

VILAS YOUNG

Triplett: Today's date is April 28, 2009, and this interview is being conducted at the home of Vilas Young. The interviewer is Sara Triplett, being assisted by Margaret Kelley, and the interviewee is Vilas Young. His birth date is November 16, 1922. He lived during the 1940s and this interview is his story during this time period including World War II. He was in the Marine Corps during World War II, and his highest rank achieved was first Lieutenant.

Triplet: Where and when were you born?

Young: I was born November 16, 1922, on a farm six miles east of Ridgeway.

Triplett: What was your parents' occupation?

Young: My dad was a farmer, and my mother was a home maker.

Triplett: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Young: I had two brothers and older cousin who lived with our family until he got through college.

Triplett: Tell us about your life in 1940 before you entered the military.

Young: Well, in 1940 was the year I graduated from high school, so it was I guess you'd say a kind of exciting time. The thing – right after getting out of high school, I needed to make some money so I'd have some money so I'd have something to start college with, and a neighbor boy had worked the previous summer in northern Iowa for a farmer, and thought he could find a job for me up there. So we boarded a Greyhound bus one morning and took off for Spencer, Iowa, and his employer was able to find a farm job for me and I spent I think it was ten weeks that summer cleaning out feed lots, and hauling the manure to the fields, putting up hay, mowing spreading hay around in the loft back hay in the barn, and threshing, and had an new experience there. I'd always – in threshing at home, I'd always had a spike pitcher to throw the bundles on the wagon. They didn't do that up there. You had to pitch your own load, and I soon found out you needed to keep the middle full or otherwise the sides of the load would fall off. [Laugh].

Triplett: Did you have any other family members that participated in World War II?

Young: I lost an older brother in World War II. He died on the island of New Guinea. He was a corporal in the army. My younger brother was – I think he got out as a sergeant. He was in the Army and served for a time in the Philippines and in Japan after the surrender. That's the family military history.

Triplett: What did you know about the war in Europe or in China?

Young: What didn't I know about it?

Triplett: What did you know?

Young: You know, I was a sophomore at the University of Missouri and one Sunday I think I had – I was living with a family and working for my board and room, and none of us went to church that Sunday morning but late in the afternoon I walked downtown to either visit friends or go to a movie, or something. Walked past the office of the Columbia Tribune, and it was plastered with all this information about Pearl Harbor being bombed and I wasn't even sure if I knew where Pearl Harbor was at that time. I hadn't really – I was in school; I hadn't paid a whole lot of attention to what was going on in the world affairs, but that changed things.

Triplett: How did the U.S. portray the war and the Japanese?

Young: How the what?

Triplett: How did the U.S. portray the war and the Japanese?

Young: Those stinking, dirty, little yellow so-and-so's. [Laugh] That's – in plain English that's about the way we thought of them. Yeah. And the way they treated some of our prisoners, I think that was an apt description of them.

Triplett: Were you aware of the propaganda here and abroad?

Young: I'm not sure if I knew what was propaganda and wasn't. Like a lot of other times you hear what you want to hear sometimes. Before I got called into service, I wasn't paying too much attention to it, because I was in school. Afterwards, why, yes, we kind of kept up on things.

Triplett: How did you learn about the attack on Pearl Harbor? Yes, you saw those posters.

Young: I think I told you, didn't I, that I learned by seeing the headlines pasted in the windows of the newspaper.

Triplett: How did you learn about the progress of the war?

Young: I guess we, you know, we heard, and we had the – some military papers; mostly we were training, we weren't too – didn't spend a whole lot of time listening to the news or reading the newspapers, or anything else. You read – if you had time to read, you read the manuals- weapon manuals and other – the rest of your waking time was spent in training. You either you were marching or you were training with various kinds of weapons, or doing your laundry, so . . .

Triplett: Were you drafted or enlisted into the service?

Young: I enlisted I guess you'd say, because I went to – while I was a student at the University I went to Saint Louis one weekend and visited the Marine Recruiting Station there and signed up.

Triplett: Basic training camp memories. How are your memories from basic training?

