

Richard Thomas Harris
Veteran History Project
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Interviewers: Adam S. Decker and Steven D. Decker

ASD: Could you state and spell your full name for us?

Vet: You bet. My name is Richard Thomas Harris (spells name).

ASD: Thanks. Where do you currently live?

Vet: I live at 89 North 200 West, in Parowan, Utah.

ASD: Is this the same place you lived when you were drafted or enlisted?

Vet: No. I enlisted in the Marines in, in Phoenix. I lived in Mesa, but I enlisted in Phoenix. That's where the recruiting office was.

SDD: Now, you had other brothers that were also in the military.

Vet: I had three brothers besides myself.

SDD: And what, what branches were they in?

Vet: I was in the Marines. My oldest brother was in the Army Air Force. My next oldest brother was in the Army Infantry, and brother just younger than me was in the Navy.

SDD: All at the same time?

Vet: Yea.

ASD: So, you served in the Marines?

Vet: Yes.

ASD: Were you full time or guard?

Vet: No. I was, at that time, the Marines didn't have any National Guard outfits, that I know of, but I joined as a reserve which meant you were in for the duration of the national emergency. If you enlisted in the regular Marines it was a six year hitch, at that time. It ended up I served three years and ten days because the war...I, I enlisted after I got out of high school, and I was in for three years and ten days and then the war ended and about a month later I was discharged on the basis of points. I'd been overseas 19 months and I'd been in combat and I was married and had a baby, born after I come back from overseas, and they had a point system and so I was discharged on points.

ASD: Alright.

Vet: Once the war was over I had no desire to stay in the service.

ASD: Where was your headquarters?

Vet: When I went into the Marines I went through boot camp in the San Diego Marine Base there, and then after I got out of boot camp training I volunteered for a gunnery school, actually it was called radio gunnery 'cause you had to learn Morse Code and then your marksmanship with your machine guns, it was all part of the same school, and then I went from there to El Centro, California where they formed the dive bomber squadron that I was a part of.

ASD: Alright. What years did you serve during?

Vet: I, I enlisted on the 18th of September, 1942 and I was discharged on the 28th of September, 1945.

ASD: Alright.

SDD: Now, you went to gunnery school so were you a...?

Vet: I was a tail gunner in a dive bomber. There's a picture of the plane here if it's something you want.

SDD: A tail gunner.

ASD: What was your highest rank?

Vet: When I was discharged, I was a Master Sergeant.

ASD: Alright. Were you decorated for your service?

Vet: I received an air medal after I came back from overseas, in El Centro, California. The commanding officer of the 2nd Marine Air Wing, they had a regular ceremony there and four of us were awarded the air medal.

ASD: Alright. Who gave you the medal?

Vet: It was a General Farrell.

ASD: So, you served in combat, right?

Vet: Yeah. I served...I had 45 combat missions in the dive bomber.

SDD: Is that normal? Is that high? Is that low?

Vet: That was usually about average for the time you came back home again. They relieved you and...

ASD: Which theater did you serve in?

Vet: I was in the South Pacific and there's Solomon Islands, Bismarck Archipelago, there was three, kind of three combat areas there that were all part of the South Pacific Area. Then I came home before we invaded the Philippines and I never did go back again – I, I stayed in the States.

SDD: But it would have been the Japanese you were fighting.

Vet: Yeah. Yeah, it was all, all in the Japanese war.

ASD: Alright. Did you meet anyone that became a historical figure?

Vet: Yeah. The guy that was the Intelligence Office in our squadron came back home and was elected to the United States Senate – Joseph R. McCarthy.

Interviewers: (Reaction)

Vet: I flew with him a few times and knew him quite well as a friend, personal friend. But, he was a judge before he came in, and then he came into our squadron as an Intelligence Officer probably because of his legal training as an attorney, I imagine.

ASD: Alright. When you remember your military service, what is one of the most vivid things that kind of comes?

