

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

**Ray Volk**  
Narrator

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Interviewer

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**RV:** Ray Volk, I grew up on a farm at Linton, North Dakota, and I joined the Navy in 1943. And from there I went to Farragut, Idaho, and from there I got transferred to the Marine Corps at Camp Pendelton by Oceanside, California, and trained as a communications man with the Marines. And then went to Hawaii for more training.

And the first invasion I went on was Iwo Jima. And our job – five signalmen and five radiomen in which I was in charge. We were the first ones on the beach before anybody else. So we had 30,000 Japanese on the island and us 10 Americans, and the U. S. Navy and the Marines behind us. So we had to tell them everything's clear to come in. Usually, the enemies will not do anything until more men get on the beach and then they forced.

They started landing thousands of the Marines, and when they were all there the Japanese opened up their artillery in the hills, [unclear] down and killed thousands of them. There was nothing you could do, just stand there on the beach in the sand. There's no place to hide.

And I was there, oh, I would say, a week or ten days. [unclear] went out for a rest on the ship and come back for another week. Another folly, I think, was my worst experience because of all the people that got killed. You could walk about 50 yards on the beach and it was just all bodies, you know; so many dead Marines. And then I was right below Mount Suribachi when they raised that flag. You've seen on the television many times. I remember a big cheer went up on the island and all the ships blew their horns.

Then we were designed just for an invasion and when everything was established, we went back to the ship and then the Marines fought the rest of the battle. And there, we went back and got more training. And we were supposed to hit Okinawa. And in the process along the beach before we landed a suicide plane hit the ship, sank the ship, and we were swimming

around in the water until we got picked up. Never did get on the island of Okinawa. And after that battle, why, I went back to the States and we replenished everything on my ship.

Then we were supposed to invade Japan. I remember they give everybody a week off to sit, because the casualties was supposed to be horrendous. And while we were at Japan reloading, that's when the atomic bomb was dropped. And we still got on the ship, went over to Japan, and had just a regular invasion because we didn't know what they would do. We landed there just like a regular invasion. Secured the beaches, secured our foothold; and there, again, after that was done, we went back out. There's a lot in between but that's kind of the sequence, the way things went.

PW: Tell us about your experience and how this operated from your radio communications duties.

RV: We were part of a staff that went with different Marine divisions, so we would go from one ship to the next, seems like depending on what ship was going to do the invasion, carry the troops. So I was on four different troop ships, different kinds. Where the VP boats were on these troop ships and then, during the invasion, we put the VP boats, probably carrying maybe 25-30 men over the side. And the men went over the side of the ship, went in the VP boats, they went in to beach, dropped the front end aground and went ashore. So we never knew what ship, the [unclear] ship we'd be on until the time come to make the invasion. Then they would assign us to a ship.

PW: Let's talk about where you came from originally and how you entered military life.

RV: I was born and raised on a farm south of Linton, North Dakota. And my parents and I were the only ones on the farm. I didn't know this, but my dad had gotten me a farm deferment. So I went into the office and found out why I wasn't drafted to go into the service. And they said, "Well, you have a deferment." So when I found that out, I went to the Navy and volunteered to go. I didn't want the farm deferment. That's how I got in. I think it's probably the smartest thing I did in my entire life for several reasons.

Number one, if I had stayed on the farm during the war, I'd have probably never got off the farm. Number two, I'd have never got a college education, because I had the GI Bill of Rights. Number three, even if I would have had the opportunity to go to school, I wouldn't have had the ambition to do it or the guts to do it because when you grow up in an environment that I did, you just didn't know a heck of a lot, you know.

So after what I went through in the military and with the Marines and whatever other combat, it got to me. I got to the point that there's nothing I can't do. If I can survive that I can survive anything. So I just tackled anything, everything. I went to college ... graduated. I started my own

business ... very successful. And I'd have never done that without the military background because that's where I got my confidence and drive, which I didn't even know existed, until I got to these horrendous obstacles. That either you did it right and survived, or you're dead. And I said, "Hey if I can do that, I can do it."

