

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
www.heritageed.com
Moorhead, MN

Marvin Swanson
Narrator
with comments by Debbie Swanson

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

August 2013

Marvin Swanson - MS
Debbie Swanson - DS
Linda Jenson - LJ

LJ: What's your name?

MS: Marvin Swanson.

LJ: And what branch?

MS: U. S. Marine Corps.

LJ: What prompted you, Marvin, to enter into the service for the Korean War.

MS: Well, it was just my friends going in and I figured that's where I would go, too.

LJ: So where was basic training held?

MS: San Diego.

LJ: And how long were you in San Diego?

MS: I went to school there and everything. I suppose it was over a year.

LJ: So a year of basic training?

MS: Yes.

LJ: And what was all involved with basic training?

MS: It was combat training, you know.

LJ: And you lived in barracks in San Diego?

MS: Yes.

LJ: What was the morale like?

MS: **Oh, good.**

LJ: Just in basic training alone?

MS: **Oh, it was good. Yes, everybody was new there and experiencing it for the first time.**

LJ: Make a lot of friends, buddies?

MS: **Yes.**

LJ: When did you get shipped out to Korea?

MS: **Oh, gee.**

LJ: After that year, you got orders then?

MS: **'50, I'd say '52.**

LJ: And you landed where in Korea?

MS: **When I say Korea, I was there on the ship. I never was walking on the land.**

LJ: So this is all ship?

MS: **Yes.**

LJ: What was life on a ship?

MS: **We had our own compartment. The Marine Corps was a special detachment and we had our own department down below decks. What we did basically was maintain security of the ship. If they needed help on the shoreline, we were trained in combat training, to go help them out and, well that's basically what it amounts to.**

LJ: How many servicemen on the ship that you served on?

MS: **On the whole ship?**

LJ: Yes.

MS: **Oh, that I don't know.**

LJ: Okay.

MS: **There were 40 of us.**

LJ: Smaller ship then?

MS: **A heavy cruiser.**

LJ: Oh, okay.

MS: **Yes, so it was a big ship. It was no battle ship, it was, you know, next to it.**

LJ: Were you in the war zone?

MS: Yes, oh, yes.

LJ: What was your primary responsibility?

MS: On the ship, my primary responsibility – I had my own office down in our own Marine Corps compartment and there's 40 of us. And I gave out who stood guard, when and where, and when liberty time came and we'd go ashore, and I'd give liberty passes. I controlled the office for the Marine Corps. When we're out at sea in the combat area, it was a whole new ball game. Then the Marine Corps – there's an open three-inch mount on the bow of the ship and an open three-inch mount on the fantail ... there were more of them, too. But the Marines operated the one on the front of the ship and on the fantail of the ship. And that was a three-inch open mount. It's just a steel rim around it. It wasn't enclosed like a five-inch, which is completely enclosed, you know, all [unclear]. So we operated those two guns.

LJ: So 24 hours a day, someone was standing guard and you were in charge of who was on guard?

MS: Yes.

LJ: Who was standing guard?

MS: We maintained the security of the ship. When we'd go to a battle zone everybody knew their positions, what to do and where to go, you know.

LJ: What did you encounter being in the war zone on that ship? Do you have any standout memories that you would like to share?

MS: I was telling Debbie not too long ago. In one particular case, when the shelling gets heavy on a ship, all the open mounts are secured below decks – the people, because they got no guards, you know? And, anyway, I remembered they called out and “all open mounts get below decks.” I remember I was the last one to go below decks. I was telling Debbie this. I had the hatch just about closed and I heard this “poof.” Well, what had happened is, we had a direct hit on the mount right next to ours, on the Navy mount right in the breach of the gun. So all the Navy personnel, which would have been about 10 of them, it would have killed every one of them. And the flack from it would have taken some of us, too, I think. So that was a close call. But usually when the flack gets in and they start firing at us, the open mounts are secured below decks. And of the all the closed mounts, of course, they fired away.

LJ: So on the ship you had both Marines and the Navy personnel?

MS: Oh yes.

LJ: How many Navy and how many Marines?

