

**A Veterans Oral History**  
Heritage Education Commission  
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Moorhead, MN

**Gerrit Van Hunnik**  
Narrator

**GVH: My name is Gerrit Van Hunnik. I'm 81 years old. I was born at Colton, South Dakota. At age 10, we moved to Bristol, South Dakota, graduated from high school in 1943; and this was, of course, during World War II. So most all of our class was going into service. I was working on a farm and so I didn't have to go, but I worked until after the harvest. When thrashing was done, I went to the draft board and said I wanted to volunteer for the draft. I wanted to go with the next group.**

**And we weren't promised that we'd get the service that we requested, but I requested the Marines and did get into the Marines. I went to the Marine Corps Base in San Diego for boot camp. After boot camp, many of the graduates of boot camp went right overseas as replacements for combat duty. Because they were beginning a new division, some of us were chosen for the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, a spearhead division, to spearhead the attack on Japan.**

**I was at Camp Pendleton with the artillery in the 13<sup>th</sup> Marines, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion. And we trained at Camp Pendleton until about September. Then I went to Hawaii, to the big island of Hawaii, on the Parker Ranch. We went to Pearl Harbor on January 5<sup>th</sup> and started out towards Iwo Jima. This was in 1945 and came to Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945, and what proved to be the bloodiest battle in Marine Corps history.**

**We were scheduled to come ashore H-hour, which was nine o'clock, H-hour plus 90 minutes. At one a.m. on this Monday morning, we left the ship, went down the rope ladder to a landing boat, and then bobbed around on that landing boat for several hours. We had to get out early because the artillery pieces and ammunition were underneath where we slept and lived and we were to go in at H plus 90 minutes. The first waves went in on time at nine o'clock and didn't have much opposition.**

**And then after a couple of hours, the Japanese opened up with everything they had and every inch of the island was crisscrossed. They could shoot from every direction from all of the caves and from the Mount Suribachi and the highlands on the other end of the island. In the afternoon, they decided they wanted the artillery to come ashore. So we started in, in a wave, and our boat got knocked out. And so we were, before this, beyond the range of the machine guns and mortars. And now we were right in the middle of all**

the firing and were crippled so we couldn't move. Another landing boat was able to get ashore and let out their troops and came back. Then we crawled over the side from our landing boat into this other boat, and we did get ashore.

Our group was supposed to go in before the artillery piece, so we could clear an area where it could be set. But the artillery, 105 Howitzer, got there before we did. And as night fell, we were sent out in twos to protect the gun, dig a foxhole. Another Marine and I went towards Mount Suribachi. And we were in this foxhole; and all night long you could hear the Japanese chattering and running all around us. But we didn't fire and they didn't fire and nobody wanted to give up their position. When morning came, daylight, I was getting hungry. So I stood up and reached for my backpack to get a K-ration and a twig snapped by my ear. The fellow in the foxhole with me pulled me down and then a little bit later, I was still hungry. And so I decided to try again and then they opened up with me with the machine gun. And all this time I thought that the first shot, must have been a stray bullet, because I was in the artillery and so the infantry should have been ahead of me. And so that couldn't have been what was happening.

But then we were pinned down for some hours and the infantry came up from behind us towards Mount Suribachi. Then we realized that we had been out there in no-man's land, out in Japanese territory all by ourselves, all night. And so later that afternoon we were unpinned. We were rescued and went back to our artillery gun; and then I was the gunner on our gun crew. We fired day and night. In fact, I had gotten up at one o'clock on Monday morning; and it wasn't until about one o'clock on Friday morning that I got my first sleep. We had been awake then for almost a hundred hours.

The battle went on ...only a few yards each day, but with hundreds and thousands of casualties each day. There was an airstrip nearby and this is why we had to have Iwo Jima because the B-29s came from Guam and Saipan to bomb Japan and they were intercepted at Iwo Jima. Also, the B-29s were crippled many times and weren't able to get all the way back to Saipan and Guam, and so they would be lost in the ocean. So now they could land at Iwo Jima.

As the battle went on beyond the airstrips through this other rough country, our forward observer team – there were 11 of them and only 5 were still alive. They needed a volunteer to go up to help with forward observer duties. So I volunteered to go and we went up there into the lines. And while we were up there, there were terrible barrages, as well as small arms fire all around us. All you heard was “corpsman, corpsman,” because another person was shot. In one of the barrages, our radio got knocked out and also our telephone, so we had no communication.

The Japanese used a technique; first of all, they would let the first troops come ashore, then they would lay all kinds of firing on the beach so no replacements or supplies could come ashore. And then another technique was whenever the artillery would lay down a barrage, they would lay one down into our infantry lines to dishearten the Marines. They'd think they were being shot by friendly fire.

