

## **Transcription: James Rothermel**

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*Today is Thursday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Mr. James Rothermel. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Rothermel is at his home in Brenham, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us. I guess the first question is maybe just tell us a little bit about your boyhood and your life before you went in the service.*

**James Rothermel:** All right. I was born in Burton, Texas, August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918 to Blue and Natalie Rothermel. I was educated in Burton School, and graduated from Brenham High School in 1938, and I also after high school it was no jobs and so forth, so I was able to get into the National Youth Administration. It was a work education program, four hours of work/four hours of education at Inks Dam and Burnet, Texas. The abbreviation was NYA. And I spent about, just about a year there. My work was painting. My father was a painter and I had sort of picked up the trade already with him, and after I finished up at the NYA project at Inks Dam, I was employed at the Naval air station in Corpus Christi helping build it in 1940.

*So, where were you then, do you remember where you were the day Pearl Harbor was bombed?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes. I was on my way, we had, I had been working at the Naval air station at Corpus Christi, came home for a weekend and just as we were crossing the railroad tracks in Refugio, Texas going back to Corpus, we heard it on the radio. We immediately said, "Well, we're gonna whip those Japs, we'll be through with them in 6 months." That was sort of our impression at that point.

*And did you think at that point that you were definitely going into the military?*

**James Rothermel:** Not at that point, no.

*So you get back home, it's that weekend, December 7<sup>th</sup> Pearl Harbor's bombed, what happens after that? How long was it before you entered the service?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, I worked another year, or more. On March 24, 1942, I joined the Navy.

*Okay, so about 3 months later.*

**James Rothermel:** Mm hmm.

*Okay. Were you drafted?*

**James Rothermel:** No, I was being drafted but I went ahead and volunteered. I enlisted and I have to tell this little story; I was wanting to go into the regular Navy and when I took my physical, interview and test and what have you, a young ensign was going over those and interviewing me and said, "Mr. Rothermel, you do not want to be in the Navy, regular Navy. I have something for you that you really need to be in." He said, "That is the CBs." It was U.S. Naval Construction Battalion. He said, too, "you've had 6 to 8 years experience in painting," and he said "I can give you a third class petty officer rating, right now. If you go into the regular

Navy, you're going to be an apprentice seaman for a year or 2, so you'll have an extra pay grade that other people won't have and I would suggest that you go into the CBs." So I accepted.

*What was it initially that made you want to join the Navy, over the other branches?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, I worked at the naval base and saw a lot of the Navy. I didn't want to sleep in the mud and foxholes. I didn't want to be in the walking Army. So that was my reason.

*When you signed up, how did your parents feel?*

**James Rothermel:** They knew I was having to go. I guess they were expecting it. They were very supportive. I had a brother in the Marine Corps and a brother in the Army Air Corps.

*Were they older than you?*

**James Rothermel:** No, younger than I.

*Younger, okay.*

**James Rothermel:** The one in the Marine Corps joined in 1937, and the other one was drafted out of high school.

*Did you have any other siblings that remained back home?*

**James Rothermel:** No.

*So three boys and all of you went into the service.*

**James Rothermel:** That's right and we served in 3 branches.

*So tell us sir, after you signed up, where did they send you to first?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, they sent me home, waiting for orders to be shipped to my designation. It wasn't until June that I was called in around the first of June and reported to Camp Allen, Virginia. It was right outside of Norfolk, Virginia. It was a CB base there and that's where we first started my training.

*Did you get there by train?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes. Went by train.

*What was the base like?*

**James Rothermel:** I tell you it was awesome. I was so dumb and didn't know what was going on and everything was so new. I do remember one thing. We got off the train at the siding at this base and there was a bunch of CBs on the hurricane, well, the chain link fence hanging up there and said, "You'll be sorry. You'll be sorry." Anyway, that was my first impression at boot camp, you know. We were commissioned the 14<sup>th</sup> United States Naval Construction Battalion on June the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

*And so when you were going through your basic training you were with a bunch of guys that were going to be C's as well?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes. Let me describe it to you a little bit. In my outfit, the average age of the CBs was 38 years of age.

*Yeah that's quite a bit older.*

**James Rothermel:** Every one of those gentlemen were skilled in their particular field. That's where the CBs got their name Can Do because there's nothing," if we had a problem, it could be solved.

*And then I guess that some point later on, John Wayne had made the movie The Fighting CB's."*

**James Rothermel:** Some time later, yes. I don't know just when that was.

*So when you're in training, tell us kinda what that was like.*

**James Rothermel:** The thing that really astounded me the first night we were assigned quarters, the first night, right then clothing and they ran out of mattresses and had to sleep on 2 blankets on some old wire springs on a bunk bed. Then the clothes that were issued were all too big for me because all the small clothing had been issued. I guess we were not very well prepared for this war. And too, we didn't have a rifle to do our boot training. We had to go into the woods and cut kind of a stick and call it our rifle.

