

Oscar Rankin

Interviewer: State your name please.

Mr. Rankin: My name is Oscar Lane Rankin Sr. I was born here in Clarksville in 1925 I grew up in Clarksville and went to high school at Clarksville High School and graduated from high school in 1941. In December 7th 1941 that's when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and I was 16 years old at the time. I was amazed that a man of patriotism with the public and their determination to work together to fight this war. I went on to Austin Peay University for two years then I became 18 years old and old enough for the draft. In the mean time I had tried to enlist in the air core and also into a college ROTC type program and I was turned down because of my eyes. I've got 24 hundred vision in my right eye and it's not correctable to any better than 22 hundred. I was drafted first in 1943 and I was turned down again because of my eyes. Then in 1944 they drafted me again and I was accepted and they put me in what they called at that time limited service. Now limited service was supposed to be a non combat task or job in the service but I ended up in combat area. But any rate I went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi which is close to Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the reception center and usually it only took four or five days to go through a reception center but I found out that they kept putting me off and I found out that they were accumulating a bunch of people with some sort of a physical defect to put them in a special unit of the engineers. Now I ended up at Fort Lenard Wood, Missouri to take engineering basic training. Now basic training engineering basic training at that time was 17 weeks and I learned how to use all kinds of tools how to build bridges how to handle explosives how to deactivate mines I learned how to shoot all kinds of guns a bazooka, Thomson sub machine gun, M1 rifle, Springfield 03 rifle, Carbon, 30 caliber machine guns and all of that sort of thing in the engineers. At the end of 16 weeks they pull me out and put me in the 1773rg engineer parts supply outfit and it was a small outfit 54 men. And immediately I had to take 6 weeks refresher course on basic training. Some of the people they put in there hadn't been in basic in a long time so they brought us up to date on basic training and I was then sent to Columbus, Ohio to an engineer supply depot.

Interview: When you took that training at Fort Lenard Wood you said you were supposed to be in a noncombat job why did they teach you to shoot all of these different weapons?

Mr. Rankin: Well that's the way the Army works. A little bit later I'll tell you about my physical I took when I went overseas. But any rate I went to Columbus, Ohio this engineering supply depot and there we learned how to operate a supply depot how to take care of the parts and how to identify the parts and so on. Then in March of 1944 they shipped us to Fort Lawton, Washington in preparation to going overseas. And there I took my overseas physical and I'll never forget it. I walked into a gym and there was a doctor there and he said jump up and down twice and I did and that was my physical he said you passed. But any rate we left Seattle, Washington on a ship called the Mormack Rin and it was a converted freighter it was a small ship but we still had 4,000 men on it. And right outside of Seattle we hit a storm and I'll never forget it, it was a tremendous storm. The waves were 30 – 40 feet high and the ship was banking at 45 degree angles and when the front end of the ship would come out of the water it would slam down and shake the whole ship. But any rate the storm lasted for 10 days and we ended up in Pearl Harbor and there we were supposed to take a 30 day jungle training course. But the orders

were changed and we were actually there just about two days and we shipped on west in the open sea and at that time I didn't know where I was going but we were in a convoy and after the weather had settled down it was a pleasant trip. I remember there was a black outfit on board and they were sailors it was a galley outfit and at night the ship was sailing in the dark with no lights and they would sing spirituals and I thought it was some of the most beautiful music I had ever heard. We went on our first stop after Pearl Harbor was Eniwetok. Eniwetok was an Island that was about a mile long and probably a half mile wide, there was an airstrip there. We stopped there for a couple of days and let half of the men off the ship one day and half the next day to get a little shore side recreation. I remember they gave me two cokes and a sandwich and we went swimming there on the beach. Then we moved on to the Island of Ulithi and we had been there about one day waiting for a convoy and we came under attack by Japanese airplanes. And fortunately they were worded off and a couple of them shot down and we didn't have any damage or any casualties at that time.

Interviewer: Were they attacked by American planes or was it anti-aircraft that drove them off?

Mr. Rankin: Anti-aircraft drove them off. We went on to Okinawa then and our arrival there was on April 25th and I remember it very clearly and I looked out over the Island and I could see these planes flying around and people shooting out them shooting planes down and artillery going off and I thought I thought I was supposed to be in non-combat zone. It was really something. But any rate along about 10 o'clock that night they decided to take us ashore and they loaded us on a boat called LCI which is landing craft infantry. Now our ship wasn't large enough to carry these LCIs so they brought some from shore out to take up in and as we started in to the shore we came under attack by Japanese machine guns. And the pilot of this boat backed it off and we back into the harbor to try and find another place to land and then there was a tremendous air attack by the Japanese and the United States put a smoke screen over the harbor there so they couldn't see where the ships were and we were in that smoke screen and we stood up all night in that LCI. Finally at dawn on April 26th we went ashore. An interesting side line

Interviewer: Let me interrupt you here just a minute. You say the landing craft that you went ashore in came out in Okinawa so there had only been a landing and on an occupational part of the island is that right?

