

Transcription: John Keith Wells

Today is Friday, May 22nd, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Mr. Don Keith Wells –

John Keith Wells: That's John.

Oh John, I'm sorry, I apologize. I made a mistake. Do you spell that with an H or not? John?

John Keith Wells: Yeah, J-O-H-N.

Yes sir, OK. So John Keith Wells, and this interview is being done by phone. I'm at the General Land Office headquarters in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Wells is at his home in Abilene. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board, Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. With that said sir, thank you today for taking the time to let us interview you. It's an honor for us.

John Keith Wells: I see, OK.

And sir usually what we do when we start these interviews is we just like to ask you to tell us a little bit about where you were born, a little bit about your family, and your background and your childhood before you entered the military.

John Keith Wells: Do you want me to start off right now and bring you up to date on that?

Yes sir, just tell us a little bit about where you're from and what your childhood was like and that sort of thing.

John Keith Wells: I was from Lakeview, Texas, in the Panhandle, about 70, 80 miles south of southwest Amarillo, Hall County. It was a community, rather a large community since I believe it was 10 grade schools come together, and over a pretty large area, and they were brought in by buses, and the high school was a new high school built out there in the way out. But it was big and nice.

And sir, did you live on a farm or a ranch?

John Keith Wells: I lived about a mile out of town. My father, we owned land and he also built a store in that little community town.

Kind of like a general store?

John Keith Wells: It was started out as a meat market because we couldn't get meat brought into there from Amarillo at that time, and it was a meat market, and we had a butcher house and butchered our own meat and sold it in the market, and that of course grew. And my mother had cancer when I was very young, and so she died when I was 10. And so he and I batched, and I helped and worked, well we sold, it ended up we were selling just about everything – ice we brought in from Memphis, Texas, and of course different sizes. 300-pound size of ice and then we'd saw it, or I'd saw it into 5-10-15-cent pieces and we had a regular little general store and

ended up selling just about everything in it that you can pile in and behind and under. And like I say, my mother died, and daddy and I batched.

Yes sir, did you have any siblings?

John Keith Wells: No, no.

So it was just your father and you running the store.

John Keith Wells: And the house and everything.

Yes sir. And so you were born there and did you grow up all through school there in that one area in Lakeview?

John Keith Wells: That's right. Well, he was kind of the standard of the whole community and just like I say, he and I together, and I had to learn to drive when my mother – I was about 10 years old, and so I started driving because I delivered stuff. And I was driving like I say at 10 years old I was driving. We even used our vehicle to, not many times, but I'd set on the fender and loop my leg around the light. Then they weren't built in, they were separate, leg around it and with a rope and we'd chase a calf out in the pasture and I'd rope him. That gives you an idea. A rancher there had two or three girls and they'd grown up, and they had a tennis court and some other kind of modern things, and it just happened that they liked me, and so I brought in my friends and I had a key to the school gymnasium. So that's where I always took my showers and my baths, and where it was running or not. And lettered in all sports – football, basketball, track, and tennis. That was our, and I lettered in all those mainly because there wasn't a whole lot, well it was, it was, in our way of doing because like I say, all the boys had horses and so we did lots of things.

When you graduated from high school, did you go to work with your dad at the store?

John Keith Wells: No, I'd been going to work, I'd been working with him at the store all the time and whenever I was done there, no, he carried me down to Texas A&M, and I tell you, he didn't have time, and that was a drive from up there all the way down there without, it was just dirt road 99 percent, and he took the big old chest of my equipment and set it in the grass out in front of one of the dormitories down there and then went back home. And I had to take care of signing up and going to school down there.

Was that the first time you'd ever been away from home?

John Keith Wells: Oh, in a sense, yeah, but then away from home was 10 miles if you go north back into camping out and you know what, so that wasn't, and of course my home wasn't a home, and daddy and I making out, but I had like a friend said, his grandmother had all 99 percent of the women in the community was his brother. Whenever I was around _____ [recording goes out for a few seconds]. When you needed it, you got it, and yeah, so I'd been two and a half years I guess down at, and when I come back I had to hitch [recording goes out for a few seconds].

It was pretty much exclusively a military school at that point, too, right?

John Keith Wells: That's true. Like I say, I was in the horse cavalry, and our platoon was mounted and I would've, I guess, well I wasn't sure I would've stayed there, but war broke out.

When you went to A&M, was that your intent to pursue a career in the military?

John Keith Wells: No, not exactly. It just, well, one of my father's cousins went there and A&M had the number one football team in the nation so you heard about it in the newspaper. One thing about it, my father bought a newspaper and it was delivered 10 miles out there by truck, when that was hauling other things, and so we were up to date pretty much on everything and A&M was number one football team in the nation at that time, and it had a lot of good, it had a real good name. People like it. It was all boys and had lots of things that would interest young men.

So when you got to A&M, do you remember what year or semester it was?

