Bruce Heilman oral history interview

Sergeant, United States Marine Corps
World War II – Pacific Theater

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Abstract:
Bruce Heilman discusses his service in the Marine Corps during World War II. Heilman talks about his family dairy farm during the 1940s, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and his decision to join the Marine Corp. He shares his boot camp experience as a seventeen-year-old in San Diego. He outlines his responsibilities during his early years, including Naval identification and signal training prior to the second wave invasion of Okinawa in April 1945. Heilman describes hearing the news of the atomic bomb strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and their impact on the war. He describes post-war Japan and coming home to the United States. Heilman reflects on his service as a World War II veteran.

Transcript Notes:
Transcriber: Cinebar Productions

Virginia War Memorial

Abstract by: Aaron Rodriguez, VWM Volunteer

Interview Transcript:

Interviewer: First thing we'll do is we'll have you spell your name, last name first.

Heilman: Okay. H-E-I-L-M-A-N. Heilman. And it's E, Bruce. E as in Edgar or Earl or whatever you want to make it. And Bruce is in B-R-U-C-E.

Interviewer: Okay, now, branch of service, rank, serial number.

Heilman: United States Marine Corps. I was a buck sergeant and serial number. You know what, I'm about to say my telephone number and then my Social Security number. It's right on the edge of my I think of it in a few minutes because I still remember it. 561292.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's start right at the beginning. When you joined up, tell me why you picked the Marines, why you joined it all, what your parents said and just sort of what was going on at the time?

Heilman: Yeah, I was the son of a tenant farmer who ran a dairy of about 40 cows, and there were three boys. And he and the three of us ran that dairy, milked the cows by hand. So, on the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, it was appropriate that I found myself in the milk room. Someone came in and said, The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. Well, that didn't mean a whole lot to me. I never heard of Pearl Harbor. But before the next two or three days were over, and the radio, which was the one thing that we had because rural electricity had just put in, been put in our place. So, it had a little Zenith radio, which I still have at home and it plays. That was 1933 or something like that. We bought it and. From that point forward, I realized, at age 15, that this was going to be a war I'd be engaged in at some point, because patriotism just swelled up everywhere. And I already wished I were old enough to go, either to get away from the cows or to get involved in the war. I had an older brother, two years older than I, who was already in the Marine Corps before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He was a corporal, was a radio operator down at Cherry Point, North Carolina. As the Marine Corps had a relatively little air force at that time, they took some of these youngsters, I think they were three of them, who were corporals. They sent them to Pensacola with the Navy, sent them through flight training, and five months made them technical

sergeants, sent them to El Toro in California, formed a squadron and shipped a squadron of enlisted pilots overseas. And my brother shot down a Zero and they commissioned him. He was 19.

And so, by that time I was about to turn 17 and I was trying my best to get my parents to approve my joining the Marine Corps, because you had to have a signature at 17. My dad threatened never to sign it if I didn't settle down and finish high school. Well, I didn't finish high school. I failed courses. And I, the second time around I failed algebra. They decided that they would give me a certificate of graduation, because the Marine Corps would do me more good than the high school was doing me. So, I went in the Marine Corps in March of '44, which was a year and a half before the war ended. And I was patriotic, ambitious, ready to leave home and all the things that the times suggested a young man ought to do. And by the time I was in boot camp in San Diego from Kentucky, I'd never been out of Kentucky, got on a train for four days, and I thought, what a big world this is. I got to San Diego and the first card I wrote home, three days after boot camp, "I said, I've learned something. The most important thing I've learned is that I should have stayed home." Well, that's boot camp, of course, but I spent four years in the Marine Corps following that and was able to do what I was ambitious to do, be the best I could be, be contribute to the winning of the war and be a hero if I could, which I never really was. But, you know, we all were prepared to be heroes, but we were prepared to die, seriously prepared to die for our country. Never thinking, giving it a second thought. And I think that represents all young men of the time.

Interviewer: Do you remember your first DI?

Heilman: I remember him vividly. He was a big bulldog looking guy with five stripes on his arm. And he had just returned from the Battle of Guadalcanal. And unlike today, in boot camp, and I'll be at Parris Island in about two weeks for a meeting of the board of the Marine Military Academy, where I've served as chairman and been on the board about 15 years. And I know today, they're still making Marines out of young people. But it's different to say to them, "Let's learn to thrust this bayonet because one day we may go to battle." They may be a little more conscious right now after what's happened recently. But when they said to us in

San Diego, and then we're going to Tarawa and the Marianas and ready to go to Iwo Jima, “Learn to thrust that bayonet.” and they just gotten back from Guadalcanal, “or one's going to be thrust through you. And within the next six months, you're going to be facing this thing. It's not, this isn't fun and games. This is serious business.” And they impressed us with their own battle experience and used vivid examples of how to do this and why to do this and how vicious the Japanese were and how tough they were.

