come off and we usually had 3 to 5 seconds before it exploded so I counted to three and dropped it and it went off almost immediately and I crawled down where this marine was. His leg was all torn up and I got him bandaged up and tried to get him to crawl off with me and he couldn't move because his leg was hurting, I guess his bone was broken or something so he said "*I can't crawl out*". So I laid there with him for a little bit and finally a marine crawled up with a stretcher and we rolled him on there and we both crawled off but this marine he probably weighed 180 pounds off the hill...

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Rick: You were mentioning that you had been wounded and you just evacuated or took care of some marine.

George: Well I got this one marine evacuated and I remember when we got back off the hill and we had some other casualties and one of the other corpsman had joined me by the name of George Long I'll always remember and we were taking care of casualties and he finally ran out of medical supplies and I'll always remember this other corpsman his name was George Long

and I said “*well we’re out of supplies George will you go back to the company CP and get some supplies*”? And of course it’s kind of dangerous there because we had been drawing fire and he said “*I’m not going back*” and I said “*well I’m senior, I’m giving you an order to go back*” and he said, “*well if you’re senior you go back*”. So I remember going back and I got back to CP and my company commander was there and he’d seen that I’d been wounded and he said “*you better get back to the aid station*” because my eye was shut then and there was blood all over my face. Anyhow I said “*well I better stay here because we’ve still got casualties over here*”, so I told him that I was going to stay and we got back to with the supplies and finally got some more people taken care of there, so that was kind of the one experience that I’d had. It was maybe a few days later we got word that we were going to go up north again with my Platoon. I’ll always remember going across this open area and one of the marines had been hit and I tried to pull him down off this hill where he was at and an artillery shell or a mortar shell had hit behind me and had hit me right in the back in the right shoulder. It knocked me down, it felt like somebody hit me with a sledge hammer and I was on the ground so anyhow it kind of knocked my ability for using my right arm there for a minute but anyhow somebody else got the other marine – a couple of marines come up and pulled him off the hill so I crawled on down off the hill and got to where a marine was in a shell hole and told him to look at my back and he pulled my jacket up and looked and said “*Oh doc, you’re okay you’ve just got a big hunk of flesh out of your back*”. So anyhow we got a dressing on it and instead of just staying there I kept going with my unit. I think the last day I was on Iwo was the third of March, we were making another advance and we just kind of dug in and one of the sergeant’s was telling me where casualties were so I was up looking for them where this casualty was and as I was looking an artillery or mortar shell hit right in front of me in a shell hole and I hit the ground right immediately and I tried to get up and get over to this shell hole where I knew there was some casualties and I remember I think somebody was hollering for help and I went to stand up and I couldn’t stand up and fell down again then I realized I’d been hit in the leg.

Rick: That was the third time?

George: My third wound yeah and it’s funny that I had no pain from it, I looked down and my boot had pretty much been torn off and my leg was bleeding so I sat down there and put a battle

dressing on it and gave myself a shot of morphine and crawled over to this hole and I remember this one marine, as I remember he'd lost both of his legs and there were five of them in the shell hole and the others were badly wounded and I got tourniquet's on this one marine then some other corpsmen came up to help me and while they were taking care of the others some other marine down the hill was hollering for a corpsman that he had been hit so I couldn't walk so I crawled down the hole and he had been hit in the leg and the arm and I put battle dressings on him and we both crawled over to a shell hole and stayed there until the litter bearers came up and took us and that pretty much ended my time there on Iwo. They evacuated us and we finally went back to an aid station and I'll always remember that. They put a splint on my leg so I wouldn't move it because of the break in it and I went on back to the field hospital there and was finally evacuated.

Rick: Well George and then your fellow marines for that gallant service and continuing while you were wounded to serve and do your job you were recommended and of course received the Medal of Honor. It's an honor to talk to you about this and we appreciate you sharing that. If you were to give advice to younger people and future generations of how you were able to do this, do you have any words you'd like to say?

George: Well the only thing I think to remember back on my problems then and even afterwards I think our biggest problem is our own self as far as doing things. I think if we commit ourselves, anything is possible regardless of what it might be and you decide what you're doing. I've had some experience since committing to do things and it made all the difference.