Vet: Well, one of the most vivid things I think about, which I wanted to be sure I told you, is I never, ever want to take away any of the glory from those marines that was on the ground landing on the beaches and stuff. One thing about being on a dive bombing squadron, we slept in a dry bed, got in that plane, went over the Japanese territories and dropped our bombs and came back and went to bed in a dry bed. So, when you got shot you were just as dead but it was a lot more pleasant circumstances than the Marines that were jumping out of those landing ships and running up the beach and getting shot up. So I wouldn't want to say anything that would take away the, you know, the credit that they have, or the conditions that they endured. They did most of that alphabetically. You just went here and you went there and I volunteered for gunnery school because I joined the Marines to help win the war and I didn't want to spend my time in there sweeping and picking up cigarette butts so when they asked for volunteers for gunnery school, why I volunteered.

ASD: Alright. Do you remember just any humorous things that happened while you were in the service?

Vet: Well, there are a lot of humorous things that the men do among themselves that...maybe the one that stands out in my mind was, we were all sitting around the tent and it was about 9:30, maybe 10:00, at night and one of the guys was asleep. So all of us got up and put on our flight gear and I was in charge so it was my job to wake everybody up and make sure they were out to the flight line in time. So I went by and kicked his cot and said, "Get up, Hunt, it's time for breakfast." And we all walked out of the tent and down to the next tent and back in and just waited. He jumped up, put on his flight gear, headed for the mess hall and when he walked in they were just cleaning up – finishing cleaning up. Then the Sergeant said, "What in the 'H' are you doing here."

He said, "Well, I came for breakfast."

He said, "Well it's just 10:00 at night."

So that stands out as one of the little comical things. (Laughter).

ASD: Where there any moments in the service that...did you have any religious experiences or anything?

Vet: Well I was, 'course, the Church [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] meant everything to me when I went in, and when I went in I made up my mind that I'd be the best marine I could and represent the Church honorably, and my family, and so, I always went, a lot of times, to Protestant services, sometimes Catholic, depending what was available and if there was an LDS serviceman's group that we could get together, then we did that. But religion was something that was close to my heart before I ever went in. I...I wanted to go on a mission, I couldn't go because my Bishop said, "If you're able bodied we can't call you now, because of the agreement we have with the government." So I went into the Marines.

ASD: Alright. How was your family life while you were serving?

Vet: I was married seven days before I shipped overseas, in the Arizona Temple, on the 16th of March, 1943, and on the 24th of March I got on a ship and headed for the South Pacific. So, the family life was by correspondence, most of it, for the next nineteen months.

ASD: So did you get a lot of letters and...?

Vet: Yeah. In fact, a lot of people who were in the service will verify this. A lot of times you'd get six letters at once, 'cause the mail just kind of piled up until something was coming your way and the same way back home. Maybe my wife would get five or six letters at one time. But you did right religiously, tried to, because you knew that people at home were concerned about you and you enjoyed getting letters from them too.

ASD: What were, just some of the experiences of joy during your service?

Vet: Well, every time you went on a bombing mission and came back and got out of the plane it was an enjoyable experience. But there was a lot of camaraderie between you

and your men and there were a lot of enjoyable things about the service. All of you were united in feeling that you were doing what you could for our country and...to preserve freedom. And, I went to Australia two different times on what they called health and recreation leave. And, of course, as soon as we got down there we found out where the church was and went to church meetings and the members would invite you out to dinner and things like that, and those were enjoyable experiences.

ASD: Did you really have many experiences of, like, sorrow or sadness during your service?

