

John Galbreath

Today is Tuesday April 29th, 2002 and this is the beginning of an interview with John Galbreath at Highland Farms in Asheville, NC. (actually Black Mountain, NC). My name is Jennifer McPherson and I will be the interviewer.

Jenny: Were you drafted or were you enlisted?

John: I volunteered.

Jenny: When did you volunteer?

John: March 13, 1944.

Jenny: And where were you living at that time?

John: New Wilmington, Pennsylvania

Jenny: What were you doing when Pearl Harbor happened?

John: I was in theological seminary returning from a choir trip.

Jenny: How did you react to that?

John: You knew something very dramatic had happened in the life of the world and wondered how it would turn out and how you would be involved.

Jenny: What made you enlist?

John: I was of draft age. I had been excused from the draft because I was a theological student; most of my friends were in the service. I wanted to be and wanted to go in as a chaplain. So I accelerated my theological training in order to get out in the mid year and immediately enlisted and went into the Navy in March of '44.

Jenny: What were those first days like?

John: I went to William and Mary for our retreat for training for our commission in the chaplaincy. It was from one college campus to another essentially except the subjects were different and the implications were different.

Jenny: Did you choose the Navy?

John: Yes.

Jenny: For what reason?

John: I think the, and this speaks out of prejudice, the Navy had a better reputation in terms of the chaplain core than the Army. Also the Army required two years' experience and the Navy

did not. And having just gotten out of seminary I was still wet behind the ears so I went to the Navy.

Jenny: So where did you go in the war?

John: My first duty in the Navy, active duty was at San Diego hospital. Having been wet behind the ears they wanted to place me where I would be under a senior chaplain and I couldn't do too much damage and they could check up on me. I was married on route. I stopped by my hometown where my wife was in college. I had the letter in my pocket saying yes but not now, and I talked her into getting married. I said I am heading for the west coast and my next duty is going to be west of that so we get married now or we wait 'til the war is over. I sweet-talked her into taking the plunge. She was facing her last term of college in the summer. She delayed that and we married and then went to San Diego. We were supposed to be there a year. After I had been there a month I came back from lunch one day and found a set of orders on my desk. I was ordered to the fifth marine division which at that time was on its way overseas. The chaplain for the thirteenth marines turned out to be alcoholic and they had to replace him in a hurry and I was nearby and had no children so they grabbed me and I was sent to Oceanside, California where the thirteenth marines which was the outfit with which I was to serve was already - some of them had gone to Hawaii in preparation for combat. I ended up being in Oceanside about a month before I actually went overseas. One of my good friends a young lieutenant said, "I've seen your wife somewhere before". I said, "Well I can't imagine where that would be," because he was from Trenton and Joann had never been to Trenton. The next day he said, "I know where I saw your wife. I saw her picture in a freshman class of the Westminster college yearbook". You know the freshman class is about an inch square pictures. I said "Well whose yearbook was that"? He said "Well it was Lieutenant Reynolds. We were going out on a double date one night and he wasn't ready and I was just stumbling through the yearbook and I saw who turned out to have been your wife". I said, "Well that be Lieutenant Merit Reynolds"? It was. He was in my regiment. (Crying) He had already gone to Hawaii and I was his chaplain. It was good to have somebody from home. When brownies came through, could share them, say what each other had heard from their families, we'd worked together in a steel mill, we'd been debate partners. We went into combat, I joined the outfit in September, went into combat at Christmas. We landed in Iwo Jima. On February 19th, we were in different ships, but agreed we would get together when we landed. He was the reconnaissance officer for his battalion. He went in early to decide where our troops would be placed because that was artillery. He was with one of the early waves. I didn't go in till dusk. I was on a ship that had been built within my wife's home in Pittsburg. An LST. From the LST I got into a duck, which is an amphibious truck which is loaded with ammunition. As we started toward shore the sun set and all of a sudden we found ourselves in the middle of a fog. The fog was a smokescreen that the Navy had laid around the island so that if enemy planes or submarines came the ships would not be sitting ducks. Well in the fog we couldn't tell which way was the island and which way was the ship. I was the only officer on the boat, there were a dozen or so other marines and I gave orders that we head for the islands. It was customary that the Japanese would have a *bonsai* attack the first night, to try to wipe us out before reinforcements could come aboard. Suddenly the fog disappeared and we could see tracer bullets. I was the only one that had a compass so we laid the direction from the tracer bullets and

