

Interview with Mr. Raymond Gaskill

Veteran – World War II

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Narrator: This is the United Methodist Church. Our guest is Mr. Raymond Gaskill, who was born September 6, 1925, in El Dorado, Kansas. My name is Megan Habiger and I will be interviewing him along with Chelsea Schmitt. Mr. Gaskill served in the Marine Corps during World War II.

Narrator: What branch of the military did you serve in and how did you choose?

Gaskill: United States Marine Corps. When I enlisted the Marines were not taking anyone. I heard that if you join the Navy, then when they needed someone they would take you from the Navy. When they called and asked for people, I volunteered to go into the Marines.

Narrator: Why were you so drawn to the Marines?

Gaskill: I guess I never thought of being anything but a Marine. During that time it was a very patriotic thing to do. My father got me a six-month deferment for farm reasons after high school. I spent that time working for him and other farmers. When the deferment was up I told him I wanted to go into the military service. I was very fortunate; I never received any serious injuries while I was in the Marine Corps. I think my time spent in the service made me a better person. It doesn't seem like it was good judgment now (chuckles); I just thought I wanted to be in the Marines; I had a friend in the Marines.

Narrator: Why did you volunteer?

Gaskill: It seemed like the thing to do in a time of war. That's what everyone was doing; you were just supposed to enlist.

Narrator: How long did you serve and if you could, would you rejoin?

Gaskill: I was in over two years. At my age I would not rejoin. (chuckles)

Narrator: Did you find any friendships that you stay in touch with today?

Gaskill: Oh yes, (shows a picture) that's a picture taken in Saipan, on the island, after the island was taken. This is one of my friends I still keep in touch with. One of my other friends lives in Kiowa County; his name is Richard Garman. We met in St. Louis to have a little reunion.

Narrator: How did the lifestyle differ and did you have trouble adjusting?

Gaskill: The lifestyle was quite a bit different. Being a farm boy and playing football in high school I was in pretty good shape; I had no problem adjusting from a farm to military life. I was 5'11" tall and weighed 143 pounds. After boot camp I had grown half an inch and weighed 172 pounds and was in the best shape of my life. Some people had trouble. The older people who had been working desk jobs had the problems adjusting. I was only 18 years old so I had no trouble.

Narrator: What type of emotions did you experience, and what situations caused these feelings?

Gaskill: You get to the base and into training and you find out the drill instructor does not believe you are a Marine yet. You go through a period when you are "dressed down" or whatever you want to call it. They shout at you and call you a "worm" or "maggot"; it is a real eye opener when you first get there. It's just part of the training.

Narrator: What did you do in your free time?

Gaskill: In boot camp you didn't have any free time. But when I was in advanced training we had liberty every ten days. I was stationed at Oceanside, California so the nearest big town was Los Angeles. We would go up there; there are a lot of things to do around the pier. We would go to Santa Monica Pier; it was like a fairground.

Narrator: Do you find it difficult to discuss feelings and situations you experienced in the war?

Gaskill: Not usually, as long as they don't ask too many questions.

Narrator: What are your feelings about the war in Iraq, and do you encourage people my age to join the service?

Gaskill: I kind of have mixed emotions about the subject. I don't think they are handling the situation very well, the best they could be. However, I think the military is doing very well. Anyone who wants to join, I would not discourage them from joining the military.

Narrator: What were your family's feelings when you left for the war?

Gaskill: They were not happy about the Marine Corps. However, I think they knew that's what I was going to do. But I had a little sister who was very upset; she cried quite a bit when I left.

Narrator: How and at what frequency did you stay in touch with your loved ones?

Gaskill: As often as possible I sent V-mail (showed a V-mail to grandma); that's the way we communicated with home. There was no telephone; communication was done strictly by mail.

Narrator: What are your most vivid feelings about your boot camp experience?

Gaskill: Graduation day, (chuckles) when they finally tell you that you are a Marine. We had to fall out of formation and whenever you did that you had to have your cap on your head; it was usually a rushed deal. I rushed out to my position and I forgot to put my hat on and that was a very bad deal; that really upset my drill instructor. I had to stand out in front of my tent and do the manual of arms over and over again. I don't know how long I did it, but it was a pretty long time. That was my punishment for not putting my hat on (chuckles).