Young: [Laugh]. Lots of memories. [Laughing]. I wrote a book for my kids so they would know something about what I went through. One of the first things you learn is that – that drill instructor is one big son of a gun, because he told you that, and he went about trying to prove it. They were really great guys though; they had a job to do and they did it. They – one of the things you learn in boot camp is to obey. You know, you don't question, you just do what you're told and that comes in very, very handy later on when you're – if you get into battle. You need to be able to respond quickly to whatever the commands are. So- But we had, you know, we had fun, we had – we had competition between platoons. At boot camp there were – let's see, there were about forty men in each platoon, and we were housed in Quonset huts about twelve to a Quonset hut, but the drill instructors tried to through competition tried to build some pride in our outfit so that you know, we knew that we marched better than any other platoon in the outfit and that we knew, or we thought anyway, that we had the best platoon in boot camp. Then of course later on that added to attitude isn't quite as prevalent because you don't have the same kind of competition and you get on doing the job that you're supposed to do, you just do it and don't ask too many questions.

Triplett: Did you have any specialized training?

Young: When I got out of boot camp it was just after the island of Saipan and Guam had been taken and the Marine Corps lost so many second lieutenants – infantry platoon commanders in those invasions that our training program was changed most Marine Corps officers went through officer training at Quantico Virginia, but they needed new platoon commanders very quickly so shortly after we got out of boot camp and were at Camp La Jeune, North Carolina, they set up a special officer candidate school there and there were somewhere around four hundred of us took that training; 376 graduated as second lieutenants. We immediately went to the west coast and on to Hawaii and that's where they began taking out and assigning them to infantry divisions, combat divisions. And like I said, being at the end of the alphabet I was very fortunate; it probably saved my life.

Triplett: How did you adapt to military life?

Young: You adapt or you wind up in the brig. No, it wasn't really all that bad. You had some people there that you could depend on, and you hoped that they could depend on you, so it was – I wouldn't say it was not difficult, but it wasn't impossible, you know. You do what you have to do.

Triplett: Where did you serve?

Young: Well, most of the – what you would call service I was on the island of Guam. I went from Camp La Jeune, North Carolina, to Camp Pendleton, California, and was there for two or three months, went on to Hawaii, was there for a couple of months, and on to Guam and spent fourteen months on Guam and the war was over, came home, went back to the farm to work all summer. My mother said she never saw anybody work as hard as 'cause it was different, you know, I enjoyed it. [Laugh]

Triplett: Did you have any special duties on Guam?

Young: Well, I was personnel officer for what they called the replacement battalion, which meant that I had three or four staff members and we took care of and made sure that each person's service records was kept up to date, and whether they were going toward the front or coming back, we'd just -- we made sure their records were kept up to date. That was -- that was the main job. My tent mate over there, who is still one of my very best friends, was supply officer for that group, and it was his job to make sure the guys going which ever direction they were going had the equipment that they should have. Pretty good -- machine worked pretty good.

Triplett: Did you form friendships and camaraderie while in service?

Young: Very much so. As I indicated, one of my very best friends, a Jewish boy from Indianapolis, he and I spent -- how many -- fourteen months in the same tent. We never did have a fight; played a lot of card games, and he's still one of my best friends.

Triplett: How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

Young: About the only way we could stay in touch was with letters. Letters -- most of -- I guess, practically all of the letters got censored. In fact I censored some of the letters for the men in my battalion and -- but that was -- and word gets around. While I was in Hawaii waiting to go on to Guam, a cousin who was in the Army stopped in to visit me and while I couldn't tell my folks where I was going, I told him, and he got the word back to my folks, so all the time I was on Guam they knew where I was.

Triplett: Did you write home every day?

Young: I wouldn't say I wrote home every day, but I've got a shoebox full of letters in here that my mother saved every one of them that I wrote I think. Dullest things you ever saw. There wasn't anything happening! [Laugh]

Triplett: What entertainment did you have in the service?

Young: Well, they had outdoor theatre, there on Guam. Mostly of the rest of the time while we were in training, we really didn't -- didn't have time for entertainment, but there we had an outdoor theatre. They guys would -- it was kind of a sandy soil; they'd just hollow out a space to fit their backs and rear ends and watch the movie and endless card games. My tent mate and I just played cribbage endlessly and I don't think I could play the game now; I've forgotten -- I haven't played cribbage for sixteen years, probably.

Triplett: Did you ever listen to Axis Sally or Tokyo Rose?

Young: Occasionally we could pick them up, but mostly we listened to programs that were designed -- you know, for U.S. troops.

Triplett: What did you do for recreation or leisure time?

Young: I guess probably played a few softball and the guys who could, played basketball. I never was a basketball player. We did a lot of reading, a lot of card playing, wrote a lot of letters, and that was about it. We eventually did an officer's club fixed up there on Guam so that we could have a little bit of social life and would invite in people from other camps, maybe some nurses and have a dance and so forth. Did the best we could with what we had.