the fog closed in again. Finally the fog cleared (crying) we were at the wrong end of the bullets. We went starboard, that is right, up to a pile of rock that is marked the place where we were supposed to have landed. When we first went in we were at the base of (?)Narcheribochi, which is held by the Japanese. So we got in the fog, landed finally -1 mentioned the pile of rocks, but the sand was so soft, on the duck the driver can push a button that lets the air out of the tires or at least enough to soften them so that in the sand you should be able to get ashore, but we couldn't so we just had to go in circles til finally a caterpillar tractor could draw us aboard, (crying) I went ashore; it was close to midnight by then. I asked the guys who were in foxholes have you seen Lieutenant Reynolds, they said the chaplain is looking for Lieutenant Reynolds, Have you seen him. I didn't find him. I found a big hole. I would guess about twenty feet in diameter which had apparently been made by a 16 inch shell. I figured that's deep I will come back there. I never did find Merit. I did find a core man so I bunked in with him. At that time the Japanese were laying down mortar fire. We could hear it from water's edge on up the bank. And I told the core man I'd been looking for Lieutenant Reynolds. He said, "Didn't they tell you. (crying) He was killed". He was killed on the beach. I was scared of course, everybody was. We could hear the shells firing, the sand came in on our foxhole, it had passed us. Finally the mortar stopped and we heard the call of the core man. So he and I went looking we found the hole I had been looking for, ten of the twelve guys were dead. We took the two wounded down to the beach and spent the night there and the next day. The next morning as we were working with the wounded marines who were shipped from the aid station out to ships. And a combat photographer came along at that particular time and took a picture. That picture was this. This is my picture. Later on, the fifth marine division - Later on, going back a bit, they built a new chapel at Paris Island where all the new marines are trained. The fifth division was invited to put in a window. One of the stain glass windows for the fifth division is this. It was taken from this picture. Two years ago my family was planning a vacation together - we have six children - got our six families together on the coast. I had never seen the window. My son called the chaplain and said can we get aboard the (?)Cant. We want to see that window. And the chaplain said why don't you have him preach a sermon to the marines. So I was invited and told the story I told you. It is the only time in my life I have had a standing ovation for the sermon. The marines now, instead of applauding they Yahoo. So that was the reception the story got. Well it was three days later when I left the beach I saw my first live Japanese. He was coming out of a bunker that had been demolished by seashells or bombs. It was early morning. He was coming out and I was walking I suppose a hundred feet away from him. I had given my rifle to a marine who had lost his overboard, but I did have a 45 automatic. I didn't want to give him rifle so I didn't reach for my automatic, he didn't reach for his rifle. I went ahead and he went back in the bunker. If he and I could have solved the problem we could have worked things out together, but we weren't invited to. That was the only live Jap I saw on the island. There were 21,000 Japanese on an island that you could fit into Black Mountain - it was a tiny island. We killed all but a few of them. I was in where I bunked later on I went to where the original headquarters were. I was looking at Mt. Suribachi and we could see a small group of men starting up. Our howitzers had been shelling the mountain; it wasn't a high mountain, only about 550 feet high. We could see this small platoon of marines starting up. Within less than a half an hour they were at the top. I (crying) saw the flag go up. You've seen the picture of the flag. I was there it was our third

