

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
CHARLES P. SMITH  
Marine, 1<sup>st</sup> Division, United States Marine Corps, WWII  
1996

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**Smith, Charles P.**, (1926- ). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recordings: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **Abstract**

Smith, an Oconto, Wis. native discusses his World War II service with Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Division serving at Pavuvu (Russell Islands) and in the Okinawa campaign. He talks about boot camp at San Diego including combat training, living in huts, language used by drill instructors, and the bitterness of draftees. He comments on his shock over the Pearl Harbor attack, boat trip overseas, sea sickness, and the good food at sea. Stationed at Pavuvu, he tells of learning from combat veterans and waiting aboard LSTs for the invasion of Okinawa. Landing at Okinawa, he describes the fear of troops, relatively easy landing on the island, taking Yontan airbase, the increasing Japanese resistance as his unit moved further in, and patrol duty. Smith expresses his regret over killing civilians and his admiration for corpsmen and medics. He compares the Okinawa experience to movie combat and tells stories of combat fatigue. Smith evaluates the different weapons used by both American and Japanese troops. He provides an account of being wounded, including feeling being shot but continuing to run, dressing his wound in the field, waiting for a corpsman to assist him, surgery in a field hospital, and evacuation from Okinawa. He touches upon staying at Naval hospitals in Hawaii and California, talking with Red Cross workers to determine his disability level, receiving a regular discharge rather than a medical discharge, and his belief that his discharge status has made changing his disability level difficult. He mentions using the GI Bill to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, feeling that the UW was just like the service because of the number of veterans, transfer to Milton College, and finding work after graduation. Smith mentions working at the Badger Ammunition Plant during the Korean War and the Vietnam War, joining the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and dislike of World War I veterans, joining the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), and working at the State Treasurer.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Smith (1926- ) served with the Marine Corps in the Pacific theater of World War II and was wounded in the fighting for Okinawa. After the war, he returned to Madison (Wis.) and served at the State Treasure from 1970 to 1990.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcribed by Court Reporter Mary Lou Condon, 2004

Transcription edited by Abigail Miller, 2004.

## Interview Transcript

Mark: Today's date is July 24, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Charles Smith, presently of Madison, and a veteran of the Marine Corps in World War II.

Good morning, and thanks for coming in.

Smith: Thank you, Mark. Glad to be here.

Mark: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Smith: Okay. I was actually born in Chicago, Illinois, but my family was really from Oconto, Wisconsin. My father died in 1939 when I was in seventh grade. Incidentally, I was born in 1926. And it was about a year later we moved to Madison. My mother was a nurse who needed a job, and there was nothing in Oconto for her, so she did get a job here with the University Hospitals.

I graduated from Madison West High School. In fact, I actually entered the Marine Corps before my senior year was up. And had my boot training at San Diego and came home on a ten-day boot leave in August of 1944, and reported back to Camp Pendleton, where we trained for about five weeks. And, about the middle of September, I was on a boat for the South Pacific.

Mark: Pretty quick.

Smith: Yes. The ship took us to Pavuvu in the Russell Islands, which is a small group near the Solomons. And we waited there for the first Marines to get back from the battle at Peleliu. And they came back in November, and I was assigned to C Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 1st Marine Division, and wound up serving in a machine gun platoon.

Mark: I want to go back and cover some of the things we've touched on. First of all, the attack on Pearl Harbor, I suppose for anecdotal purposes if nothing else, but to perhaps sort of highlight a teenager's view of Pearl Harbor, since it was going to impact on your life and a lot of other young men's lives at the same time, do you recall the incident, where you were and that sort of thing, and what the reaction was of you and other teenagers?

Smith: Yes. Yes, I recall it very well. It was a Sunday morning, of course, December 7, 1941. I got a phone call from a high school friend who said,

turn on the radio. We were just attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. So, of course, we had the radio on for all day and all the next day and probably several weeks after that. There was no TV coverage at that time.

And I was a sophomore in high school, and I guess we were all shocked by the ferocity of the attack and the treachery that was involved in it. And many of us just couldn't wait to become old enough to get into the military. And, in the middle of my senior year, I tried to get into the Merchant Marine, but, at that time, they had closed enlistments to my age group. I was just 17½. So, about a month later, I guess February or maybe March, I joined the Marine Corps.

Mark: Now, you were not 18 yet.

Smith: No, I was not.

Mark: So you had to get your parent's permission.

Smith: Yes. My mother had to sign for me.

Mark: Was that a source of controversy in your family? Some parents didn't want their kids going off, necessarily.

Smith: Well, it was somewhat. She had been widowed for a number of years, and my older brother was already in the military. But I was pretty adamant. I said, Mom, if you don't sign, I'll run away and join the Canadian Air Force. So she relented. I guess she realized I was going to be 18 in a few months anyway and that I would probably be drafted. So, I actually had my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in boot camp, in San Diego.

Mark: And you did finish high school?

Smith: I got my diploma when I came home.

Mark: Oh, I see.

Smith: They gave it to me when I got out of the Service.