MS: Well there were 40 of us Marines. We were a special detachment. And how many people that took to run the ship, I haven't got the slightest idea. But

we were detached to do offshore fighting and whatever. They'd call on the shoreline for help. We'd go ashore and we just about did that one time, but they called it off at the last minute, because they got out of whatever they were in. I was happy about that. And then one time, we went by and they had a group of Navy personnel and their job was to watch for mines. You know what I mean by a mine, don't you?

LJ: Right.

MS: And what happened was we went by a mine.

LJ: In the open water?

MS: In the water.

LJ: And how does that work, an open mine in the water?

MS: Well all you can see was just a little bit of the top and the rest was submerged.

LJ: Wow.

MS: See and there we went along and they had personnel watching for this type of thing. When they went by the mine, the wake of the ship kept the mine about that far from the ship. And the only one that saw it when it neared the end was the captain of the ship. And boy was he mad. Because the mine detectors missed it somehow, but I'll never forget that and we just blew it up, you know, then you go on.

LJ: How many mine detectors are on a ship?

MS: I don't know, there's a group of them. I suppose six-seven, maybe there's more of them. The Navy took care of that. And anyway, they missed this one, but what scared me most of all was the fact if we would have hit, we would have been bad enough so the ship stopped. It would have taken the people on the shoreline about 10 seconds to zero in on us and would have blown us all to pieces. So it was just lucky, you know.

You think back afterwards, you didn't think about it too much at the time, but afterwards, you think, "Oh my gosh," you know, "that could have been bad." And then one time on a forward eight-inch mount – they have powder charges. It had a shell, but they have powder charges. Somebody mishandles something inside there and one of them powder charges blew and it killed, I don't know how many, in there. We opened the hatch and got them out, but we were dragging them out. There must have been seven or eight that were killed in there, because it was all contained you know, and ...

LJ: But no damage to the ship otherwise?

MS: No, it was just that gun mount and not to the ship other than that.

LJ: Thank God, yes.

MS: So you never know. And just like one time they needed somebody ashore. And they called us and we were going down the side of the ship on the long, small boats to go ashore and they called it off, they must have got out of what they were in, so we were pretty happy about that. I wasn't too excited about going ashore, but you know.

LJ: So it was better for you to just remain on the ship than to ever be called to shore, is that correct?

MS: Oh, there's no question about it, yes. That's actual hand-to-hand combat, regular combat. While I was on the ship, then I got the whole ship to help protect me. You know what I mean?

LJ: Sure, absolutely, amazing. I didn't realize that this was a mix of both Navy and Marine.

MS: Yes, there were 40 of us. We had our jobs and then we maintained security of the ship. And we took dignitaries when we'd [unclear] beach and that. We took dignitaries to different places, too. But when you think back on it, we were lucky in a lot of timing, in the war zones, that we didn't get, you know . . . What scared me most, we got hit so you couldn't maneuver the ship because the shore batteries, the enemy, would zero in on you and just blow you apart. But everything worked out good.

LJ: What was the longest time that you were on the ship?

MS: I suppose maybe two-three weeks. We'd have to go in and refuel, and so . . .

LJ: Go back to shore to refuel and . . .

MS: But a guy thinks back on a lot of that. That book I got shows, I think I got a picture ... but you think back at a lot of times, the close calls you have ... And like I say, that three-inch forward mount we operated that I was on, the one that the Navy got a direct hit like, did I tell you?

LJ: Um hum.

MS: And . . .

LJ: So direct hit and then what happened to them?

MS: Well, it would have killed every single one of them. But they had just secured the ship because we were in a war area and the shells were flying so they ordered us, get all open mounts, get below decks and we just got below, and the Navy did too, and then I heard a "poof." And I suppose 50 more, 40 more seconds, that the Navy would have been there, they would have killed every single one, so . . .

LJ: Gosh, such a close call.

MS: Yes.

LJ: What was the morale like when such a close call like that happened?

MS: **Well, the morale was good. There's no getting around that. Because we had shot down planes and that. We picked up dead pilots. They'd radio in to us and some of them were killed and a lot of them weren't – they got out, they bailed out and then they called us to pick them up, you know.**

LJ: The Korean War ran from what year to what year?