Narrator: What are some of your pleasant memories from serving your country?

Gaskill: The friends I made when I was in the Marines, especially the ones I still keep in touch with.

Narrator: How many friends do you still keep in touch with?

Gaskill: Oh, let me see (counting on fingers), there are probably about seven I still keep in contact with.

Narrator: Being a veteran, does it change your views on the present war today?

Gaskill: I don't know that it changes my view any. At the time I thought we did what we needed to do. No, I don't think it changes much.

Narrator: Do you feel it is important to tell my generation about war and patriotism?

Gaskill: Oh, yes, definitely. War is a terrible, terrible thing and should be avoided at all costs. However, when the country's freedom is at stake, you do what you have to do.

Narrator: Did you receive any medals or honors in the service? Could you explain them?

Gaskill: I received some medals, such as battle stars but no honors. If you went to the Asiatic Pacific you automatically got an Asiatic Pacific medal. I don't remember the names of them, but whenever you were in a battle you received a star for that and I've got about five medals, but I don't recall the names of them.

Narrator: Have you or do you have a desire to return to some of the places you went?

Gaskill: Yes, they had an anniversary celebration in Saipan a couple of years ago to celebrate the taking of the island. I would have liked to go on that but it was kind of

expensive. Yes, I would like to return. I spent some time in the occupation of Japan. I would like to go back there.

Narrator: What are some of the activities you did in Japan?

Gaskill: Well, we were the first ones in after Nagasaki, and seeing the devastation of the bomb was quite a sight and the condition of some of the people still alive was an eye opener. We were the 2nd Pioneer Battalion attached to the 2nd Marine Division. We were assigned to live in some warehouses around the docks, but the stench from rotting grain was really bad. We elected to stay outside on the dock at night. We saw absolutely no Japanese people except for a few that had some official capacity. Little by little some children began to appear, curious I suppose. We tried to befriend them by giving them candy from our K-rations. We later found out that the people had been informed that Marines were very cruel. It is true that Marines did not take many prisoners during war, which was mostly the Japanese soldiers' fault. Japanese soldiers were expected to fight to their death, and most of them did. At ground zero in Nagasaki the entire area was reduced to rubble. As you looked across the area the only things that were standing were some safes. Then I was sent up to Fukuoka to guard ammunition, which was an important job. The Japanese had a barge there and they were loading stuff up on the barge and taking it and dumping it into the ocean. The job came to a sudden stop and the darn thing blew up. The Japanese had some explosives subject to rapid deterioration on that barge. Luckily no one was hurt by the explosives, and we finished our job.

Narrator: Do you think that returning would be very emotional to you?

Gaskill: Oh, in some respects it would be. . . Particularly if I went back and met back up with some of the Japanese people I met. I met one family I became very close with. It would be a very emotional experience.

Narrator: What were some of the characteristics that you noticed about your enemy? Do you admire them anyway?

Gaskill: Strangely enough I became pretty good friends with the Japanese family. When we were in Sasabo I was over there for quite a while, and a friend and I went walking around the area to see what it looked like. This little girl befriended me. Strangely enough the Japanese kids were studying English in school and these little kids were trying out their English on us. The little girl invited us to come to her home and, of course we did; and I became a pretty good friend with the family. I became a good friend with the little girl in particular; she was about the same age as my little sister at home. The little girl taught me some Japanese songs and I taught her some American songs. We developed quite a friendship, and I kept in touch with them even after I was out of the service.

Narrator: What was your average day like?

Gaskill: The average day, well, it varied from where I was stationed. In boot camp it was up at 5 o'clock in the morning. They would take you out and run you around the yard. Then you had breakfast; after that it was either marching or learning how to fire your weapons. One period of time they would take you down to the swimming test. You had to pass the swimming test and jump off a tower into the water in case you had to abandon ship and stuff like that. You usually had to be in bed about 10-11 o'clock. But after boot camp it was a lot less regimented. You had certain duties to do, but then the time was your own.

Narrator: What did you do in your free time when you were in Japan?

Gaskill: In Japan . . . usually wandered the town that had shopping and a lot of bartering. Cigarettes and candy were as good as money because they were in pretty bad shape over there. We had what we call occupation currency which was different from their money actually. And that's usually what most of us did; we would just get out and look around town.