Vet: Well, when you lost friends. I'd mentioned this, I think, in our High Priest [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] lesson, about the young from Chicago, that's ambition was to play for the Chicago Cubs, when he got out of the Marines. His name was Vanderhagen. He was of Dutch descent, obviously, and he was a crackerjack baseball player, played third base. 'Cause we had a lot of ball games in between combat missions. You'd come back and you had, maybe, the whole afternoon to play baseball, volleyball, whatever, and hike along the beach looking for shells and different things like that. But, anyway, when he was killed, it was my responsibility to gather up his personal things and send them to his family. And that was a sad experience, because he was just a young man, not married yet, hadn't really known what life was all about, and had a future that he looked forward to and several other young men that age that I, you hated to see killed. But that was sad.

ASD: Alright. How were your feelings of support from your country?

Vet: Well, during World War II the country was behind you. There wasn't any...oh, I suppose there was a little bit of opposition, but primarily you were...like, when I would go from San Diego to Mesa on liberty, you stepped out on the highway in a uniform and people picked you up. They didn't hesitate. One time I got thirteen different rides between San Diego and Mesa, because some people say, "Well, I'm only going twenty miles, but hop in," and so in that respect, people respected you and appreciated the fact that you were serving. So you didn't have the bad-mouthing and bad press and demonstrations and things like the Viet Nam War, for instance.

ASD: What were the physical conditions you served in? Like, was it jungle or...?

Vet: Well, everything in the South Pacific is jungle. Some of it has been cleared and they've planted coconut groves and coffee plants and cocoa plants, but most of it was just jungle. They'd carve out an airfield for us...the SeaBees [CBs – construction battalions] would. As soon as the Marines and the Army got an island secured, then the SeeBees would be right there to get an airfield built, and then we'd move up to that airfield and help out with the next campaign and support the infantry and bomb the airfields and things like that, to try and neutralize Japanese opposition to our troops. And, so, it was jungle, other than where you'd cleared it for your air field.

SDD: So were you seeing a lot of malaria or...

Vet: There was quite a bit. We had a little yellow tablet they called *atabrin* that everybody, it was right where your, they had these canvas bags for drinking water, and there was always a little box there with these little yellow tablets, and you took those. In fact, if you took them for very long you started getting kind of jaundiced.

SDD: Turn yellow...

Vet: But they were supposed to suppress the malaria. I never did have malaria and none of the men in my squadron that I knew of, but my brother, in the infantry, in New Guinea, and then in the Philippines, he had malaria, and a lot of men did under those conditions. A lot of the Marines that were ground troops contracted malaria because they were...usually, as soon as you got an airfield built, they started controlling the mosquitoes with DDT and stuff, and so they kept it pretty well under control. But the boys that were out wading around in the jungle, and the mosquito carried the malaria...kind of like when they built the Panama Canal, it was bad – [unintelligible]. But my brother still had attacks of it, even after the war. It stayed with him.

ASD: Do you regret anything about your service?

Vet: Not really. I tried to be a good marine. I tried to do my job, and...no, I don't think I have any regrets. I could have been a better person, maybe, but I tried to, tried to be the best I could.

ASD: Alright. What do you think would be the most positive experience of our service?

Vet: Well, I think the association with the men from all over the country was a positive educational experience. One of the things I learned, 'cause I, I grew up in Mesa, which was a fairly small...not predominantly LDS, but a large percentage, and so, some of things that I was exposed to in the Marines were kind of different, and new. But one thing I did learn is, is that, well, there a lot of good men in the world that have habits that we kind of frown on, but they haven't been raised the way we've been raised. But they're good, they're good men and you could trust them and they'd, they'd give their life for you.

ASD: Did your service ever really color your political or social views?

Vet: I don't think, really, in the service...well, there's politics that didn't seem to be...you know, you argued about stuff if you didn't have anything to do. They used to say, "If the men aren't arguing, you better worry," because if they're not griping about something or arguing you better be concerned, there must be something wrong. My political views, I think, have been pretty much just formed by my own experiences, probably before I went into the service. My education in school, before I went in, helps you to form opinions. I changed my registration *once*, after I got out. I was a registered democrat, but when Eisenhower ran, I favored him so I changed my registration to republican. But I haven't been, what you'd call, a died-in-the-wool republican. I've tried

to vote for the man I thought was best qualified for the job and not out of party loyalty particularly.

