

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD OHLROGGE
Seagoing Marine, Marine Corps, World War II
2004

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Ohlrogge, Donald. (b. 1924). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Approximate length: 35 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Donald Ohlrogge discusses his World War II service with the Marine Corps, being aboard the USS Enterprise, and joining AMVETS. Ohlrogge discusses joining the Marine Corps in 1943, boot camp in San Diego where he volunteered to be seagoing, and being stationed in Pearl Harbor. He describes being assigned to the USS Enterprise, and the typical day and duties while aboard the ship. He outlines the battles the Enterprise was part of, and the part the Enterprise took in the battle of Iwo Jima. He describes the ship being targeted by kamikaze planes and the ship being hit badly by one in 1945. Ohlrogge outlines his brief time aboard the Enterprise after the war had ended, going to San Francisco and being part of New York City's Navy Day Parade. He discusses joining AMVETS in 1952 and being part of the drill team, including going with the drill team to Kennedy's inaugural parade. He then reads some excerpts from a diary he kept while he was a Marine.

Biographical Sketch:

Ohlrogge (b. 1924) served with the United States Marine Corps during World War II. After being discharged he went to the Milwaukee School of Engineering and was part of the AMVETS Drill Team.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2004.

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2012.

Edited by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Transcribed Interview

MacDonald: —Donald Ohlrogge, who served with the United States Marine Corps during World War II. The interview is being conducted at approximately 1:00 p.m. at the following address [REDACTED], Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of December 31, 2004. And the interviewer is Terry MacDonald. Don, can you give us a little background description of your life before you entered the military service?

Ohlrogge: Well, my dad was a cheesemaker. I spent a lot of time working in a cheese factory. And first we were in Luxemburg [Wisconsin], and then we moved up here in Whitefish Bay, which is near Valmy. And that cheese factory burnt down. And then we went to Peninsula Center cheese factory there. And that's where I was at the time I—I got tired of working [laughs].

Yeah. First I went to Sevastopol High School. And then when we moved up there, then I went to Gibraltar [High School]. But in my junior year I went and joined the Marines.

MacDonald: And what year was that?

Ohlrogge: November of '43. And I went to Milwaukee, and they sent me to San Diego. That's where I had my boot camp.

MacDonald: What made you join the Marine Corps? What was your thought behind that?

Ohlrogge: [Laughs]. I don't know—gung ho, I guess. I never thought about it. My dad said he could have got me deferred, because he needed somebody to help with the cheese factory. But I wanted to go in the Marines.

Why I picked the Marines, I can't remember [laughs]. Well, a friend of mine that was in high school, Gibraltar, he joined the Marines. And I thought that's where I wanted to go.

MacDonald: Well, when you went out to San Diego, boot camp, can you describe a little bit about what it was like to go through boot camp? How old were you—eighteen/nineteen years old?

Ohlrogge: [Laughs] Oh, I was nineteen, I think, yeah. I didn't think much of it at the time. You just do what they tell you to do, and it wasn't easy. I got through it.

MacDonald: Was most of the people at boot camp the same age as you—some older guys?

Ohlrogge: Well, some older, yeah. I don't know; they seemed to be all around my age, a lot of young guys.

MacDonald: After you got done with boot camp, what happened then?

Ohlrogge: Well, after boot camp we had a week. I came home. I rode the train home, spent about two days at home. I only had ten days leave. So that took me another three/four days to take the train back. And then from San Francisco, we were shipped to Pearl Harbor. Marine barracks in Pearl Harbor.

MacDonald: Did you have any advanced training after boot camp before you went to Pearl Harbor? Or did—basically boot camp, and then they shipped you over to Pearl Harbor?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. And there we had duty, this guard duty. They stick you way in the boondocks and guard some ammunition dump, and all that stuff. Oh, I remember at night the mosquitoes would come out so *thick*. I don't know why, but there was a lot of mosquitoes. You had to wear a net over your head all the time to survive.

MacDonald: Did you live in tents, or did they have barracks for you?

Ohlrogge: No, great big barracks, yeah. It was nice, yeah—great big barracks two stories high.

MacDonald: When you went to Pearl Harbor, what was your impression when you come into the harbor and saw the damage done by the Japanese? Or was it cleared up already?

Ohlrogge: It was mostly cleared out. Yeah, it was, mostly. We had duty on the dry dock, watch on the dry dock and all that.