MS: **Oh gosh.**

LJ: Was it 1951?

MS: **I was just going to say '51, but about '53, I think.**

LJ: To '53.

MS: **'53 or '54.**

LJ: What length of time were you on the ship?

MS: **Oh, I suppose I must have been on there at least one year.**

LJ: Good to know. So one full year on the ship and then docking as needed for fuel and basic groceries, everything you needed, correct?

MS: **Oh yes.**

LJ: And when you went back to shore, where was that? Do you remember?

MS: **San Diego.**

LJ: San Diego.

MS: **And Hawaii.**

LJ: Hawaii.

MS: **And, yes, that's about it, I guess.**

LJ: You got to see places you never would have otherwise.

MS: **Oh, no question about that.**

LJ: Obviously.

MS: **When I was in the Naval Reserve, then I went to Cuba. I was in the Naval Reserve for a number of years, before I joined the Marine Corps. And I think that's probably why I got sent on a ship.**

LJ: I see.

MS: **In the Marine Corps, because I was acquainted with the Navy.**

LJ: So you had served that period before you went?

MS: **In the Marine Corps, when I was in Cuba.**

LJ: In Cuba.

MS: I went to Cuba that one time.

LJ: And how long were you in Cuba?

MS: Oh, I imagine three-four days or something like that.

LJ: And what was that like?

MS: Well we went and got around quite a bit. I don't know, it's much different than any other towns. I mean, their lifestyle isn't exactly a lot of difference.

LJ: How were you treated when you were in Cuba?

MS: Cuba? Good, oh yes. Of course, they had a lot of visitors there. You mean, their income was quite different from the people in the States coming in or whatever.

LJ: Tourism.

MS: That's one thing about being in the service you get around quite a bit.

LJ: Definitely, you see places.

MS: And I went to different places in Cuba and I have to look it up now, it's so many years ago, that the places I've been – I got around in the world quite a bit, I guess.

LJ: Did you get lots of letters from family back home while you were serving in Korea?

MS: Well, I don't know if I got a lot but I got, I got letters. Oh yes.

LJ: What was that like, getting mail from home?

MS: Oh, you enjoy it. Yes. No doubt about it. And my brother was in the Air Force and so I'd get back to port and I got to see him a couple of times.

LJ: where did he serve?

MS: He had a base right by the ocean. I can't remember the base, so I can't remember the name of the base.

LJ: Was this in California?

MS: Yes, right.

LJ: So you got to meet up with him?

MS: Well I didn't get to meet to him. No, but I knew he was there. See here I made a mark.

LJ: That's a big group.

MS: Yes, this should be about 40 of us.

LJ: Very nice.

MS: Let's see, where was that mark? Yes, that's the mark.

LJ: Yeah, very nice.

MS: Swanson, MD (*Marine Detachment*).

LJ: And were you were a corporal?

MS: Corporal, yes.

LJ: What does it take to become a corporal in the Marines?

MS: Oh.

LJ: What's the basic you start out as?

MS: Private first class.

LJ: Private first class and what does it take to become a corporal?

MS: Well, if you do your job and you do it right – I don't know what the time element would be . . . but I would have been sergeant if I would have stayed in, I would have been a buck sergeant. Because they said that.

LJ: And that was how close to happening when you left?

MS: Oh, I would have, if I wouldn't have left, – that's the idea to make you want to stay. I would have become a sergeant right away, so . . .

LJ: When did you find out that your time was done? When you did find out that this conflict was over?

MS: Oh, I can't remember the date.

LJ: Okay, but it . . .

DS: Fifty-three.

MS: Yes, it was '53, but I didn't know at the time.

LJ: And it reached you on the ship?

MS: Oh, yes.

LJ: Yes and then after the happy news that this was over, you went back to port in San Diego?

MS: Let's see. I wonder if we didn't go back to Hawaii?

LJ: Okay.

MS: San Di–, Los Angeles or San Diego, yes. I think, but I'm not sure [unclear] can get back or I can't.

LJ: Um hum.

MS: We went back to port and that was, you know, the end of that.

LJ: All these years later, Marvin, are there people that really stand out in your memory that you served with, that you would like to talk about, any buddy stories?