Triplett: What about D-Day? How did you feel about them dropping the atom bomb?

Young: I think we welcomed that. I know there have been some people who have criticized us for doing that but had that not happened, no telling how many hundreds of thousands of troops – U.S. troops, Japanese troops, Japanese civilians – would have killed in the invasion of the home islands, you know Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, and some of the other islands over there were just – would have been just a prelude to what would have happened if we would have had to invade the home islands.

Triplett: Do you think President Truman should have ordered the bomb to be dropped?

Young: Absolutely.

Triplett: Absolutely?

Young: What?

Triplett: [Indistinct]

Young: Yes, absolutely. I'm glad he was in there to do it.

Triplett: Where and what were you doing when you got the news that the war was over?

Young: I really don't know. The news, you know, it came into the camp, and we celebrated a little bit, I'm sure, but then the main concern was what they called the point system. You got so many points for the amount of time you spent overseas, you got so many points for amount of time you spent in combat, and of course the guys with the most points were at the top of the list to come home. So, we watched the point system pretty carefully.

Triplett: How did you get home?

Young: Came home on a ship; let's see – can't remember the name of that one, but I went from Hawaii to Guam on the U.S. S President Johnson; not Lyndon, Andrew. Came home, got into San Francisco – I tell you one of the prettiest sights in the world is the Golden Gate Bridge when you go under it coming home. I called – it was late at night when I got to a telephone; in fact it was about two o'clock in the morning here and I wanted to call the folks and – so I put in a call and the phone rang and rang and it rang and finally a neighbor heard the phone ring and he answered and told me – I told him, I said tell the folks that I'm coming to Des Moines on the

train and then on the bus to Bethany and I knew the schedules and so I told him to tell them to meet me in Bethany such and such a time, and they were there.

Triplett: Were you given a reception from family, friends, or the community?

Young: Nothing special, I guess, you know, everybody you saw, yeah, they were glad I was home, and at church, and we – I don't recall anybody organizing a big party for me or anything of the kind. We might have had some homemade ice cream and popcorn, or something like that, but that's something we did anyway.

Triplett: How did the people treat you when you returned home?

Young: I had no complaints about how they treated me. I supposed that they gave a little extra consideration to those of us who had been in service, but mostly they were glad that you were home.

Triplett: How did you adjust back to civilian life?

Young: By just working as hard as I could. [Laugh]. I got home in April; April is a good time to start out on the farm, so I got in on the crop planting and later on in the summer putting up hay and threshing the wheat and oats and so forth, so there was plenty of work to do. Dad had – well there was three of us boys; the oldest one died as I said in New Guinea, and I got home before my younger brother did, so I was Dad's helper during that summer until I then went – well I went down to Columbia intending to go back to school and perhaps get my master's degree, but I learned that they were having these farm classes and that looked like an opportunity to make a little money so that's what I did. I did go back and get my master's degree twenty-eight years after the B.S., so I'm kind of a slow learner, you know.

Triplett: [Laugh] Besides your tent mate, have stayed in touch with other people you were in service with?

Young: Just the – mostly just this one friend that lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, now, and then another one that I went through the University of Missouri with. He lives in Columbia and I see him oh, two or three times a year perhaps, call him once in a while. In fact, the one in Scottsdale, we visit maybe once a month, but they're about the only ones that I maintain any contact with.

Triplett: Did you join the American Legion or the VFW?

Young: I am a member of the American Legion but I have never taken an active role in that.

Triplett: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

Young: Sure!

Triplett: Sure? After the war, were you concerned about the Soviet Union's spread of Communism?

Young: I think everyone was. They eventually I guess you'd say they outgrew their britches or something; what ever happened over there. Yeah, I think the Soviet Union was for many years the big bugaboo that a lot of people worried about.

Triplett: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill for education, housing loans . . . ?

Young: Not for my education. I took advantage of it by teaching, so I guess I took advantage of it.

Triplett: What are the differences between the wars today and World War II?

Young: Well, the weapons that we used in World War II would be considered primitive now. It's – I don't know the wars were involved in and Iraq and Afghanistan there's a lot more mechanization like more aerial attacks then there were in World War II, I think. It's still – war's still pretty stupid.

Triplett: I always feel like that in World War II people felt it more than they do now?

Young: I don't think the American people have been as close as – now what's the word I am looking for, Margaret?

Kelley: Involved, maybe?

Young: There was something about Pearl Harbor that pulled people together and I don't think we've seen that in recent times.

Triplett: I think that's all I have for you.

Young: Well, good! You can interview my wife