*That definitely sounds like supplies were pretty sparse. How long was your initial training there in Virginia?*

**James Rothermel:** Approximately 6 weeks. We departed from Camp Allen to Davis, Rhode Island and that was about the 1<sup>st</sup> of August.

*Did you go by ship?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, we crossed the Chesapeake Bay and then took a train and went up to Rhode Island.

*Okay.*

**James Rothermel:** And then while at Rhode Island, we constructed some Quonset huts for quarters, the base just being built. We stayed there until August 6 and then boarded the, no, we got there August the 6<sup>th</sup>, excuse me and August the 22<sup>nd</sup> we left Rhode Island. We boarded 3 different trains and the train routes were different routes across the United States to San Francisco, California. We stayed at Treasure Island, San Francisco, for a few days, weeks rather and we had some military, you know telling us about where we were going in the Pacific. They did tell us Guadalcanal, that we were heading there. Then on September the 9<sup>th</sup>, we boarded the ships and we headed for Guadalcanal.

*What was the mood like amongst your fellow CBs, as you were getting ready to depart?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, they were all pretty well rarin' to go. We did have one incident happen with one of the trains going across country. One of the guys decided he didn't want to go. As we were traveling, we would meet trains, and he jumped out of the car he was in, in front of another train and committed suicide. That's the only one that I know of that was really disheartened about it.

*So everyone else was pretty eager to get over there.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, we were edgy, you know. We didn't know what to expect.

*Were you able, while you were still training in the States, were you able to follow kind of what was going on with the battles in the Pacific and that sort of thing?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, to a certain extent. It wasn't too much. I guess they didn't want to give us too much.

*But you all had to have known that your mission was going to be important as CBs.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, right, yes, we sure did, we were very well briefed in that respect.

*So tell us then sir, you're at Treasure Island in California and you finally get ready to embark and ship out. Tell us what that's like. Tell us a little bit.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, I tell you, you know the thing that really sort of shocked me was when we were boarding the ship, there was a Navy band out there playing Sentimental Journey, and Red Sails in the Sunset and some of those type songs, as we were boarding. And I tell you what, I first really fully realized when we went under, through the Golden Gate bridge, that all of us on that ship were expendable. I had been not too religious, I guess I'd say, but being on ship board having nothing to do, and I got to getting worried about where we was going. I had a little pocket bible that was given to me. Then and there I started realizing what was happening to us. I just said boy, we were all expendable. So, from that point on, we were thinking pretty heavy about where we was going and what we were doing. We didn't know where we was going. We landed at New Near Caledonia, sometime, I can't remember just how long, I think around 30 days getting there. We had a sister ship, which had some of our cargo. It went around 6 knots. That was its top speed.

*That's a pretty long time to spend on a boat.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes it was, and out there in the Pacific with no escort. And then, too, I guess that we didn't fully realize that we were in hostile waters and what have you.

*How would you pass the time during those 30 days?*

**James Rothermel:** Well like I said, I read the bible. We did have a small library that we took with us and they opened that up so we could read some books and this type stuff, so that's what we did primarily.

*Was there any sort of training you could, did you guys have any training or classes or that sort of thing?*

**James Rothermel:** No I tell you the one thing that was really, this was a converted freighter and we didn't have any air conditioning and had big wind socks that pulled air in as we were moving, but it was horrible in the quarters that we were furnished. It finally got to where it was smelling so bad that you couldn't stay in there. Another thing that really was hard, we were rationed water. They had one spigot at the bridge and every morning you could fill up your canteen. And that was all the water you got. You had to shave, you had to drink it. When I didn't drink all my water, I hung my helmet up on my bunk, took the liner out and poured the water in there so I would have enough to maybe take a spit bath.

*Yeah, that's pretty rough.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah it was. It was quite an adventure. When we landed at New Near Caledonia, we stayed on the ship, but I was very fortunate. I was able to get off the ship because they were building a hospital receiving, a receiving hospital there for the wounded you know, on an advance basis they would bring them there. So I being a painter, I was able to go forth. I stayed on the island for about 2 weeks. But we got in there around October sometime, I can't recall the date. Then on November, we left there late October, I'd say the 25<sup>th</sup> and was headed for Guadalcanal.

*Had they said anything to you about Guadalcanal or did you even know?*

**James Rothermel:** At that time when we were there on ship, we knew we were going to Guadalcanal.

*What was the thought amongst the men? What were they thinking about Guadalcanal?*

**James Rothermel:** We knew nothing, and it was basing us, too. They told us we had to be very careful because the natives, they were cannibals. We found out when we got there they weren't. So our intelligence wasn't very good. So we found it to be very meek and very acceptable.

