

Landon Roberts interview

March 31, 2003

D: today is March 31. It is not April Fools yet. I am with Landon Roberts, Sr. Partner of the Roberts and Stevens Law Firm in Asheville NC. I am Deborah Miles and today is March 31, 2003. I am conducting the interview today. This is for the "Veterans History Project" with the Library of Congress and later the exhibit "WWII Mountain Memories: Home Front to the Frontlines"

D: So were you drafted or did you enlist?

L: I enlisted.

D: What motivated you to enlist?

L: I had been trying to get through college before the war came and it slipped up on us and like most people I was very patriotic and wanted to serve my country and I attempted to join the Marine Corp but I had a broken my left foot and they said I would not be able to go into service and so I went to the Navy the next day. They didn't look at my foot. They just looked at the flower on the floor where you walked across. Having seen how they did that I made a good arch.

D. So you tried to figure out a way to pass?

L. That's right; I figured it out.

D. So this is after Pearl Harbor?

L: After Pearl Harbor - this was in February.

D: So where were you in school?

L: I was at the University of North Carolina and I was almost required to finish that year in May and then I went to Columbia University to Midshipman's school.

D: How long were you in Columbia and what did you study in Midshipman's school?

L: That is called the "90 day wonders" - the college graduates, preferably from Yale you did pretty well but I had been to UNC and they said "What the heck was that?"

D. They didn't know about Chapel Hill?

L: They did not know what UNC stood for.

D: So what happened after the 90 Day Wonder program?

L: And then I was commissioned on my 21st birthday in 1942 and assigned with orders to report to Pearl Harbor for assignment.

D: What did your parents think of all this?

L: I remember my mother having said, being an only child at that time, my brother had died in an automobile accident that she felt the world would end with my being gone. But babies were born and people got married and people died and the world went on and she realized that and I do too. It might be of interest that my father was head of the draft board in Madison County. They said he was so damn mean that if he were to die with the war going on, they would not be able to get six men to be pall bearers. My mother said one fellow he'd have to carry the casket by himself.

D: Were you living in Marshall when you enlisted?

L: Yes - I was born and living in Marshall and graduated from school there when I was 16. My father would not let me go to the University and wanted to send me to prep school but I went to Mars Hill college for one year and then to Chapel Hill as a Freshmen but entered as a Sophomore.

D: So your dad was in charge of drafting everybody in Madison County?

L: I got a draft notice. I was in the far Pacific.

D: You were already there and you got a draft notice?

L: I told them I was willing to report back.

D: When you went to Columbia from Asheville had you traveled to other places before?

L: I had been to New York before. But when I went to Midshipman's school I got there and I saw them out drilling, so I decided that was the crew that was leaving. So I went downtown and checked in to a hotel and showed up Monday morning and then it turned out that was the crowd I was supposed to be with. The six naval district of the south and I was a day late.

D: When you graduated, did you go directly to Pearl Harbor or stop by and see your folks?

L: I did - I graduated on my birthday. I was in Pearl Harbor before the first of the year.

D: So you went across the US by train. Does anything stand out for you?

L: I remember seeing the Golden Gate Bridge. We were going out. Everybody said "Golden Gate in '48" and that sounded like a long time away. I did come back in 44.

D: Back home or back to the US?

L: Both.

D: We'll get to that later. What was your assignment?

L: I was there for an assignment. Basically, we did not have any ships. In fact, we were not doing too well with the war. And I was put in Naval Operations as an officer.

D: What did you do as an Operations Officer?

L: We had to keep track of all the ships and the planes in the Pacific. The area was operated by the Navy. We had one occasion the only thing I really remembered. It was and myself on duty and we got word from the air force that Pearl Harbor was being attacked again from the South. We had to call all the Admirals and we had to put all the airplanes in the air and the ships to the sea. It turned out it was a false alarm. It turned out instead of being five air carriers, it was five banana barges putted by tugs.

D: So how did y'all know that - were their airplanes flying over identifying that?

L: Yes - I got wonderful treatment. The admiral told me to go fly with the air force and I got a long stretch of 700 miles and I went to ride on an aircraft carrier, and I went on one of those for a few days.

D: So how long were you in Pearl Harbor?

L: Well, then I was assigned to a converted yacht; it was Julies Fleishman's yacht - the USS it was made in Germany. We did not have many spare parts. The commander of it had built the airfield for Amelia Aerhart. Howland and Baker. South of the equator. We went down there to see if we could establish a new air field. The ship that I was on - I guess I was a gunnery officer. We couldn't make more than 10 knots and you'd roll a depth charge off the rear of it and you'd think you were going to blow the rear end off. We got down there and the Japanese discovered us in a flying boat. And he must have been trying to drop 50 pound bombs and I was trying to hit him with 3 inch gun. He couldn't hit us and I couldn't hit him.

D: So you high tailed it out of there. How far away was that from Pearl Harbor?

L: I don't know. It was South of the Equator. Let's see. Pearl Harbor should be twenty degrees north....that is like a different world.