John Keith Wells: No, I don't. I don't know what year I got to A&M. I know I was I think 17 years old. I finished high school at 16. We only had 10 grades then.

So probably sometime in the late 30s or maybe early 1940.

John Keith Wells: Yeah.

So you were at A&M then –

John Keith Wells: Well like I say, I spent two years there when war broke out, yeah.

Do you remember where you were when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

John Keith Wells: Oh, do I remember it. I had bought a small radio and had it racked up and it was on Sunday morning, and I was going to stay in school and do a little studying, and so I was studying and whatever, and turned that little radio on and all of a sudden it come on that Pearl Harbor was being bombed and the war was on mostly the Navy. They had done a poor job, the leaders had, and didn't have 'em scattered for war or anything. They had their equipment all real handy there in Pearl.

The sneak attack.

John Keith Wells: Where they could, enemy could destroy it.

When you heard that on the radio, did you think at that point that you'd be going to war yourself?

John Keith Wells: Oh, I knew I was, oh yeah. Because they switched A&M, switched from horse cavalry to tanks and there were two Marines. We just didn't have any Marines in this country, in Texas, you know, three or four. I think there were two, no more than three or four Marines come down and was in school at A&M there, and I got to talking with them, and when the school turned to tanks, I wasn't about to get in one of those tanks. And so but anyway, so I immediately contacted one of those Marines, and there just wasn't many of them around, and talked to him and he, in a week or two he called me and he said say, there's a Marine recruiting officer down on the coast. Right this minute I can't – Houston, wait a minute, I think it was

Houston, in Houston, and so I just hitchhiked down to Houston and found him and joined the Marine Corps.

How long was it between when you signed up before you were on your way to basic training?

John Keith Wells: It was real quick because like I say, it was in the middle of the school year, so -

Did you tell your father that you were gonna sign up?

John Keith Wells: Oh I didn't, he and I were just like two young men, and I didn't make any decisions for him and he didn't make any decisions for me, you know.

What did he think about his only child going off to war?

John Keith Wells: Oh, I don't know what he thought really, I don't. Like I say, those were times that are so much different than they are today. It's hard to explain except that whenever I told him anything, he believed every word. I tried to be an excellent boy in one sense that I took care of the work that I did. I did all, I milked cows, I raised chickens, baby chickens myself, by myself, you wouldn't believe, and while I was growing up and when summer come and he couldn't use me, why somebody could. One guy carried me quite a ways to other communities, and we checked chickens, learned how to caponize, yeah, caponize the little roosters, and I learned to do that, and we did that and checked chickens, and well because I was doing it, and install telephones out in the country. They come, and so a school teacher in the fall summer, this man school teacher, he got the job of installing those phones, so and of course like I say, my dad was in charge of the schools, too.

Tell us a little bit about what it was like the first time you got to boot camp. I assume, did you go to San Diego for boot camp?

John Keith Wells: No I went to Paris Island.

Tell us about your first thoughts when you got to Paris Island.

John Keith Wells: Now I had learned to just about accept anything and everything, so not many people have that type of background, because like I say, I learned to even butcher. I butchered a cow by myself, skinned it, butchered it, quartered it, and backed the car up. Like I say, we didn't have any laws against, I guess, a 5-year-old, if he could drive. There was no law against it, you know, and so I was able to just about hand in the government, I say that because these people that worked surveying fields and surveying various pen for cotton, various laws and stuff to regulate the growth of foods, and so I had the opportunity to, and thank goodness they all liked me, so Laurel and me, we built terraces. See we didn't get much rain up there, so we built terraces and I helped 'em build terraces so that it will hold water longer and give the crops, didn't just run right off. Everything you can dream of just about I did, and well, I didn't have a mother and daddy was working and what else, you know?

What were most of the men like who were in your platoon like in boot camp? Where were they from and - ?

John Keith Wells: Oh, they were from everywhere and the boot camp was bringing together, that was something, and that was something -

Do you still remember what your drill instructors were like or who they were?

John Keith Wells: In boot camp, they were extremely offbeat in many ways to thinking of now, for instance, let me just take for a second right here, they would, I got there late to boot camp. I had signed up and everything there at school down at A&M, and I thought that they didn't ask for me in transportation, so I went home. Well, then all of a sudden they found out where I was. They sent tickets and I caught a train and went up to Paris Island, and when I got there, things were so, so, you wouldn't believe it. But for instance, I always thought this was something. The commodes in our training base there, let's say there would be 10 or 15, maybe 20 seats along on top of a large metal deal, and ocean water was pumped in one side, so you could have, all the Marines that you want to, and we did it, filled up on that big rack, and you didn't have to flush, you didn't have to do anything. You know, whatever you feel, or squatted into the water, it went right out to sea, you know.

Yeah, that's a little different than now.