And there was no fantasy about that. So, boot camp to 17-year-old kid, and I had other friends in the boot camp as old as 30 or 31 or 32 who had families back home, because they were drafting Marines, by this time. I was a volunteer, but the Marines for a long time were all volunteers. But we had draftees, and these were bigger men, tougher men. I was pretty small at the time. But you didn't get any special privilege, no matter who you were or what you cared, everything you did, everything. And you got knocked around by all the rest of them. And so, it was an experience based upon reality. I mean, we trained to defend ourselves against the opponent who was going to kill us, and that was going to happen soon. So, we better be prepared. And it was an experience unlike any you can get without war, I can tell you.

Interviewer: And how long were you in boot camp?

Heilman: I was in boot camp four weeks, I'm sorry, eight weeks, two months. That was the shortened version, which today is either 12 or 16 weeks. I think with The Crucible, it may be 16, but we, they were sending Marines through by the literally hundreds a day, every Friday, graduating hundreds of them. And of course, there were lots of them getting killed and wounded. And we were coming through fast to replace those out in the islands. And so, we, we didn't spare any time. We worked day and night. And we're on the rifle range for two weeks and six weeks in training otherwise. And then, we went to our advanced training. I went off to radio gunnery school, because I was number one in the rifle, as a native Kentuckian using Kentucky windage. And I've got even have a citation from the paper at San Diego of my expertise as a rifleman. So, they sent me off to gunnery school rather than to the ground forces.

Interviewer: Are there any, any things that happen in boot camp that still stick in your mind?

Heilman: Well, that's one thing that sticks in my mind. I was very poor student. I had not ever succeeded at anything except I was fast at milking cows and things like that. But when I succeeded in rising above the rank and file and success, and in firing a rifle, and in the Marine Corps. That's important. It was an expert rifleman was written up in the San Diego paper as one of the top three out of 600 men. And I was one of the youngest and smallest in the outfit. I really took on a sense of pride in that. And then, it even gave me $5 a month extra for my whole career in the Corps. And with $51, $5 added, it's pretty good. So, I remember that vividly. I also remember, of course, the, that it was tough even for a farm boy who worked hard. I used to get up at 3:30 and 4:00 every morning to milk those cows. Got to sleep till 5:30 in the Marine Corps. I thought that was pretty good. But once you got up, you hustled for the whole time. Those long marches and all of the, the tough stuff you had in swimming and everything else. But, but here again, they would throw us in the water with full packs and all the rest and said, you know, "You're going to be on troop ships and troop ships get torpedoed and you're going to be in the water and you're going to have to learn to survive." We had, we had one of our fellow Marines drown in the swimming pool in San Diego in boot camp, because they kept pushing him back in. And, you know, there's a fine line between reality and reasonableness, and it's difficult to know when that transpires. But we actually had one to drown. But we jumped off a tower and we'd be in the water for an hour. And you learned how to do it. I remember those things well.

Interviewer: How was gunnery school?

Heilman: That was, I went to the Naval Air Technical Training Center from San Diego in Memphis. We had to go through radar, radio and gunnery, preliminary gunnery in Memphis for six months. And I'm sure that my rifle experience got me in there, because actually we shot shotguns at clay pigeons. And that's really gunnery in the tail seat of a dive bomber. A Japanese plane is much like following a clay pigeon. You have to learn to lead and windage and all the rest. So, I spent six months there and we had to learn radar and they had radar and barbed wire enclosures. You had to have a special card to get in. It was a big secret. Then in Memphis and elsewhere and I learned radio, we actually had mock up planes

where we learned Morse code. We learned semaphores, we learned hand semaphore code, so we could communicate plane to plane by flags or by code. And then, after we finished there, we went back to an operating unit. I went back to San Diego and was supposed to get in a squadron. The fact is, it was about time the Marines landed on Iwo and a lot of my ground friends went there and as I said, I would have gone there as a replacement myself. But because of that, and then with Okinawa coming up and already, you know, when Okinawa was planned, we already had plans to invade Japan following that battle. Operations Olympia, I believe, if I remember correctly, it was called, so that I did not then go on to gunnery school where I actually practiced gunnery from the aircraft. They sent me then on the ship to Okinawa as a replacement on the island, and I became an operator of IFF, that's Interrogation, Friend or Foe, in the tower to discern whether these were Japanese planes coming in or American planes coming in.

Then, I was also on radio watch, which, interestingly enough, I happened to be on 4:00 in the morning radio watch when a, the, a Japanese newscast came by, in English, that a, that a big bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. I picked that news up on Okinawa for distribution to the troops. And it was fascinating. And I have a letter at home that I typed out on an old Royal typewriter, I'm sure, shortly after that, that, I sent to my mother saying, “I have just heard the news that a big bomb has been dropped on Japan from Japanese radio. And this might be the end of the war for us.” And I still have that letter preserved. And sure enough, that, well, a few days later, then the next bomb was dropped and that brought within 30 days we were having celebrations on the island. I have a clipping from one of our newspapers on the island, one of the squadron papers, that six servicemen were killed in the celebration of the war's ending by flak. We were shooting everything up into the air and we had six people killed just from that celebration, which in that particular era and following the war and with 250,000 people killed on Okinawa in four months, that was no big deal, you know, interestingly, that's very interesting, but it's true. We didn't think a whole lot about that. But six of our own were killed just in the celebration.

Interviewer: You know, when they shipped you out, where did they ship you from?