Narrator: Did you find some of the training at boot camp exciting like jumping off the tower?

Gaskill: Yes, it was quite a thrill. It's a 33 or 35-foot tower. You've got your pack on and everything; you have to take your helmet off before you jump in the water because if you jump into that deep of water with your helmet on, it will jerk your head off. You have to hold your helmet against your chest. Actually I couldn't swim when I went into the Marine Corps, and that's one of the things you had to do to get out of boot camp. Also you got a boot camp furlough after boot camp. If you didn't learn to swim you lost your furlough, but I finally passed the test before I left boot camp; I managed to get my 10-day furlough.

Narrator: What is a furlough?

Gaskill: You got to go home and leave the service in other words. And of course my home was back in Kansas. I rode a bus for three days and came back here. Then one of my Marine Corps friends was driving back and I arranged to meet him in Dodge City and we drove back to San Diego.

Narrator: Is there anything else you would like to say to us as a veteran to influence our thinking?

Gaskill: Well, sometimes I worry about young people's patriotism to their country. I would encourage them to be as patriotic as they possibly can and to admire our service people and what they are doing. Does that answer your question?

Narrator: Yes. How do you define service?

Gaskill: Define service? I'm talking from sixty years ago. The service is a highly regimented type of life for the most part. I had no desire to make a career out of it but I was happy to be in there. I would do the same thing all over again.

Narrator: What does war mean to you?

Gaskill: An awful thing, seeing people mutilated and killed. War is not a very pleasant thing.

Narrator: How was the food?

Gaskill: In boot camp it was the best you could get. At other times, when we first landed in Japan we lived on the docks for a few days. We had what they called K-rations back then, a little box about the size of that (points to tape recorder). Sometimes it was a can of meat, chocolate bars, crackers, and four cigarettes. Some of them would have a little canister with something that would burn so we could heat up that can of stuff. That was the worst part, but for the most part whenever possible we ate pretty good. I remember in the Navy for breakfast every so often we would have beans, and that wasn't my ideal thing to eat in the morning. Whenever possible we had pretty good meals.

Narrator: What about in Japan?

Gaskill: Japanese food? There was a dish called Sukiyaki that I really did like. I tried about everything they had over there; I even found out I liked squid; I didn't think I would. Their tea I wasn't too crazy about; they are big tea drinkers.

Narrator: What was some of the most important work you did?

Gaskill: The most important work I did was probably a lot of the work I did with the ammunition. That was probably the most important.

Narrator: When you got back to the States, did your family ask a lot of questions or did they give you some space?

Gaskill: I remember that they asked a lot of questions about the war. They were pretty well in touch with where I had been and what I had done. They didn't know exactly where I had been. Before I left we made an agreement that whenever I wrote a letter, I would write the first letter of where I was, and they knew where the action was going on. Like when I went to Saipan, when I first wrote them I write to my parents and my dad's name was Sam so I would write dear Sam. The first letter of the person would indicate where I was.

Narrator: Did they edit your mail?

Gaskill: Yes, after we were overseas all your outgoing mail was seized and if you put something in there that they didn't think you should, they would cut it out. You knew

what you were supposed to write about. Like when I was in Saipan I couldn't tell them where I was. I could tell them that there are palm trees and things like that. Yes, you pretty well knew what you couldn't write about.

Narrator: Do you think that the military has changed a lot?

Gaskill: Yes, especially in the weapons that they have today; they are much different than what we had. They are more sophisticated; you know when they can shoot from a ship that's 600 miles away and knock the windows out of a building that's over here someplace; we didn't have anything that good. The Norton bombsite was the most accurate thing we had and it is nothing compared to today.

Narrator: Do you think that it's fair that the men in Iraq have much more equipment than you did?

Gaskill: Oh yes, they deserve all the advanced equipment that they can have. Glad that they got it.

Narrator: Would you go fight in the war in Iraq if you could?

Gaskill: Oh, yes, I think so.

Narrator: What is one of your impressions of the Japanese?

Gaskill: The time I was there they were in large part a very courteous people. The thing that shocked me when I was there that if a Japanese husband and wife were walking down the street, the wife would trail behind the husband by three or four steps. They would never walk together. Another thing was their shoes, much like thongs are today, except they were wooden. They don't wear their shoes in the house; it always amazed me how, especially the kids, would run up to the house and jump out of their shoes so quickly. Their shoes would be there outside, and coming out of the house they could just slip them right on. I would have to stop and look and see which way they go.