I was trying to think of how I ever got in the seagoing part of it. I think that was still in San Diego. When you got through your boot camp, you were put in different units, some foot soldiers and tankers. And I volunteered for seagoing.

MacDonald: And what did the seagoing mean?

Ohlrogge: You were stationed on board a ship. And I figured that's a good safe place to be [laughs]—I won't be digging foxholes and stuff like that, being shot at. So I was in Hawaii, Pearl Harbor. Yeah, I was there till July.

And then I was assigned to an aircraft carrier—*Enterprise*—about twenty-six of us. The aircraft carrier came in. And a whole bunch of Marines were transferred off of there, and we took their place. So then I spent the rest of my time on the *Enterprise*.

MacDonald: And what was your job aboard the *Enterprise*?

Ohlrogge: Well, we were—during general quarters, or anything. If you weren't on duty, you could man the 20mm guns on the port side. The whole port side was all 20mm.

MacDonald: Was that anti-aircraft machine guns?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. Otherwise, if I was on duty with the Captain, I was way up on the island structure with the Captain. So then I didn't have to go.

MacDonald: Can you describe a little bit about what a typical day aboard the aircraft carrier, the *Enterprise*, was for you as a Marine—standing watches and things like that—or how did your typical day go?

Ohlrogge: Well, you got up and showered and go to the mess hall. One thing about being a Marine, we could always go ahead of the sailors. The sailors had a great big long line-up going to the mess hall. We could march right up ahead of them all [laughs]. So we were favored that way.

And sometimes I'd stand guard up on top of the flight deck, the ladder going up to the flight deck. I'd be way up on top. As planes come in, I wouldn't let nobody come up. And they would land, and once in a while one plane wouldn't hook the arresting gear and started heading for you. You made a mad dash down below, because you didn't want to take a chance with that thing plowing into you.

MacDonald: Were you outside on the flight deck, is that where you stayed?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. And then when it's quiet, the Marine detachment marched, stuck together, and everybody did drill marching up and down the flight deck just to keep in shape, I guess.

MacDonald: What was your living quarters like aboard the ship?

Ohlrogge: Oh, [laughs] they were pretty cramped. It was about three decks high, canvas type, and you had a little locker for your stuff. I didn't stay down there very often.

I went out there, and underneath the flight deck they had places where they store lumber and stuff like that. So, I strung a hammock underneath the flight deck, and that's where I [laughs] spent most of *my* time. A nice, cool breeze up there, and it was kind of warm down below. You got all those air conditioning motors and cooling down below. So I rigged up a hammock up there, and I slept up there most of the time.

MacDonald: Now, you were saying that the *Enterprise* was an aircraft carrier. Can you give us an idea what—I know there were several different sizes of aircraft carrier in the war.

Ohlrogge: This was one of the old ones, *Enterprise*. And after Pearl Harbor, then they came out with a whole bunch of newer class aircraft carrier. We were about 900 feet long.

MacDonald: Is it true that they had wooden decks on the landing?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. It was all wood. Well, then there would be a metal strip where they could fasten down. They had clips where they could fasten down the planes. And then they had arresting gear wires strung across. So if a plane didn't land, they'd plow into those wires that went up. In case the plane didn't hook, they could hit the wires and didn't flip over.

MacDonald: And stop it.

Ohlrogge: Yeah.

MacDonald: Where did the *Enterprise* sail after you left Pearl Harbor? Where did it sail out to?

Ohlrogge: We went way west. We were in the China Seas and the Solomons. Well, we spent a whole year out there, so we were hitting a lot of places. We'd be out there for—. We had tankers come alongside of us, and they transferred fuel, so we had fuel. And then the mail would come on a transport; they'd drop off mail.

And every once in a while we'd hit some little island. One was called Wardbog [sp??] and the people would have liberty. There was a bar there, and everything, and everybody went out there.

MacDonald: Just to let you get off the ship for a little bit.

Ohlrogge: Yeah. And then we'd go back out.

MacDonald: I assume that the aircraft carrier sailed with a task force, a variety of different ships and stuff for battle.

Ohlrogge: We were all surrounded by destroyers, two or three around us all the time. And sometimes a cruiser was with us. So if we got under attack that would be enough fire power.