When this barrage was on, another Marine and I decided we'd try to find the telephone wire that was broken. So we got out of the foxhole and we crawled along the ground and we found the wire that had been burned off. They used phosphorous shells. White-hot and it would burn up everything. So we spliced the wire and were able to communicate and let the artillery know exactly our position and have them raise their firing so they'd be sure to be into the Japanese territory and cut off the barrage that the Japanese were laying on us.

And just as the two of us had gotten out of that foxhole, an artillery or mortar shell landed in the foxhole and exploded. We were just above ground – out of it then and so we started rolling. We weren't seriously hurt and were able to repair that telephone line. So we stayed up there.

Also, one time the Japanese were in all of these caves and holes; and shots came not only from the front of you but beside you, behind you, from every place. There was a Marine guarding one of these holes because the Japanese kept coming up and then shooting at the Marines. Since he'd been watching, his unit was moving up, trying to move closer towards the other end of the island. And he said, "You watch this, I'm going on ahead." And I tried to tell him, "No, I had another job to do." But he left and so I sat there and watched that hole and the Japanese didn't come up while I was there. But if I hadn't been there, he would have been shooting at our Marines.

When they couldn't use the artillery anymore because we had come almost the end of the island, then I went back to our gun unit. And then we went aboard ship. After being aboard ship, some of the Japanese we had pinned closed up in caves. And it was rough country so you couldn't get in there with tanks or anything, so a Marine would carry a flame thrower on his back and as somebody said, "we paved the way to every cave" with his Marines. Some of the Japanese had broken out of the caves and they had a network of travel below ground so they got together and did spring another banzai attack.

Some of the Marines on our boat, I didn't have to leave, but they had to go back ashore again because most of the Marines were off the island and the Army was there as occupation troops. I like to say the Marines had to go back to rescue the Army. But they weren't set up for this kind of combat duty. They were there for occupation duty.

Then we went aboard the ship and went back to Hawaii. We got replacements and were aboard ship again, ready to spearhead the attack on Japan. At the island of Kyushu was where we were supposed to land. Then the atomic bombs landed and the war ended. Since we were aboard ship ready to invade Japan, we still did go on to Japan. We were the first troops to land on the southern island of Kyushu. And we landed the same way we did on Iwo Jima except not a shot was fired. We disarmed at Sasebo, Japan, the suicide torpedo boats that the Japanese had been using; and then we went on to Nagasaki, and we were doing occupation duty there.

We used the point system to get discharged from the services. And so you got points for how many months you were in service, and how many battles you were in and how long overseas. And so, different Marines as well as the Army and other troops, were going home. When my turn came up, I had enough points, went back to California again.

**INT:** Can you comment on your experience with the Japanese people during the occupation?

**GVH:** Yes, we were there from September until about late April. And at first, we didn't trust the Japanese and that's why we landed there the same way we did in battle form like on Iwo Jima. But not a shot was fired. The Japanese – all we saw was a few men and I think they were probably military. And after we'd been there some days then the women and the children, who had been in hiding in the mountains or someplace, started coming out. Their businesses were opening and things and the people were very friendly. I enjoyed contacts with them. I learned some of the language so that even later when ships came in, and Navy people came to the stores to buy souvenirs, I helped the Japanese storekeepers as an interpreter.

**INT:** Can you describe what Nagasaki looked like?

**GVH:** Yes, the area, of course, where the bomb landed was completely wiped out. Just maybe a smokestack or a small piece of a wall was there. I was on MP duty, so I had a jeep driver. So every day or so we would drive around the area where the bomb landed and check things out. The whole city wasn't wiped out. It would be about like if a bomb landed in at the airport, over here ten miles away in Moorhead, there wouldn't be that much damage. But everything was wiped out. And people were suffering from burns, terrible burns and they had scars and scabs and . . .

**INT:** Could you talk about what you did on your off time in Japan.

**GVH:** Yes, since I was on MP duty, I would often stop at the different stores. They had offices and things and we'd visit with the people on the streets. Usually would simply go visit with some of the Japanese that we had contacted while we were on MP duty. I had a real good relationship with these people.

**INT:** You were never wounded in combat?

**GVH:** No, never serious enough to report. Sometimes like shrapnel would stick in your hands or face or something. You'd just wipe it off and a drop of blood would come to the surface, but . . . One time either a bullet or shrapnel or something hit the top of my foot. And I did have a scar for a while and a bruise, but it was never reported, or anything so I don't wear a Purple Heart, so I was never really wounded.