PW: So your experience in the military helped shaped your life?

RV: Completely and for the better, not for the worst, for the better. Well the propaganda of Tokyo Rose, basically what she'd say, "Your girlfriend is at home or your parents are – your mother's crying and wish you were home," and basically to demoralize you. But in between, it played the best big bang bottom music the U. S. ever had. Now where they got it from, I don't know. But it was in between the music; it was kind of demoralizing deal. Like when we invaded Okinawa, she'd say, "You're going to get on the beach and you know what, you might get killed," ... this kind of thing.

Now what she ever thought or the propaganda machine, what good would that do because hey, you were going to go in there; no matter what she said, you're going to fight for your life. That's basically what you did. In wartime, in combat, you either kill or be killed and you're going to go kill as many people that's in front of you and that's because you want to survive, not because you hate people. You don't hate the guy ahead of you. He never did anything wrong with you; but you'd kill him, so he doesn't kill you. So Tokyo Rose could say all she wanted. That went in one ear and out the other. You see, it was wonderful.

So then the ship went down. A suicide plane hit it. We were relatively close to the beach to unload troops to go ashore, these VP boats. So the VP boats roll over the side to unload troops. When that suicide plane hit, well then it's abandon ship. And, of course, some of them went in the VP boats on the rope ladders over the side. Some of us jumped over the side with life jackets on, because you never know if your ship's going to sink because if it does, and you're close to it, it kind of sucks you under, you know.

So you're floating around there and hoping somebody will pick you up. And you're just a pebble on the beach. Nobody slows down .... there's a few guys swimming around in the water because you can't afford to because you might be a target. So anyway, whether our ship got completely sunk or not, we'll never know. I know I lost everything I had, except the clothes on my back. And we were then transported into another ship. We went onboard before that but by that time our group was kind of broke up in splinters, so bad we couldn't make an organized landing, so we were pulled off that landing process.

It was dangerous and, actually, it wasn't that dangerous because before the invasion we had the ships and the destroyers, the cruisers and the battleships

and Air Force would bomb an area from the beach in quite a ways to clear out the enemy. So when you went in, the first ones in, there was nobody around. They started moving back into the area after the troops landed but that's why they try to put the troops in real quick and get established before they regroup and come back out towards the beach.

So [unclear] even though we were the first troops on the beach, it wasn't dangerous because there's nobody around. We were standing there all by ourselves and then the rest of the [unclear] come in. Well by that time, the Japanese started coming back up towards the beach again. That's when the battle started. But usually there's battle right off the bat. The Americans, they lost more troops because we weren't dug in. We had no place to hide. Whereas the Japanese, they had 50 years to prepare their defense, you know, to land and dig in and caves and pill boxes. And those pill boxes you didn't know existed until you got into the woods; and then you had to call planes in and rockets and try to bust them up and get at them.

So usually the first couple of days was tough until you get hunkered in a little bit. You got more troops and you got tanks and you got this and you got that in. And, of course, after that took place why our job was over and then we got pulled out, five radiomen and five signalmen.

Signalmen, you know what I'm talking about, they're the guys with the flags. So the real battle started, we got pulled out, because we were not trained to fight. We were just trained to establish a beachhead by communication, not by fire. But we had guns. I mean we're ready to, hey, if you had to defend yourself, you defended yourself, that's ...

**RV:** We were the marksmen. These other guys didn't know what a gun was. We knew how to survive. In the 30s, you're on the farm you better know how to survive. We could lie in a ditch and you can lie in a foxhole with very little to eat. The other guys lay and bellyache about different things, you know. We were just talking about this winter, here. The quicker you adjust the safer you are. The better you are. If you don't adjust, you're going to be miserable. You know, some cases in combat, you're going to be dead. You don't know about it, but you're going to die if you don't adjust.