MacDonald: Were you in any major battles of the Pacific?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah, a lot of them. [Laughs] Just a minute; I got a book here that I marked down.

MacDonald: Don's going to describe some of the engagements that the *USS Enterprise* was in, in the Pacific Theater.

Ohlrogge: I got it marked down. This was from December 1944 to May 31, '45. We supported the Luzon Landing, the Luzon Airfields, the French India China Cambria [??] Bay, Saigon, Hong Kong, Canton, Formosa Airfield, Okinawa. Then we were the first carrier to send planes over to Tokyo to bomb them.

And we supported Iwo Jima landings. We were the only carrier out there that operated at night. All night long, our planes were taking off and going over to Iwo Jima, blasting away, and then coming back. Soon as daylight showed, we went further away from the island. Soon as it got dark, then our air group start taking off again. So that was a first.

Uh, Kyushu [??], Inland Sea, Circle Kaiyai [??] Airfields, Kyushu first carrier strikes. All these battles here, we were constantly being attacked by suicide planes.

MacDonald: Can you describe this? It's hard for me to imagine what it would be like to be on an aircraft carrier where you're sitting out in the open, a big target for a kamikaze plane to come in. Can you describe what it's like?

Ohlrogge: Most of it, when we got that close to Japan, there were more than one aircraft carriers—two/three aircrafts and cruisers and destroyers—it was a great big group. And all these planes were taking off and hitting Okinawa or Saipan or some battle that was going on.

And then all of a sudden these kamikazes—you had bogeys in the radar, and they'd know to fly in. And right away, some of our planes would meet them and fight them. And if some got through, they'd come after us, and they dove right down. And there were a number of carriers that were destroyed.

MacDonald: Was the *Enterprise* hit?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah. We were hit. We were hit twice. One time we got hit, a kamikaze went right through our flight deck and went down below the hangar deck, and the bomb blew up down there. So we lost a lot of airmen down there, because that's where their quarters were. And the elevator went flying sky high. So that was the worst. And then we had to go back to the States.

MacDonald: For repairs.

Ohlrogge: Yeah. And while we were in the States—that was '45, I think—the war was over. They dropped the atomic bomb while we were in Seattle. We came to Seattle for repairs. And then I was able to get home for thirty days.

MacDonald: Can you just briefly describe—you said you were a guard on the flight deck. What was it like when the planes were taking off and landing constantly? You saw a lot of action.

Ohlrogge: [Laughs] Yeah, there was lots going on. Those planes were taking off, and there was a lot of guys working, you know, getting those planes off. Of course my job was to sit there and watch them come in and when they land—come back—and make sure that nobody comes up that way.

MacDonald: Was it extremely noisy up on the flight deck?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. [Laughs] You can't even hear yourself with all them planes, motors running, and all that.

MacDonald: Being on the *Enterprise*, did you ever have any admirals or Command staff aboard?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we had Admiral—oh, I can't—whoever was head of the operation out there, one time he come aboard. As a matter of fact, I think the ship that they were on, I think the *Yorktown*, was hit pretty bad. And they transferred them over to us. And they were with us for awhile until we got hit. And then they went someplace else.

We were just very lucky that they never hit the island structure, because that's where all the communications and the big shots were. [Laughs]

MacDonald: Did you have to participate in any firefighting or anything like that?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure.

MacDonald: That was part of your duties, too?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah. See, when I wasn't with the Captain, then I was on those guns, 20mm guns. And when we see those airplanes coming down, we'd just keep firing away, hoping that—[laughs]. And there were a lot that blew up before they even come close to us. So, there was a lot of banging away.

MacDonald: So then when you got back to Seattle for the repairs—you said the war had ended in the meantime, when you were in Seattle. And you got a little bit of time off to get back home?

Ohlrogge: Yeah. When we stopped in Seattle, the ship was going to be repaired there. So I had thirty days. I came home. And when I come back, another group went home. I think we were there two months.

MacDonald: When you came home on leave, what was it like here in Sturgeon Bay as far as a welcoming, or anything like that?

Ohlrogge: No, no, no.

MacDonald: You blended right in?

Ohlrogge: Yeah. It was immediate family. They were glad to see you, and, yeah, they met you up there. Now let's see, where were we? I don't even remember. See, while I was away, my dad sold the cheese factory. So it went out of business. We still lived there, but the factory was bought by—.