John Keith Wells: Oh well of course you know, and of course, well they're even worse today. Young people, they more or less coddle right on up until they not only go into school, but up pretty high. Anyway of course, I wasn't, and a lot of the boys up there weren't, and we all had horses, too. Old Judge was my best one because he could run, well I'm exaggerating but not much, he'd just stack in on the back, even babies almost, and Judge would take care of 'em, and if they fell off, he would stop dead still. He didn't take a step but he might step on one of 'em. I mean this horse wasn't special trained. That was just him, you know. Like I say, we all did, fell in love with our horses that we were riding and of course that's where we went and did things.

Let me ask you again sir about at Paris Island, did you feel, was it different being there as a recruit and having been in college? I imagine most of the guys that you were in basic training with had not ever gone to college, nor did they ever think they would ever go to college. Did they treat you differently because of that? Were they harder on you because of that?

John Keith Wells: Well, quite a number of the guys were either in college or just finished high school, nearly all of them. We were more or less a specialized group. We weren't like, as I saw later, we were a little bit I won't say babied, but we were helped a little bit higher I guess because all of them could read and write, and use main core language.

Yes sir. Tell us about after you finished your basic training and you became an infantryman. Did you choose to go in the infantry or was that something that was assigned to you?

John Keith Wells: No, we finished, our little group that was going there [some break up in the recording for a few seconds] I guess, and so when we finished, why we were all going to officer school, this group, and so because we weren't controlling the water is all, the sea waters, the United States wasn't in complete control of them, well they put us in a train and sent us to Quantico in this train and the train was blacked out, and hot, my gosh. Well we just, I just got down on the floor and laid in the dirt on the floor and there was no lights on the train and it was that type of thing. We pulled into Quantico, and I tell you, the people looked at is. We sure didn't look like officers.

Did you ever find out why they sent you to enlist the training and then on to officer candidate school instead of just to officer candidate school right away?

John Keith Wells: Well, that was, they didn't have a lot of the special training. When they did, it was just, well, Marine Corps wasn't much as big as your hand, wasn't very large. And to begin with, and you know, if I hadn't stayed two and a half years, whatever it was, at A&M in the horse cavalry, they was rough as a stucco bathtub. Why it was fairly easy for me as far as doing it is concerned, mentally doing it was concerned because I had like I say, I had raised myself, and through all of my beginning years, and so nothing really -

Yeah. When you got to Quantico, what was the main difference in your training at Quantico than what you had at Paris Island?

John Keith Wells: Oh well, of course it was high, high stuff. It was good war training, and they had different mental attitudes. And I had an attitude, like I say, I raised myself and I had keys to anything anywhere I wanted to, and everybody trusted me, and the baker there, his son was my age and one year younger back at home, and so I taught him how to swim and dive and you know what I mean, all the basic, I had before I even got to Quantico -

So because of your upbringing, you felt that things were easier for you than for somebody that might have been brought up differently?

John Keith Wells: That's true.

How long did you spend at Quantico in officer candidate school?

John Keith Wells: I manipulated so that I, two of us out of that whole class, well technically they call it four of us – only two had already been through parachute school out at San Diego, El Cahon right out of San Diego – and so they had already been through that, these two. But there was two others, another man and I, a young man and I, we had to go, we went to parachute school.

So you went from graduating officer candidate school to parachute school at El Cahon.

John Keith Wells: Right.

California.

John Keith Wells: Yeah.

And at that point, when did you finally join a fleet unit, a unit that was going to deploy?

John Keith Wells: Oh, well just as soon as I was finished. Oh yeah, it was a lot different than it is now in time and everything because technically I broke my leg on my next to last jump. And when I got to I'll call it the hospital, they carried me. When I got there, the happened in tried working with me and all, that's what had happened to him. He had a deal on his leg that he had broke, you know, and I told him I just lacked one jump. Actually I lacked two, of being a graduate, and I said I'm gonna be – I won't go through the whole story of it. But as it turns out, why we manipulated it and I got to put my friends in my jump twice, got them to pack my chute for me, and then I went right out of the hospital right down, and picked up my chute, and then

with like to land, there was a stray, well I think he just finished carrying the group down to jumps, and so I just got in the truck and he hauled me down and they were already lining up down and the officers looked at me. But I'd been helping them some in various things so they didn't say anything, and I went ahead and jumped with that broke leg.

Yes sir. When you were in officer candidate school, was that when you were assigned to go be a paratrooper?

John Keith Wells: Yes.

And was that something that you were able, did they have a certain number of slots for it that you could sign up, or were you just told that was where you were going?

John Keith Wells: Oh no, we had to sign up. There was four of us signed up.

But I mean was that something that -

John Keith Wells: Oh, you had to sign up for it.

How many men did you have in your platoon at officer candidate school? Was it 30 or 40 men, or 50 men? And then four of you went to jump school?

John Keith Wells: No, I already ___ was all alone. Mercy, there was - I don't know how many, there was oh, 200 or 300 in the officer school.

Yes sir, but I was talking about in your platoon that you went through training with. At officer candidate school they had you broken into platoons?

