

WW II-21

Interviewer: Glen Wegel

Interviewee: William ("Bill") Cross

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C: I started out as a plain old PFC [Private First Class], as a lineman [set up and repaired electric wire communication or power lines]. I was out there and there was nobody else up there in front of me except the Japanese. When I landed here in Saipan [June 15, 1944], we came in the afternoon. We walked right into an artillery barrage because the Japanese had pretty much zeroed in on the beach. As I remember very distinctly, I jumped into these big gas cans piled up; of course, they were all burned up but there was a trench around these gas cans. I jumped in. It was something like this [makes a circular motion to describe the gas cans, trench, and his location], and I jumped in here.

No sooner had I jumped in there than an artillery shell hit right around the corner which meant I was maybe twenty feet away. You get a lot of dirt flying. It becomes really dark because all the dirt is flying and all the bodies are flying all over everything. It had hit a lot of Marines. Of course, those first few hours are real important to maintain a beachhead so that you can get the injured off the dang island and get more coming in, and you can get some supplies and especially ammunition.

The Japanese were dug in pretty well. There was no, what you call, "had-to-hand" combat. Most of it was artillery and mortar shells coming at you. The first night the flares are going off, and I remember when some Marine went ape. He started running out. Evidently he started running because you could hear him. He was running out, and, of course, the Marines shot him because otherwise the Japanese would [have shot him]. He would have run right into the Japanese.

It was hot, and I wanted to cool off. I jumped into the ocean because I wandered off to the ocean. That was the dumbest thing in the world to do. Your uniform was in the saltwater, your damn uniform was nothing but salt. Jesus Christ, that was the dumbest thing in the world to do.

Once we got in the next day, we began to get a little organized, and knew where we were going. I remember it was either the second or the third night out there [that] there was a gap in the lines. There was a line [points at 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division book from his time spent with them in World War II], and there was a gap in there. We were with the son of the Commandant, E. Vandergrift, Jr. So he volunteered us to fill in that gap. So here we are in the middle of the damn night, marching along, well, not marching, just ambling along trying to fill in that damn gap. The goddamn Japanese were walking along with us. They were right over there. Here we are working the line. Nobody was shooting anybody. But the Japanese were moving right with us. It was the damnedest, funniest thing. They

were not going to bother us, and we were not going to both them.

Finally, late in the morning [or] late at night, we filled in the gap. Of course, we were tired. It was kind of hairy at that particular point because we did not have much ground. The Japanese had most of the ground. Then we started out, just pushing them off the island. Pushed them all up to the one place I saw, Marapi Point [northern part of Saipan]. [This is the point] where they [Japanese civilians] had gathered and at this point, it was a cliff. It was honeycombed with caves in there. A lot of the Japanese soldiers and civilians—we did not know who they were—we could watch them. They [Japanese] would take the babies and throw them into the drink because they did not want to be captured by the Americans—or they would blow themselves up by grenades.

There was an LCVP [landing craft] out there, broadcasting for them [civilians] not to do that—for them to surrender [instead]. Well, they would choose not to, but I remember one of the things about that Marapi Point was all of these caves in there had tons and tons of Japanese soldiers in there. And the goddamn crazy Marines, they would take a rope and tie it with all kinds of mortar shells, and C-2—which was a [plastic] compound that exploded—and they would start swinging that thing so that it [would] swing out and into the caves. They would get that damn [thing] going and then they would set that damn thing off right at the time it would get into the cave and blow that goddamn thing up.

Then we had to go into those damn caves, and the flies and the blood and the dead bodies were unbelievable. Then we had to go out on the [Marapi] point where a goddamn Nip [Japanese, short for Nippon “Land of the Rising Sun”], was still in the cave and did not get the word. I am standing next to [a Marine], and I remember this guy from New York. He stood up, and the guy got him right in [between] the eyes and he fell into a pool of water [that] turned red right away. Well, they [Marines] finally got that goddamn guy, but he must have been a helluva marksman because he got several Marines. That goddang Japanese, he was a sharpshooter.

One of the other things that happened there on the way to Marapi Point was [seeing] a big cave-like thing. There was all of these smaller caves inside it. Well, I went up by the side of the cave—Marines all around it. They told us to back off [because] they were going to move a flame thrower tank. They drove the flame thrower tank right into this big cave. They started letting the flame thrower torch everything. Then they got through torching it and told us to move back up to where we were previously.