*So you left in November of '42 to go to head towards Guadalcanal?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, rightly, and we landed there on November the 4<sup>th</sup>.

*Tell us what that was like.*

**James Rothermel:** Well, see, the Marines, they had landed there August the 7<sup>th</sup>. And the beaches we went in on were secure. We could unload. Now we did have some red alerts, Jap's planes, but they didn't come in to where we were luckily, and we got everything unloaded pretty well, and then we started doing our work. Our primary objective was to build an emergency landing field for those planes, well Henderson Field was already established, and those planes that got shot up and couldn't make it back but didn't want them to land on the field and tear it up, and so they made an emergency landing field. We did that in about 10 days. And then we started immediately after that building a 7,000-foot bomber strip, and it took us quite a bit of time.

*That's a lot of work. I don't think people realize how much work that is.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes it was. And when we finished this little emergency landing strip, our commander, Captain Tarney, he went to Henderson Field, he was a pilot himself, and he picked

up a fighter plane, I don't know just what plane it was, but anyway, and he had a radio man with him, and he flew in and tested out the field and we all were out, nearly everybody that wasn't working somewhere else or could go, we would be there to receive him when he came. And when he landed and he got out of the plane and he gathered us all around and the men and us on the good work we'd done and how fast we completed it, and you know, blah-blah, that type of story, and then he took off to go take the plane back, and somehow or another the plane's motor failed when he was over the Skylark Channel and crashed and he was killed, and so was the radio operator.

*That's horrible.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, and so anyway -

*And that was your commanding officer of your unit.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes. So we had another man that took over right away. He was next in line. Then do you want to know a little about the conditions - ?

*Sure, well I was going to ask you, too, I know that building that runway, I assume you guys worked 24/7 on that, right?*

**James Rothermel:** Pretty well, yes sir.

*How would the shifts work? Would you have like yourself, did you have a period of time that you'd sleep and then you were back out working on the runway?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, we had the normal hours. We worked a 12-hour day I would say. And we didn't have 8 hours. We worked from daylight to dark.

*Well I mean you had 8 hours, I meant you had like 8 hours that you could sleep or eat or something.*

**James Rothermel:** Oh yes, we had, those that were out in the field working on the runway, there would be cooks and stuff brought food out to them at noon. They ate breakfast in the camp and then night meals in camp.

*So it was a 12 on/12 off type of thing to get that built.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes.

*Well I know that had to have been important and obviously having to move quickly. So tell us then sir, you were going to describe the conditions. Let us know about those.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, we not only just built the air field, we built roads and maintained them. We built a water point to where we'd fetch water out of the river, you know, where we could treat the water, and we also had a saw mill where we sawed lumber. We built one bridge that was 220 feet long, and about 20 feet wide, made out of mahogany, and so we built several bridges and then the road, and we also had, were building a hospital, too, at the same time, and so that was sort of our work schedule. I was in the sign shop, a paint shop. When I first landed there, I was not in the sign shop. I was assigned to outside painting and stuff, about the first

three or four weeks. Then I would move into the paint shop and then I stayed in that the rest of the time being at Guadalcanal.

*What type of signs were you painting?*

**James Rothermel:** We painted signs for locations and directions. Like we built a tank farm for gas and oil for the planes. We built a big sign out there identifying it. And we also painted insignias on airplanes for the bombers that we had to strip after we got their permission. We just painted about anything and everything.

*It sounds like it.*

**James Rothermel:** Whatever needed painting, we painted. I'll tell you a little about the conditions.

*Okay.*

**James Rothermel:** When we first landed there, on the first couple of nights we just slept on the ground. Finally we got some tents put up. We set the cots with the canvas cloth and with a mattress. We had mosquito netting, to keep the mosquitoes off. Our biggest concern and our biggest enemy was mosquitoes. We were shelled one time and then we were bombed a couple of times, but other than that we lost no men.

*Describe what that was like though when you were attacked and bombed. Did you have bomb shelters you had built?*

**James Rothermel:** We had just a little old trench dug we called a foxhole. The first thing that happened, when the first bomb fell within our perimeter pretty close, it was about maybe a thousand or two thousand yards away, it took us weeks to clear the junk to put our quarters in. That one bomb cleared an area about as big as (...). That scared us all pretty well. We then realized that we were really under some real conditions.

*I think the first time you are in a situation where you realize someone is actually trying to kill you, it wakes you up.*

**James Rothermel:** That's right. And that was quite a rude awakening. The funny part of it is, the officers the next day after they saw what it was, we didn't have anybody go to work. All of us started building bomb shelters. The officers usually had the men dig their own, you know, for themselves, had to dig it for them. Well they were digging their own.

*Well that's the way it should be.*

**James Rothermel:** That was a rude awakening. But the shelling didn't hit any of us in our campsite.

*That's fortunate.*

**James Rothermel:** We had one night, one bombing raid, where the Japs dropped a personnel bomb, and it was in the shop area and it was at night and nobody was in the shop.