John Keith Wells: Yeah, well, just what would go into the jump plane, you know. I think it was, I don't remember how many, but there was not many.

Yes sir. I guess the question I'm asking more or less is when you went to officer candidate school, did only a handful of you from officer candidate school were able to go on to jump school, right?

John Keith Wells: Oh that's right, there was only four.

How was it that you were one of those four?

John Keith Wells: Oh, I tell you -

Did you do well enough that you got to pick to go? Or were you just told you were supposed to go?

John Keith Wells: Oh no, I let it to be picked, oh no, I wasn't just out picked. I guess they might have picked me without me really, really getting with it, you know, but that was definitely where I wanted to go, and -

So after you finished jump school, what was the first unit that you were assigned to after jump school?

John Keith Wells: Well, they were about to get ready to quit doing jump school because those islands just weren't, with all the trees and such, it just wasn't good, but I went ahead and they shipped and I pulled some strings and I won't go into all that, but I got on a ship and ended up in Guadalcanal in the South Pacific.

And was that the first action that you saw?

John Keith Wells: Yes, it was. I was at another island there, Cozumel, no, right this minute I can't think of it. I didn't stay long on it. It was nothing.

Tell us about your impressions of the battle at Guadalcanal.

John Keith Wells: Well, both good and bad. I pretty much, because of my youth and how I was raised and all with wild horses and back in wherever and everything, just put me more up ahead of about 9/10 and I don't mean that smart-ass, I mean that's the truth. And so I just, you know, the service people, and I notice it's still that way, even some of our largest officers, they have one way of doing it and I think just like it was done in high school in various sports. In other words, kind of like one, two, three go. You know, it's not a stock thing, finding a weak spot and destroying it and that type of thing, and oh, I got along good in some places there in Guadalcanal, and in some places, one particular, you would've thought he was, excuse me for saying this, but thought he was an Army officer, and you had to do everything by the number. I think they all went to the bathroom marching, that type of being ugly. But it was that type.

Was he one of your unit commanders?

John Keith Wells: Yeah.

Battalion commander?

John Keith Wells: A little while in there, yeah. Well, he wasn't a paratrooper. They had sent for me over.

How many men were you in charge of? Did you have a platoon that you were in charge of?

John Keith Wells: No, just me, brings back memories of ___ a man that's probably old enough to be your father. I'll put it this way. I got along real good because the officers that would be slightly under me or with me, my age, they liked the way I do things and did things, and so we were able to get a lot of things done. Now for instance, water to drink at Guadalcanal was something. The natives there, they had figured out little ways of trapping their water when it rains and what have you, but for military people in large bunches, you had to, and it just happens, maybe all those things I had worked out when I was a young man at home, you know, and so I just went ahead and did them, and got in a little bit of trouble, but usually I got out and did it again, and got special, well, also it's the thinking down there was way different, way different.

I know this is jumping ahead a little bit sir, but I know that you were a veteran of the Battle of Iwo Jima, and I'm a Marine, and every Marine I've ever met, that's the iconic battle in Marine Corps history, and I was wondering if you could share with us some of your memories about Iwo Jima.

John Keith Wells: Well, I think all of that's of course easy to, I can, let's put it this way. We got the platoon on Iwo Jima, got one congressional medal of honor, three maybe crosses, one silver star, platoon sergeant promoted to lieutenant, and over 100 percent purple hearts.

That's amazing sir.

John Keith Wells: Did you hear that?

Yes sir, that's amazing. Who was the medal of honor recipient?

John Keith Wells: My runner, our runner, our platoon runner.

Do you remember his name, sir?

John Keith Wells: Oh yeah, just a minute. Donald Rule.

Donald Rule?

John Keith Wells: Yes.

Yes sir. And were you the one that wrote up the citations?

John Keith Wells: That was the only one I wrote up out of the whole thing, and we were the most decorated platoon ever to come out of a single engagement in the history of the United States.

Yes sir.

John Keith Wells: And that was the only one. All the others that were written up by our colonel before he died, and those are people I don't know who all was responsible.

Tell us about before you went ashore at that battle. I imagine you could see and hear all the shelling that was taking place on the island. What were your thoughts and what did you tell your men before you went ashore?

John Keith Wells: Well, they had already been with me and around me enough to know that I was different. I didn't do it always by the number and they found out real quick when we hit the island. They found out real quick that we were gonna be doing probably whatever we're doin' there, we're gonna be doin' it a little bit different than anybody else, and that turned out to be true.

What were some examples of things that you guys would do differently as a platoon or as a unit that other units wouldn't do?