When I got to the point where I had been before, here was a woman lying there playing dead—and I thought she was [dead]. Then she started cussing me like it was going out of style. That lasted probably just a few minutes. We got rid of her. We gave her to the MPs [military police] to take her back to be interrogated. I

never knew what she was or whether she was just a civilian. But I remember telling that story to one of my tennis friends on December 7, and he still won't let me forget that I kicked a woman. And I kicked her hard.

One of the other things that happened on going out as we were pushing through, another Marine and I came up on a pile of debris. [It was like] corn shucks or something piled up. Well, it did not make sense to us so we just dropped an incendiary grenade down there. Well, it set the damn thing on fire, and the smoke was going, and then we heard a baby cry. Oh, shit! So I stripped off everything I could except I kept a knife. [I] went down in that hole--and it was a huge hole--and there were two families living in that hole that they dug in the ground. With the smoke and all I could see this hand reaching up.

Well, I grabbed that hand and pulled and pulled a little kid out of there. They were civilians; we figured out they were civilians. And we got them all out of there and of one was really hurt. They were shocked, but they were kind of appreciative [with] the fact that they were now safe. We did not cause any problems. We did not stick around. We would get rid of them as fast as we [could] cause we were moving, and you got to keep those lines going, so that line was moving.

One of the other things I keep thinking about [was] that [with] every landing we would make, we would come across the line, "They found Amelia Earhart!" [famous aviatrix who died mysteriously while making an around-the-world flight in 1937; she allegedly crashed near Howland Island, a small Pacific island, on July 2, 1937]. Found Amelia Earhart. Well, it was all a bunch of baloney, but it just would spread like wildfire.

But that was one of the things. I think about that whole thirty-day operation. I think we were on that island [Saipan] for thirty days. Something like that. We got one day off where we were able to just bivouac and sit there. I found a damn chicken. I killed that chicken and built a fire, barbecued that chicken. We would wash our socks and just sort of take care of our personal things.

[Regarding] the Saipan operation, they [headquarters] gave us the good news that we were going to have to take Tinian [just three miles south of Saipan]. You could see it over there. It was a much smaller island. So we bivouacked in a big area, and one of the sights that I can remember, or sounds that I can remember, is a battalion of Marines--all with dysentery. All night long these guys, the poor Marines, would be heading toward the damn latrine to get rid of it. All of them were sick as a dog. The whole damn battalion was sick.

W: Did you ever drink the water?

C: Most of it was probably nerves because when it was over, you did not have that stress anymore. And the water we had was pretty good water because they

purified the water real well. All of us carried tablets that could purify the water.

W: Iodine?

C: Well, I cannot remember what it was. No, it was not iodine. Maybe there was some iodine in it. But it was something else. I remember when I got aboard an LST—Landing Ship Tank—we were going to take Tinian. And [while] we were going in, there was a Namboo [also spelled Nambu]—a Japanese Namboo gun [pistol] hitting the side of the craft we were going in. The amtrak [also known as LVT—landing vehicle tracked—an amphibious armored vehicle—and also known as amphtrack or amptrack from the contraction of amphibious tractor] can go on land and sea. Here is a Marine with dysentery sitting on the end of that thing just going like that—not paying any damn attention to that damn Namboo. He was not going to move.

Well, I got landed, rolled over the side, lost my rifle, lost my helmet. So the first thing I did was grab the helmet and rifle of a dead Marine. We started moving out because that was the plan as soon as you land—to start moving in. Well, I started moving in and, goddamn, there was a bullet that went by my ear. I did not know what it was but it burnt my ear it was that close. But the plan of the attack was [that] there was two prongs going in and there was not much of a place to land the amtrak because they had to get in and get out—there was no place to do one, two, three, four, five, one at a time.

We went like this. Then we would get off and fan out, set up a perimeter. The next day, I was heading over toward the 25<sup>th</sup> Marines' area, and this Marine [was] seated at a machine gun because the Japanese had counter-attacked that night. There were three battalions of Japanese. We killed two of the battalions that night. But this Marine never left his machine gun, and there were Japs all over. Bodies of Japanese piled on top of him. He never left his damn gun. You could hear him firing all night long, and we did not get much of a counter-attack. The 25<sup>th</sup> Marines got the big counter-attack.

It was a pretty easy operation after that because [we knocked] out two of the three battalions the first night. We met sporadic [fire], just a little bit of sniper fire. By the time we got through and had passed across the line, the island [Tinian] was secured, which means effectively no more operations.