MacDonald: So then when you went back to Seattle, how long did you stay aboard the ship then?

Ohlrogge: Well, then from there, when they had the ship all repaired, we went back to Hawaii, Pearl Harbor. And we loaded up with a whole bunch of troops. We were bringing them back to the United States. So we brought them back to San Francisco.

And then from San Francisco we went south down through the Canal, Panama Canal. And we went to New York City. And we were in New York City for the Navy Day Parade and all that. There was a big shindig. Boy!

MacDonald: They didn't make you march in the parade?

Ohlrogge: No, no. We didn't. The ships, you know, they were in the parade, all these big aircraft carriers and cruisers. And when we docked we had open house to the public. We were there for a couple of weeks. So I got liberty there, to see New York.

And from there, we went up to Boston. And at that time, everybody was talking about being discharged. If you had enough points, you can get out. And we had enough points.

MacDonald: Because they counted all the time out at sea.

Ohlrogge: Yeah, I was [unintelligible]. So, when we got up to Boston, all those that had enough—. I think most of the Marines, they were shipped to Great Lakes. And that's where I got discharged, at Great Lakes.

MacDonald: Now, what was your rank then?

Ohlrogge: PFC, yeah. You didn't get too many raises during the war, unless you got moved around a lot. But I was over about a year and a half on the *Enterprise*. So, you didn't—.

MacDonald: Then when you got out, Don, did you take advantage of any of the GI Bill at the time?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, school. I went to Milwaukee School of Engineering. I took refrigeration, air conditioning. So I went down there. Loan, no, I didn't take—I could have got a loan too. And then I met my wife, and then we bought a house. Between our savings, we were able to buy a house.

MacDonald: In Sturgeon Bay?

Ohlrogge: Yeah.

MacDonald: Did you make any real close friendships in the Marine Corps? And did you keep in touch with them after the war?

Ohlrogge: Oh, yeah, yeah. The Marines joined the—ream [??] what do you call it? Well, we have a reunion every couple of years, *USS Enterprise* Marines. So every two years, we go and meet somewhere.

MacDonald: Different cities around the country?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. And, one year I was up at Seattle, 'cause that was one of our [laughs]—that was the one that I wanted to make—oh to New York and Chicago.

And friends of mine, two of them live in California. I keep sending Christmas cards and little notes, how things are going. Then we had a friend over in Eau Claire. Of course, he died about a year ago. Then I got a friend down in Kiel, Wisconsin. So we send cards; that's about all. And then, once in a while, if we go to the reunion, we meet.

MacDonald: Did you join any veterans' organizations when you came home?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. AMVETS, I joined the AMVETS right away.

MacDonald: Were you one of the original, when they formed?

Ohlrogge: No, no. That was in '51, and I think it was '52 when I joined. A friend of mine asked me to join, 'cause they were getting together a drill team, forming a drill team, and they knew I was a Marine and had a lot of drilling. So, that's how come I got into the drill team. And we were quite busy there for a while.

MacDonald: It's my understanding that the AMVET drill team was a pretty award-winning unit, wasn't it?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, yeah. A lot of the posts in the state had drill teams, and we'd compete against them at the state convention. And most of the time we won. And then the national convention, we went down to Florida. And we competed down there, and we won.

And we went to Philadelphia. I can't remember if that was a national convention or not. And then the inaugural parade, Kennedy's inaugural parade, came up.

MacDonald: The AmVets Post 51 got invited to march in that parade?

Ohlrogge: Yeah, we were invited to march, yeah. And we had some fund-raising deals to get enough money together to send a whole bunch. We had to fly out there.

MacDonald: Did you hold any Post offices?

Ohlrogge: Commander—I was commander one year; I think it was '56, something like that. I'm not positive. And then I was treasurer for a good many years till I finally gave it to somebody else that wanted it [laughs].

MacDonald: Looking back on your military service and your war service, have you got any thoughts about that? Did it have a big impact on you?

Ohlrogge: Mmm, I don't think so, no.

MacDonald: Was it because you were such a young man, and more or less everybody was doing it?

Ohlrogge: Yeah. When we came home, there was no praise for us or anything. It was just—everybody came home and just mingled in with the people that they left. So most of us, you forgot it.

It's a little different nowadays. 'Course, you've got more publicity now, with the TV on all the time telling what's going on. But, no I don't think too much about what I went through.