MS: **Well you all have something in common and we used to go raise heck when we went to port. And go to the clubs and all this kind of stuff, you know. Yes.**

LJ: Did you keep in contact with them throughout the years after?

MS: **It's funny you should ask, because we just did, in fact, Debbie just talked to him.**

DS: **Last night.**

MS: **Yes.**

LJ: Great, come lifelong friendships were made.

MS: **Yes, right.**

DS: **David Darley (sp?).**

MS: **Yes, David Darley. I just talked to him and she just talked to him not too long ago.**

LJ: Wonderful.

MS: **Yes.**

LJ: Did you have reunions throughout the years?

MS: **We, they've had reunions but I didn't go to them. Because a lot of them were in Los Angeles and that, but they did have reunions, yes.**

LJ: Now the person that you just talked about that you were friends with all this time, where does that man live?

MS: **Los Angeles – wasn't it, Debbie?**

DS: **I think so.**

MS: **Los Angeles, I think it was, he lives in. But Debbie just talked to him and I talk to him once in a while. And so we went on liberty together. There were about four or five us. In fact, I've got pictures of us sitting at a table at a bar and we kind of all stuck together in our little, small group, you know.**

LJ: That's great, very nice, oh for fun.

MS: **Oh, yes, there was our table.**

LJ: How old were you when you were serving on that ship?

MS: **Oh I must have been around 21, 22, I suppose.**

LJ: Okay, just young, very young. How did you feel about leaving the military?

MS: Well, I guess I didn't have too much feeling. I didn't really want to stay in, you know.

LJ: You didn't want to make it a career?

MS: No.

LJ: After all those close calls on the ship, you were anxious to be done?

MS: Yes, this was our group that we kind of stuck together.

LJ: Very nice.

MS: And this was that David Darley that Debbie was talking about.

LJ: Yes, very nice. So what did you do after you left the military? Once you got off that ship, what was the next thing for you to do?

MS: In the service?

LJ: No, after you got done with the service.

MS: Oh, I went back to work for Red Owl.

LJ: And you had been at Red Owl prior to going into the service?

MS: Oh, yes.

LJ: And what did you do at Red Owl?

MS: I operated the cheese cooler.

LJ: Okay.

MS: You know.

LJ: You don't want to get stuck in there, do you?

MS: All the refrigerated items, yeah.

LJ: Are there any stories you would like to go on record sharing? Is there anything you'd like to say?

DS: The dignitaries?

LJ: Oh, the dignitaries that were on the ship – you had dignitaries there?

MS: Oh, yes, Pillsbury. We took him and we took some other dignitaries at other times too but, gee, I can't remember.

LJ: And you said what was that name?

MS: Pillsbury.

LJ: Pillsbury and why was he on the ship?

MS: They took him to Hawaii.

LJ: I see.

MS: Every once in a while when we'd go to LA or whatever, and then we'd go back to Hawaii, or when we come, we'd hit Hawaii first, then we'd go to dock at the States. And when we left again for Korea, then we'd stop at Hawaii again, and so we stopped there every so often . . . So we got to spend some time there, too. But . . .

LJ: How did life on the ship change when you having those dignitaries on?

MS: Oh, it didn't really change that much. I saw him once and that's about all, you know. And so it didn't change, make much difference. They just took him to Hawaii, or if we were at Hawaii, took some back probably sometimes. We had some other dignitaries too but – one day it'll click in. It's funny how it goes. You try to think of them now and you haven't even thought of them before and it clicks in but . . . There was other dignitaries, too. It's quite an experience. But what I really enjoyed was going to Cuba, you know.

LJ: You enjoyed going to Cuba?

MS: Yes.

LJ: Now why do you say that?

MS: Because it was just a fun place to go, you know. And it isn't a war zone and you got to party. And you'd hit the bars and so forth. And I'd never been there before.

LJ: Any last thoughts you would like to share?

MS: Oh, gosh.

LJ: About your experience, are you glad that you did it?

MS: Oh, yes.

LJ: If you had to do it all over again, would you still have gone through the military and everything you went through?