I said, fuck it. I headed back to the first battalion aid station and laid down and fell asleep. I stayed there for two days. They evacuated me over to Saipan to the hospital because my face was all sores, and I must have been down to—I don't know how many pounds—but not many pounds. I was in the hospital. All they did was give you some food and some water, some rest. They put me back aboard the ship to get ready to get back to our advance base. Our advance base was on the island of Maui in the Hawaii Islands.

Going back, we were on this troop ship—a transport ship. We had about 300 to 500 Japanese prisoners of war down in the bottom [of the ship]. They [the POWs] could come up an hour a day and take saltwater showers and wash their skivvies. There were three Japanese doctors who took care of them. Of course, there was one, two, three, or four of them [who] would die [every] night [and the ship's crew would] throw them overboard—weighted them down and threw them overboard. But they shaved all of the hair off of their head and their body. They [would] come up there and they did not know what the heck was going on. Well, they knew they were safe and they were getting food, and they were getting sleep down at the bottom of that damn ship. When we got to Pearl Harbor, [the POWs] flipped out. They did not realize [the U.S. was still in control of Pearl Harbor]. They still thought the Japanese had gotten Pearl Harbor.

W: How long was the trip from Saipan to Hawaii. Ten days?

C: Probably that. We would get on the ship about thirty to forty days prior to the initial landing because we would practice our landings around the Hawaiian Islands. We would go to Pearl and pick up our escort. You could only go as fast the slowest ship; you could not go any faster. You had to stick together. Of course, we were on black-out the whole dang time. Crap games, card games, black-out games all over the ship with a thousand Marines. Half of them were sick. Just seasick. I always got a kick [that] one of the things I learned [in the Marines] was not to gamble because there would be maybe a hundred games—cards of blackjack or craps [taking place] on the ship. When we get ready to make the landing after about thirty days, there was one game. The big guys, the gamblers had the money—and I saw that. One of them was a mess sergeant named Benny Felica. He had made tons of money gambling.

W: When you were on Saipan, you were with the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, right?

C: 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 24<sup>th</sup> Marines, 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division.

W: When you landed on Saipan, there was a well-developed Japanese civilian population. What did the Marines do with them?

C: We never had anything to do with them. That was somebody else's job. We were combat Marines. We were not worried about prisoners of war or supplies and all that. Our job was to fight the Japanese. So when it comes to the civilians—although I did have an incident and I was probably guilty of it. Some woman was cussing at me because they said I shot her baby. Well, there was a baby there; she was holding the baby. There was a bullet right through the neck, but not a drop of blood. You could see, if you would hold up the little baby—the hole through it. I do not remember the circumstances why we got involved with this, but a lot of time if we saw anything move, we would shoot it.

They sent me up one time to talk some Japanese into surrendering. I was trying to talk to them because I understood a little Japanese. Tomadachi, tomadachi, harimas, harimas. Well, anyway, this damn Jap jumped up and pounded his grenade and threw it at me. Man, I am telling you, I could beat anybody—I never ran so fast. These grenades, what you do is detonate them by pounding them on something hard. I heard him and could see him doing that, and [then] he threw that grenade at me. Man, did I get out of there! Oh, that damn grenade. I thought it was going off right behind me, but, hell, I was a long ways [away] by the time that grenade went off.

We just left them there, and some engineers had to go flush those guys out. I remember where that is now. I was going down a cliff, and some Jap was pointing a rifle at me, and the guy behind me shot him, otherwise he would have had me. That day, we got down there, and I got caught in some crossfire and [I] hid under a tank. If that tank [had] moved, I would have been a dead Marine. But I hid underneath that tank until they got rid of the crossfire. I do not know who got rid of it, but, thank God, they got rid of it. I remember the goddamn heat. It was unbearable.

W: What do you anticipate were the losses of the three Marine divisions that were there?

C: In that book it will tell you. It will tell you how many injuries we had and how many Marines got this, that, and the other thing.

W: My research says that the Marine Corps lost about 3,500.

C: Oh yeah, the first few days are the most critical because they were zeroed in, and we do not have all our artillery in and everything [else]. The first thing was to get the injured off of there and [then] get in water, food. The first thing I would do is I would find a dead Marine [and] I would take his canteen so I would [have] two or three canteens full of water most of the time. I carried plenty of grenades on my belt. I would have three or four grenades. I loved to throw grenades.