Heilman: They shipped me from San Diego. They shipped, they had a ship, the *USS*, let's see, *Lorraine*, L-O-R-R-A-I-N-E, I think. I don't remember the exact spelling. It was, it was APA troop ship. I would guess, we probably had 6 or 700 in the hold of that ship. We might have had 1,000. It's not that vivid in my mind. And of course, we went ashore with packs, rifles, full gear, everything to land. We didn't know where we were going. We knew Iwo had been secured, but we had heard of Okinawa. And in one of my letters to my mother that I think was mailed, maybe before I got on the ship, I indicate that we don't know where we're going. It could be here. It could be there. Even mentioned Okinawa. And because the according to my discharge papers, I left San Diego on the 16th of April on the back of my second discharge, I got two different discharge papers... I re-enlisted at one time, that I left there on the 16th. Actually, Okinawa was invaded on the first day of April, April Fool's. And so, I was moving into the South Pacific just right after that. They had initially invaded the island and, of course, it was about four, four and a half months before it was totally secure. So, we loaded up that ship and took off. And I remember, of course, I got a little seasick first two or three days, and then we sailed and sailed.

We would wake up one morning with, maybe, 40 ships in the convoy, and the next morning we'd wake up and we were all alone. The next morning we'd wake up, maybe have a subchaser, and then the next morning we'd wake up and we'd have two carriers. But and, we zigzagged all over the place. And we were on that ship for 56 days. And I can remember while on that ship, I was on the fantail when we sighted the Japanese sub and the subchasers were dropping these big barrels over the sides, darting around everywhere. And I was grateful that it was daytime and that I was on the upper side of the ship, because one of the things that I thought most of us suffered, that we never put in context very much, we go to bed at night in the lower holds of those troop ships, knowing there were submarines operating. And that the worst thing in the world I could imagine was having a that hull penetrated and not being able to get out of that thing or getting out and getting in the water at night. And the options are not very great there. And that's one of the things as a young man, I had courage and all the rest and it was willing to die, but I didn't want to die that way if I could help it.

So, we, we went through all that exercise, but we did stop in the Marshall Islands at Ulithi, where we had a lot of ships anchored and so forth. And then, we moved on into the area, Okinawa area where the kamikazes were coming down. And we had literally hundreds, almost thousands of ships in that area. You couldn't see anything but ships. But the troops, as we moved in, of course, we were, we were more vulnerable by that time almost on the ship than we would be ashore. So, we wanted to go ashore. So, when we did get off, we landed like all Marines do, even though the beaches were already cleared, on, on these little landing craft and slept on the beach the first night. And I remember for me here again, I didn't know what to expect. None of us, we were green and you and landing for the first time, hearing Japanese planes overhead and maybe a bomb dropped or two like that. But, but to the to the first timer, you know, that's war. And it is war. of course, the battle was going on, but it had moved on. And then they moved us the next morning into replacements with the squadron I was with Marine Air Group 31, and my designation, of course, was radio gunner.

And so, radio was opened. I never did actually fly in combat as a gunner. My flying took place after the war ended and we realized we didn't have to move into Japan, which I would have been put into operation and been flying again as a tail gunner had we moved in there, and probably wouldn't survive that. But when we moved to Japan and I went up right after the war ended and took over a naval base, the Japanese naval base at Yokosuka, which was really Omura in a smaller sense, but it was a Japanese naval base, and we had a squadron of Corsairs. And we had the, we had the, the commander of the Fifth Fleet's aircraft station there had an all-Marine crew. So, they assigned me as a radio operator on the staff ship, the commander of the Fifth Fleet, which was wonderful duty. And that's how I happened to be almost immediately at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And I have my flight book, I was showing to the other gentlemen out here. It shows when I landed on Hiroshima, and we walked in those ashes not realizing that they were radioactive or anything. I mean, we just thought it was a big bomb. We had nothing to know better. But because of being assigned to that ship, I had an opportunity to be all over Japan and flying to Okinawa, Iwo, Guam.

On one flight to Iwo, on takeoff, we spun in and crashed. So that, whereas some of my buddies were killed in action, I just barely escaped it after the war. But

many vivid memories of things that were really outside of battle, per se, that happened, I think, to all service men. that that we overlook many times. We had in Japan, I was on a truck with probably 100 Marines, one of these we call them cattle trucks. And we'd all been down to the slop chute from several miles from the base and coming back, many of the Marines were pretty tanked up and they were singing and weaving back. This truck was on a rock road, probably doing 40 or 50 miles an hour, going around the curve in the side of that thing broke off and Marines were strewn all up and down the highway. I don't remember how many were killed or wounded, but, you know, they were cut up on those rocks and everything. Things like that. It's like it's like being in battle. And another case, I was in a car where two men were killed. And so, I remember all those things almost more vividly than some of the actual things. Of course, our troops, our ground troops who were in foxholes for 40 days.