Mr. Rankin: Well Okinawa was 65 miles long and 35 miles wide at its widest point. It was shaped like the western hemisphere with an isthmus in the middle like we've got the Isthmus of Panama. And that isthmus was eight miles across and on the original invasion the Marines went in and the Army went in and the Marines went north and the Army went south but after they get in the landing wasn't too there wasn't many casualties they got right in. But the Japanese decided to make their stand in the south so the Marines went through the north pretty quick. But the Army was stopped on the way heading south and then the Marines joined in the fight to go to the south. And that day I went ashore I said I got in about dawn and we were waiting to get orders where to go and I remember there was a United States plane shot down it crashed on the beach close to us. Fortunately this native pilot walked away from it and it turns out that the United States forces shot him down and he said he wasn't going to fly. At any rate that night we found an area where we were going to bed down and I remember there was in our

training they had told us we had to dig a hole that was two feet wide and two feet deep and six inches longer than you were to get down below the surface of the land to protect you from the fire the bullets and so on. And I did and I realized pretty quick all the shooting that was going on everything that goes up comes down and I could hear this scrap metal hitting in the dirt close to me and another man in there decided we had to find a safer place to sleep. And we got into a tomb and I have a picture of it here a cellar tomb they had these all over the island and that door on there that you see is about three feet tall. And it had a stone wall and stone top and the way the Okinawa's did, they would when somebody died they put the body in an urn and good size urn and put the urn in the tomb and for two years on the man or person that died birthday they'd come back and celebrate and after that they would cremate the remains that were left and put them on a shelf around this tomb it was a family tomb.

Interviewer: How did you find out about that did you talk to Okinawa's about their custom?

Mr. Rankin: Yeh we talked with some Okinawa people and they told us what it was. My reason for getting in there was to get somewhere that had a top on it so the scrap metal couldn't get me because I had seen a plane crash within a hundred yards of me when I was laying out there in that ditch. But any rate the next night we moved on to a another place and I slept in a sweet potato field and I got these flees all over me and I could feel them crawling all over my skin and everything and I'd open my shirt and I could see them but they would dive into your clothes and I had a hard time getting ride of them. They had issued us some louse powder and I put that on me but that didn't seem to work. I found out the way to get ride of them was to put the louse powder on the seams of your clothes because they would dive in the seams. One morning I woke up and I had flea bits all over me and I counted 26 on my left arm. At any rate I was in the engineer part supply and we had parts for 1,192 machines and by machines I mean bulldozers, steam shuttles, road graters, water supply units any kind of construction equipment you could name. But there were 1,1,92 machines that we had parts for and they were landed on the beach and the boxes were marked and we got the boxes and took them to a central area and then we would issue parts to the people that were working the machines. Now we had more men than we had machines over there. The machines were usually running 24 hours a day. Bulldozers for example used to build airstrips and airports and roads and I was, we ended up in an area that was I'd say an eighth or a quarter of a mile from Kadena Airstrip. And I remember the airstrip was built out of coral and every night the Japanese would come by there and blow holes in it. And we'd have planes that had been up and needed to land so these bulldozers would be sitting on the side with piles of coral and go out there and fill the holes immediately. But we had parts for the engineers and the CDs. The CDs were a branch of the Navy and it was quite interesting to see how it all worked. People would have machines that had a part go bad and they didn't know what the they might know that name of it they didn't know the part number and we had these parts manual books and we'd look it up in there and some of us had a knack for looking at those charts and drawings in there and pick out the part and then get the part number then we'd know what to issue them to replace their damaged parts. There was a lot to well many many men there and I forget now how many casualties we had can we stop for a minute?

Interviewer: Well since you were in this combat area under airplane attack and you said shrapnel and shell fire I guess how did you cope with that?