Mark: I was doing the math in my head here. You said your brother was in the Service as well.

Smith: Yes.

Mark: What branch was he in?

- Smith: My brother, Bill, was in the Army Signal Corps. And he wound up on Guam attached to the 20<sup>th</sup> Bomber Command. They were stringing telephone wires all over the island.
- Mark: Did you get any sorts of insights on military life and what to expect from your brother, or did you—
- Smith: Well, he wrote quite a bit to the family and told us about the drudgery of being a soldier. And he tried to get into the Air Force, I guess, but he didn't qualify for flight school, so he wound up in the Signal Corps.
- Mark: So his letters didn't dissuade you from joining the Service.
- Smith: No, not really. If anything, it probably made me want to join all the more.
- Mark: And you chose the Marine Corps.
- Smith: Yes.
- Mark: For what reason?
- Smith: Well, I guess I thought I was pretty tough then, and I always respected and admired the Marines. And I thought that would be, I guess, a real adventure. And it was.
- Mark: So you go out to basic training. Did you go to San Diego or Paris Island or—
- Smith: I went to San Diego.
- Mark: Why don't you describe basic training to me. I went to Air Force basic training 40 years later. Some things I'm sure were the same and some things I'm sure were very, very different. Why don't you describe the sort of training that you did, all on the last—
- Smith: We went on schedule in boot camp on June 1, 1944. And they were pretty rough on us. We got to practically skin down to all the hair off of our head and wore nothing but dungarees. We marched, we marched, we had a week on the firing range, we did some bivouacking, and we got some training in hand-to-hand fighting and judo. They really kept us hoping. We didn't have much time, except maybe on Sunday, for any personal activity. At night, maybe after chow, we'd get to see a movie, but sometimes we were all so tired we'd fall asleep during it. And we all went to bed pretty early because we got up awful early.

- Mark: Did you have any troubles adjusting to military life, say the discipline or the communal living situations?
- Smith: Well, it was certainly different from what I was used to. We were in huts with, I think, our platoon of about 60 men. We had about three huts with about 20 people in each hut. And each hut had one man that was chosen to kind of supervise everybody and tell them what to do and when to do it. It was very disciplined and frustrating, and sometimes I wondered what the hell I did that for. But there I was, there wasn't much I could do about it anymore.
- And I was certainly waiting to get out of boot camp and get on with the rest of my career in the Marine Corps, which I hoped wouldn't be quite as rigid as boot camp was. And it wasn't, although we had some tough training after that at Camp Pendleton.
- Mark: Some veterans I speak to were a little shocked by some of the language that was used. Having grown up as part of the MTV generation, I guess that sort of thing doesn't shock me too much. But yourself?
- Smith: Oh yes. Well, the drill sergeants were pretty, I guess the word we used was salty. And they could out-cuss a longshoreman. Of course, being a kid in high school, I don't think there were any words they used that I hadn't used or heard before. But, when they spoke, boy, you hoped to. They kept you, well, one word I guess I could use was scared. You didn't dare not do what they told you to and do it just like that.
- Mark: Now, the Marine Corps has a reputation of being tough and elite. And I would imagine that there were some who didn't finish basic training, who couldn't handle it. Was that the case?
- Smith: Yeah, there were a few that dropped out that just couldn't take the discipline, or even some of the physical rigors of it. I remember one fella in particular that was pretty heavy and probably shouldn't have been admitted to the Corps anyway, there were just a lot of the things that he couldn't do. He kind of washed out. I don't know what his military career, if any, was after that. And there were some that were just kind of crybabies and Mama's boys. I think my platoon only lost a couple that I can recall.
- Mark: Did you have draftees or were they all volunteers?
- Smith: No, they were draftees. I mean, a lot of them were draftees. I had enlisted, of course. I wasn't old enough to be drafted. But some of them were quite bitter. They didn't want to be drafted into the Marine Corps. They wanted to go into the Navy or the Army or the Air Force. When

they wound up in the Marine Corps, many of them weren't very excited about it.

Mark: Military training often brings together people from different parts of the country. I mean, at this time the Armed Forces were still segregated and there weren't many women in it. But, even excluding those groups, there was still a pretty wide diversity of people in this country. Was that the case when you were in basic training? And, if so, how did people of all these different backgrounds get along?

Smith: I think, for the most part, we got along very well. There were no African-Americans in my platoon. In fact, there were very few in the Marine Corps at that time. There were a lot of people of Spanish or Mexican heritage. And I know some of the drill instructors tended to kind of pick on them, which I found—I was very resentful of that. And some of them would talk in their native language, Mexican and each other, and that kind of angered some of their comrades in the hut that we were in. It didn't bother me. In fact, one of the young Spanish-Americans there was my bunk mate. His name was Max Talamantez(?), and he was married. A young fellow, but he was very nice. We got along just very well together. And he, incidentally, was killed on Okinawa.

Mark: A lot of southerners?

Smith: Pardon?

Mark: A lot of southerners, perhaps?

Smith: My boot camp platoon was primarily California, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Mark: So, from basic training, you said you got some leave, went off and did some more training.