Rick: You have made a career out of the service and since your service days you've been an active member of fighting for veterans; what particular thing are you most interested in here in Utah as far as the veterans are concerned?

George: Well the think I've been interested in, of course we've got a state veterans cemetery down there at Camp Liggot and so that was one that we got way back that we lobbied for and Nolan Carras then was the Speaker of the House and he sponsored that bill, I'll always remember that. Then we got a nursing home since then which is in the grounds of the Veterans Hospital

and we lobbied for that because I'd worked for the VA for 14 years both as a representative of helping veterans and then after that time I had lobbied and having had the experience of working for the Veterans Administration and helping veterans I'll always remember I realized what they went through a lot of them and it was even tough sometimes for veterans just going into the service and leaving home and I remember those problems too so I always went out of my way to help them wherever I could. That was a great experience for me working for the VA.

Rick: So you're really trying to work for more veteran's nursing homes here in Utah as I understand it?

George: Yes, we got the one nursing home and we've got a ten-acre lot reserved in Ogden there in Slaterville and so we're hoping to get 120 bed nursing home up there and the importance of getting the veteran's nursing home is that the VA will pay for 2/3rds of the home and the state has to pay for 1/3 and the state actually saves money because most veterans would be on Medicaid with the cost of the nursing homes after a period of time so it would cost the state then \$750 a month for every veteran in a nursing home out of Medicaid so the savings to the Medicaid funds and because the VA pays every veteran in there a per diem to stay there too so the savings from Medicaid funds would pay the state's amount they pay in a period of about 5 years then they've got that savings. So it's a savings program for the state and this is a message we need to get to all of the representatives that it'd be worthwhile for them to have that.

Rick: George, thanks so much for being with us. We appreciate your comments today.

Rick: They probably sent you to a hospital after you were wounded your third time in Iwo?

George: Yes I did go to the hospital. I spent ten months in the hospital before I was finally released in December of 1945.

Rick: And then when did you decide to make a career?

George: Well then I got out of the hospital and went home and met my wife and finally got married then I went up to Weber College which was a two year college at the time for two years and graduated there and I planned on going to the University of Utah but I went to work for the Railway Mail Service hoping to save enough money to help me go on to college and get my bachelors degree and during that time a recruiting sergeant came and offered me a good grade to go in the Army and finally I wasn't too...I didn't accept that idea until he finally offered me a day on recruiting there in Ogden so I took that and went in the Army with the idea – and he told me to go in as an investment and I could resign after three years which was true I could do that but before the three years was up Korea came along and President Truman extended everybody for a year so I had four years I had to stay and during that fourth year I was sent to Japan so I had six years before I'd get out so then I just decided to stay.

Rick: And then you were discharged as a major and then you worked for the veterans administration after that?

George: Yes I did, I worked for 14 years for the Veterans Administration after I retired and that's where I got involved in doing some lobbying and stuff for veterans too. So anyhow I appreciate everything that has happened to help veterans and it always annoys me that the state of Utah has one state veterans nursing home and Idaho had four and I just encourage everybody to get with the legislators and get them to support another veterans nursing home.

Rick: I can't think of a more worthy thing for the state to do than provide nursing homes for these heroes that served their country.

George: Thank you very much.

Rick: You know it's an honor to have you participate in this and I know with the dedication coming up you've got a lot on your plate and it was good of you to take the time to travel down here, I know it's a long way from where you live so we do appreciate it.

George: Well thank you I appreciate that and of course you know their naming the veterans hospital after me too.

Rick: Yes they are. Have they had that ceremony yet?

George: It's on the 2nd of August.

Rick: Well it's just an honor really to have you down here.

George: I appreciate that and the only thing I'd like to say is I'm just representing the veterans and caring for what happens them.

Rick: How many men did they lose on Iwo? How many marines?

George: My thoughts were they had 27,000 casualties that were wounded or killed – 27,000 I think is the figure I heard that were killed.

Rick: That was one of the last great battles.

George: Well Okinawa.

Rick: Okinawa was after that yeah. When I think of what you guys had to go through and the poor guys that were left there in their early 20's or late teens and it seems like we all have an obligation to make sure their sacrifice....

End Interview