MS: I think so, yes. Because I was in the Naval Reserve first, then I got to go to Cuba with the Naval Reserve. And then I got to go halfway around the world on the other ship. And so I'd stayed in the Naval Reserve ... I still spent most of my time in the Navy, you know.

LJ: Interesting.

MS: And, like I say, we were a detachment of 40 and it went pretty good. I got no complaints. It tells where we'd been. Yes, this is Hawaii, it shows here.

LJ: That's a very nice book.

DS: Dad saw that.

MS: Oh yes, I watched them do that.

DS: He was watching that [unclear].

LJ: What's the last round?

MS: **Of the war. Yes, here they were signing the last shell that was fired in the Korean War.**

LJ: So that's what a shell looks like.

MS: **Well that's an eight-inch shell. They've got five-inch shells, eight-inch shell, you know.**

LJ: Did you go to shore in Hong Kong?

MS: **Oh yes.**

LJ: Really. What was that like?

MS: **Oh it was fun. It was something different, you know. It's something new. See we got quite a bit there and I got around. Here's the . . .**

LJ: What's St. Paul in Hong Kong?

MS: **Oh, that's the ship.**

LJ: That was the ship, okay.

MS: **Oh yes, the St. Paul, USS St. Paul (CA-73).**

LJ: That is the one that you were on?

MS: **Yes, that's it. That's it CA-73.**

LJ: Beautiful.

MS: **Yes, there's another picture of it.**

LJ: Okay.

MS: **And when I say, open mount, I don't know whether you can see it or not, but see that right there?**

LJ: Um hum.

MS: **That's the one I was on.**

LJ: Okay.

MS: **And then we had another one like that. Well the one that got hit was right here ... right in the breach of the gun.**

LJ: Amazing. What great memories, I mean, to have a book like this.

MS: **Oh, that's . . . Yes, this is Wonsan.**

LJ: Where is Wonsan?

MS: **It's way over there. I don't know what it's by, Wonsan Harbor.**

LJ: But over in the Asian, Korean . . .

MS: Yes. [unclear]

LJ: That is a name I have not heard of before, Wonsan.

MS: **Wonsan Harbor, yes.**

LJ: Yes.

DS: **Guantánamo Bay, you were in Guantánamo Bay?**

MS: **Oh yes, well, that was Cuba.**

LJ: Okay, so you were at Guantánamo?

MS: **Yes.**

LJ: What was that like?

MS: **Well it was different people, you know. But it was nice. Oh, yes. I haven't looked at this for so long that ...**

LJ: How would you like to be remembered, Marvin?

MS: **Oh, gee, I don't know.**

LJ: You've never thought of that before?

MS: **No, I never really give it much thought.**

LJ: It's one of those questions I wind the interview with. How you would like to be remembered for your military service, service to country?

MS: **Well, I'd like to be remembered as just being a good guy. I haven't done anything spectacular in my life.**

LJ: I'd say you did your country very proud. So when you came home, you got married?

MS: **Yes, got married and . . .**

LJ: Raised a family?

MS: **Raised a family, yes, nothing spectacular.**

LJ: Yes, your generation is.

MS: **I'm trying to find a ... 3rd Division, 5th Division.**

LJ: What division were you in?

MS: **I was a Marine, right here.**

LJ: Okay, the Marine Detachment.

MS: **Yes, Swanson MD, right there.**

LJ: Great to have all those pictures.

MS: **One thing about it, you got to see the world a little bit.**

LJ: Absolutely.

MS: **And like between the Navy and the Marine Corps, I've been a lot of places in this world.**

LJ: Now have you been back to visit any of those places, like Hawaii or Hong Kong, since you served?

MS: **No, I haven't. Yes, it was good to have the past, but, like I say it's been so long ago now that ...**

LJ: Now what's this picture?

MS: **Oh, this is a friend of mine and Randy Carlson. And we went to ... where was that?**

DS: **Minneapolis, St. Paul.**

MS: **Minneapolis, yes, and this was the anchor of the St. Paul.**

LJ: Really?

MS: **Yes, the St. Paul's anchor so that's where we had the picture taken, see?**

LJ: That is so amazing.