Smith: Yes. I got a ten-day leave, had to take the train from San Diego back to Madison, Wisconsin. And that train ride was over three days. So I didn't really have very much time at home because it was three days back again.

But I reported to Camp Pendleton at Oceanside, California, and was assigned to what they called the 10<sup>th</sup> Replacement Draft. And we did quite a bit of rough extensive infantry training for the five weeks we were there. And then we were put on a boat out of San Diego to the, as I mentioned, to the Russell Islands.

Mark: How was the voyage to the South Pacific? That's a long time to be on a ship.

Smith: Yeah. A lot of guys got terribly seasick. I kind of made it a point to stay up in the fresh air and try to eat all my meals. And I got pretty queasy for the first two or three days out, but I never lost it. After that, I weathered the storm pretty well. But a lot of guys just were sick most of the trip. But the food was good on the boat.

Mark: Oh, was it?

Smith: Yeah.

Mark: Must've been a Navy ship.

Smith: It was a General Harry Taylor. It was a troop ship.

Mark: So, you get to the Pacific. What happens then?

Smith: Well, when we arrived down at the Russell Islands, they sent us to an area to await the return of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. And then I was assigned to C Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, of the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division.

Mark: Now, they had just been where?

Smith: They had been fighting on Peleliu, which was a very rough one. I guess I can say I'm glad I missed that one. And, after a number of months of training, from November to around the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, we had training, and we made several dress rehearsal invasion landings on Guadalcanal. And we had some training and they put some kind of mock villages up so that we got some training in street fighting.

And then, around the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, they put us on LSTs. We didn't really know where we were going, but we were aboard ship for—not the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, about towards the end of February—we were aboard ship for over five or six weeks before we actually made the landing on Okinawa. We didn't find out until after we spent about four days in the harbor of Ulithe in the Caroline Islands waiting for the fleet to gather, the convoy to take us to Okinawa. And it was after we left Ulithe that we were told where we were going. And they explained to us that Okinawa was one of the southern-most islands of the immediate Japanese empire and that the people that were on it were kind of mixed. Mixed ethnics groups, many of them Koreans and some kind of a poor class Japanese, and even some Chinese.

And, as they gave us some briefings about the landings, they said, depending on where we landed, which was going to depend on how rough the seas were at that particular time, I guess they originally wanted us to

land on the southern end of the island, which I think we later learned would have been very disastrous. We eventually wound up landing on the China Sea side. They said we'd be lucky if you go 50 yards the first day. That's the type of resistance they expected that we'd meet.

But, as it turned out, they weren't there. We just walked in, practically, and took over Yontan airfield, which had been, of course, vacated by any airplanes. There were a lot of mock planes there just to encourage us to bomb it. And they looked probably pretty realistic from the air. And we were on Yontan in less than an hour. They said it would probably be four days before we got there.

And then our division pretty much proceeded directly across the island, just split the island in two. And some of the divisions, whether they were Marine Corps or Army, some headed north to clean up the northern part of the island, and my division headed south.

Mark: I'd like you to describe the landing because you didn't realize that it was going to be as easy as it was to get on the beach.

Smith: That's exactly right.

Mark: What sort of preparations do you make thinking that you're going to go into battle like that? And what did you think after you actually got on shore?

Smith: Well, I think most of us were pretty damned scared and anxious until we actually got in. Because most landings there was a lot of mortar fire and artillery fire from the people that were defending, the Japanese that were defending the various islands in the Pacific. But, we just didn't hear any of that. The only firing we heard was the naval vessels that were firing over our heads. And, of course, naval planes and Marine Corps planes came by and put a smokescreen down so they couldn't really see us anyway until we got very close to shore.

And, when the landing craft got in and they dropped the gate and we started heading in, we all expected to hear a lot of at least small arms fire. But there just wasn't any. We were, I guess, really quite relieved. And we didn't come under—at least my company didn't—heavy fire for about almost another three or four weeks when we proceeded to cross the island and head south. That wasn't true, of course, on some other parts of the island where there was some pretty heavy combat. We didn't really get into that, at least my unit, until, oh, sometimes towards the end of April. Incidentally, the landing was Easter Sunday of 1945—April 1<sup>st</sup>.

Mark: So, when you finally did start getting into heavy combat, people watch war movies—did you have something you wanted to say?

Smith: Yeah. Well, after we secured a good share of the mid-part of the island, we were ordered to move south. In fact, we even bivouacked a few days in one certain area where we covered some trails and so forth. And we kept watch at night. And we had some civilian casualties.

One buddy and I were on watch at night. We saw a group of people coming towards us. It wasn't a very moonlit night and we, of course, started blasting away at them and it turned out that it was a family of about seven people. Some very elderly people and some younger people and some very small children. I remember very particularly one of the little girls that was hit in the stomach. And I got a Jeep and got her back to one of the field hospitals. She was probably about four years old. Hopefully she was saved, but some of the elderly people were killed outright and some others were wounded.