One of my best buddies that I still see, we graduated from the same college and have been, still know each other and still friends, he was, I think, in a foxhole for 40 days on Okinawa and the rain and the mud and all the rest. Of course, those of us who were in squadrons, we had some kind of a tent or another until the typhoons came through, took our tents away, and we were sleeping on the ground, too. But so much of a four-year experience in the military is outside of the actual combat. Now, true, we've had we've we had some troops who seemed to hit every island and still survive. And they had a lot of stories they could tell about that. And I certainly can't tell, except I know about them, and who was there, and I wasn't very far away from it. But my experience is all in all, were maturing experiences and growing experiences. And I think the kind of experience that has made the so-called greatest generation what it is, whatever it is, it bypassed that article that I had an interruption that lasted a lifetime. At age 17, I went into a four-year experience that when I came back, I was a transformed individual. I was disciplined, I was ambitious, I was self-confident. I had been a sergeant. I'd been in control of men, things that I never had any confidence far before I had grown up.

I grew four inches taller and gained 40 pounds and I was ready to be married. So, when I was a freshman in college with the GI Bill... I never dreamed of going to college, I married as a freshman, went all the way through PhD program and had

five kids before I finished. That would never have happened to me, and that was multiplied time and time again by veterans of World War II. So, we prepared ourselves. But it wasn't because we made it possible. It was because the country made it possible, but the war prepared us to take advantage of it. Now, as bad as war is, it is unfortunate, as some of my friends were… they've been, they haven't been here these 58 years that I've been able to be here, and that still hurts.... but the you take the good with the bad. And fortunately, you know, I've got 11 grandkids and five kids. So, when somebody says to me, we shouldn't have dropped the atom bomb, I can come back fighting, because I wouldn't had those grandkids and I wouldn't have had the wife and children, because we all knew that we wouldn't survive that. But of course, the generation of today don't know that they think we're terrorists or something.

Interviewer: Yeah, they weren't there. When you went, when you landed on Okinawa. And you spent that first night on the beach, where did you actually go after that?

Heilman: I actually went to what we call then Shamu Field. It was a coral strip that the Seabees had just graded out because our MAG, 31, was at Yontan and that was one of the central areas there during the battle. And after a certain area was secured, they'd move in and take another strip. And when I say secured, I don't mean it was without Japanese. I mean, they weren't in mass, you know, they were up in the hills, the hills all around us. We used to go up there, with snipers and pick them out and so forth. And they'd come in at night and slip into the perimeter and get food from us if they could. And so, we walked perimeter back to back, hoping the habu snakes would get out of the way and the Japanese would....and of course, Japanese didn't make themselves very obvious, because we'd shoot them in a minute if they did. And they weren't. And they were just in hideouts, because the main troops had bypassed. But this little strip had Corsair fighters. We had B-24 bombers going into Japan, and we had Japanese planes, of course, coming in trying to disrupt our airstrip. One night a plane came in, loaded with troops and landed with wheels up and they jumped out and run them down the strip splitting our aircraft, the fabric and all. Of course, they were all killed shortly.

But I've got pictures of them out here on the on the strip. But the, the area was on Shamu Bay, and we call it Shamu Field. Actually, there's a little town there called

Ken, K-E-N, Okinawa. And today Camp Hansen is there, which is a major Marine base and there's no airstrip. And I visited last year for the Marine Corps University, because I was chairman of the board, and I was there visiting the five camps for our educational program. And I went back there, and nobody there realized that there had been a strip there. And I showed them that the main street was the airstrip, but now it's blacktop, it's got buildings all around it. And they were fascinated by that, because they didn't know that history. And I was visiting my daughter, who is with the Defense Department on Okinawa, and I have a grandson goes to school there, today. So, it's like a different world. It was nothing there when I was there except destruction. And today it's a metropolitan island. So, it's like a dream. It really is like a dream. You can't... it's hard to envision that. I landed there on a barren beach and took a truck through muddy highways, you know, up to the axles and got this little coral strip. And we set up tents as best we could and had a little food service place out there with two by fours, with canvas over the top of it with field kitchens.

And then, a typhoon blew all of that away, because we had a vicious typhoon while I was there. And so, and they've recently had one on Okinawa. And our daughter called and said, we're batten down. They now have concrete buildings. They're secure. And the, and the typhoons can't blow them away. But they had closed school for three or four days, she said. And all the military had to batten down the hatches, fly the planes away. And of course, we did that, too. When the typhoon was coming in, we'd tried to fly the planes out, but one, on the one occasion they caught the Navy planes, the pontoons down in the bay wrecked most of them, because they didn't get out in time. And ships, too, the ships would leave as best they could. But that was a real problem in and of itself, the heavy winds over there, we had two typhoons during the during and right after the battle of Okinawa, while we were trying, I was on a ship going to Japan for the occupation when the second one hit. And, and, you know, it was like the ship would sink and come up and we didn't care where it came up or not. We were so sick that it it really didn't matter too much. You lose all sense.

Interviewer: Now, you said that you were on the island actually on the radio when the first...