**INT:** Tell me what it was like to re-deploy back to the United States.

**GVH:** Yes, when we left Japan, we came back to the United States. Of course, we didn't fly in those days. It was aboard ship. I think we landed at Long Beach and there were no bands. There was nobody there to greet us. We simply got off the ship and went to a Marine base and received dress uniforms and things because we didn't have any of that overseas. And then went on liberty and went to Chicago to Great Lakes Naval Station. I was discharged from there on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May. It was on a Sunday afternoon. And I rode a train to Bristol, South Dakota.

Got to Bristol, nobody knew I was coming. Nobody was there to meet me. I simply set my sea bag in the depot and walked across town to where my parents lived, our home, and there was nobody there. My older brother had been discharged from the Army. He had been in longer than I had but he wasn't home. And so I just went to a restaurant and had a Coke and visited with the waitress for a while. A few hours later, I went home, walked home again, and my parents were there. Took the car and went and picked up the sea bag. We could just leave it sit in the open in those days.

**INT:** Can you talk [unclear] your home?

**GVH:** There was a letter that I had written while I was in the gun pit. And I described [unclear] got it all out, but apparently they didn't. And I'd written a letter to my mother and somehow [unclear] the county paper, the [unclear] *Dakota*, and so I still do have a copy of that letter that was printed in the news.

**INT:** [unclear] a lot of combat action, but the nice things that we like to talk about is things like how did you eat, what kind of showers did you have? Can you comment on that?

**GVH:** Yes, oh, there's a difference, of course, when you're in combat and when you're in training. In training no problem with showers, good food almost all the time, but in combat we'd mix rations with food that you could cook. I don't remember if I had a hot meal the whole 30 days that we were on Iwo Jima. Just the K-rations except if there was a lull in the battle, we'd build a little fire and take our helmet and heat some water and probably heat the can

**of Spam or whatever ground meat, whatever was in the K-ration. And I don't remember ever having a shower during the 30 days.**

**INT:** Well, that's very interesting. You returned to Bristol, South Dakota, and I guess I would like to talk a little bit about what did in terms of a job?

**GVH:** Yes, so there was work to do on the farm. I went back and helped a neighbor on the farm until fall. Then went to Augustana College in Sioux Falls and then summers I also worked on a farm back at Bristol. When I graduated in 1950 from Augustana, then went to Luther Seminary in St. Paul. And then was ordained in 1953, and went up to Milton and Osnabrock, North Dakota, a five-congregation parish up by the Canadian border.

I was always interested in youth work. I was called the dean at that time, Director of the Park River Bible Camp, and was elected president of the youth for the North Dakota District of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. And so I had contact with youth from all over the state of North Dakota; was youth pastor at Olivet Church in Fargo. I went up to Grand Forks; was senior pastor at Calvary Lutheran for eight years. I went to Oakes, North Dakota. Then I was the Director of Youth and Education at Windom, Minnesota, and then directed a bible camp for five years, Nebraska Lutheran Outdoor Ministries and Circle R Camp, for the State of Nebraska and Missouri. And then came up to Vining, Minnesota, a four-congregation parish and retired from there. Then for three-four months, I did interim pastoral work at Hitterdal. And then in January of 1987, I was asked by Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Moorhead to help out temporarily for three months part-time and now, 20 year later, I'm still on the staff there.

**INT:** I want to go back to one of the military topics. What kind of important people did you meet while you were in the military?

**GVH:** Yes, Bob Crosby, brother of Bing Crosby. He was one from the Big Band Era. He was our recreation officer. I don't remember seeing him on Iwo Jima; but when we came back, he was there to greet us with a beverage and a little welcome ceremony. So I remember Bob Crosby.

**INT:** Your friends that you made in the military, did you keep up correspondence with them?

**GVH:** That I suppose would be one of my regrets. Never really kept in touch. I think most all of us simply were glad that the war was over. And we were home again and it was behind us. We just went on with our lives and to prepare for whatever we were going to do in the future. So never did really keep in touch with them.

But here, just now, this spring or winter, I saw a man wearing a 5<sup>th</sup> Division Marine cap; and so I went over and talked to him. He had just recently

**moved to Moorhead from Portland, Oregon. And I discovered that he was in the artillery, also. He was in a gun pit right near the gun pit I was in. And the seventh day of battle, a shell, a mortar, or artillery literally went over me and landed in his gun pit. And there were three of the men who were huddled together under the Howitzer, and the man on each side of him was killed. His one side was ripped and so he went back to a hospital ship, back to Guam and then back home and was discharged after being in the battle for one week. The battle lasted about 30 days.**

**INT:** Gerrit, last question, how would you like to be remembered?

**GVH:** I suppose simply as a survivor of Iwo Jima and Nagasaki and a veteran of World War II, who simply saw a job that needed to be done and we did it.

**INT:** Very good, I'm impressed. Thank you.