And, after the firing was over, our gunnery sergeant called down on the phone to our machine gun bunkers and said, What's going on down there? And I said, All I can say is there's something moving out here and we got them. So he came down in the morning and I guess there were three dead, maybe four, I can't quite remember. All he said was, Bury them. If you're going to shoot them, you've got to bury them. So it was just, you know, a terrible feeling that we hit a bunch of civilians, especially women and children. But that's just what happens in war.

Mark: And you moved from that point, then, to an area of heavier traditional combat.

Smith: Yes. Then we started moving south towards what they called Shiri Castle. And I never got that far. Of course, everything was a ridge. You go over one ridge and there's another one. And we were advancing under some fairly heavy mortar and small-arms fire. And this was the 12<sup>th</sup> of May. It was a Saturday morning and just hotter than hell out. Of course, a couple days before that I had lost my squad leader, my first and second gunner in my platoon, and one or two other guys. At the time I was just an ammunition carrier. So I think, over a period of about four or five days before I actually got hit myself, we had about, oh, 60% casualties, just in my company.

Mark: That's pretty heavy.

Smith: And, of course, they were bringing fresh recruits in, too. By that time I felt like I was a real combat veteran. And then you have to kind of stay close to these guys because they're just as scared as I was when I first got

there, and try to cheer them up and show them the ropes and tell them when to keep their butt down and that kind of thing.

Mark: What is it about combat that you think people don't seem to understand? You watch the war movies and it has a certain look and feel and that sort of thing.

Smith: I think a lot of the war movies are somewhat glorified. And they make it look like it's just, oh, a plain exciting thing to do. Well, it's exciting all right, but it's just devastating. And some guys just can't handle it. They just crack up. I guess back then we called it combat fatigue. Now they got another name for it that came out of Vietnam, I forget what the term was.

Mark: Post traumatic stress disorder.

Smith: Yes, right. Right. And I saw a young corpsman—you know, most of the medical service provided to the Marine Corps was by the Navy, so all the Navy corpsmen and those guys were really something else. I really admired them.

But we, after doing a perimeter on a hill one night, before we got into the heavy combat, we woke up to find a young civilian man, he was probably in his early twenties, and we had gotten an order from our battalion commander not to bring any prisoners back to the regiment because he'd shoot them himself. And, of course, I guess I assumed at the time that he was talking about soldiers. Well, somebody else was getting ready to shoot this kid and all of a sudden the corpsman, and generally they were armed with just a .45 pistol, pulled out the pistol and shot this guy right in the head. And I thought, Jesus, a pretty dumb thing to do. A couple days later this corpsman cracked up. I don't know if that was it or something else.

And I just have to give a lot of credit to the many, many lives these corpsmen saved, including my own.

Mark: In combat, I wanted to go over some of the equipment that you had and that sort of thing. Why don't you just basically describe what you're wearing and what sort of equipment you have. And then I want to talk about which items are most effective, least effective, useless, whatever the case may be.

Smith: Well, we were armed with—those of us who are ammunition carriers—they took our M1 rifles away from us that we had in boot camp and gave us a 30-caliber carbine, which was semi-automatic, had a ten-round clip in it, smaller bullets, shorter and a lot lighter because we each were carrying two boxes of machine gun ammunition. We had a strap that went over our

shoulders, that is, those of us who were ammunition carriers, with hooks on the bottom of them so all the weight wasn't on our hands and arms. And we had a belt that had our little pouches for our ammunition clips. We got a combat knife, we had a knapsack where we kept our mess materials and a blanket, some change of clothes, socks, skivvies and so forth, and a few personal items that you wanted to carry, like pictures of your girlfriend and so forth. And the dungarees were standard equipment.

When we first went in, they made us carry gas masks, too. But, within a couple of days the guys just dumped them and sometimes used the case to carry other stuff in. And also, they required initially that we wear leggings because, supposedly, there were a lot of poisonous snakes on the island. I never did see a live one, but I saw some that had discarded their skins. I saw the skins lying around. But, basically, that was the equipment that we used.

And, of course, in a machine gun platoon the first gunner usually carried the weapon itself and the second gunner carried the tripod that it was mounted on. And there were ten of us in each squad. And there was a squad leader, of course, first and second gunner, and then seven ammunition carriers.

And I think the machine gun is one of the most devastating weapons. Of course, just about every infantryman today is armed with a fully-automatic weapon. And machine guns fire at a lot faster rate than they did when we were in there. The Japanese had some rather fearful weapons that fired—called a namboo (??)—fired about 600, 700 rounds a minute compared to about 500-some rounds for the Browning machine guns that we carried. But either way, whether it's 500 or 700, they can be very, very devastating. Every machine gun, I can't remember whether it was every fifth round or every tenth round, was a tracer bullet, so you could pretty much see what you were hitting.

And then, of course, along with our infantry platoon, we also had a mortar section. And a good mortar attack can also be very devastating. These guys were very well trained. And, good God, sometimes they could dump a mortar on a machine gun nest that was only 60 yards away. And that meant it had to go up a hell of a long ways and had a very narrow trajectory and come back down again.