Heilman: When the announcement came, I picked up the first news from off the island about the atom bomb being dropped. And of course, we were the forward troops for the invasion. And actually, those of us who were replacements, who didn't land with the original group were the prime participants in the invasion. You know, some of the troops had been there three or four months. Those outfits were pretty much worked out over, anyway. They were going to go back and probably be rehabilitated. But I have, which I received just several months ago, a secret document that has, after 50 years was made non-secret…. and I got this from a Marine Corps officer… about the precise nature of the invasion, when it was to take place, what Air Force components would be engaged, what Navy ships would be engaged. And it said the entire Marine Corps would be engaged. And, I mean, that, they had it designated where each one would take its place. And do you know, on that same date, a terrible typhoon came through? If we had been landing in those troop ships, it would have been a disaster. And when you look back, that's that, that mighty wind that the Japanese are always looking for. They've been saved by over the years and they got to reflect on that, divine wind. So, that history really tells you. what good fortune we had in ending the war with that atom bomb.

Because we knew when the Japanese had planned, they had saved, I believe, if I remember the figure correctly, nearly 4,000 planes that we were unaware they had to dive into the troop ships when we invaded the mainland. And we don't know how long it would have taken us to, to win that war because we don't know how many we would have lost. Well, we, we anticipated we would lose a million men, but I think we would have lost more, because of the circumstances that the Japanese would probably lose two to five million. And yet today, we still debate whether 250,000 killed with two atomic bombs was unacceptable, even though 250,000 died in in four months on Okinawa with the Okinawans, the Japanese and the Americans. But most people don't understand that, because that's history. I understand it, because I was there. And thank goodness some of us can still be around to tell it. But what you're doing here today and have been doing provides a continuum of conversation for future generations. They can believe me or not, and others are not, but they're at least getting it from those who were involved rather than from a historian who couldn't feel it, even though he might dig out a document and write about it.

Interviewer: When you got that message, did you did you understand what that bomb was about?

Heilman: No, I just understood it to be a bigger bomb. And every nation and war moves to the next biggest advantage, and that you know, we, we had the B-29s and incendiaries and we burned Tokyo to the ground, and Yokohama. And it was more vicious in many ways than the atomic bombs. You know, they had the, the water boiling in the river. And so, this was just the B-29. You know, we get where we got a B-29 and we got a B-17, we got this, we got a bigger bomb. Wonderful. Maybe. But, but, because they said that destruction was so vast and of course, they called it an atomic bomb, that didn't mean anything to me. I didn't know anything about fallout or just how vicious it was, but it was obvious from the communication that was unusual. And then, when the second one was dropped. But I remember when that first one and I wrote to my mother, and they didn't censor it. I said this could be leading toward a resolution of the war if, if it is as bad as it sounds to the people, because it cited the loss of life. And I'm sure the Japanese were using it propaganda wise to the maximum extent so they'd make the folks back home restless that we would do anything so disingenuous as that to drop a bomb, to kill civilians. But of course, the Germans were killing civilians in London, and we were killing them in Berlin. And, and you during the war, and as a participant in the war, you applauded every action that your side took to advance your cause.

And that might have been callous or whatever else. But of course, you were living the reality that your life was being risked every day, your family's life was being risked, you might lose your freedom. And, and those Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor without our even knowing that we were about to go to war, the Germans invading countries, and the psychology of the time was such that no one questioned those things, really. And I don't mean that quite literally, but certainly those of us who were at the forefront ready to make the next move, well, it was like the next touchdown. We won and we were grateful for it. You know, we we thank the Lord for being on our side. And we prayed that he would stay there. But in the Japanese, you know, they wanted to die for the emperor and the banzai charge. no matter how many we shot down, they kept coming. And we, even

Marines that the Japanese said, we're vicious killers et cetera, et cetera. But none of us really wanted to die. And we'd do anything we could to live. But we would fight, clearly, to the death to do to to succeed at our objective. We were trained that way, and we literally felt it. Didn't mean we weren't scared. It didn't mean we, but I think we were courageous. But we were courageous for our cause.

Interviewer: Where were you when you heard about V-J Day?

Heilman: I was, you know, I can't remember that as clearly as I can Pearl Harbor or Kennedy's death or October or September the 11th, because from the time the bomb, first bomb was dropped and the second bomb was dropped and V-J Day, it was a series of negotiations going on that were clearly leading to, to, to eliminating the battle to terminating the war. And so, on the actual V-J Day. And I've got the date, because I've got that paper that talks about the celebration. And I remember the celebration, but I don't remember precisely what I was doing at the exact moment that I heard about that. But my circumstance was, at that time, we had put a little wooden floor in our tent. And I can remember the four of us who lived in that tent with our rifles swung under our beds... we were still going up in the hills hunting Japanese. And, and we were still, of course, keeping everything on the ready for further battle, and even preparing to move into Japan if we did not get an armistice at that time. But I don't remember the precise place I was or precisely when I heard about it. I think, it was over a couple of days that we it was sort of building up to it is true, you know, we hear it and then it transpires, and we know our officers were collecting then for the signing of the armistice and all that. But I don't I'm not vivid in exactly where I was.

Interviewer: When you actually went to Japan and end up going to Hiroshima or Nagasaki, what in the world did it look like?