John Keith Wells: Well I don't want to put the others down. You know, they, well, for instance when we landed we were supposed to be in or should be in and was the reserve of our company. So we went to land in the 11th wave instead of the 10th wave or whatever, so when it come time for us to land, the beach was absolutely loaded. All the death weapons was trained because that was a place on the other side of the island we could've probably landed, but it was not near, you know, it wasn't as pretty, military pretty. Of course that's the reason the Japs had

it so well, they were fightin' their favor, and so we then, I was up helping the guy running the, we didn't go in in a regular boat with the front end went down and everybody run out at the front end. We were in a tank, ___ tank, and we landed on the extreme left end of the whole thing because we couldn't land where we were supposed to. It was covered with machine trust and men, they had dying hood bent. You'd be running over 'em. So we landed right at the base of the mountain over there. Well, we caught the water, the regular landing was more or less shooted from the current. The current come down strong up in the north end, and layin' out, and down at the south end, why that's where most of 'em were landing. So we, I was with the tank people. We went in a tank, open top tank, and I was out there with 'em, and like you say, helping them run the thing. But anyway, so we landed and about the time the back end let down and they was gonna run out, why we were too far and wasn't sheltered by that bend in the island, and so the current took the weapons away from the ones running out the back and they were able to get back. I always, I kind of wish he was still living, this little young one said, lieutenant, lieutenant, they got my gun, the water got it. I said look yonder. Yonder is your gun. There was a dead man laying right up in front of us. They didn't get his gun, let's go. So anyway -

Did you have pretty good communications with your higher headquarters when you went ashore?

John Keith Wells: I had communications, wasn't always what I preferred, but I had good communication, yeah.

What were the orders that they gave you when you got ashore? What did your commanding officer tell you to do?

John Keith Wells: Well, he didn't tell me to do anything. So I don't know, like I say where I was born and raised and how I was born and raised and working out and building, all that kind of stuff, I could see, and so we didn't stay there on the beach. We got up from the rough edge of the top and went down that rough edge, and I had two slightly winded on that. That was my whole nearly 50 dead. And went down to where we were supposed to end up, and I've got a picture of us right here in front of me, of us doing just that.

Do you remember how many days total you spent there on Iwo Jima fighting?

John Keith Wells: I spent it was three days I think. It could've been four, but I think it was three days. I spent out on the ship where I was wounded, well pretty bad. I was wounded two or three times pretty bad. And I won't go, but the commanding officer of the whole operation was on that ship and it was, and I got back ashore and the reason I could and did, all, now I say all, two or three men on there, the ship, they knew me or knew of me, and my platoon sergeant, he come out to talk to the, they had raised the flag -

On the top of Suribachi?

John Keith Wells: Yeah. And so he come out to talk to the general, and Lord mercy, he said we've got to have Mr. Wells, we've got to have you, and like that, so they hid me and unloaded. Nobody else was allowed to, but they carried me back ashore.

Was that General Smith? Who was the general aboard your ship?

John Keith Wells: He was the general of the whole operation.

Was that General Howland ___ Smith?

John Keith Wells: I think that's right.

That's right? Yes sir. And did you have a chance to see him at all up close?

John Keith Wells: Oh no. See there was two or three Marines who shot. His ship was loaded. Shouldn't have been, but it was. It was loaded with their ___ and wounded, but there were several Marines in there that knew me, and oh man, they had him thinkin' I was a general. They liked the way I was doing business out there. And so that's the way it was whenever my sergeant come out to the ship to talk back to the States, and when he did and saw me, why he had to have me.

Tell us a little bit if you would sir about the flag raising atop Suribachi and your men.

John Keith Wells: Oh, it started with a fight at the bottom of Suribachi. There was a big, big, big opening there, and of course all the weapons that you can think of that they would have, they had it zeroed, and that's when they got me, and that's the way it was until we, I did this always, I found out real quick that if you was laying flat or if you was up running, you had a chance of being alive. If you was flat, I don't – well they had too many ___ that because they were sitting too tiny. Oh, they weren't coming out and fighting like you'd think. Somebody read the book and they didn't go by the book. So anyway -

Your men as I understand it, your men were part of the group that helped raise the first flag, correct?

John Keith Wells: My men raised the first flag, yeah.

You had already been wounded at that point –

John Keith Wells: Oh yeah, oh yeah, and in fact, when they got me back on the island and I was by myself, over going through a bunch of jokes to get some kind of clothes because mine had been just shot off of me. And get some extra. And I ended up that battle wearing Japanese britches, and well, that's a story, too, because we went into that big cave that went into the main – Suribachi was totally operational in the way that it had a major cave -

Oh it was a whole cave system –

John Keith Wells: It had all kinds of caves going up from it, and you ask me, well I know that because I went in it. And inspected it and they had had a door there, and I was tempted and then I just had to do it, to open that dad-gum door, and I opened that door and there were some star steps down, and then there was a ton of equipment. Man, I got every kind of, I didn't have any clothes. Most of my clothes back then was Japanese, but that's just the way it was, and you had asked me about getting along there. I'll tell you the type of things, the people and things that went on in that first, I'm talking about when the war was first. Guadalcanal. Well, now we've left that, let's leave it alone. Can you hear me?

Yes sir, I'm here.