And also attached to us was a special weapons company where they had bazookas and flame throwers. The flame thrower was used an awful lot to clean out caves and bunkers and so forth. I didn't really ever see a Jap use one, but, boy, I sure wouldn't want to be hit by one because that napalm would stick right to you. And that had to be a pretty terrible death. And then even some of our tanks would pull a trailer full of napalm and then

shoot the flames right out of their cannon if they had to get up to a bunker that was just too dangerous for the infantrymen to get too close to.

And, of course, we had air support. It was a lot of fun to watch the dog fights occasionally off the shore. And, of course, we saw many of the kamikazes come in and hit some of the ships. And it's pretty damn terrible, really.

Mark: Now, your basic training, your drill sergeants yelling at you, being scared, taking orders, that sort of thing, did you find that that paid off in the end? Or there's really no way to prepare someone?

Smith: No, I think it paid off. I think you have to have good discipline to keep a unit together. And most of the NCOs, whether they were the platoon sergeants or the head gunnery sergeant or even the corporals and head of the various squads, they were all veterans. They had been in two or three battles. Some of them had been at Bougainville and Peleliu before we got to Okinawa. And it really paid to pay attention to what they were telling you because they had been there.

A lot of us, you know, at first we didn't know enough to keep our butts down. And I remember one of the first days that we were fired at, I was running up a little hill and I could see these little puffs of powder ahead of me, just like an enemy machine gun was chasing me up the hill. And one of the squad leaders hollered at me, "Smith, get your goddamn ass down or you're going to get your fuckin' head blown off." So I learned to keep my ass down after that.

Mark: You said you were in combat about three, four days before you eventually got hit?

Smith: No. No, no. We landed the 1<sup>st</sup> of April and I didn't get hit until the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, so I was there actually six weeks before I was hit. And another thing that we did, they had a bunch of us volunteer for a patrol. And, like a dummy, I volunteered, which was all right. There were a bunch of snipers up in the hills sniping at our 155 long toms(??). Those are artillery weapons. And killing off a few of the gunners. So they sent us on a patrol to wipe out a Japanese bivouac area, and we did a super job and got a commendation from the regimental commander. And so we did it. Before we finally got into the last phase of the operation, we weren't just sitting there. We were on patrols and that sort of thing. And it was one hell of an experience.

Mark: So, eventually your number came up, I guess, and you were hit.

Smith: Yes. This was a Saturday morning. And I don't know exactly what time, it was probably mid morning, maybe around 10:00 because we had been moving for a couple hours. And trying to take one ridge after another. I mentioned before, you take one and there's another one to get over. And we were under some rather heavy small arms and mortar fire. And I was running at the time, and all of a sudden I felt something in my side. It felt like—it stung. I felt like I had been hit by a baseball bat. And I still ran, it didn't knock me down. And finally I figured out I'd been hit.

And I guess, as I recall, I made out a couple yells for a corpsman, but then I kind of got hold of myself and figured, well, Smith, you're still running, it can't be too bad. So I stopped and sat down behind a little rise in the ground, right in a puddle of water, which felt good because it was hotter than hell out anyway. And a little rise so maybe the guy couldn't hit me again, although I'm sure he would rather hit somebody else than somebody he had already hit.

But anyway, I took my, oh, I can't remember, my dungaree jacket off and my tee shirt that I was wearing under it and saw where the bullet went in on my side. And I also saw where it came out and I could see a little hunk of bowel that had popped out in the back. Pretty soon one of the young men from the mortar platoon came along. He had been carrying up hand grenades to us. And he saw that I'd been hit. He was a young man from Cokeville, Wyoming. And he said, "Charlie, I'll go find a corpsman for you." And he came back and said, "He'll be here in a few minutes." He told him where I was. And he was crouched down and, just as he got that out of his mouth, I think maybe the same sniper that got me got him. And he let out one yell and just fell over backwards. He was dead.

Anyway, pretty soon a corpsman came along and didn't like the way I had patched myself up, so he did it over again. Also about that same time, our platoon lieutenant came along, and he wanted him to put me in a poncho and carry me out and send a stretcher up farther. He said, "No, this guy's going on a stretcher." The corpsman can be boss in that situation. So, I wound up on a stretcher and carried back to a jeep.

Mark: You were still conscious during this.

Smith: Oh yes. Yes. It hurt, but I was pretty aware of what was going on. And then they put me in an amphibious tractor. And, while they were taking me back to the aid station, I actually received whole blood during that time. And then, when I got back to the aid station—there was a kid from my company there, his name was also Smith, I forget his first name—that had been hit. And we talked a little bit. Then a priest came along and talked to me for a few minutes. They take a look at your dog tag to see

what religion you are, and, of course, I was Protestant at the time, which at the time was all right.

And then I guess I didn't wake up until the next day. They put me out and did the surgery. And I remained in the field hospital for about a week. Then they put a bunch of us on a plane to Guam. Fleet hospital 103, I guess, on Guam. And, while I was there I was able to—I got up a couple times when maybe I wasn't quite supposed to, and went to the bathroom myself instead of sitting in a bedpan.

