

WWII: David Hartranft

A Marine's Experience in World War II as told to Patchwork by David Hartranft

Interviewed by Josh Yablonski and Jeremy Campbell in the spring of 2003

David Hartranft was a Marine in World War II. Stories from World War II are important because several thousand veterans of World War II die each day.

David Hartranft has been living in the towns of Mountain Grove and Bloomsburg for his entire life. He served in the 5th division of the Marines on the island of Iwo Jima.

PATCHWORK: How were you enlisted or drafted?

HARTRANFT: I was enlisted. I was a farm boy, didn't have nothing else to do. I enlisted because I never got out in the country. My father took me to Hazelton and I enlisted. By the way that's the first train ride I ever took, to Philadelphia, and then from Philadelphia to South Carolina.

PATCHWORK: What job were you given when you enlisted?

HARTRANFT: Just a plain private rifleman.

PATCHWORK: Could you tell us a little about that, or what you did?

HARTRANFT: Well, for quite a while we were taught blindfolded to dismember the rifle, and how to assemble it back together, still blindfolded. It took quite a while but you mastered that. Then from there they sent us out to the rifle range just like you would go out from here. Parris Island South Carolina is where we started, and then from there we went to New River North Carolina. There one Saturday afternoon we were in this 90 millimeter group, and we were looking up, and all at once I seen these paratroopers come out of the planes. At that time we were only getting like \$41 dollars, and that paid double, so me and a few of my buddies, we went and got transported over to paratroop battalion. From there we completed, I think it was 14 jumps and then they called us professional parachutists. From there we were transferred to Camp Penelton, Oceanside, California. We didn't know what we were assigned for, nothing like that until quite a while later. And then one day the orders

came down and we had to disband all Marine paratroopers. Then we formed the first 5th Marine Infantry Division, so they took all us paratroopers, and made us squad leaders, which I didn't care about but that's how that happened. Finally we shipped out from San Diego to Pearl Harbor and I'll never forget that because my buddy from Ohio and I, it took seven days to get over there and would you believe it we were sick, seasick for seven days. We wanted to die right there. If you ever heard that saying, it's true. So there was a small chain of islands over Pearl Harbor, and they took us to a little place called Hilo, Hawaii, and there that was all volcano, all volcanic, eruptions beforehand. Well they set out camps up right on the volcano ash, on the hard stone. And there we stayed; I don't know how many months, training, up in the mountains in Lettice Flatts, wild boars and things like that you know. It was very exciting and then the orders came that we had to ship out of there, and we knew nothing of where we were going, you know, they keep you in the dark. From there we were put on LST's and some naturally problems, landing on different islands. And then we got to Guam, and there we got on the battleships and the troop transports, and then they told us where we were going. On board the ship they had pictures of Iwo Jima; it showed you every pillbox or every tunnel. They used to have trolley tracks that people would run their rifle, the guns, back in and they'd run them out, fire a couple, run them back in. But we had to day after day, just study that, 'cause they showed us where each outfit was gunna land, and ours was Red Beach Two. I never was offered a good steak in my life in the service, and the night before, we pulled up, it was dark on the outside of Iwo Jima, and they said to all us guys, "Would any of you enjoy a steak?" Well we sure didn't feel like eating, you know, because we knew nothing of what was ahead of us. And from there on we went down aside the ships over these ropes they throw over and we went in in am tracks, we had a platoon, I think, in each am tracks, three squads, you know. We got into shore right on this side of Mount Serabochie. The ocean just dropped off, so we had no choice, they had to open the gate in the back and we had to go out around the side and hang on. You were all wet, loaded down with all kinds of things, hand grenades, my God. So that's how we invaded Iwo Jima.

PATCHWORK: What was your first day of combat like?

HARTRANFT: Scared to beat hell. That's the worst, but you realized you had a job to do, and it was all teamwork, just as you see on the movies and TV today, just teamwork.

PATCHWORK: What were some of your responsibilities as a Marine?

HARTRANFT: Well, like I said, I was a squad leader, and once you're a squad leader, it's just like a chicken with her flock of little chicks, you had to take care of them, you had to keep your eye on them you had to know where they were at all times. And they would not move unless you would move. You moved up, then they moved up, in other words, you were responsible for your lives just as you were for your own.

PATCHWORK: What were some of your regrets about being in the war?

HARTRANFT: Oh, what a question. Now let's see, off hand I had no regrets. I was proud that I served ,you know, as all the rest. Regrets, naturally I lost some of my best friends, that was a terrible regret, but it happens, you know. I don't know how else to explain that.

PATCHWORK: When you found out that the war had ended, how did you feel?

HARTRANFT: Relieved, very relieved.

PATCHWORK: What were some of the best memories that you had when you were in the war?

HARTRANFT: I shouldn't tell you young people that...I'll never forget. I was a guy that used to brag how good I could dive, you know, in a swimming pool. Well, I never thought I was gonna have to prove it, but we flew down to Hilo, on the...yeah. And the weekend passed, so these guys told me, "Well, we want to see how good you can dive," oh geez in this modern hotel, oh what a beautiful place. So we all put suits on, you know, and I got up on the 25 foot, oh my God they used to call me Dutch, "now, Dutch you can go higher than that." And I thought, 'Oh, Jesus I'll probably flop all over the place.' So I got up, I think it was the 50 foot marker, you know, and it was higher than that even, but I figured that's far enough for me, see. And I thought I dove off, swan dive you know, about half way down I could feel my body, just come un-loose right, and when I hit, my whole side, I hit on my side, never did stop aching, so that taught me a lesson not to brag.

PATCHWORK: After the war did you continue to serve in the Marines?

HARTRANFT: No, I wanted to be a career Marine but I had to take the medical discharge because I was wounded.

PATCHWORK: Where were you wounded?

HARTRANFT: I was wounded in the arm, and the hip, and these were just minor, but this one here you know, it got me pretty good. It doesn't hurt when you get hit, it's just numb.

PATCHWORK: When you back, how had Mountain Grove changed from when you left?

HARTRANFT: I would have to say that in my little town, I had seen no change whatsoever. The homestead was still there, I was still a farm boy at heart.

PATCHWORK: Do you still stay in touch with any of your old Marine buddies?

HARTRANFT: Yes, the one was wounded real hard, and he didn't want to live. His wife said to him, "Well, why don't you try to get in contact with some of your old buddies?" Now this was forty years after the war, that's how long, and every year now we have a reunion. Our nickname was Hogan's Goats, yeah, isn't that something, and I did get to a few of the reunions, but now that I got older and have some problems, I don't go anymore. We keep in touch by phone once in a while.