Heilman: And one of my letters, and one of these days I'm going to put them together and comment on them. They're all together in sequence. But I draw from that some of my remembrances. And to my mother, I said, “That I have been to Hiroshima. And the place was devastated.” We landed across the river, remember, in the history and in the news releases, it talked about the river was full of dead bodies and all the rest because people went there and just jumped into the river to cool

themselves, what have you. And I remember that river. We landed on the strip, or at least on an open place. And I remember a couple of little kids when we got off the plane with scabs on their bodies, and we had some of these little ration biscuits and I remember giving them some. And then, we walked in the area and I remember seeing the building with a dome that you see in pictures that just a shell of it was still standing. Otherwise, it was pretty much level. But I said to my mother, “That while this is devastated and looks terrible, it doesn't look any different from Tokyo and Yokohama,” which was literally true. You know, they were just as so I said to myself, what's the difference between doing it with one bomb or doing it with a thousand bombs? You know, it's all the same.

So, we are no more barbarians in dropping one, that's bigger, than we were in dropping thousands and burning people out. And they, likewise, doing the same thing to us, bombing ships that sank with people still entombed and they're still there. So, I guess, maybe, we are defensive a bit about that, those of us who were a part of it and defend what was done, because we would have been, well, we would not have been able to believe that we would not have used the biggest instrument we have in order to prevent us going to further war. So, but when I was there, yes, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were both devastated. Yokohama, Tokyo... I traveled all over Japan, flew all over Japan, but also travel, because when we landed, we took over this base and the troops was one of the troops. We would go out into the community, we would get on trains, those that were still traveling, you know, the Japanese would be packed full hanging out windows. I remember on one train I was on, they were hanging out, went under a tunnel, and one Japanese hit his head and fell back in the car and killed him right there. And that the Japanese weren't doing a thing about it.

And some of us Marines were trying to be helpful to him, but they were almost like they were dumbfounded with all that was going on. The war was over. We were there taking over from them everything. They resisted almost not, not at all. They bowed to us on street corners so we would commandeer a car truck, a train. We'd we took over whatever we wanted, and we would go up into the mountains or we'd travel to other cities and whatever conveyance they had or we had, without any restriction or resistance. And it's amazing that we didn't get more casualties from disgruntled or angry Japanese people who were doing this. You

know, the soldiers were all being rehabilitated, rehabilitated, Japanese soldiers brought back from different parts of the world. But it's amazing, once the emperor said, we're no longer at war, they lay down their arms and they bowed to us on the street corners, literally. And of course, we again, I was I was still 18 years old, then. And so, they didn't have a lot of mature people. We were all over the place. I would go back in those caves on, on activities, we'd have day after day and disarm their Baka bombs and carry out the materials that were to be destroyed. They were all under the hills, everywhere. That's fascinating.

Interviewer: Now, you were in for two more years before you went.

Heilman: When I was in Japan for about five months until April, maybe, six months. And I had a young man from Cincinnati, one from Hartford, Connecticut, and another one, I've forgotten where he was from, we were all a part of, well, one of them was a crew chief on, on the admiral's plane. It was they were Marines. The other one was the was the squadron photographer. And, and he traveled with us and took pictures everywhere he went. And the other one, I've forgotten what he was, and I was a radio operator, so we were all on the flight crew and great buddies. We decided we'd ship over and stay a couple more years in the Marine Corps. So, we, we re-enlisted right there in Japan. I guess one of the attractions was that they said, “If you reenlist here, we'll fly you back to the States and give you a 60-day leave immediately.” So, we did, and we flew back to the States. We had a 60-day leave and I fell in love and almost got married then. Then later on, got a Dear Bruce letter and married a different woman. But we had that 60-day leave and then we had shipped over two years, and I went to Quantico for a short time and then, ended up at Cherry Point and was, was the sergeant in charge of the crash crews and the transmitter station. A few other things for all the flights out of down there. We, we were sort of rescue mission for the pilots that would maybe crash off in the ocean outside the base there, because we had a lot of a lot of air flights out of that area. And I was in charge of repairing all the radios.

And, and I had all the young troops coming in from boot camp who were in electronics and so forth. And of course, then, I was a buck sergeant with ribbons, and they all thought I was a real hero from the past. It's interesting the transitions you go through. And but, that was an interesting two years. I didn't really fulfill

the full two years, because one morning I saw a bulletin on the bulletin board that stated that there was a convenience of the government discharge possibility for Marines who wanted to go to college. So, I said, I think I'll go to college. I think maybe I ought to do that. So, I sent it through, came back, I got a discharge, and this was in the middle of the year, January of '47, I guess, and enrolled at this little college, where I met my wife within a few months and married her within a few more, little junior college that they would take anybody, and they wouldn't have taken me otherwise. I couldn't have gotten into any college I've ever been president of. So, I went to school and that little school, I succeeded and kept moving ahead. But...

Interviewer: What was that school?

Heilman: Campbellsville Junior College in Kentucky. Today it is a university, and I serve on the board. And the president's home is named for my, named for my wife. She was there on a scholarship. And her mother had died when she was 16. She had five little sisters, had gone to orphanage and somebody helped her to go to college down there. So, in that little school let me in when I didn't have very good grades. So, we think a lot of this school.

Interviewer: What was it like when you got home during that 60 days? I mean, all the way home, home.