*Very lucky.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, we were very lucky.

*Did they describe those as, I might be confusing the terminology, but Washing Can, Washing Machine Charlies?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, that was so, I was getting ready to get to that. Then we didn't sleep a whole lot at night, for the first two or three months we were there. Washing Machine Charlie would wait until about midnight. He'd come on over and he would fly around all over the island, just round and round. The plane that he was flying didn't have synchronized motors and it would go woo-woo-woo. It was very weird, too. Then he would drop his bombs somewhere on the island when he left. We finally got these airfields and we got some night fighters and we were able to shoot down some, not too many, 1 or 2 or 3.

*So this became kind of a routine occurrence with the Japanese bombers flying over at night. And because of the strange noise they made, that's why they were called Washing Machine Charlie?*

**James Rothermel:** That's right. Yes. Anyway we had that, so we had to get up and go to our bomb shelter, because we didn't know where he was going to drop. So we sat on the edge of the bomb shelter and this getting them sometime in the lights and the planes would try to shoot him down. We would whoop and holler when they shot one down, you could hear everybody on the island.

*That's great. What was the food like?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, the food at first was not too good, until we got organized. Then our food was alright. Then we got some problems. The shifts would not be able to come in to bring in supplies, and we were low on supplies when all this happened and for several weeks there, we were eating whatever we had. But our food was all right, it was real good.

*What about mail? Were you able to get mail from back home pretty regularly?*

**James Rothermel:** Now, we didn't get any mail until we landed at Guadalcanal and about the second week we were there, we finally got some mail.

*How long did it take it to get to you?*

**James Rothermel:** That's what I say, we left on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, and this was December, about December 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup>, somewhere along in there. It was right before Christmas.

*So you were getting mail from home that was three or four months old.*

**James Rothermel:** Oh yeah. Talk about a joyous day that day when that mail call, you know, everybody waiting to hear your name. It was really something.

*There's no bigger morale booster than getting mail from home.*

**James Rothermel:** That helped the morale a whole lot.

*So did your parents write to you pretty regularly?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, we, you know, not every day did they write, but I got something pretty well after that, pretty well every mail call, someone in my family.

*Were you able to in turn write back to them at all?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, we had what we called V mail and we did that, and everything we wrote was censored so you had to be careful what you would say.

*Keep it pretty vague.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah.

*What was the weather like there when you were at Guadalcanal?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, the heat, we were fairly close to the equator, you know. And the heat was sort of unbearable. Sometimes it'd get up to 110 degrees.

*And very humid, right?*

**James Rothermel:** And very humid, rained a lot. I was told that while that year we were on the island, that somewhere, it rained so much on the island that the island had 300 and some odd inches of rain.

*Wow, that's definitely kind of a swampy environment.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, we all, we had a few dry weeks, you know, but most of the time it was always wet, yeah.

*And you had mentioned earlier, too, the natives on the island, you'd been told initially that they were cannibals. Describe them and what type of interaction you had with them if any.*

**James Rothermel:** The natives were very, had accepted us very well, and the natives helped the Marines when they were fighting them with the British sergeant, the British owned this island prior to the Japs taking it over, and he thought, let's see, policeman for the natives, and he knew the island like the back of his hand, and they used him as a scout, getting the Marines to where they were going. Then boy, the Japs, he knew where they were and all this stuff. And so he did a great job and he was captured by the Japs and tied to a tree, and they slashed his throat and what have you, and he was able to untie himself and get back.

*Did he survive that?*

**James Rothermel:** And he survived that, yes.

*That's amazing.*

**James Rothermel:** His name was Philip Voutha. And we hired natives to do some of our work, too, you know. I think they gave 'em about a sixpence a day, something like that. Now I want to tell you about the living conditions. The mosquito, malaria was our big enemy, more than the

Japanese. We had malaria and we had jungle rot and dinghy fever, and that's sort of like a flu, and so we had a lot of that and some got pretty sick with that. And then the jungle rot, those guys are working out in the field. Now I never had too much problems with that but I was able to of course stay dry. But those working, they got jungle rot on their feet, under their arms, and they were constantly sweating and wet. So we sent home, we were there exactly one year. We left on November the 8<sup>th</sup>. But anyway, during that year, we sent home a little over 500 men. 14 CBs had 1,040 men and 25 officers, and so you can see, we were just down to \_\_\_\_, and the reason they shipped us home, we got to the point where we wouldn't have a viable unit anymore and the men, nearly all of them were half sick, not sick enough to go home and what have you, and so we were really fortunate. We got sent back to the States.

*With the malaria, was there any way to avoid it?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, we had adavarin [???] tablets, and a lot of the guys wouldn't take 'em. They were yellow looking, you know.