But then we came back in and I was transferred to a PC -that is a Patrol Craft- and it was a 599. PC's had 5 officers and 65 enlisted men

D: And what was that?

L: The ant submarine vessels The smallest is a sub chaser -a submarine chaser- then a pc, then a dc -a destroyer chaser

We were only down about 7 1/2 feet in the water and ordinarily your torpedo has to be set in at least 8 feet so we were not in danger of being hit. And the narrow width of it, no bomber is going to strike it 'cause they are looking for the big ships, the troop ships, the ammunition ships.

So the sub chaser and the patrol craft were looking for submarines.

I was on the 599 and the 596 got a submarine in Alaska by ramming it. Of course, that was our instructions and if one surfaced on, you ram it and you got promoted and a 30 day leave. They knew all the tricks of the trade. My PC was assigned to Commander of the submarine pacific on one occasion. We were out with 4 American submarines and I had 5 periscopes so we knew there was a stranger in the midst. So we had our orders for ours to go back to Pearl and we were left with one out there and it was attacked and there was an oil slick that was 200 or 300 feet long and a 1/4 mile long

It was a freight carrier submarine

[Landon explains to me the sizes of the boats]

I was there in 1943 and 44 and during that time we went to the Marshalls and the Gilbert Islands.

19:00

It was only after the war that I realized what we did do. We could take the place of a destroyer. Like having a cat in the house, a submarine is not going to mess around to be detected by a PC. You don't need to have a big bull dog chasing you if you know he is there.

D: So did it take a while for the manufacturing of the boats to catch up with the need for them?

L: I had been going. It was really in 1944 that the big boats showed up the aircraft carriers and the battleships. I went on the smaller boats to the Douglas, Marshals and Gilberts.

[I (Debbie) showed him a book written by Joe Alexander: The Battle for Tarar. On page he refers to a story of Mr. Roberts as a young officer taking an island that had been held by the Japanese.]

L: That was in Tararar

That was in the Gilberts. Christmas Eve of 1943.

D: So that story was based on when you were in Pearl Harbor. Would you tell us about it?

L: When we were in Tarar I went ashore to talk to the General Marine Corp about getting some men and going to take an island called Minuti which was south of Tarar and he said he didn't have any to go and just to go by myself with the members of the crew. So we went down in an LCDP which was a landing craft and - should I just tell the whole story? Yeah, so I took 20 men and was going to have a landing party go ashore. The Admiral and the British Lord Governor but we went ashore without them. About a 1/4 of a mile of the beach, I hit a reef and we were stuck. We saw some natives come around the end of the island. We looked over the edge of the ship and saw them coming in outrigger canoes. When they got to us they said, "No Jappy - all Jappies dead." Apparently they had taken care of them with knives. We stayed on the beach that night. The next day we went out and got the Lord Governor General ashore and came back in and had a meeting with about 6,000 natives on the island. As I remember they stood on the shore and cut the palm fronds and laid them across the beach so we wouldn't have to walk on the sand. And went up to where we had the place where we were going to have a statement about how the war was going. They had not seen anybody since 1942 other than Japanese.

D: So they Japanese had occupied the island since then?

L: So I had erected a flag pole and ran up the American Flag. When the British Governor General came on shore he said "Strike the American, ensign, add run up the Jack". We had just taken that island the day before. So I ran up two flag poles and ran up the Union Jack and the American at the same time and then the British gave a report of what had happened in the war from 1942 - 1943 - whatever date that was

26:00

L: They had a young man with me who was a native leader by the name of Rota he spoke German and English and Gilbertese. He had been to Oxford.

D: How did he learn that?

L: I don't know but he was a wonderful fellow. The British General would speak and Rota would translate for the people. And the old Englishman was named Lord Neville. He said he had been on the island when the Japs came. They took all the boats and all the radios. He found

a life boat from a sunken ship and he took and with a sail and sailed from there to Australia.
Now the this one of the biggest talks I had ever head

D: He was the English gentleman?

L: He was the British Foreign General of the whole Pacific Area. Lord Neville.

D. He was the guy who told you to strike the flag.

L: Right

D: Lord Neville. He was on that island?

L: He said he was on THAT island on the day the Japanese ships came through

D: And did he hide from the Japanese and then find these supplies?

L: Must have

L. That would have been 2500miles

D. So it was especially significant to him to go back to that island.

L: That is right

This was the island. Somewhere we loaded some natives and hauled them to some other island.

D. When all this was happening with the natives and the 6,000 and then the Lord General speaking and Rota translating were they all standing listening?

L: Well they had the Council of Elders - old white headed men - in front. One of the old men, while this was all going on, pulled my pants leg and said "When we get American cigarettes?" He had not had cigarettes in several years.

The funny part was like a comic opera went ashore - we weren't equipped we had a couple of sawed off shotguns, I had a pistol, I took my yeoman, he was a legal secretary from Bangor Maine. He was about 40 years old and we thought he would die anytime

33:00

D: Because he was so old?