MS: **Yes, I had a little trouble throwing it overboard.**

LJ: Oh, my gosh. I had no idea.

MS: [unclear] **"Swanson, throw the anchor over." "Yes, Sir," and I'd throw the anchor over.**

LJ: That is one amazing, huge anchor.

MS: **Yes, I was remarkably strong.**

LJ: Yes, I'm impressed.

MS: **You're not helping it, Debbie.**

LJ: I'm impressed and there you are just kind of sitting back relaxing on that anchor.

MS: **Yes.**

LJ: All those years later, when was that taken, what year was that?

MS: **Oh, gosh. Does it say on there? I don't know when it was.**

DS: **About two years ago.**

MS: **Two-three years ago.**

LJ: Oh, sure, November 2010.

MS: **Oh, okay.**

LJ: All those years later, resting on that, sitting on that anchor.

MS: Yes.

DS: The ship is retired now.

MS: Yes.

LJ: Oh, thank the Lord. Yes, that is amazing. What a great picture.

MS: The pilots used to radio in to us when they were hit; then we'd pick the pilots up that were hit, and they had to bail out. And a lot of them – the hospital's right next door to the Marine compartment. So, I know I'd walk by there several different times and they have them stretched out and fixing them up to go home. And I thought, "Oh my God, their wives don't even know they're dead," you know. Now they've kind of . . .

LJ: So sad.

MS: You know, it kind of hits you a little bit, you know.

LJ: Yes, amazing what you have seen as such a young man.

MS: Yes, I've been around quite a bit. I've had that opportunity, I know that.

LJ: Yes.

MS: That even being with the Naval Reserve I got to California; and like I said, I was on a destroyer to Cuba, and so I got around quite a bit there, too.

LJ: Now what was the name of that destroyer?

MS: USS Hyman.

LJ: The USS Hyman going to Cuba.

MS: Yes.

DS: It came in the mail to . . .

LJ: Oh, letter of Appreciation of Republic of Korea, June 25, 2000.

MS: Gee, I forgot about it.

LJ: "Dear Veteran. On the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, I would like to offer you my deepest gratitude for your noble contribution to the efforts to safeguard the Republic of Korea and uphold liberal democracy around the world. At the same time, I remember with endless respect and affection those who sacrificed their lives for that cause. We Koreans hold dear in our hearts the conviction, courage, and spirit of sacrifice shown to us by such selfless friends as you, who enabled us to remain a free democratic nation. The ideals of democracy, for which you were willing to sacrifice your all, 50 years ago, have become universal values in this new century and millennium. Half a century after the Korean War, we honor you and reaffirm our friendship, which helped to forge the blood alliance between our two countries. And we resolve, once again, to work with all friendly nations for the good of humankind

and peace in the world. I thank you, once again, for your noble sacrifice and pray for your health and happiness. Sincerely yours. Signed Kim Dae-jung, President of the Republic of Korea.” What, what a nice tribute.

MS: Long time since I’ve seen that.

LJ: What a nice tribute. How beautiful, written in Korean and in English.

MS: Yes.

LJ: Beautiful, what a keepsake.

MS: Yes, you bet. But one thing about it, going to these foreign countries, it’s nice to see how other people live and that. It’s really an education.

LJ: You realize how good you have it.

MS: You bet you do.

LJ: Yes and what we take for granted.

MS: Yes.

LJ: That is really something.

MS: I don’t know whether you can see it. The gun mount I was on, I was right on this one, right here. See these are enclosed mounts, five-inch and eight-inch guns and they had . . .

LJ: And this one was open.

MS: Yes, they had one here, one there, and they had a couple on the sides here of the open mounts. Yes, then we had a seaplane in the back. And this is how they used this to lift the seaplane back up.

LJ: Great photography back then, all those years ago.

MS: Yes.

LJ: Well, thank you very much, Marvin, for sharing your story with us.

MS: Oh, thank you. It’s been so many years, you know, you lose some of it to tell and then once you start talking about it, things start clicking back, because you never . . .

LJ: You never really forget it and you never really talk about it but, once you get going on the subject, it all comes back.

MS: Yes.

LJ: Well, thank you very much for your service.

MS: Thank you.