But, one of the best things about being there was I told the Red Cross lady that I had a brother there. And all I could remember of his address was the 389<sup>th</sup> Signal Company. By God, she found him, and that first night he was up there and he came up to see me every night that I was there. And he wrote to my mother to tell her what had happened, and she heard from him about a month before she heard from the Service that I'd been wounded.

And, after about ten days, roughly, I can't remember the times anymore, on Guam, they flew us to a Naval hospital at Waimea Heights in Pearl Harbor. And, with two stops on the way, we stopped at Kwajalein Island and Johnston Island to refuel, so then, of course, I was able to get off the plane, even though I was walking a little unsteadily at the time.

And then, after about ten days in Pearl Harbor, when I was really up and active, ambulatory, they flew us to a U.S. naval hospital in Oakland, California.

Mark: Now, is the war still going on by this time?

Smith: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. The war wasn't over until sometime towards the end of June. In fact, I had my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday when I was in the Naval hospital in Oakland.

Mark: What I'm wondering is, were they going to send you back to the front, or was this going to be it for you?

Smith: No. No, I was out of it. And I just remember, from hearing the doctors talking, that I had this perforated bowel. I imagine they did a resection where they cut a hunk out and then sewed it up again. But they sure did a number on my scar because they cut me from here all the way back to here. And I suppose just what you hear talked on M.A.S.H., meatball surgery. They didn't care how pretty you were, they just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else left in there.

So, as a result of that, I don't know if you've noticed, but I have a bulge here, it's just called an abdominal hernia, that I've talked to some doctors

about the last few years to see if they could fix it, and they won't touch it. It doesn't bother me physically, but it kind of does cosmetically because I like to go swimming and all that sort of stuff. But what the hell, it's there and I can't do much about it.

And then, after about maybe ten days at the Naval hospital in Oakland, they put quite a few of us on a train to the big U.S. Naval Hospital in San Diego, oh, around the 20<sup>th</sup> or something of June. Then I stayed there until about the first week in August. Then they let me go home on a 30-day convalescent leave. So I took the train back to Madison. And I had asked them if I could be transferred to the Great Lakes Naval Hospital and they said no, they're just too full. But then some doctor said to me, he said, Look, don't tell anyone I tell you this, but when you're ready to leave Madison, just report down there and tell them you don't feel good. They won't ship you out.

But, by that time I decided I wanted to go back to San Diego and see some buddies again. I couldn't get discharged for another—actually, it was the 21<sup>st</sup> of November because I had to wait for my records to catch up to me. So, I think it was around the 16<sup>th</sup> of October that they sent me from the Naval hospital back to the Marine Corps base in San Diego where I just put in what they called a casual company and waited for my records to catch up so I could get my discharge.

I did not get a medical discharge. I went through the Medical Survey Board and they said I could perform useful limited duty. But the war was over then. They weren't keeping any limited duty, so I got out.

Mark: With a regular honorable discharge?

Smith: Yes.

Mark: Without the medical discharge.

Smith: Yes.

Mark: So then, after the war, how does that sort of discharge affect getting pensions and that sort of thing?

Smith: Well, originally the Red Cross people interviewed us to see if we were going to get a pension or so forth. And I guess they reported to the Naval Service. And I got 100% disability for about six months. I don't know why, I never thought I was 100% disabled.

Then in Madison I was instructed to go to the Veterans Hospital for a review. And my disability was lowered to 30%, which I still get.

- Mark: So it didn't seem to have much of an impact one way or another, the medical versus the regular discharge.
- Smith: Yes. I guess, even if it was a medical discharge it would have been 100, though.
- Mark: Oh yeah.
- Smith: But I get 30% now, which is about \$298 a month.
- Mark: So, you're out of the Service. Now it's time to get on with things. You're all of 20 years old, perhaps, now?
- Smith: No, I'm still 19.
- Mark: What are your priorities in getting the rest of your life back on track?
- Smith: Well, number one, of course, was going to college. I enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in January of 1946. And I only stayed there about three weeks. I thought I was still in Service. They had this huge influx of veterans, and we were putting a lot of makeshift buildings on the campus, Quonset huts, etc. I don't know, I just felt like I was still in Service.
- I went and talked to my advisor and I said, I'm not just quite hacking this. He recommended that I consider a smaller college. And I asked him about Milton College because I already had a couple of friends going down there. And he recommended it very highly. So that spring another friend and I, this is the spring of '46, went down to Milton and looked it over and enrolled for the September term. And four years later I graduated.
- Mark: One last question about your UW experience, your brief one. With your war injuries, did you find it getting around such a large campus?
- Smith: No. No, not at all. In fact, this wasn't there then. This came in later years.
- Mark: Oh, I understand.
- Smith: Because of the weakness of these muscles. So, no, I didn't have any problem at all with my injury.
- Mark: It was just a matter of too many vets on campus.

