

KENNETH BLACK
WORLD WAR II

Can you tell us your name and what year you were born?

Mr. Black: Kenneth Black and I was born in 1920; February 18, 1920. I was born in Limestone County.

Going back a little bit before the war, can you tell us about some of your memories of the Great Depression? How your family coped with it?

Mr. Black: How we coped with the depression?

Yes sir.

Mr. Black: Well really it was just ordinary. You were just used to it and you didn't know any better. You just knew that you had to work trying to get food to eat. Of course your food wasn't too high in those days.

Did you have a job before you went into the service?

Mr. Black: Oh yeah. In 1937 I went to the CCC as a civilian conservation corp. I put two years in there and I got out of that. In 1939 I went to work in the meat market and learned the trade of meat cutting.

Were you drafted into the service or did you enlist?

Mr. Black: I volunteered.

When was that?

Mr. Black: I volunteered. I was working in Sheffield, Alabama, at MP Brothers Company meat cutter and I got my change of classification so I hitchhiked to Decatur and joined the Marine Corp. I hitchhiked back to work. That was August of 1942. I called my boss and told him I was quitting work and that I had joined the Marines and I wouldn't be back until the following week.

Do you remember where you were when you got the news about Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Black: Yeah I was at Sheffield, Alabama, at Thompsons Restaurant. It was a barbeque and restaurant in Sheffield, Alabama. I was there eating breakfast.

Prior to that do you think that most Americans knew the threat of Nazi Germany and Japan that they opposed to the US?

Mr. Black: I don't think so. We thought we, and we were, king of the hill.

After you enlisted where did they send you for your training?

Mr. Black: Boot camp was Parris Island, South Carolina.

What were the living conditions like during your boot camp?

Mr. Black: It was pretty rough. We lived in wooden barracks. We had a wood floor with cracks about a half an inch in the floor. Every so often you had to clean the barracks and you had to what they called ____ stone the deck. The deck was the floor. We would take bricks and sand the floor; pour sand on the deck and rub it down with the brick. Then you had your wash pail with water and wash it all down and that thing would be, you could eat off the deck.

After you finished your basic training where did they send you to?

Mr. Black: I went to New River, North Carolina. That is Camp Lejeune now. We did more training there and I wound up in a weapons company. We had a 30 caliber machine gun.

Did they ship you overseas from there or did you go?

Mr. Black: No I took extra training there and then we went to Virginia and took a ship out of there all the way down the coast down through the Panama Canal. Of course we had to zigzag on account of subs. We were at sea for 30 days and we wound up docked at San Diego, California. From there they bused us to Camp Pendleton up in the canyon. They called it Los ____ Canyon. I swear that at night it would get just cold as the dickens. During the day it would warm up and be just as hot as hot.

What were the conditions like on the ship for those 30 days?

Mr. Black: Close quarters; very close quarters; several hundreds of Marines plus your regular Navy personnel on board ship. On board ship usually Navy food was usually better than what we had in the corp. We went from the US from Virginia all the way down to San Diego. We were on the USS Monroe ship.

Where did you go after you bused out of San Diego? Where did you say?

Mr. Black: We left, well at Camp Pendleton at Los ____ Canyon there, we trained there and from there we boarded ship and sailed to the Kwajalein Islands, Marshall Islands. That was our first invasion to take land from the Japanese. We landed there I believe it was in late February I believe. We didn't have a real heavy resistance. Of course anytime somebody is shooting at you, you got to be on your toes. Anyway that was our first invasion at Marshall Islands.

We talked about the weapons training that you did, did those weapons hold up pretty well in combat?

Mr. Black: Oh they sure did. Of course our machine gun was a water-cooled machine gun. It was a super weapon. We also had the air-cooled; same caliber and everything except it was a whole lot lighter. For the Browning automatic machine gun we had the tripod that you put your gun on that weighed 51 pounds and the gun itself weighed about 38 pounds. You had one man that carried the tripod and one that carried the gun and of course we had so many men that carried the ammunition.