battalion artillery that had supported the twenty-eight regiment whose men went to the top. The next morning Jerry Shields, with whom Joanne and I had double dated in camp Pendleton, Jerry stopped by. His guns had been among those that shelled the mountain. That being over then that the 28th then turned north up the west side of the island to join the other regiments in our division. Our third battalion, which had been supporting the 28th then turned and followed them on up to bring fire on the northern part of the island. (Crying) Jerry said he'd heard from Dotty, he was killed. As he went up toward the front he was getting into enemy fire and he thought he would get close to a tank for protection, well the enemy were firing at the tank and he was to close and he was killed. The battle took a month. The taking of Mt Suribachi was the first four days, so most of that battle lay ahead. We lost 125 of our guys, but being artillery we did not take the casualties that infantry took. In that month we lost 6500 men in the fifth amphibious core which included the 5th division, the 4th division and half of the 3rd division. It is interesting that our regiment lost about the same number of men that were killed in the Iraqi war. About 125 were killed and about twice that many wounded. After that month, the island was declared secure. We got aboard our ships to return go home. We won, we were victorious, but nobody cheered. We were just exhausted and grieved. We turned to Hawaii where we were prepared to- we were called the spearhead division, because our division was scheduled to be the first ones into Japan. We had to replace a lot of our men, of course, who had been killed or wounded. We landed in Hawaii about Easter and there we heard about the death of President Roosevelt. We went on from there to our camp on the big island of Hawaii, it was called camp Tarawa. Named for the battle of Tarawa, because those who were there first were the first division who had been in the battle of Tarawa. We missed of course the guys who were killed. I remember in July praying at a worship service that somehow or another that we would not have to kill again, (crying) or be killed. It was about two weeks later that our prayer was answered with the atomic bomb. We were sent into occupation near Nagasaki, which of course had taken the second bomb. We were there at Sasebo it was a city, a port, until close to Christmas. Our regiment spread out over the Kyushu, which was the southern island of Japan, destroying weapons. I am absolutely convinced that had it not been for the atomic bomb, the war would not have ended. In fact a friend of mine, this is another story, returned there a few years ago and visited along with some other marines, Hiroshima where the first bomb hit. A former Japanese soldier approached him and said I want you to thank American people for dropping that bomb. Without that bomb the war would not have ended. He said "I was a kamikaze pilot and my name was about to come up, you saved my life to. I was very proud of our marines in occupation. As we landed we went combat loaded. Prepared for combat in case the Japanese changed their mind. As a matter of fact, after the emperor had declared surrender a group of high ranking Japanese officers decided they would keep fighting. They were finally put down, but the Japanese were prepared to go on had the emperor not surrendered. There was no violence on the part of our men, or practically none. The only mistreatment of Japanese that I was aware of, coming back from the island we had two guys in the brig, a marine called Davey Crocket and an Indian who had crossed the canal that bounded where we were stationed and raped a Japanese girl. They were being sent back to the United States for general court martial, but I wasn't aware of any such misbehavior upon the part, or any thievery or looting. I was very proud of the discipline of our marines when they went ashore. When I got back I landed in San Diego, it was Christmas Eve and from there I went back

to Pittsburg to my wife and my family. I got orders then to the brig at Norfolk. They were emptying the brigs into Norfolk which were the largest ones on the east coast, so I spent the next six months as Chaplain at the naval disciplinary barracks in Norfolk Virginia. You asked me the time and I told you how to make a watch. Didn't mean to dump all that on you.

Jenny: No that was wonderful.

John: But uh, I actually extended my period in the Navy because I was getting a lot out of that duty at the brig. The prisoners there with very few exceptions, had they been civilians would never have been in prison. Most of them were there for being over the hill or desertion. We had an excellent commanding officer who allowed no physical discipline of the prisoners. He said you are not here to be punished, you're here as punishment. When a man had served a third of his time he came up before a clemency board on which I sat on with the commanding officer, line officer navy and marines, psychiatrist a penal officer from the federal prison system. Before you met the prisoner, the night before you received a foil document of his background, military history sociological background, physical, criminal background if any - everything you could know about the guy, and he appeared before the board and could ask for a discharge, or to complete his sentence or to go back on duty. For a young pastor who was just out of seminary, we went through a thousand cases in that six months, and it was a wonderful case history experience. After a man had appeared before the board, he was excused and the board would discuss whether to give him a kick that is get him out with bad conduct or dishonorable discharge, possibly mitigating a dishonorable to a bad conduct which is less serious, or send him back to duty. Frequently they would be alcoholic and to send them back to duty would be to set them up for a return. We started an AA unit and where men had had a good military record, but had gone alcoholic we tried to arrange for them to have what they call a convenience of government discharge. And where possible have an AA unit to meet him at the bus when he got home. When I got out of the Navy in August and this time it was August of '45. I was discharged and went and started a new church in Pittsburg. I was there from '45, let me back up. In '51 I was in reserve, they recalled me to active duty and at that time my wife was pregnant with our fourth child, so I went to Washington and said I would be glad to come quietly if we could keep the family together. I got orders to Great Lakes. Illinois so I spent 17 months in the Navy training center at Great Lakes. Saw more of my family during that time than I did when I was in the parish where I was out almost every night at meetings and so forth. So my recall, I deserved no sympathy at all it was a very good experience and a good learning experience. I stayed in reserve after I returned to my church and stayed at the church from '45 until '79 about 33 years. Started the church in a cornfield, by the time I left it was the largest Presbyterian church in Pittsburg, 2600 members. Then I was asked to go to the church headquarters to be a staff person for theological education being the liaison between the denominational headquarters and the seminary related to the Presbyterian Church. A year ago I got orders from Brigadier general MacAbee recalling me to active duty in Hawaii, (crying.) They were putting up a peace memorial in Kauai bay in Oahu. They wanted a chaplain who had been on Iwo and apparently I was the only one they could find who was still vertical. So they invited me and my wife to return to Hawaii and there they had a statue which was a smaller model of what you see in Washington DC of the flag raising on Iwo. One of the best parts was at that flag raising the fellow with whom