- Smith: Yeah, I think so. I just felt it wasn't the place for me at that time in my life.
- Mark: And how was Milton different?
- Smith: Well, it was a very small school. I think, at the most, there were about 500 students there at that time, most of us veterans. And I just found the atmosphere there totally different. And the classes were smaller, the professors were much more willing to sit down and talk with you and that sort of thing. It was just a whole new ballgame as far as I was concerned.
- And then, after my freshman year, I got married. The first year down there I roomed with a bunch of guys in a private home. And then, after I got married in the summer of '47, we went down and found a small apartment over a drug store right downtown, where we lived for two years. And then my senior year we moved down to some units that were, some old barracks they bought up from Camp Grant, made into apartments for married veterans. And we lived there for one year. So I really enjoyed my college experience at Milton.
- Mark: Did you use the G.I. Bill?
- Smith: Oh yes. In fact, I was eligible for Public Law 16.
- Mark: Oh that's true, yes.
- Smith: Yes. Which gave me a little more money. And also gave me extra money because I was married.
- Mark: And that covered your expenses, I take it.
- Smith: Yes.
- Mark: It's a private school. I'd imagine that tuition was—
- Smith: Tuition was covered, books were covered. I got enough money to—I think our rent was only about 20 bucks a month back in those days. So we got enough money to live on. I worked a little on the side, too. Several different small part-time jobs when I was in school. My wife worked for a while, too.
- Mark: What did you study?
- Smith: I majored in sociology and history. Two majors, actually, and two minors in English and political science.

- Mark: **[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]**  
And, once you graduated, what did you do for a living? There were a lot of other vets on the job market.
- Smith: Oh sure, you bet there were.
- Mark: Did you have trouble finding employment?
- Smith: No, not really. I took an exam for a case worker with the Dane County Department of Public Assistance and was hired by them. Worked there for only about, well, a little less than a year. The pay was so bad. Here I am a married guy with one child and another one on the way and getting about \$229 a month, and my rent was 80-something. And I was driving cab several nights a week just so we could survive. And it was pretty tough, so I left Dane County after that and worked at a number of goofy jobs for a few months.
- Then I went to work at the Army Badger Ammunition Plant at Baraboo as a supervisor in the production of both rocket and cannon propellants. And, in 1955, now this was during the Korean War, I was there three-and-a-half years. And then they were kind of on the verge of shutting down because the war was over.
- And I took a job with Mobil Oil in Milwaukee as a dealer/sales representative. And then I was with Mobil for about three years. Then, from about 1958 until 1966, I was in the insurance business. And I did fairly well, but I wasn't going to get rich or anything.
- But in 1966 the Badger Army Ammunition Plant reopened for the Vietnam War, so they called me and asked me to come back. So, in January of '67 I went back to work for them, and I was there until January of 1971.
- And in November of 1970 I was elected State Treasurer and served in that position for 20 years until January of 1991. And, since then, I've done a little consulting, but now I'm pretty much completely retired. I just turned 70 about a month ago and I'm really enjoying retirement.
- Mark: So the war didn't seem to have any impact on your ability to get a job.
- Smith: No, I don't think so.
- Mark: There was no economic handicap for you in that sense.
- Smith: No. None at all.

- Mark: Medical adjustments. We've pretty much covered the physical wounds. After the war, a lot of combat veterans especially had nightmares and that sort of thing. Did you suffer from those?
- Smith: No, I don't think so, really. The only thing that bugged me a little bit, when I was in the Naval Hospital in San Diego, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July there was a bunch of fireworks going on. And I was still in bed most of the time. And that kind of drove me a little bonkers. And I woke up several times and jumped. I don't think I screamed or anything, but, when they were interviewing me for my disability, I discussed that with the nurse. And I think maybe that's what gave me that 100% for a few months. I'm not really sure, but that's what I think probably did it. And, of course, then they reviewed me. She told me initially, after our discussion, I said, what do you think my disability percentage will be? And she said, Oh, probably 40%. So when I was awarded 100% I nearly flipped because I just didn't feel I was 100% disabled. And six months later they caught up to me and cut it back to 30, which has been maintained all of these years.
- Mark: I'm kind of curious. You were in a hospital setting when this happened with, I would imagine, many other combat veterans. Were there others who seemed distressed by this, by these fireworks?
- Smith: Yes, I think there were a couple guys there. Also, it was right next to that great San Diego zoo. You could hear the damn animals yelling their heads off, too. You probably don't remember this, Mark, but Madison used to do their fireworks at Vilas Park.
- Mark: No, I don't remember.
- Smith: When I moved here in 1940. And, after a few years they stopped that because it was driving the animals bonkers. Now it's way on the other side of town.
- Mark: Now it's at Warner Park.
- Smith: Yes.
- Mark: I've just got one last area that I want to cover, which may or may not even apply to you, and that involves veterans' organizations and reunions and that sort of thing. Did you at any time ever join any of the big groups like the American Legion, VFW? And if so, why, and if not, why not?
- Smith: Well, I think this was probably in December of 1945, three of us, longtime friends, went up to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The other two fellows had been in the Air Force, one in Europe as a gunner on a liberator

bomber, the other one a gunner on a B29 in the Pacific. And we decided we'd join the VFW.