So like I say, the experience, every success, every education, the success in business, in life that I had is 100% because of the military, the training that I had. Not of shooting and whatever have you but the guts, the willing to go forward, the willing to take a chance, the will, your will to accomplish, confidence.

I used to tell my son when he was going into business or he'd get a job, don't set your sights too high because if you don't make it to the top, and you fall down, you fall so hard, you won't try it again. Set your sights to half ways up the hill. Get established, then take the next climb up the hill and get

established. That's how you get to the top. If you do it all at once, just like in the military, if you think you're going to overrun an island in one day, you're dead. But if you take step by step with backup, you're going to make it eventually to the top. That's the lesson I learned in the military. And that's the lesson I learned in ...

When I got out of school, I worked for the government and I said, "Hey, this is no place for me," because well promotion in the government is rather like the service, not for what you do. And I started my own fertilizer business. And everybody said, "You're crazy, you'll never make it." Oh, if I don't I won't but I can say I made it, I took a shot at it. Because of the brutalist of the conqueror, I was successful. While a lot of other guys in the same time, with the same business went belly up. But some guys can't handle pressure. Like my wife, when I sold out after 20 years, she said to me one morning, she said, "The many years we've been in business, this is the first time you didn't talk in your sleep." About business, you know. See, you worry about it, plan. And that's, to me, that's the military. And that's all plan and move, plan and move. And that's how you do business, you plan and move ahead, slowly but cautiously, you're going to make it.

And you made up your mind; how do I get there? Well, you wait, you crawl in mud, you ate K-rations and pretty soon you get there. And you have a lesson back of your head, and then you take another job, which is not in the military, and you say, "How do I get there?" You say to yourself, "The same dang way as I got there before." By pushing, by clawing, by scratching, you'll make it. In the process, in the military, you'd probably kill a few people, you had. too. You're not going to have to do it in civilian life, but you're going to push them aside and move ahead. If you don't, you're going to be with the rest of them troops behind you.

I say today you cannot, the United States cannot fight a war because you've got television cameras on your back, and a war is to kill or be killed. And if you have civilians ahead of you and they're in your way and you've got someplace to go, they've got to get out your way. The only way to get them out of your way is to get rid of them. And you can't do that today because you take pictures of that, too many people that's too brutal. War is brutality. I mean, when you kill that's – nobody pats himself on the back by killing a bunch of women and kids and stuff; but hey, either you or them, make up your mind.

Now you can be a hero and get killed. They can bury you and they walk around it, but not this kid. Nowadays why they're there with television cameras and say you shouldn't have done that. What do you mean, you shouldn't have done that? I was there to win a war so I had to kill the guy ahead of me. If I don't do it, he kills me. I have to do it. Not that I like to do it, but I have to do it.

So after World War II, then it was the Korean War, then there was the Vietnam War. We never won either one, did we? Why, because we were fighting, fighting them on television. We've doing the same thing today, the war over there.

[unclear] you got a Marines being court-marshaled. I can just see these guys going into a house and maybe there was shots fired from that house. They'd break in and, let's say, two or three women in there. Who do you think shot? The gun wasn't shot from a block away. Somebody in that house, there's been three girls in the house, it's one of these women, right? So what do you do, you rid of them, right? Then you get court marshaled? No. That's no war. That's the way they want to fight, then stay out of there.

PW: Tell us about your example of the Marines and the civilians.

RV: The civilians were told to come behind the lines and, in the process, there's a bunch of Marines sitting in foxholes. And as they went through there, a woman went by, she had a grenade under her arm and she opened her arm and dropped the grenade in the foxhole and killed three Marines. We just opened up and leveled them off. You wouldn't do that today because the television is going to be sitting there, taking pictures of that. The reporter forgets that three guys are dead up here, three Americans, forget about that. They show you pictures of what you're doing, not what somebody else did to them.