L: He had an upper and lower plate. The natives had never seen anybody with false teeth. They all wanted to see it done. So he would pop them in and out. And I took Jackson - He was an Ebony Charles Atlas. He had been a national Heavy Weight Boxing Champion of the United States. He was a black man.

D: He was in your company?

L: He was my steward. We got there and the little girls.... so put a line in the sand and said “now you see what they did to the Japanese and they will do it to you if you do anything. And they stayed in. I slept in a cot beside them. If I woke up in the middle of the night one of the natives went skinny up a coconut tree and slice off a coconut for me to drink to help me sleep.

The girls did not have any tops on - they had grass skirts. The medium of exchange was one American cigarette for a grass skirt and finally they had all the supplies bought and they just took their skirts off.

D: So they would just walk around without anything on?

This must have been quite - this was a different world?

L: This was a completely different world. I am sure I did not just dream this up.

D: Does it seem like that sometime?

L: What is fact and fantasy.

D: Where were the guys that came with you on shore?

L: They were sleeping on the beach - that is where I drew the line to sleep inside. [More explanation about the coconuts]

D: How long were you on the island?

L: I don't remember, just a short period of time.

D: So these natives they must be remembering now “Remember when those guys came ashore?”

When you were in front of the Council of Elders how many were there?

L: There must have been about 12 with the Governor General and then myself and the Captain of the ship - we all sat on a platform and they decided to present the Captain with a wife and he said he couldn't accept it - he was an American and a Christian and we only had one wife And then

they offered me a wife and I had to say I had a wife too, which was not so. The captain had gotten away with it.

All the people were there. They were lined up on both sides and as we approached they laid them down on both sides as we came towards them. It was the same thing as the passion play when Christ entered Jerusalem.

The girls came up and would say about Jackson "Me want him - him Africano".

D: What was his name?

L: Jackson - that was his last name. He was from Chattanooga. That is the only man I can remember on that ship - isn't that amazing?

36:00

D: We are going to interview a number of folks from the African American community of this project. Part of what we want to talk about is the way the war changed America.

L: When I came back, I was offered a ship with an all Black crew - I did not take that. But that would have been about 1944.

D: So when you were done with the Gilbert Islands you got back on the boat and went back to Pearl Harbor?

L: And then I flew back for America. I wrote my own orders and wrote them to go to Miami Beach, Florida.

D: Why?

L: Well - I thought that was a good place to go. I was in a sub marine chasers training school - pause - I could tell a bad tale but I don't know if I should tell that - We were learning things that I had already done all the things so I did not attend much of the classes.

When it was all over the captain called me in and said "Roberts, tell me, why did you come to Miami?"

"Well sir I came to Miami to have a good time and I have."

And he said "Get out of my office." And the next day I reported, "Mr. Roberts, you will be very interested in a dispatch that I have sent." So he read to me that he wrote my commanding officer that "Landon Roberts is recommended as a beach master on the next invasion of the Pacific and if that is not available then an LST - and that was the dirtiest thing he could do. Then it turned

out his request was not honored. But that did not happen. I got put on a ship that had just been built in Stamford, Connecticut. That was a PC 12.

Patrol Craft

D: So this is midyear in 1944?

L: Well the headquarters had moved from Pearl to Guam. (Names of islands)

Then we went to the far Pacific, (names of islands including Iwa Jima

After Iwo was taken

D: Were you involved in the taking?

L: See I did not get to be a hero - one of my friends did get the Congressional Medal of Honor -

We were assigned off the coast of Japan to rescue aviators. We got one or two of them. They landed right into the ocean. And we would pick them up.

Bobbie Morgan was flying B-29's

He was flying them at that time

The other one was off of Tinian and I went down and watched them load the Atomic Bomb

D: Tell me about that

L: So down in the Pacific we had heard about the idea of the Atomic Bomb. It happened I had no knowledge

I went down and watched them load the Atomic Bomb ... I went over to the airfield to see them put the "big boy" in the belly of that ship. We had been told that it might be a dud or set off a chain of events that would go around the whole world. It was night time... about 2:00 am so it could fly at dark and bomb in the morning."

D: Were there lots of folks watching?

L: I can't remember that. I just remember them doing it.

D: How did you hear about that morning?

L: We heard about it through Tokyo Rose. I guess we had radio operators and they heard it.

D: Did you quickly know that the war was over?

L: No - we just knew it had exploded.

It did not draw enough water to be torpedoed or big enough to be bombed. One thing I was afraid of was Japanese Destroyers. On the morning that I heard the war was over - I saw 4 Japanese destroyers and I think they wanted to surrender but they went on.

Some character had given me an island near Guam. So I asked if he could get any girls. He said he could. So were going to have a party on my island.

D: So how do you get given an island?

L: It is there - go take it. All the captains wanted to come to the party. So all the captains came with whiskey and there were the girls and we had a good time. came with his aide and we had a good time. About 2:00 am I remember. He had to get on his way to take the surrender of an island called Marcus - Captain don't you think I should go with you - I don't think you can find it. He said "you can't find the United States of America."

This is history - I have incredible respect for y'all.... tape runs out.