*Why would they not take them?*

**James Rothermel:** Because it turned them yellow looking. Yeah, it turned your skin yellow.

*So they wouldn't want to take them, but then they would end up getting malaria?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, now, there were a few, I wouldn't say all of them. But anyway, I was very faithful and so was the guys living in my tent. I have to tell you that we in our tent, I told those guys, I said we don't want to get malaria, and each and every day, you catch a chameleon, that's a lizard, and said put it in your mosquito netting, they'll catch the mosquitoes that are inside. My father was a great outdoorsman, and we used to do that when we camped on \_\_\_\_ creek fishing, and catching mosquitoes while we, if we spent two or three days down there fishing, you know, and so I knew that. So we did that and I think that's the reason why none of us got malaria.

*So that and the pills you took. I know that malaria is not something you want to get. I think it stays with you for life.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah.

*So that's not good.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, then when we returned to the States, we landed in December of 1943.

*Back to San Francisco?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, back to San Francisco. We were sent to Camp Parks. It was a receiving ship for 72,000 of those coming in for leave, and so we were sent home for a 30-day casualty leave, and reported back to Camp Allen, and we spent about 9 months there. We did some more training and while we were on the base, we opened up some shops. I was in sign shop and I did that.

*What was it like to have been gone and have been living in those conditions on Guadalcanal for a year and then come back to the United States and all the amenities that you had previously taken for granted?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, we found out, we heard about sugar rationing and gasoline rationing and all this stuff, and we were able to view it when we got home to visit our parents, our families. The thing that really got me on the train going on my leave to go home out in Levelland, Texas, this little old lady got on the train and we didn't have troop trains take us home, it was in all those places in the United States -

*Sure.*

**James Rothermel:** But anyway, she was sitting with us, when she come walking on, we had a vacant place there she could sit, so we invited her to sit down. Then she asked us about what we did and all this stuff. She said can you tell me something, was some fun happening that ya'll had instead of all this old other stuff? I says oh yes. And so I don't know, we were saying something or other, so one guy said his and I said mine. I don't remember just exactly what I said anymore, but I do remember the remark I made. When she said something, I said oh, chicken shit. Excuse me for the name, but I have to tell you. And oh man, and I realized what I said and man, it embarrassed me to no end, and I said excuse me, I got to go and I walked on down to some other car. I took a seat down there. And here she comes down there. She grabbed me on the shoulder and said you get on back up here and sit down. Said now one thing you've learned is when you get home, clean up your language.

*That's pretty funny.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, it is.

*What was that like when you finally got back home? Did your folks know you were on your way home?*

**James Rothermel:** Oh yes, I had called 'em when we got in to San Francisco, yeah. Yeah, they knew we was coming. And that was a nice 30 days that I had. It was really hard to go back, you know, but we did.

*Were your folks able to keep up with your brothers and how they were doing?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, now we did, I think at Guadalcanal I didn't have, I had one letter from my brother. He was in China. And I didn't get anything from my brother who was in the Marine Corps. But I got word from my mother and stuff and then he finally got my address and then I got something from him, but it was a long time.

*Where was he during the war in the Marines?*

**James Rothermel:** He was mostly stateside. He was a cryptograph, he decoded, he was radio operator and what have you, and he decoded a lot of Japanese messages that they would intercept. And then he was in the aviation unit, he was a radio operator on the SBD4. He did right up to the end of the war, the last. But he was on a ship and he came into Okinawa and come to see me, and I heard he was in and I went to see him the same day. We passed somewheres.

*So you didn't get to see him.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, we did see him, and then he came in again another time and I got to see him.

*That's great. That's got to be kind of a small world to be that far away and see your brother.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes it was.

*So you did your 30-day, you had your 30 days off back home and then you reported back. Tell us what happened next.*

**James Rothermel:** Well we stayed there about 9 months. Like I told you, I was in the sign shop. The other guys were working in their fields, where they needed them. A lot of them had nothing to do, really. We shipped out in October of 1944. We went to Hawaii. We stayed at E-wuv (???) right next to Pearl Harbor. Then the airbase, we were right near that airbase. I can't remember what the name of the field was.

*Hickham Field.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah. We were right at the perimeter of the base. We stayed there about 4 months and then we took off for Saipan. We stayed there about 2 to 3 weeks. We were loading ships and unloading ships. We loaded some of the ships that went to Iwo Jima. We thought that was where we were going, but we knew it wasn't a sign there we went down. Then we took off right around the first of April, the day that they landed at Okinawa, we took off from Saipan. We got there I would say about the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, about 15 days after they landed.

*What are your memories of Saipan?*

**James Rothermel:** It was a bombed out city. There was nothing left of it. I think the city's name was Gropan. And they had these cliffs where when the United States invaded it, all the Japanese families and stuff jumped off these cliffs and committed suicide. We saw that. There were still a few that would still hide. They jumped off, so I understand. I didn't see any of it.