We went to one meeting and, of course, there was all the old World War I veterans. And with those guys, the first liar didn't have a chance. We tried to tell them our war stories and, boy, they'd try to top us. So I guess all three of us decided that we just didn't want to belong to the VFW.

So then, I think the next summer, they formed a detachment of the Marine Corps League. And I went to the first meeting they had here in Madison, and I could have been a charter member except I didn't have \$3.00 in my pocket, so I didn't even join that.

Then, the only other organization I belong to now, I joined this about maybe ten years ago. I'm a life member of the Disabled American Veterans.

Mark: Why that particular group and why at that point in your life?

Smith: Well, I just think that they've done a great job to help the veterans with disabilities get a fair deal from the Veterans Administration over the years. And I thought, if there's any organization that I do want to belong to, it's probably that.

And then a couple years ago my wife and I were out in Las Vegas. And, living out there was a fellow that I went to high school with who was also in the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, and, while I saw him a few times on Pavuvu, I even ran into him once on Okinawa, we weren't in the same unit. And he said something to my wife about the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division Association, so she bought me a surprise membership in that organization. And last July we went out to Las Vegas to their annual convention. And we had a good time. I only met one guy that I remembered from my company, and he was in the mortar platoon that was bivouacked right next to my machine gun platoon. But anyway, we had a good time. And the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division band was there, and they put on just one tremendous show. It was just really kind of fun. Now they're meeting this year down in New Orleans, but I don't want to go to New Orleans in August.

Mark: That's true.

Smith: In fact, it was so hot last year out in Las Vegas, it was over 100 degrees every day. We stayed at the Riviera and I went in the swimming pool a few times, and that was even too hot. So I just never had any real interest in joining the veterans' organizations.

In fact, during the Vietnam War, many of them really upset me. Anyone that was against that war, which I guess I wasn't at first, but along about 1966 or '67, when I began to see how involved we were getting, I started going to the antiwar rallies and so forth. When these organizations come out and practically call some of them a traitor just because they aren't supporting 100% our war effort, that's when those organizations—I just had it with them. I think they intend, in many ways, to kind of glorify war. And it seems to me that some of the worst offenders in those organizations were some of the guys who had never been overseas before. And, of course, they would be primarily Legionnaires, not VFW people. So I just never had—

Even a couple of good friends wanted me to join the Military Order of the Purple Heart. And I do have a Purple Heart, but I haven't even been interested in that.

Mark: And you managed to get elected to public office without being a Legionnaire?

Smith: Yes. Well, you know—

Mark: Contrary to the myth, I guess.

Smith: Well, on my brochures I listed, of course, what I had done over the years. I also indicated my military service and the fact that I was a Purple Heart veteran. And how much that had to do with my getting elected, I don't know. But, in fact, the first time I ran for election I didn't win. This was 1968.

The incumbent, her name happened to be Smith, Dena Smith, died in office at mid-term. And the governor appointed a legislator from Oconomowoc to fill out her term. And, of course, I had been very active in, especially the Dane County Democratic Party at that time, and decided, after consulting a lot of people, to run for state treasurer in the election in November of 1968.

Well, I won the primary against our former Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, but lost in the general election. That was the year Bronson La Follette, who was our former Attorney General, ran for governor against Warren Knowles, and it just wasn't a very good year for Democrats. So, I decided to run again in '70, which was the beginning of the four-year terms. And Pat Lucey was elected governor and I was elected treasurer. And then I was re-elected four times and lost the election to a young lady out of the legislature in 1990.

Mark: Is that still an elective office?

Smith: Oh yeah. It even predates me that there have been a number of attempts in the legislature to eliminate it.

Mark: I know things have changed a lot in the last couple—

Smith: Yes. The Treasurer and the Secretary of State from the ballot and make them subject to gubernatorial appointment. But it's just never gotten through the legislature. I know the Senate has passed it, but it always died in the Assembly. And I guess the thing that irritated me about it, more than anything else, was that it was my Democratic buddies that were pushing it. Here they hadn't held those offices for years, and then a Democrat gets in to both the Secretary of State's office and the Treasurer's office, and they still want to dump them. And I had a few go-rounds with some of those guys over that. But it still comes up every year in the legislature. It's usually joint resolution number one in the state senate. I don't know what happened this past year. But that would be a constitutional amendment, of course, and it would take two consecutive sessions of the legislature to approve it, plus it would have to go to referendum. And I don't think the people would support it. That's my feeling.

Mark: That's pretty much it. Anything you'd like to add? Anything you think we've skipped over or glossed over?

Smith: Oh, I don't think so, Mark. I'm just glad you asked me to do this. I thought it was very interesting. Nobody ever asked me again about World War II. I guess now they're all asking about what'd you do in Vietnam or what did you do in Korea. I think the World War II veterans are kind of passé now, many of us.

Mark: Not around here. Well, thanks for coming in.

Smith: Okay, Mark.