W: What about the naval bombardment of the island prior to your landing?

C: Well, we would get outside and then we could see it the night before—the air strikes and naval bombardments. But, actually, the day of the landing, we were told it was going on, but we never saw it. We would just get there and get off the ship. We did not want to sit around out there. But the damn Navy ships would pull up as close as they could, and they would be blasting away for hours—just pounding them, and the planes would be coming in and strafing and bombing. We would only see that the day of the landing or just prior to that.

W: Some of the accounts that I read about said that the naval bombardment did not

do very well—that the Japanese positions were well fortified and dug in.

- C: Oh yeah, oh gosh yes. They were so far in that it felt like on Iwo [that] some of those concrete bunkers—I think they could have been bombing them from now until kingdom comes, and it would have never hurt anybody—as long as they would get water and food. That was where I got my Purple Heart—trying to find those damn caves where the Japanese were launching the rockets.
- W: How did you get your Purple Heart? Did the Japanese hit you with a rocket?
- C: No, the Navy did.
- W: So it was friendly fire?
- C: It was friendly fire. I was up trying to find these caves—identify the caves, and the Navy did not know we were up there so they let loose at us.
- W: No so friendly fire.
- C: It was not so friendly fire when it was going off.
- W: When you landed, at the southwest part of the island, and you pushed pretty much north toward Marapi Point . . .
- C: Yeah, that is where we actually cleaned up. We just kept pushing them up there.
- W: On the way to Marapi Point, did you stop around Mt. Tapotchau? Did you go through that area at all?
- C: No, a little bit of it.
- W: So you really did not get to experience “Purple Heart Ridge”—the ridge east of Mt. Tapotchau, its name given by the 27<sup>th</sup> Army Infantry Division to one of the most heavily fortified Japanese positions.
- C: No.
- W: Some of the stories were pretty gruesome about that area.
- C: Oh yeah.
- W: What was your opinion of the Marine Corps thinking it would be OK to include the 27<sup>th</sup> Army Infantry Division?
- C: Well, you do not know the mindset of a Marine. The Marine is basically an idiot—a

moron--because they think they are the toughest fighting men in the world--and that everybody else is not worth the while. So we exactly did not have any respect for the Army because every time something happened, the Army would not do its job [and] we had to go do the job of the Army. That happened on several occasions. So we did not have a lot of respect for the Army. As a matter of fact, I do not know this--I would have to read the book--[but] they [General Holland Smith] relieved [on June 24, 1944] one of the commanding officers [Army Major General Ralph C. Smith] of that Army unit [27<sup>th</sup> Infantry] at Saipan because he did not et the job done.

W: Was that "Howlin' Mad" Smith? [Marine General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith]?

C: No, he was in the Marine Corps. "Howlin' Mad" Smith, he was in charge of all the Marines in the Pacific. Our division commander was Clifton B. Cates. His assistant was General Hart, Brigadier General Hart.

W: On Saipan, they say that only about 21 Japanese survived.

C: That is not true.

W: I guess military personnel? Not counting the civilians?

C: No, because I told you we brought about 300 to 500 [Japanese] on that ship. They were soldiers. No, Iwo was the one where they only had a few prisoners of war. But at Saipan and Tinian we had quite a few.

W: About the men in your unit, in your division, in your battalion when you went across the island. Do you feel like everyone was more in the mindset of shoot to kill? When you took the beachhead, you shoot blindly--anything that moves or shoots back.

C: In front of you, you better believe it.

W: What about on day two, three, and so on--when you start crossing the island? Anything that moves or looks Japanese is getting a bullet?

C: Yeah.

W: I guess that is fair. My research says there were almost 32,000 Japanese on that island.

C: I do not know.

W: That sounds a little much because that island does not look very big.