*What was the weather conditions like at Saipan compared to Guadalcanal?*

**James Rothermel:** Oh, it was beautiful. Good weather every day. The B-29s were flying off of Tinian, which is a next door island, it was B-29s and they were bombing Japan proper. They were flying in and out day and night. They flew out right over our island. Those B-29s were big planes and they made a lot of noise. I guess that's the only thing. We had a little problem sleeping at night because of the planes.

*But the island was pretty secure at that time?*

**James Rothermel:** Oh yes, it was very secure.

*You were saying, you thought that you might have to go to Iwo Jima at some point?*

**James Rothermel:** Well, we never were told as such but we were thinking when we left Hawaii that's where we were going to go. We knew when we got to Saipan we were loading some ships and supplies and stuff for the Iwo Jima invasion. But we were never told we were going. So, we didn't know.

*So what happened next after Saipan?*

**James Rothermel:** Then we went to Okinawa. We loaded all our stuff on LSTs, landing craft, you know. I was on a particular LST that had 50-gallon drums of high octane aviation gas. On top of that they put 1 x 12 boards about 20 feet long and covered it, the barrels, and then they drove jeeps and trucks and stuff on that. We were in a big convoy going and they sighted a submarine and we had to be on alert, while en route. We were very fortunate. A submarine launched a torpedo and we could see it coming but it was set for a greater depth than our ship was. I don't think that it went through. We were past it but you could see it coming.

*You had to have felt like a big target with all that fuel aboard.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, right. If it had hit us, there wouldn't have been anybody alive. Other than that, it was a pretty good scare. In Okinawa, I guess when we first landed there the big thing was fleas. Man, that island was just infected with fleas. But they had DDT and they had C47s fixed up with sprayers on them and they sprayed the island. I only encountered fleas the first night. We were right at the beach. Other than that, they were all taken care of.

*What are your memories of Okinawa?*

**James Rothermel:** We had a bunch of new, nearly 500 guys, new recruits, or younger men and people. I was assigned to a different company in the shop area. Really I didn't have much camaraderie with much of the personnel of our outfit. When we were together the first time, there was a lot of camaraderie. We were just all kind of to ourselves and in the shop. We built, maintained roads and maintained some work on some of the airfields, the Marine airfield. We built, our main project at Okinawa was to build docks, where big ships could come in. They didn't have, Naha was the capital city of Okinawa, and it was so bombarded and so many ships and stuff sunk in the harbor there that they couldn't use it, and so we built a dock to where they could come in. They were temporary docks. They weren't anything permanent. I don't think they would last very long.

*Sure. Did you see much of the civilian population there at Okinawa?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, now it was mostly women. All the men, the Japanese had constricted them or did something with them. They were all in the Japanese control and service in some part, I don't know. I met an Okinawan lady that was a school teacher at Okinawa. She had graduated from Stanford University. She was in Okinawa, and she came back to be a school teacher. So the Japs took control and we would come in by. We bombed out nearly all of the schools so there wasn't any school operating. So we had tore up Okinawa pretty bad.

*Yeah, it had been a dangerous spot.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes it was. And it was one of I guess the biggest battle that we encountered in the Pacific. I recall after we were secured there, pretty well secured I'd say, I looked up the islands and they had a huge burial ground a lot like the national cemetery in Arlington, and

wooden crosses, you know. I tell you, that was a huge, they lost, we lost around 6,000 or more men. I'm not sure, I forget.

*Iwo Jima and –*

**James Rothermel:** Several thousand wounded, you know.

*Yeah, Iwo Jima and Okinawa were both very bloody battles.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, they were. They were very heavy casualties.

*At that point when you were at Okinawa, did you have a pretty good feeling that we were gonna win the war?*

**James Rothermel:** Yes, but I'll have to tell you something else that happened though. Right before they dropped that bomb, I would say around the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, we were cleaning up our equipment in the shops -

*And this is '45?*

**James Rothermel:** In '45, and we were cleaning up all our ship and only just kept a little something we could contain to operate, and we were loading ships and taking over stuff to the docks. I don't know where they were loading but I didn't go down there. But anyway, we were issued foul weather clothing and winter clothing. I mean absolutely fur-lined clothing and boots, and we were gonna, 14<sup>th</sup> were scheduled to go to Kuril Islands which just is north of Japan, and we were to build an airfield there. And so when they dropped that bomb, why that was quite a relief. I think the one thing that really got me up, I said to myself, boy, man, I've got some good deer hunting gear and boy, I won't have to worry about freezing to death sitting in a blind. I was a big deer hunter even before I went in. But anyway, you know what they did to us?