ASD: If you could give advice to service men and women of today, what do you think it would be?

Vet: Well, I would think it would be, maybe the advice we got from the First Presidency [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], a little pamphlet that said, "Do your best to be a good whatever you are, be the best." And that's primarily...I've advised my grandkids, as they've gone into the military, I've said, "Whatever happens, make up your mind to do your best and be a good soldier or a good marine, or whatever you are, be the best that you can." And...the military...I've always had, rather, a feeling that...almost like universal military training...I've almost had the feeling that every young man, that's able bodied, probably ought to have some basic military training. I don't know whether I would favor absolute mandatory, but, I think, maybe it's an experience that every young man could have the basics to be prepared and understand what it's like to serve your country and....

Not that there isn't a lot of service rendered outside the military. There are many, many men that I knew that I went to school with that stayed on the farm and worked on the farm because farm products were needed to feed the troops. And I guess the important thing, really, is just for all of us to be oriented to the idea that we serve our country whatever we're doing.

SDD: A lot of the veterans have said exactly that, that, maybe not mandatory but maybe even mandatory basic training. I, I look at basic training and I think, you know, I could have joined the military if I could have gotten out of basic training, but a lot of the veterans have said that, about basic training, that they would favor that broadly, across the country.

Vet: One reason that I...is 'cause I saw some boys, now I was in, part of the time, I was in a position of responsibility because I was the non-commissioned officer in charge of all the gunners in the squadron. There was thirty-six enlisted men that I was in charge of, and you ran into some young men that had never known what it was like to just do what they were told to do or what they were asked to do. They'd just drifted through life doing what they felt like doing without any feeling of responsibility and then to finally be put in a situation where you don't argue about it or debate it when somebody tells you, that's in command, says, "do this" you do it. It's like the old saying, they tell you do jump you say, "how far and which direction" but you don't start out arguing about it or refusing. So in that respect I've felt like that there is a need for all young people to be obedient, primarily. And the military does teach you that to a certain degree.

ASD: How do you feel about the current war in Iraq?

Vet: There are so many imponderables on that I think one day you think "it's a hopeless cause, why are we over there," and then other days you think "but look at all those people over there that have never known democracy, all they've known is

totalitarianism” and someday or another you’d like to be able to help them know what it’s like to be free. But sometimes it’s practical and sometimes it isn’t. A lot of times I think, maybe there’s too much criticism of the military by armchair quarterbacks,” maybe, that aren’t actually on the scene. Sometimes you wonder, is the news media really giving us the full picture or are they emphasizing the negative, because a lot of the men you talk to that come back they say, “We need to be there. Those people need us to try to bring order and safety into their country so that you can walk down the street without fear of somebody blowing you up.” But those things are, are complicated. I, I wish I had the answer. I wish that our leaders had more of the gift of discernment, which is a spiritual quality, that would help them make the decisions they make. I do wish that.

ASD: Any more...just any experiences that you’d like to share or anything?

Vet: Well, I had a few life threatening experiences, which I felt like the Lord saw me through. One time after one of our bombing mission, in fact, we were in the dive and we got a bullet through the wing and the pilot, he’s on the intercom and talking to me, and I’m facing backwards with my guns. And he says, “Look at the hole in the wing there. Are you scared?”

And I kind of lied a little bit, I said, “No, their wasting their ammunition.”

So when we got back to the base, he hopped off the wing and said, “Boy, I’m sure glad I fly with you.”

I said, “Why is that?”

And he said, “Well you always seem so sure we’re going to be back ok.”

[Laughs]

But we had a few times...one, our first bombing mission, I tell about it in my history here, it was a Japanese air field and our targets were planes or anti-aircraft guns or whatever was a visible, and when we pulled out and joined up after we had thought we dropped our bomb, and joined up to go back to the base the guy that was flying wing signaled to us and said, “You still got your bomb.”