John Keith Wells: Anyway -

So you want to skip, yeah, we'll skip past Guadalcanal, but -

John Keith Wells: Yeah, there were some things there, well, killed a bunch of Japanese and on there, if you weren't eat up by crocodiles, it was more of a fight against, you couldn't, you dug a trench and laid on a mat until you could roll over into the trench when they shelled, the planes come over and bomb. If you could do that, why you know, well, they would trap those Japanese and we would and just kill a bunch of them.

If we can sir, if we can go back to Iwo Jima for a second, do you remember when the flag was raised, were you conscious at that time? Did you hear the horns on the ships?

John Keith Wells: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Tell us about that moment.

John Keith Wells: Oh well, yeah, we heard that and they helped me.

Were you aboard the ship?

John Keith Wells: I was aboard the ship and was, I tell you, I wasn't running, but I was making myself because I had a big, well I had a shell in the back of my head, and then I had, and I still got metal in my leg, and it was -

But were you able to make your way on that ship to where you could see the flag atop Mt. Suribachi?

John Keith Wells: Oh yeah.

What was that feeling like?

John Keith Wells: Oh well it was great, of course and in nothing flat, well my sergeant was on board the ship there and here he come, and then another man who wasn't in my platoon but knew my work and everything, and he had back in the dad-gum general and his staff to take me in, back in and let me, and they had it to such a point that, well I don't want to go into that, but I was treated almost like a general.

Were you there sir, or were your men there for the second flag raising when Joe Rosenthal took the famous photograph?

John Keith Wells: Yes, see that was, in fact the leader of that was my corps man.

John Bradley?

John Keith Wells: Yeah.

Wow.

John Keith Wells: He was my quartermaster. And there was another one. But it wasn't under my platoon, was from the company. Well for at least three or four months in the State and then two or three months out in the big island of Hawaii, I had trained the company. I hate, well I'm not gonna say anything, but except all, for all those months in getting ready for Iwo, I had trained the whole company in the field. In the field I did 99 percent of all the training, so actually, and I just took that, to go to Iwo, I just happened to take that one platoon, but I trained 'em all.

Wow. So did you know, sir, some of those guys pretty well like John Bradley and - ?

John Keith Wells: Oh, Bradley of course was my corps man, and I knew 'em all as good as I knew, I knew 'em all. I knew 'em as well as I'd know my own brother. No, I'd done all their training, all the rep training they got on Hawaii. And I was, oh well, let's don't go into it.

*Well I imagine in recent years there's been the books like *Flags of Our Fathers* that John Bradley's son wrote. Did you ever have a chance to read that book?*

John Keith Wells: Oh, of course he sent me one but you know, he come and made a meeting with us after the war, he come and made a meeting with us -

John Bradley's son?

John Keith Wells: ...in Oklahoma, well the first meeting was here with Bradley in Texas, and they, cowboys just wouldn't let us have any of the rodeo and any of the big stock, big stuff, so I moved it up to Oklahoma. Wichita Falls, moved it up to Wichita Falls, and I guess it, I think it's still there. I get a note from 'em.

And what is it in Wichita Falls?

John Keith Wells: A meeting of, well it turned out to where it's just Iwo Jima I think. It started out where it was 9/10ths of my men and what were - yeah, we had the first meeting here. Was that in '82, Cathy, when we had that first meeting here? Well - yeah, I think it was '82, and we, they all met here. Well, I got a list of 'em. 40. That was my whole company.

Yes sir. Did John Bradley's son interview you at all for his book?

John Keith Wells: Oh, once.

Once, yes sir.

John Keith Wells: Well we were having a company deal, why he come and well, I knew him. I got to know him. And of course he said he was gonna write a book. Well, _____ -

Yes you did.

John Keith Wells: You wouldn't understand me I don't guess, but I didn't, when we first got back, a big, big company wanted to and everything and you know, I just didn't go for it, all that. To me I guess it's a little more, I guess it's almost like a religious thing, highly respected, but they were as far as I'm concerned extremely, and but I did meet, and I've got a picture here of Bradley and his wife and five or six or seven of those children that he had. He was when he went into the service he was at a funeral home.

Yeah, working at a mortician –

John Keith Wells: Yeah, and he had about seven, wait a minute, I saw that picture, just a minute, just a second – I'll go back here to my office. I saw that picture. Yeah, here it is. And his whole family, let's see it's he and his wife and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine children I believe it is.

Yeah, all from Wisconsin.

John Keith Wells: This is his family in 1976 that I'm looking at. Yeah. That was Lynn with some papers back here. Of course Bradley was like I say, the platoon corps man that we had two, but he was the big one and of course he did all my, every single bit of my stuff whenever I was wounded, why he come and visit, he visited. But the boy made one of our meetings and he's just a kid, and he was talking about he had a lot of opportunities to get up big and do a blah-blah-blah, that just doesn't -

Wasn't your style.

John Keith Wells: It's just not my style and that's all right, that's their style and they like it and that's great, that's great.