*They took it back didn't they?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, they took it back and then they put some sawhorses out and made a big circle and they had a fire going in the middle of that circle -

*And they burned it?*

**James Rothermel:** We had to turn in all of our stuff and they burned it.

*Well that's horrible. I thought they were gonna save it or something.*

**James Rothermel:** That's what I thought.

*That's a shame. Wow.*

**James Rothermel:** That was. Then going home, I went home on an aircraft carrier Yorktown. The hangar deck, they marked off a spot about big enough you could put your mattress on and then a little walkway in between. I don't know how many thousands of guys were on that ship besides the crew, and it took 14 days to get home. But as we were going home, they dumped bombs, jeeps, airplanes and everything in the ocean, getting rid of excess stuff I guess.

*Wow, I've heard stories, people I've interviewed about especially the planes at the end of the war, just how quickly they were taking those and breaking them up for scrap. There was so many that had been made and it was amazing how quickly they were made, but then again how quickly they were destroyed as soon as they weren't needed.*

**James Rothermel:** That was really hard to fathom, really.

*So tell us where you were, what your memories are when you learned that the war was actually over.*

**James Rothermel:** Well, I'll tell you what. The GI bill was just passed in '44, about April of 1944, '45 I mean, and I said I'm gonna take advantage of that and go to college, and I went, started out here at Brenham at Glen College for the first two years, and got a Bachelors and Masters degree in business education, and I got married at the end of my sophomore year here at Glen, and then I went into education. I taught three years here at Brenham High School. Then I became a high school principal at Schulenberg, Texas and Grenado, Texas for 12 years I was a high school principal. And then I went from high school principal to a new college that was being built in Pasadena called San Sina College, it was a community college. And I started out just as a teacher for oh, about 6 months, then I was made department chairman, and then about 6 months later, or maybe about 8 months, I was made division chairman and that's like a dean of the college of business administration.

*Wow, you moved up pretty quick.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, the college was growing so fast. We built three, two more campuses and I was over all of those while I was there, and I was with the college 17 years.

*That's great. Going back a bit, sir, can you tell us what your memories are the day that you learned the war had actually ended?*

**James Rothermel:** Oh yeah, we had preparations made so when they would announce the war was ended, well, my expeditors and stuff got a bunch of beer and some meat and when this happened, we had a big BBQ and beer bust and I'll tell you, when they announced it over the PA system, guys got out there with their rifles and start shootin' in the air. I thought somebody was gonna get killed at first. But nothin' happened. We were lucky with our outfit. There were some outfits that people got hurt.

*It had to have been a great feeling though to know it was all over.*

**James Rothermel:** Oh man, you just don't know. A lot of guys cried, and I was one of 'em. But we knew where we were goin', and it was just a relief. You can't imagine what a relief it was.

*Yeah, that's just amazing. Well sir, I'll tell you it's been an honor -*

**James Rothermel:** Let me tell you one other thing I've got to tell you. I'm retired, I moved back to Brenham, and I served on the city council for 14 years. I was mayor pro tem for 8 years. And then in 2000, we were going to built a veterans memorial with bricks and stuff to honor the veterans of Washington County, and we talked about it and talked about it in an American

Legion meeting, and one night I got up and I said look fellas, are we gonna build this or are we just gonna talk about it? And the commander looked at me, Rothermel, I'm gonna appoint you chairman. And so I was made chairman and then I also organized it and supervised the building of it, and we sold 2,000 bricks to pay for it. It's located at Brenham Fireman Park, just right behind the American Legion hall.

*That's great. That is really something. I'm active in the American Legion myself, and we're just starting a new post out where I live in Williamson County out in Cedar Park and Leander, but the community of Cedar Park is doing the same thing. They're raising funds to build a memorial, a veterans park there, and it's definitely an important thing to do. It's a big task.*

**James Rothermel:** If you ever get to Brenham, I'd like you to look at it. It's most unique. It's in a silver circle, in a circle. We have 8 tiers and the bricks are laid in the exterior slanted. It's not on a wall. And with a wheel trail or you can walk along and read all the names of the place. It's very unique.

*That's great. Nice bidding tribute, but that's important and that's why we wanted to interview you today, sir, because it's important that we honor our veterans.*

**James Rothermel:** I'll tell you, you're doing a great job. But I'll tell you one more thing if you've got time.

*Sure.*

**James Rothermel:** This last weekend, 14 CBs was disbanded in 1946, and in 1961 they were reactivated, which I didn't know anything about, but I knew there was a 14 CBs in Jacksonville, Florida. Well, those CBs in Florida were writing their history and they wanted, they were actually the 14 that we were in, and they went, they need somebody to fill 'em in of what we did and what was happening to us while we were in World War II, and so I, oh I've got things scattered all over. I've got some books in the Library of Congress and papers in Washington DC, Dimmits museum out here, Fredericksburg, and just all around, and anyway they found some of this and they got my phone number and stuff and called me and wanted to know whether I would, and I did.