Mr. Rankin: When I first went ashore and was all the artillery and all the antiaircraft and airplanes and suicide planes and saw all of the shooting that was going on I was latterly scared to death I didn't know what I was into. And I decided the only way I was gonna to get through it was adopt the attitude that if something was going to happen it was going to happen and there was no use in me worrying about it and that's what I did to cope with it because it was a tremendous thing to see all of this going on. Particularly the suicide planes and as I said the Japanese attacked our area with airplanes every night. I know they would send one airplane over about midnight every night we called him wake up Charlie because the whole idea was he was trying to wake up the troops so they wouldn't get to sleep. And he'd fly around until they shot him down. And the fighting continued in Okinawa until about June 25th and then the fighting ended on the southern end of Okinawa and a great many of the Japanese soldiers committed suicide by jumping off a bluff down there. And some of the civilians and the island was just about leveled there were very few buildings left there were about two or three churches left standing and religious temples. But everything else was flat I mean the artillery clean it out. And then after June 25th the island was secure and the United States started building up the troop strength in order to invade Japan. And there were more troops coming in all time. One thing I forgot to mention, I ran into Riggs Hayes who operated Hayes motor freight lines her in Clarksville. I was walking down the road one night at dusk and I ran into him, he was in the Marine air core and we visited each other off and on for several months there. Then in August the United States dropped the atomic bomb and we heard about it but we didn't know many details we had radios armed service radios and we got some information but then when the second one was dropped and the war was over we were elated because we were poised ready to invade Japan and I suspect there were over close to a million men there on Okinawa ready to go on the invasion. Okinawa was six hundred miles from Japan and this was about the closest area that we had control of and I've heard a lot of discussion about the atomic bomb and how many people it killed there in Japan and I think it was terrible to kill those people but at the same time I know we would have lost no telling how many Americans if we had to invade because when you invade a country you're invading a home land. All the civilians and everybody else gets in the act of fighting and the night it happened it was announced the war was over I'll never forget the people started shooting all over the island the anti-aircraft going off in every direction and at the time I didn't know what had happened and the word filtered down to us that the war was over. After the war was over they designated our unit to go into Korea and in the occupation there. Japan had been in control of Korea for some time and in November 1945 our unit and other units too loaded on LSTs we took all of our equipment and everything loaded on LST and went to Korea and we landed at Inchon Harbor. It was in late November and I will never forget while I had been on Okinawa I only had two sets of fatigues which was a cotton jacket and cotton pants and I had no winter clothes and neither did anybody else, we just had summer clothes. And we got there in Korea and it was freezing cold and with no warm clothes and as I remember you got about 10,000 men lined up there in the street on Inchon Harbor and it got so cold there were some empty buildings down there and some of them tore wood off these buildings and built fire so we could get warm. Later we move on into a place that had been a Japanese arsenal. The army called it Ascom City or Armed Service Command. And there were warehouses there and we started setting up the engineer depot there to take care of any construction that might go on. At that time we were about seven miles from Inchon and I got to visit Sole Korea as well as Inchon. And I was really surprised at how dirty everything was over there. They didn't have any sewer lines the sewage was

running down the road in ditches. And if a cow died for example in the street they'd just leave it there until it would disintegrate. When you'd go to town you could smell town before you got there. Then about the middle of December two men and myself were assigned to go to Pusan, Korea which was roughly 300 miles south of Sole down on the southern tip and we went down there to organize and set up a depot there. And I spent the rest of my time in Korea there. By that time we had fairly good quarters with a small stove in each unit and we built fires with charcoal and we stayed warm that way. Bu the winters in Korea are tremendously cold I will never forget the river over there the ice on it was approximately 18 inches think or maybe a little less than that. I remember the people out there cutting the ice to save it for the following summer. Then in April 1946 I got orders to come home and the way they did it they, everybody wanted to come home right then. And they did it on a points system you got so many points for how much time you'd been in the service and how many months you were overseas and whether you were single or married or had children or whatever. Any rate by time came and I got on a ship called General Leroy LT was the name of it. Now I'd spent six weeks getting to over there but it only took two weeks to get back to the United States. And everybody was really joyous to come home. And I remember the guys wouldn't wash their clothes they would just get dirty clothes and just pitch them over the sides cause they thought they would get some more clothes when they got back to the states. We went back to Fort Lotton, Washington and caught a troop train and I went to Camp Chappy, Arkansas where I got a discharge then I came on home.

Interviewer: How old were you when you came back home?

Mr. Rankin: I was 21 at that time. When I went in the service I was 19 years old. After I came back I went to the University of Tennessee on a GI bill and finished my education up there. And then came back to Clarksville in 1948 and began working.

Interviewer: Did you see any Japanese prisoners during you?

Mr. Rankin: Yes, I saw Japanese prisoners and I saw a good many bodies over there. It was absolutely awful. Think was is absolutely senseless. And I would hope that future generations would fine some other way to settle their differences I don't know whether they will. It's the most senseless thing that man has ever done I think.