Heilman: I remember my father and mother had by that time bought a little farm, because my dad's sister and her husband had been killed in a train wreck. They were coming from Pittsburgh to Kentucky, crossing the crossing in a car, and a train hit them and killed them and their daughter. My dad inherited about $3,000. That was a lot of money. My dad never had $3,000. He paid a down payment on a little farm. And of course, when I left, he was still a tenant farmer. So, I remember coming back, and I didn't even let my folks know that I was anywhere near and coming in, I think I flew into Louisville maybe, and got a train out to Lagrange, maybe a taxi out the little farm, which a few miles out, coming up to the house and, and seeing my mother. And it was…. and I had been away, well, maybe not more than 18 months or two years. Some guys were away for a couple of 3 or 4 or even five years. But that's still a long time. And how great it was to be home. And

already I thought to myself, I'm not sure I should have signed over for another two years in the Corps. Now I've been in the war. The war is over. Maybe it would be great to be back here and so forth, but it was too late for that. So, I moved back into the Marine Corps. But during those 60 days, I came to know better… a young lady who was probably two years younger than I. And when I left home, she was too young for me to date, but she wasn't too young anymore.

And so, I started dating her. And within 60 days we were prepared to be married, except I still had two years serving the Corps, and she was ready to go to college. So, I drove her to college, went back to, to Quantico. And as I said, I had that wreck with my friend who he almost got killed and two other people did. So, we wrote back and forth. I visited a couple of times at Mars Hill College in North Carolina, and probably six or eight months later I got that letter that I heard so many about, saying how she didn't know how to say what she had to say and so forth, but she'd fallen in love with somebody, and so forth. So I have my experience with the Dear John, like all the rest of them. But in the end, you know, once you've had five kids and ten grand, 11 grandkids with somebody else, you're so glad it didn't happen. And by the way, she had, I just heard this several months ago from a close friend, that she had developed Alzheimer's about four years ago, and she just died about two months ago. And that her husband, who was a minister, had that she met at Mars Hill, had looked after her for those four years and was so depressed that he had just before she died, he had killed himself. So, I thought to myself, boy, I'll tell you, you never know. You look back, you never know what you're getting out of, as well as what you're getting into, do you?

Interviewer: Now, it must have been a shock because when, when you came back, you said you were four inches taller and 40 pounds. You must have been a different looking, different looking boy.

Heilman: I was when I went in the Marine Corps. You had to weigh 130 pounds and I weighed 130. You... I don't know what height, but I was five, eight. I was in a play in high school called *The Three Little Men*, and I was one of them. Within six months, I had grown four inches taller in the Marine Corps and had gone from 130 to 165. And I came home on furlough, and I literally was, you know, girls that I wouldn't have thought about dating, because they were taller than I and that

type of thing. I was a different person, and I knew it and others knew it. And that's all a part physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, you know, the transformation for many of us, particularly young men, 17, which lots of them were in the Marine Corps, 17,18... the transformation was almost total. And so we were different people. And I was literally a different person when I came out when I went in. Not to say that I was a better person, but I was clearly a different person.

Interviewer: When Pearl Harbor was bombed. Your whole generation stepped up to the bat.

Heilman: Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer: Had to be done whether they wanted the service or worked in factories...

Heilman: We would have been embarrassed not to. Why? You know, that's from a very real definition, I think a very real definition of why is hard to come by. But it certainly grew out of an immediate response to the idea, even at age 15, as I was maybe about turned 16, the audacity... and I didn't even know the word back then. Of a country to attack us when we weren't doing anything to be attacked. Of course, I didn't know anything about withholding fuel from the Japanese. They thought they had a reason. But we, the citizens in particular, the younger citizens, I think most citizens this was just a blanket invasion of everything we represented sinking our ships, killing our people. This is America. It's kind of like the, the Twin Towers again, Why would anyone do this? We're going to get those son of a guns and, and I want to be a part of it. I want to defend my country. It was even a part of our spiritual being, you know, the good Lord would want us to do this. And I grew up in a very rural Baptist church in Kentucky. You know, religion was very much a part of my life. And but, I didn't think of hesitating to kill people who were going to destroy our freedom, our families, invade our country. And at that time, the reality was, you know, we had people, we were sitting up guns on the West Coast to protect against a Japanese invasion. And then, we had submarines and coastal battalions on the East Coast to fight against German submarines that were sinking our ships. They were surrounding us a little bit like, Chesty Puller says in Korea, you know, “The bastards are everywhere. Now, they can't get away.”

Well, you know, we had them that way then, and, and just deep down inside gut feeling, we wanted to be a part of protecting our country. And then, after, we actually started moving ahead, of course, we in Europe, we were going to be moving there before we did some in the Pacific. But the word started coming in from Guadalcanal, my brother was over there fighting. Where they had *30 seconds over Tokyo,* all these films, you know, *Guadalcanal*, they had film about the Marines. I'd see those things and, you know, I had to be one of those, literally, I wanted to be a hero. And I think that's being honest, that most of us younger men, because we had nothing to highlight our individual competence or selfishness, or there was no success in my life academically. I hadn't done anything. I wanted to prove to my dad and mom and everybody else that I was somebody. And that, literally, was a part of why we wanted to be involved. We don't want to be left out. I couldn't imagine the war being over and my not having had a part in it. Well, of course it lasted long enough that I had a substantial part, but it was emotional. It was, I think, rational. It was reasonable. It was patriotic. It was a desire to fulfill one's selfhood, even manhood. I was a kid. I wanted to be a man. And the Marines? Why did I go in? The Marines? You say you want to be a Marine. You say you want to be a sailor, a soldier, a Marine. What's the toughest? I mean, you just accept it and go on.