Did you know sir, what were some of your thoughts of some of the other, those men that raised that flag in that one photograph, of course they're pretty famous now in Marine Corps history, guys like Ira Hayes and Rene Ganyon and others, so what did you think of them? Did you know them pretty well?

John Keith Wells: Oh, did I know 'em, I knew the men and they knew me. Those Indians well, up until last year I got a phone call every year from the Indian reservation -

The Pima tribe?

John Keith Wells: Up in -

Arizona?

John Keith Wells: Wyoming. Now the one in Arizona.

Ira Hayes was a Pima.

John Keith Wells: He just almost worshipped me. He just, it was unbelievable. When they got him to come back to the States to be on this brag deal, you know, well he come and he said he was not going back and they was over up in ___ and I was in the hospital at Pearl, and they said he wasn't going back until he talked to me. This bunch out of Washington had to bring him from the big island over to me in the hospital there.

That's pretty cool though. That's great.

John Keith Wells: Yeah. And those Indians, they all men, I tell you they were good, good people, and not only that, but I'll tell you one thing, they couldn't, they couldn't take liquor, I

mean to tell you they got into that very long and they were gone. There was no family history
—.

Yeah, that's kind of sad with Ira Hayes, he died pretty much I guess from alcoholism.

John Keith Wells: I know he did, yeah. I got probably mentioned on how he died and I knew he was having that trouble whenever he got back off of that tour, some woman out in California hired him to be her driver out there, and then he, I guess he got tired of that. But he stayed in touch with me through some of the others or from himself, and whenever he would come down and went to the -

I was gonna ask you too, sir, in that famous photograph, there's one ___ Harlan Block from Rio Grande Valley of Texas is pictured in the photo at the base of the flag, and I'm sure you're familiar with the story of how his mother was convinced that that was him, but for a while there, the photograph, it was misidentified as another Marine in that photograph. Did you hear that story? Are you familiar with that?

John Keith Wells: No, no. And I didn't, I think you do now that the minute we come back to the States and the war was over I immediately got out and went back to school and got a degree in petroleum geology and I went right out into that – well, the way I looked at it, I won't name any names, but some of the higher people, the way I looked at it, I come back here, I'd have to associate with them, and they just wasn't my way of thinking whatsoever, you know. And I'm not saying they're wrong, I'm just saying not my way of thinking and we'd get crossed up. So I just, well I got retired as a major, I think you know that.

Did you pick up major, when did you get promoted to major?

John Keith Wells: Well, they did that some time later. Well, they -

But the Battle of Iwo Jima, were you a first lieutenant at that time or second lieutenant?

John Keith Wells: I was second lieutenant. Ah no, I don't remember.

At some point you had to have picked up captain and then picked up major.

John Keith Wells: Yeah, but it was all when we were getting really divided, north and south -

Korea?

John Keith Wells: Korea, yeah. We lined up there to do that, and they got within one or two of me and shut it down.

Yes sir.

John Keith Wells: So I didn't, and it wasn't I guess some time after that that I was promoted to major in '59, 1959.

Yes sir.

John Keith Wells: I was promoted to major.

I've got a few last questions for you, sir. When you were in the war in the Pacific, did you have a wife or a girlfriend back home and were you able to correspond with her?

John Keith Wells: I didn't do that.

And with your father, were you able to get any letters from your father or send any letters to your father?

John Keith Wells: I think I did send him a letter. He had married again and my mother like I said died of cancer when I was a little boy, and he had married again, so don't think for a minute that he wouldn't give his life for me any minute, but at the same time he was married to a young woman and they had a child and my mother had died, and so I wasn't about to get involved or bother that.

Do you remember what it was like the first time you got back home after the war? When you were finally able to get back to the United States and be around family and friends again?

John Keith Wells: Let's see, I can bring it up, just one second. Oh, when I come back, why all the organizations of various kinds wanted me to join 'em, and I evidently made some kind of name, or maybe they thought I finally learned something, and tried but I didn't, and I made up my mind I just want to go to school and so I started college.

You went back to A&M?

John Keith Wells: No, I went to Texas Tech is there in their home, and then that way I could do some work at home if I wanted to. And of course I was still a Marine, you know, so I just hung around there, and then finally I'm trying to think, oh, and of course, that school up there right quick after the war, it completely filled up, Texas Tech did, and was mostly girls. So that was kind of a drawing card, you know, and so I was up there and was making, taking courses I could take back down to A&M. Texas A&M of course didn't allow girls, but they put out notice they were getting ready to allow girls. So I thought well I'll just go up there where there are girls and get stuff to school my role down at A&M. Well, my grades didn't go very high, been a change since A&M, so about that time I went to – yeah, anyway, I changed, oh I changed my grade. What I was taking, I changed my major then, I changed it to geology because my grades were pretty poor and was over there in agriculture, so I changed them to geology and that fired me all up and so that's the way I ended up getting really fired up in geology, and when it was all over with, why two men from Odessa, Texas, and down in there two ranchers and oil men, they heard about me, and so they sent for me and I went down. And they hired me on the spot.