Did you feel like they trained you as well as they could for what you would see in the first invasion?

Mr. Black: I think they did because they would always use this phrase; they needed fighters for the cannons. That way you didn't have time to train everybody to the fullest extent that they would like to because we didn't have a full combat ready division in the Marine Corp when World War II started. We had to get guys through boot camp and through training as quick as we could to get them back and get them into combat.

Was the cohesive working in your group pretty good when you were in combat? Did everybody work together in a group like they were trained to?

Mr. Black: Oh yeah. We had no conflicts in that manner.

After the first landing where did you go from there?

Mr. Black: From the Marshall Islands we went to the Hawaiian island which was the island of Maui. Maui was our staging area. That is where we regrouped and retrained and everything. From Maui we left there on LSTs and went to the island of Saipan which was in the Mariana Islands. That was one of the most fierce battles at that time. We had secured that and then we went to the island of Tinian. That is where I was wounded at. I was wounded there and Tinian as you know was the island there where the planes flew to drop the bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I was wounded at night. They penetrated my left flank where I was and came in from the rear and a Jap came into the hole at me. I had a time getting rid of him and a buddy of mine helped me with him. Of course another one was there waiting and when I got him pushed over the side to get up there was another Jap standing there that stabbed me right through the belly. He had stuck my buddy, Takowski, too. They stuck him through the back here, it missed his kidney. He came through alright after that. Later on, many years, I guess it was probably about 10 years ago, Takowski was his name and he died from cancer. He was a real good Marine. I stayed in the hospital close to five or six months. I came back to the states. I was in the hospital at New Hiberties Island I believe it was. After that we rode ship for the second time headed for the states but when we got down to the island of Caledonia they put me and some of the other guys off in the hospital down there. We still had what I call the irrigation system. My wound where the blood and stuff had just about collapsed my lung, I could hardly breathe. They started with a needle with a big syringe through my back into that cavity and they would draw out that fluid. It did pretty good for awhile and then it got so thick that they couldn't get it out through a needle. A guy in front of me there in the bunk, they came in one day and put a sheet around him like this and pulled him up in the bed like that and they made an incision between his ribs and put a tube in there. It was rigged up to an irrigation system where they let saline solution into the cavity and then they would cut it off and you would have a pipe coming down here and they would open that up and it would drain all that liquid out. They would do that every so often. I thought, "Man I hope they don't do that to me." The next day I was number two. The next day, Michael Terrance, a buddy of mine had the same thing. They got Connors first, me second, and Terrance third. We all had tubes in our back. When we got down to New Caledonia after we were there a few weeks, they took that tube out and told us to go out and lay in the sunshine to let the sunshine hit you in the back. When we did that of course it eventually healed up.

Did you feel that the medical treatment that you got was pretty good?

Mr. Black: I think it was exceptionally good. I can't complain a bit about that. They carried me down to the aid station after I was wounded. Of course an aid station there is nothing but a spot on the Earth. There was no cover, no nothing. Of course I was on the stretcher above the ground at night and you could just see tracers. They are just as thick as feathers on birds. They look like you can just reach up and one would go through your hand. They had given me a shot of I guess morphine. I was soaking wet from perspiration anyways and got ready to relax and of course the next thing I knew it was morning and they took me and Takowski and some more down to the beach and put us on a duck. You know what a duck is don't you?

Yes sir.

Mr. Black: They carried us to a hospital ship. That is the way they operated on me and all of our other guys. I don't remember anything after that except when I did awake I just heard them say, "Smoking lamp

is out button down all the hatches.” That is the first thing I heard. Of course with a stomach wound you couldn’t get anything to drink.

It’s getting time to go.

Mr. Black: That is a part of my experience.

I appreciate it sir.

Mr. Black: When you see a Jap and you smell his breath, you know something’s got to give.

(End of Tape)