Interviewer: You say that when you took your training you were taught how to defuse mines. Did you actually do any of that or was it just strictly a parts depot?

Mr. Rankin: Well I learned how to do it and they had small charges in them and they wouldn't hurt you. But I learned how to find them and disarm them and booby traps and this sort of thing. And I don't know what I would have done if I had been assigned to do that. That was really dangerous work to disarm the mines like that. I'll never forget so we would understand more about explosives they took probably 100 of us and put up in a big circle laying on the ground and it was probably 100 feet in diameter and they took a stick of dynamite and stuck it in the middle of that and set it off. And the idea was to show you that it wouldn't hurt you if you were down the explosion went up like this. So I went through that and.

Interviewer: But you didn't actually disarm any mines or bombs in the field is that right?

Mr. Rankin: Not in Okinawa I learned how to do it. Like I learned how to shoot a Thompson Sub machine gun and that's the only time I ever did it was when we were training.

Interviewer: When these planes would come over these Japanese planes at night did they ever fire on the troops on the ground?

Mr. Rankin: At night time they were mostly bombers and we had these search lights and they might be five or six search lights with the rays pointing at the plane and you could see him. And they'd be shooting at him with anti aircraft guns and of course that went on day and night too. I've seen the sky just full of tracer ammunition and if you know anything about tracers every fifth bullet is a tracer so there's five times as much going up there as you could see. But I saw suicide planes hit ships there in the harbor there at Okinawa.

Interviewer: Did you see just one or two instances of that or was it more frequently.

Mr. Rankin: No I saw more of that. It went on for almost three months.

Interviewer: I believe that was the first time they actually used kamikozies was in Okinawa is that right?

Mr. Rankin: I think so as far as I know they may have tried it somewhere else first. But they went into it in a big way and they had planes that were especially designed for it they weren't regular airplanes. They also had regular airplanes too that were these suicide planes.

Interviewer: Who was the commander of your unit?

Mr. Rankin: His name was Joe Temple and as I said we had a small unit there wasn't but 54 men and he was a first lieutenant. And he was had been a profession football player before he went into the service. And I've been trying to rack my mind I can't remember what team he played for. As it turned out we had another man in the unit that had been a professional ball player.

Interviewer: And he was one of these people that was on limited duty because of physical injury or something?

Mr. Rankin: I guess so I don't really know the criteria for the unit I ended up in. Originally the whole everybody I was taking training with had some sort of physical disability but in that unit they had some older people and younger people. And I know we had one mad that had about I'd say a 60 IQ and I was surprised that he was in the service but he was in our unit. And he was nice as you could imagine and everybody in there tried to take care of him and we did he came through it alright.

Interviewer: You say that you adopted a kind of a fatalistic attitude to remain reasonable calm during all of this fighting. Were there any people you saw who just couldn't take that or not?

Mr. Rankin: Yes I saw some men that just went berserk and they shipped them off to some hospital somewhere and I never did see or hear of them again. The way the army would do if they had to

replace a man they'd ship one off and another one in but you'd never know what happened to the guy that got shipped off.

Interviewer: Since or once you got out of the service did you ever get back together in a reunion or anything of that sort?

Mr. Rankin: Our unit didn't have a reunion as such. As I said it was a very small unit and the men was scattered all over the United States. But I did meet with some of my close friends several times and some of them came to visit me in Clarksville and spent the weekend or so with me. It was good to see them. I was mighty young then and I learned a lot. I do believe this though I don't think it would hurt for any young man to have at least one year of military training. Not necessarily to fight but I think it does help you. I helped me it made me realize I wasn't as smart as I thought I was.

Interviewer: I've heard a lot of people say that they who were in the military say that they wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience but they wouldn't do it again for a million dollars.

Mr. Rankin: That's right that's true.

Interviewer: Well I think you've given us a pretty good account of your military service and I can't think of any more questions. Do you have anything else you want to say?

Mr. Rankin: Well I want to sum up with three subjects. First I don't think people today the amount of patriotism there was in the country back then when the war started. I really feel it today if I see an American flag march down the street I get cold chills running up my back. I don't think some people today realize that. The second point I don't think people understood about the atomic bomb. I really think under the circumstances President Truman done the right thing by doing it because he stopped the war and he stopped the misery and the killing. There's no telling how much more would have happened. And then finally as I said while ago, I think war is absolutely senseless I just wish there was some way we could resolve our problems without resulting to war.

Interviewer: I guess that's all I appreciate you sharing your experiences with not just me but future generations who will view this video tape. So thank you very much.

Mr. Rankin: Thank you