Narrator: Were you in any combat?

Gaskill: I got my first look at what war is like at Pearl Harbor. The troop ship that took us from San Diego to Hawaii spent a week tied up at Pearl Harbor while our convoy was assembled. During that week I observed many ships of all sizes coming into the harbor, obviously for repairs. Most of them had heavy damage to the superstructure and some appeared to have been on fire at some time. I remember thinking, "This war is for real, and somebody could get hurt!" Later, when I got to Saipan it would have actually been what they would call "secured." This means that we had taken the island but there were still a lot of Japanese on the island so we had to make patrols. Saipan was only 16 miles long and 4 miles wide. It has a real big mountain in the middle and the rest of it's like a jungle type of thing. And we'd make patrols out there to try and flush out the Japanese; we could never find them, only where they had been. We knew they had been living off

snails. We'd find their campfire and a lot of snail shells lying around. My first night on Saipan several Japanese bombers flew over the island. I thought it would be a good time to take advantage of my foxhole. My buddy didn't seem concerned; finally he said, "They're looking for the airfield. Hell, they couldn't hit a bull in the butt with a banjo at that height." Pretty soon we saw some P-38's taking off and chase them away. I felt pretty relieved. Periodically they would raid our dump; we didn't have anyone down there but we knew they had been down there because they'd do funny little things. They had a bulldozer down there to cover things up. They would come in and take the gas tank lid off; they wouldn't take it; they would just lay it someplace else, just little things like that.

Narrator: Do you think there should be a choice to go into the military or should it be an automatic draft?

Gaskill: Well, it's better if it's voluntary. But if the military can't get enough people voluntarily, then by all means draft them.

Narrator: Could you tell the difference between the voluntary people and the drafted people?

Gaskill: I don't think so; most of the time when they're in they're in. We did have one guy I remember that didn't want to go to war; he was upset because he had a wife and a small child or something like that. He created such a fuss that they finally discharged him, sent him back. But that was the only instance I've seen that happen.

Narrator: What branch of the military do you think is the most difficult to go into?

Gaskill: Umm, yes, the Marine Corps, I think. I remember I got my training done in San Diego and the Navy had a place not too far from us. We would see each other back and forth. I remember seeing a Navy guy one time and he said, "I feel sorry for you guys;" they had what they call Marine push-ups which is you have to push yourself up and clap your hands before your nose hits the ground. I remember seeing guys doing that in the barracks, and things like that make the Marine Corps the toughest.

Narrator: Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Gaskill: War is hell and you should try to avoid it at all cost. I was glad to serve in the war when I did. It's not something you go out of your way to do, but do in case it calls for it. I sometimes wonder if young people realize the cost of the free lives they have today. I would suggest that they visit a military gravesite, to realize that those buried beneath were young people like them that made a sacrifice so they can enjoy the life they have.

Narrator: How do you feel about women in the war?

Gaskill: They have a place, I think. They were just starting to get women involved in things like war. In combat I'm not sure I'm in favor of them being involved in that. I've heard that some of them make pretty good pilots and stuff like that. But as far as a foot soldier I don't think that that is their place. So you're off the hook there (chuckle).

Narrator: Were you treated differently when you returned?

Gaskill: (Shows picture of ship) That's us Marines standing around there; we are just coming into the harbor of San Diego and everyone's out there wanting to see what it looks like to get back. Oh yes, they had a band when we disembarked from the ship. They played some military songs and stuff like that. Yes, they gave you a pretty good welcome home.

Narrator: What was the name of your ship?

Gaskill: I was afraid you were going to ask that (chuckle). I don't remember the name of it. It had a bad boiler in it so it took us a long time to get back because it wouldn't go very fast. It put out a lot of smoke. Oh, and then we had to stop several different times on the way back; they'd spot a mine floating around and of course they wanted to get rid of those things. The Navy guys would get out all their guns out there and try to explode the mine. I didn't realize how hard those things are to explode; they kind of had these tentacles and they had to hit one of those tentacles for it to blow up. Doing that with a machine gun takes a while sometimes.

Narrator: We would like to thank you for coming and sharing your experiences with us.