- C: The figures are in that book which will tell you how many Japanese.
- W: What about leisure time on Saipan? I remember you saying you got one day. You got yourself a chicken and had a barbecue, but did some of the other guys go fishing or spearfishing or relax in the water?
- C: I am sure there were people who had more time than we did. We were combat Marines. I was with a combat unit. There was nothing but Japanese in front of us. The people who were in supply and had other kinds of jobs, they had more time and they were not in danger. I remember one time they sent us to unload a cargo ship. Hell, those guys aboard those cargo ships, they were having a ball. Hell, I remember going into Iwo, which I thought was a perfect example of the Marine Corps. Here we were going in landing and the damn bombs are going off and the planes are strafing it—the whole nine yards. Here are these Navy guys sitting on the fantail of the ship drinking a hot cup of coffee. Here we are loaded, prepared to take off, going onto that damn island [Iwo Jima, February 15, 1945].
- W: So I know the time period during World War II was an interesting period back home as well. Was your outfit or other outfits on Saipan integrated units or all-black units?
- C: No, I do not think there were any black units until we went to Iwo. They [blacks] were in what we called “ducks” [DUKWS]. [These Marine amphibious trucks] were for water; they could go on water and on land.
- W: Were they the Willys jeep conversion?
- C: Yeah. That was the first time I really saw any blacks in the Marine Corps in those “duck” units, and they would bring supplies up to us—rations. Affectionately, the Marines called them “night fighters.” I remember we were up, and a duck was unloading and there was rocket fire going off, and that poor black guy turned white—and just got out of there as fast as he could. The damn Marines are standing around laughing and joking and having the best damn time. Damn rockets [were] going off. Marines beat to a different drummer.
- W: Your book says that 23,811 Japanese soldiers were killed, and 1,810 had been taken prisoner.
- C: We had about 300 to 500 on that ship.
- W: When you guys were there, did you find a lot of Japanese equipment?
- C: Yeah, you would find a lot of stuff. Samurai swords, you would find weapons—knives, daggers, helmets. One time, we had a career Marine who had been

court-martialed. His name was Jolly. Sergeant Jolly. He had been court-martialed on Wake Island. He had been caught stealing during the bombing. He got caught stealing the officer's booze. Jolly came across a sake [Japanese wine made from fermented rice] dump. He was drunk as hell. That was up at Marapi Point. He was an alcoholic.

W: Did you ever run into any blown up Zeros or maybe abandoned Japanese tanks?

C: A lot of tanks, but not Zeros [Japanese naval fighter plane made by Mitsubishi].

W: Some of the tanks are still there in the water. They are all rusted. You said your position was a Marine Intelligence Scout?

C: Yeah.

W: You were a Private First Class?

C: Yeah.

W: Did you go in as a Private First Class?

C: Yeah.

W: What was your final rank when you got out?

C: Sergeant.

W: So you went from being an E-2 to being an E-5?

C: I don't know what "E's" stand for. We did not have that when I was in [the Marines]. It was either Private, Private First Class, Corporal, Sergeant, Staff Sergeant.

W: So you did not have the Lance Corporal rank at that time?

C: No, never had that

W: Did you ever have much interaction with the other divisions?

C: No.

W: How about when you were on Tinian? How about the comments about the airbase where the *Enola Gay* was based—the plane which dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945?

C: That was all after we were long gone. I remember we were right at the edge of

the damn airfield when the first plane came in that was crippled [after it had been on a bombing run over Japan]—[it was] crippled and made a landing there. The runway was terrible because it had been bombed out, and the plane did not have any power. It was just luck that they were able to get in there. Anyway, I never saw the airfield in Tinian. It had to be repaired because it had been so bombed out.

W: Of all the islands we were at, was it a consistent procedure to always repair the airfield?

C: That is why you went there—to get the airfields. That is why we were there. That is the first thing you do—secure the airfield.

W: Was it a constant thing to get a strafing attack from the Japanese force?

C: No, we never got strafed. We had superior air power. The one time we were in Saipan, there was the Japanese Navy trying to get to us, but our Navy intercepted them and blew them out of the water. So we never got any naval, Japanese naval, Japanese air. Once in a while, we would see a Japanese plane come over. We would all stand, look, laugh, and joke about it.

W: What year were you on Saipan?

C: We landed on Saipan in June 1944

W: You left within thirty days?

C: Well, we went to take Tinian and that operation was ten days.

W: Then from Tinian, where did you go?

C: Back to Maui, our advanced base, and then we landed on Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945. We just celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the landing on Iwo.

W: Of all of your service during World War II, do you feel like you regretted anything?

C: No, I am very proud to have been a Marine.

W: Very proud of your comrades as well and your accomplishments in World War II?

C: Yeah.

W: Do you think the war could have been won without it?

C: No.

W: I definitely have to agree with you, and I want to thank you for your service and thank you for doing the interview with me.

C: All right. Am I done?

W: I guess so unless you have anything else you want to say or ask.

C: No.