Interviewer: Let me ask you this. When everybody got back, essentially people came back, took the uniform off, hung it in the closet, either went back to school or went back to work. Really never talked about the war.

Heilman: That's right.

Interviewer: Well, why do you think that is?

Heilman: Well, certainly for the ones who came back who were very viciously wounded, for those who had been psychologically disturbed somewhat, because they were so long in battle on the battlefield, for those who had had a face-to-face engagement with reality of death, I think, clearly they could not comprehend conveying that to people who had not been a part of that. Now, when they got back with their buddies, you know, the reunions and all... I've been to several of

them, it's a different story. They can remember lots of things and can converse about them, their wives, their children. They were going on with their life. They didn't want to disrupt it by things that were, that didn't present a happy picture. All of us, those of us who were, you know, ordinary Marine soldiers, sailors who had our taste of battle, who had our experiences, who knew what reality was and war, and who were in the battle zones, I think, we could talk generally about it. It was easier for me to talk about my experience in the Marine Corps than to concentrate on, you know, why we dropped the bomb or what went on, on Okinawa, things like that. Because again, if you weren't there, you didn't understand what anybody was talking about.

If you hadn't had the experience, you could not identify with it. And, I guess, again, we wanted to have what we consider to be a normal family life. We went, we went to college, we got caught up in marriage and children and, and we kind of put a lot of those things behind us that in more recent years we've brought back out, because it wasn't all bad. In fact, an awful lot of it was very positive. And we became what we became because of it. And we want to identify the credits that are due in that regard. And then, our children, even my children, today, are more interested in what I did than they were, you know, when they were growing. They're now in their 40 seconds and 50 seconds. My grandchildren now in college, they're interested in it. So, you began to talk more, because you have a listening ear, it was pretty easy with 20 million vets to turn your ear off if they were all trying to talk about, you know, life for them, because life was moving on. So, I guess it was just natural for people to to clam up and go on about other things.

Interviewer: When all these interviews are edited together, they're going to go into the schools of Virginia, so those students are studying US history and they get down to World War Two. That is just not pages of the book. The real people talking about real events. If some of them were sitting right here, what would you say to them about what the war meant? Why was fought or how it changed you or…

Heilman: Well, I think I would try to say to them one thing that I think each generation needs to accept. That to the extent they want to change history, that they weren't a part of by denying that it should have happened the way it did, like dropping the

atom bomb. That whatever they are thinking about and believe in deeply today, would they want the next generation, the next generation refuting it, because they think from a distance, they understand it better. That reality is presence to a large extent. That human beings make judgments based upon what's, what's before them. They don't have 50 years later to look back when they have to make that decision. And therefore, those who are critics ought to recognize, while they may think they would have made a different decision, or say a different decision should have been made, that reality, to suggest you can't second guess the people who were there. You know, I try to tell my children that, and others, that, that the war, I think, was a good war based upon the circumstances, that is, good was served, because we defeated governments that were imprisoning human beings, like the Jews in Germany, the Japanese who were creating all kinds of atrocities. In both cases, the Japanese and the Germans were aggressors.

Certainly, the allies did not fight a perfect war, nor were they perfect people, nor is anyone or any generation that, but his best judgments could be made, I think, we had the right war, the good war. I think our society today is what it is in a positive sense, because we had that war. We've had other wars. We'll continue to have wars. And that those of us who participated in it, deeply hurt over our colleagues who were lost, recognize that each of us established ourselves with our country in such a way that our life might have been taken from us and we were willing to give our life for that in which we believed. Those of us who survived benefited from the reality that we came to understand something that was worth dying for, as well as accepting life as something worth living for. And until we face that kind of reality, we're at a different level of maturity. I think, once we've said, this is so important, I'll die for it. We don't really have the perspective to fully live for the good things that we have defended and preserved. And I really believe that now. That's a matter of degree.

And you don't have to go to war to be willing to die for something. You know, your principles, your values. And there doesn't have to be a war. But for us to be able to say, we believe deeply in this society, because it's free, because there are certain basic values based upon our history, there are certain spiritual commitments that are valid for us, for me, for individuals, and that I would die for this if I had to. I would not allow it to be taken from me. I would not allow my

house to be invaded and my children killed. You know, if someone was banging on the front door with a sword, I would defend my kids until they kill me. That's what I'm talking about, literally, we had to face that in reality, not conjure it up as a, you know, a fantasy. And and it it makes you a different person. There's no doubt. It's just no doubt about that. Not necessarily better people. But different people, people who faced reality and dealt with it, and for the rest of their lives. nothing is as serious as it might have been if they hadn't been through that experience. You know, you take it with a little more comfort.

Interviewer: Perfect. Thank you very much.

Heilman: My pleasure. Well, good.

Interviewer: Well, I enjoyed your Marine story.

Heilman: Oh, good.