I had bunked in on Iwo for the whole month was there. He was the only one of my outfit that was there, only one from the division that I knew. We had a great reunion. His name was Dick Fisk. Dick was on the West Virginian in Pearl Harbor. He was the bugler, he had played in a dance band in High School so went into the Marines they made him bugler and he was the bugler on the West Virginian when Pearl Harbor was hit. He had gone up to the bridge to blow his bugle at 8:00 and that was the time when the Japanese came in. They were so low that he could see the facial expression on the pilots that bombed the ship. The West Virginian took nine torpedoes and two bombs and was sunk within 12 minutes. He swam ashore and remained in Hawaii for two years. Finally was sent back to the states and was ordered to the fifth marine division. Going back to Pearl Harbor, he helped to get sailors off the ships and so forth and help to do what could be done in terms of repair., but he said as he passed the Arizona which was next to his ship, he said he could hear the tapping (crying) inside. I said two weeks there is no way to reach them, they died. He said for months after Pearl he could see the expression on the Japanese pilot who came in and sank his ship. After Iwo he returned, he transferred to the Air force strangely enough. He stayed in the military until retirement. On retirement he went back to Hawaii and volunteered on the Arizona where they have this national memorial. Just a part of the ship is sticking out and they have the memorial above it. He is the volunteer guide there. If you go there on a Friday you can probably meet him. There are a lot of Japanese that visit there, as well as American veterans. There were a couple of guys that came to him once about this age and he asked if they have ever visited before. One said, "I led the squadron that sank your ship" (crying), Dick said, "The war is over, we are friends". He kept that friendship- in Japan they have a group like the American Legion, but it is formed of former Japanese (?)Zero pilots and this man was one of them. They invited Dick and his wife to come over and it was Dick that was at Hiroshima and the Japanese said thank you for bombing it, it stopped the war and saved my life to. I think that is about it. I have a copy of the talk I gave to the marines at Paris Island. It was essentially the story I told you and essentially the story of Dick Fisk. So if you want t a copy of those two talks I can give them to you.

Jenny: Do you still talk to Dick Fisk?

John: Yes. In fact, let me show you an email I got from him. I think I have it here. Anyhow, what it said was Lieutenant (?)Obi now has cancer I want you to pray for him. And this was the Japanese that sank his ship. I guess I don't have it here. I have it somewhere else I guess. So he keeps a close correspondence. Lieutenant Obi and Dick, this winter I turned on the TV and they had the TV at Pearl Harbor and they showed Dick and Lieutenant Obi when they had the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Dick appeared in that along with (?)Schwarzkopf and Charles (?)Kuralt. It was a nationwide that was CBS. Then more recently they had this other one on WWII and Dick was in that picture as well. I think I have a picture of Dick here. Here is our bunk on Iwo Jima. We had a sign over our bunker, "the regimental chaplain, the barber and the ghoul - were not mad at anybody". Dick was the regimental ghoul - his job was to spray the Japs to keep them from drawing flies. Every day, as I said we killed 20,000 Japanese on an island that wasn't as big as the town of Black Mountain. He said that after WWII he developed stomach ulcers and had to have surgery. After the surgery the doctor came to him and said I almost lost you. What is eating you and Dick told the story and he said after that I didn't have these dreams

again. He and his wife are still at Pearl Harbor. This is Dick's story and this was my story (handing me papers).

John: I was saying that when I was on Iwo the combat photographer took my picture during the battle and when they built the new chapel down at Paris Island, this is the chapel, the fifth division. There is my family, six children and they each have two kids.

The stain glass window for the fifth marine division is modeled after the picture that they took on Iwo. This was the cemetery. This is I. And this is Dick Fist and myself. The flag raising. This is our choir. That was just before Christmas, before we took off for Iwo. This is Merit, who was killed. And this is Jerry who was killed. Two of my closest friends and Dotty Fink. This is when I was young and foolish.