Here’s this 1,000 pound bomb hanging there and hadn’t never dropped. So the pilot pulled out of the formation and pulled his bomb release over and over again, did all kinds of maneuvers, try to shake that 1,000 pound bomb loose and never could. So we went on back to Guadalcanal and when we landed there, as soon as he touched the runway he realized he had a flat tire. So he managed to bring it to a stop, and they came out and picked us up. We went in and the first thing you usually do is to into the interrogation room and then they talk about the raid and anything you observed, targets, your effectiveness, and that sort of thing. We’d been there just a few minutes, ‘cause you check your parachutes and stuff on your way in. Somebody hollered, “Where’s Captain Brooks?” And this guy from the parachute loft came over and had his parachute in his hand.

What had happened, a 50 caliber armor piercing bullet had gone through the front of the wing of the plane. The wheels are retracted up into the wing, and gone through the tire and flattened it, and glanced off from the rim and came up through and clipped the bomb release cable, just cut it in half, and went on up through the bottom of the cockpit, through the bottom of his seat, through his parachute and stopped in the pad right under his bottom.

ASD: No way!

Vet: Came that far from blowing his hind end off. We didn't know what was wrong, you know. I mean we just knew we couldn't drop the bomb until we'd landed and everything checked out. Then we realized that it was that bullet that prevented him from dropping his bomb. So that was our baptism of fire. That was our first bombing mission.

But there was another two or three times when we had....

Maybe the one close call that's worth mentioning, our entire squadron of thirty-six planes, had left Guadalcanal, and our, our target was Japanese airfields on the southern tip of Bougainville Island. There was three airfields, and it was a pretty good sized island, and when we got right up there, almost to the target, a storm front moved in and just closed off the target and we couldn't find a hole through, to get through to it. So the commanding officer, 'course, just turned the squadron around and headed back. Well that storm front, between Guadalcanal and our target was another island, Russell Island, that had an airfield on it, and they were hoping to be able to find a clearing in the clouds so they could land at Russell Island. 'Cause your fuel is figured pretty close, and here's this squadron of thirty-six planes trying to skirt around that storm and make our way back to the Russell Island. And finally we're down to like five minutes of gas in the planes and we'd been instructed, all of us, to get ready for a water landing, which is just an emergency landing that if you're lucky you live through it. And you have a, you have a life raft in the plane that, the plane'll land and you got maybe two minutes to get out of it, get the raft out, then the plane'll sink in the ocean. So we were all...and you took your flight jacket off and put it in front of you so you could lay your head over on it, the gunners, to keep you from bashing you face in when you hit the water. And almost like the Lord just controlled the elements, I've always believed he did, that storm just opened up and there's the Russell Island Airfield. And when our last plain landed on that airfield, the rain just come right up the runway. And we stayed there for two days, 'til the storms cleared, refueled, and then....

But several of those planes, I mean everything was on empty. It was...but we all managed to make it, so...I, I always, personally thought that was a miracle. I really believe it.

ASD: Alright. So after fighting the Japanese, how do you, kind of, feel about them now.

Vet: Oh, I love the Japanese. I went to school with Japanese. Lived neighbors to them. I never, the propaganda, you know, was always aimed at trying to get you to hate the enemy. I never could do that. I just figured I'd...it's my job. They got their job. I think I'm right and their wrong, but they probably think we're wrong and their right. So when we'd...when I'm strafing with my machine guns or we're going in to drop a bomb, I always offered a little prayer, "Heavenly Father, if there's somebody down there that's trying to do what's right, protect them, 'cause I don't want to kill them. I'm not...I don't hate them." But that's the way it was.

ASD: Alright.

SDD: Did any of your son's serve?

Vet: Jim joined the Marines.