MacDonald: We're getting toward the end, here. Is there any other thing you'd like to talk about, as far as how your service was, any events that took place that stick in your mind real big?

Ohlrogge: Well, one thing about going across the equator. We were pollywogs, and they initiate us. We went through a lot of initiations [laughs] to get—what do they call it, pollywog to—after you cross the equator? That was quite a deal.

After we got out—the *Enterprise* Association—all the sailors that served aboard the ship, they had a club too. They called it the *USS Enterprise* Association. Every two years, they meet somewheres, too—all the sailors and Marines.

And in the beginning we tried to save the *Enterprise*. It was headed for the scrap yard. It was stationed in New York, sitting there, and they tried to save it. But they couldn't get enough money together. So, eventually, it ended up in the scrap yard. We thought very highly of it. It was the "Gallopig Ghost," they called it.

At that time when I was in there, I kept a little diary of all the things that were going on, and all different things. The *Wasp* was another carrier that was damaged. The *Franklin* was damaged. Survivors off the *Franklin*—.

MacDonald: What battle was that? Do you recall what battle that was?

Don's got a diary that he kept during the war, and he's just kind of looking back through it and identifying some ships and things.

Ohlrogge: This was—at the time they called it Task Group 42, or 52—.

[Break in recording] [End of tape 1, side A] [00:30:02]

MacDonald: —Donald Ohlrogge, explaining his diary that he kept during World War II aboard the *Enterprise*.

Ohlrogge: This was at the time we were hitting Okinawa. And from Okinawa we were going to hit Japan.

[Reads] “Routine patrol in strike.” See, that’s when nothing’s going on [laughs]. We called it ‘routine.’

[Reads] “Target, night combat, air patrol, cancelled, which leaves *Enterprise* Air Group forty-five minutes without planes in the air. Thus, the record has been stopped at 174 hours and ten minutes continued flying.” That was a Air Group that was stationed on there, *continuously* flying.

[Reads] “Routine scuttlebutt is, the ship is going back to Ulithi the fourth of March.” We got a lot of scuttlebutts.

[Reads] “Routine patrol.”

[Reads] “We arrived in Ulithi. Ulithi’s fleet of nine carriers there, and two days later the Big E pulled out.” We were called the Big E. “We were pulled out with the fleet of nine carriers still in Ulithi. I wonder what kind of a war they are fighting?” [Laughs] That’s my opinion, anyway, you know.

MacDonald: Uh-huh.

Ohlrogge: [Reads] “Routine fire practice. During sunrise, we could see flares being dropped over Task Group 58 on the horizon. We were under attack during the day. One carrier, the *Franklin*, was hit in Task Group 58. She lost control, and a large fire, smoke, and explosions were seen coming from her.” That’s another aircraft carrier that was hit by a suicide bomber.

[Reads] “*Franklin* was hit by a one-hundred-pound bomb, which went down her bomb elevator, setting the magazine off and putting number one engine out. The crew abandoned the ship, but the skeleton crew stayed. Fire under control late in the day. The *Enterprise* left the Task Group to replace the *Franklin*. Our admiral took over Task Group 58, while that admiral was on the *Franklin*.” See, he was on the *Franklin* and he was coming over with us.

[Reads] “We stayed and protected the Franklin. We will not send out strikes. Monday, March 19, we were under attack by ‘Judy’s.’” That’s the name of a Jap plane [*Yokosuka D4Y*].

“We took one bomb hit on number one elevator, which glanced off and hit the island structure, setting off a fire. Bomb did not go off, but landed in the battery. Eight men—three men on Battery Seven were killed by the fire, two wounded. One man died of burns from the fire, and two, then,

were also burned. Two Marines were wounded on Battery Twelve. Fire was put under control.”

We all took part in the funeral procession, in the back fantail. One guy was killed. Marines were there to fire a couple of rounds, and they dropped the body over.

MacDonald: Buried him at sea.

Ohlrogge: Yeah.

MacDonald: That’s a pretty important diary you got there. I hope you keep—.

Ohlrogge: I don’t read it very often, but I remember I was writing everything down there for a while.

MacDonald: Well, Don, I certainly appreciate you taking the time here, and we’re going to end the interview here. Okay?

Ohlrogge: Glad to do it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]