*That's great.*

**James Rothermel:** And we worked about a year together corresponding and what have you, and too, the 14 CB senior chief petty officer and first class petty officer came up to Brenham and awarded me with a plaque.

*Oh that's great.*

**James Rothermel:** And then they brought their computer and scanner along. They scanned everything and put on their computer my stuff and I gave them a Jap pistol and for their museum. They have a \_\_\_ museum down in the Naval air station in Jacksonville, Florida, and they furnished me an expense paid trip, all expenses paid, and we were there and we just had a ball this last weekend.

*And that was at the base in Jacksonville?*

**James Rothermel:** Jackson Naval Air Station.

*Is that Mayport?*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah. And they have a small perimeter for the 14 CBs there.

*Yeah, the CBs still do very important work. I was in Iraq and we would see those guys and they would be out building bridges and roads, and then even a lot of the runways had been bombed out during the first Gulf war. They were out there filling in the crater holes and fixing the runway so that our planes could use 'em again. It's still a vital component.*

**James Rothermel:** And they honored me with a couple of citations, honorary membership in the chief petty officers association, and also they have, it's the annual grand ball that they have, the 14<sup>th</sup> has every year, and then Saturday night program, they had \_\_\_ in their ball, well had a reception and then we had dinner and then we had a program, and I was honored by Admiral Seer with a shadow box with all my medals and a few other things, and then we were, my wife and I were presented a quilt that a quilting guild, captain's wife is president of this quilting guild, and they live in Tennessee, and they make a quilt for every CB in the 14<sup>th</sup> that comes into the CBs.

*Wow, that's really something. They really went all out.*

**James Rothermel:** Then they presented this quilt to Dorothy, my wife.

*That's nice. That's a real honor, sir.*

**James Rothermel:** That was the highlight of my life. And I want to tell you, too, I'm 91, well nearly 92 years old.

*Well you sound like you're doing great.*

**James Rothermel:** Well, and I feel great.

*That's great. I've interviewed a lot of veterans over the years, and you really, you're very sharp and unfortunately a lot of World War II veterans, we're losing a lot of them or they're really just not able to talk or remember things anymore, and it's nice you have such great recall. It's been a joy to talk to you.*

**James Rothermel:** Well let me tell you, too, that my 14 CBs, I've had reunions starting in 1960, and we finally dwindled down to the last reunion in 2005, we only had about 6 or 7 there, and so we decided to disband and it was too much trouble for those 6 or 7 to get back and forth to the reunion, and so we had about \$2,000 in the treasury, and Katrina, this was in 2005 when this all happened, had just hit and the Navy base at Fellport, Mississippi was hit very hard, and a lot of the sailors and Marines and stuff there were, their home and apartments and where they live were shattered, and so we took that money and gave it to the Marine and Navy Relief Fund for them.

*That's a good group.*

**James Rothermel:** So I wanted to tell you that. I know I've given you a lot of information.

*No, it's been a great interview and I just want to let you know that from Commissioner Patterson to everybody at the Land Office, we're all very thankful for your service, and what we'll do, too, is we'll get this interview made onto CDs and we'll get those sent to you pretty quickly, hopefully within the next week.*

**James Rothermel:** Will it be on a CD?

*Yes sir, they're on CDs. You can play it in any CD machine.*

**James Rothermel:** Can I play it on a television, too?

*I don't know.*

**James Rothermel:** On my computer.

*Yeah, you could probably play it on your computer or play it in a regular CD player if your car has a CD player or your stereo. I don't know if it would work on your TV unless your DVD plays –*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, I've got another one that I can play it on where we play CDs and DVDs and stuff on.

*Yeah, we'll get that sent to you and then at some point later on, we'll get the commissioner to sign a certificate and it's really nice and we'll send it to you, too.*

**James Rothermel:** I just appreciate you people doing this because you got to present this history -

*That's right. If you know anybody, sir, that is a veteran that lives in Texas that wants to be interviewed, just have them contact me.*

**James Rothermel:** Well, I do, I have all that and the next American Legion meeting I go to I'll go to announce and I'll get with the VFW also.

*I'll include some of our brochures.*

**James Rothermel:** Yeah, I would like to. That way it's more easier for me to explain it.

*Sure and that's really how our program works is through word of mouth and that sort of thing.*

**James Rothermel:** I think I'll just wait until you send me that to help get recruits.

*Hopefully I'll be able to get that in the mail to you by next week.*

**James Rothermel:** We don't have a meeting now for another three or four weeks.

*I'll have it to you well before then.*

**James Rothermel:** All right.

*Nice talking to you sir. We appreciate you. Thank you very much.*

**James Rothermel:** Yes sir. You too.

*Bye bye.*

*[End of recording]*