SDD: Jim did.

Vet: But he was on the way to Viet Nam, him and Phil Burt joined together, and they, they were sharpshooters. That is what they were trained for. But they got as far as Okinawa and then the war ended, so they never did go into combat, but they were heading that way.

SDD (to ASD): That'd be Gail's husband. That'd be a good interview for you.

ASD: Ok.

SDD: You knew McCarthy and, you know, when we talk about McCarthyism we, generally, don't say it in a very nice way in this day and age.

Vet: Yeah.

SDD: Is that fair?

Vet: Well I always just kind of thought he took a bum rap. Mind you, I always thought he was a kind of an opportunist. Politically he had ambitions. I'll tell you why I thought that.

When we crossed the equator, they had a, always had an initiation for anybody that hadn't been across equator before. And so the sailors on board ship had the hoses out hosing you down and carrying on, you know. Well he slipped on the wet deck and broke his foot and he got a purple heart. And I thought, and I really felt like maybe, 'cause he took a flight or two, 'cause he wanted to have pictures of him, in a, and he used those in his campaign when he ran for the Senate.

But in a lot of ways, I did feel like that he uncovered some things that we don't like to admit, that were existing in our government, like Alger Hiss and some of those that were actually known Communists, that were doing things that weren't in the best interest of our country. So I think that he opened our eyes, at least, to the threat of Communist influence within our own government and there were a few people that were prosecuted and convicted.

I always... Alger Hiss, for instance was dismissed. He was in the Department of Agriculture, as a known communist, and sentenced to federal prison. But the courts said, "You can't deny him his pension." So he retained his pension and a few things like that, but I don't claim that McCarthy was a bastard saint or anything of that kind but I, I do feel like he, he did uncover some things that needed to be brought into the light.

I was a little disappointed, for example, when Truman just called it red herrings, there's nothing to worry about here, everything's ship shape. And then later, 'course when Truman fired McArthur in Korea, I thought that was a terrible mistake because the war, instead of being fought by the military, was being fought by the politicians and...

SDD: And they have ever since, I think.

Vet: ...and it cost us thousands of men. A lot of people don't realize we lost 60,000 men in the Korean War and 63,000 in the Viet Nam War, and then lost it, basically, it was a defeat. But I never, I always felt like, in a way, that our generals didn't really face up to their responsibility. When McArthur was relieved of his command and General Ridgeway was called to succeed him, I felt like that, 'cause, you see, commissioned officers, they can resign. Enlisted men can't. You're in until it's over. And, but a commissioned officer can just resign his commission and he, he can go back home. I've always felt like Ridgeway should have said, "No President. Unless you're going to let me be the general here and fight this war, to protect our troops, I won't take the job, so you'll have to find somebody else." I really felt that way.

But it went to him, and then to somebody else, and the same way in Viet Nam. I felt like our commanding officers let the men down by [not] saying, "Hey, we will not fight this war this way. Get yourself another boy." That's the way I've always felt. But then, the system we live under... and mind you, I don't favor a military regime, I just, I just feel like, that sometimes our politicians haven't acknowledged the military are trained to fight the war. That's what their trained for. They're not trained to be diplomats and, anyway, I guess you can talk about that for ages and never really get the right answer, maybe, I don't know.

But I've never regretted my service in the military. In fact, I've always felt that we should be able to have a military voluntarily. I've always been a little bit ashamed that we had to draft people to serve in the military. I've always felt like I loved my country. I'm here because I want to be here. And when I got out I didn't ask for a pension or anything else. I did figure anybody owed me anything. I was protecting my home, my family, and so I never applied for veteran's benefits of any kind.

I'm not saying that if I had a lost a leg or something that it would be justified. I'm not belittling the men that were injured and had to get disability payments. But I have felt that there's, maybe, a little too much of a tendency to play on that idea, "I'm a veteran and I want some benefits from it." That's just my personal feeling.