And from there you went to work in the oil business?

John Keith Wells: I went to work in the oil business.

And that was your livelihood, that's what you did for your career?

John Keith Wells: Oh yeah.

That's great.

John Keith Wells: It's my mind, geology total, it's in my mind and let's see -

So you'd go out and you'd help identify places to drill there in West Texas –

John Keith Wells: Oh I did it all. I drilled in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona. I drilled the first oil well ever drilled in Arizona and made oil, and it was on that Indian reservation up in the northeast corner of it, and so all of that was a wonderful thing to me, when there was no war and it was just people fighting over positions, you know.

Yeah, I bet. Yes sir.

John Keith Wells: But I had some real good friends that come out, and a few good friends that stayed in the Corps, and let's don't get into it.

Well I know I've taken up a lot of your time today with this interview.

John Keith Wells: Well, I expected something like this.

Well again, it really is an honor for me personally to be able to interview you, especially about your memories and your service. I think of you as a hero and all the men that fought in the Marine Corps in World War II, but especially at Iwo Jima. I've read a lot about that battle and the men that were there, and so to me it's an honor and I know that Commissioner Patterson who is a Marine and a lot of other people that work in this agency are veterans and even people that aren't veterans here appreciate your service and your sacrifice, and especially Memorial Day coming up soon.

John Keith Wells: Well then you know that I'm, I don't mean a friend, I mean a real good friend of your governor, of the governor -

Yes sir. Oh I think yes sir, that's amazing.

John Keith Wells: Yeah, that was kind of unusual, but we've been real close friends.

That's great.

John Keith Wells: I used to be anyhow. And of course, well, quite a number of things have happened and I'm very thankful to people like you and to the man upstairs.

Oh yes sir.

John Keith Wells: When you get my age – I tell you what, I've got two things that I'll tell you what it is, it's a picture of me in battle, in my platoon, while we're in battle the first day I've got a picture of it. I've got a roster of the third platoon and Easy Company which is my platoon. I've got the roster and exactly what happened to 'em all, and a colonel in the Army said he'd never heard of such a thing and looked at it, but I've got a, and what happened to 'em, and I said I wanted 50 men and I would raise the ____, and I think I ended up with 48. And of course I lost a number of them, but and most of 'em was lost to somebody else. And they've now got a, if you're interested, just listen to this for a second. Awards presented to John Keith Wells, here is a list of the awards the Marine Corps has seen. It's a full page list, so I got those out so I could have it when I was talking to you.

That's great.

John Keith Wells: So would you like a copy of them?

Yes sir, in fact any copies of any pictures or anything you have of that sort we can put that on our web site and we can put it in the archive, and what I'll do sir is after we finish this interview today is like I mentioned earlier, we'll make copies of this interview on disk and I'll send that to you along with my card and all the information for how you can mail that stuff to us.

John Keith Wells: OK. Then I can mail – yeah, that'd be good.

We might be able to get copies of that.

John Keith Wells: OK, just a minute, my wife – what is it –

Mrs. Wells: Hello?

Yes ma'am, how are you?

Mrs. Wells: I'm fine. I was just gonna remind you, well not remind you but tell you, your editor for the Statesman has written a couple of articles on Keith.

Oh, that's great. Well I'll have to –

Mrs. Wells: I think one of them was an editorial.

Yes ma'am. I'll have to go look up their archives and pull those stories up. Yes ma'am.

Mrs. Wells: And also you know Keith has written a book.

No, he didn't mention that. I think you had mentioned that but he didn't tell me that.

Mrs. Wells: Right, and I think that editor has a copy of the book.

Editor, oh –

Mrs. Wells: I can't think of his name.

Oh, I'm not with the Statesman, I'm with the General Land Office. We're a state agency and this is a state program that Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson started to interview veterans and save their stories for future generations, but –

Mrs. Wells: Oh I see.

But I've read the Statesman a lot but I don't work for them. But I'll look up those stories in the archives.

Mrs. Wells: Yeah.

Absolutely, yes ma'am. Well thank you.

Mrs. Wells: I'll give you back -

Thank you.

John Keith Wells: Hello.

Well sir, I'll go ahead and -

John Keith Wells: We've been married 60 years.

Oh, well congratulations!

John Keith Wells: I don't think she knows me yet, but -

Is it 60 years this year?

John Keith Wells: But just about every wrinkle.

Is it 60 years this year?

John Keith Wells: Yes.

Well congratulations, that's amazing. That's a true milestone.

John Keith Wells: Yeah, well I'll get her to tell you how many kids, grandkids, and great grandkids we got. Just a minute.

OK.

Mrs. Wells: Great children.

Yes ma'am.

Mrs. Wells: 11 grandchildren, and 10 great grandchildren.

Oh that's great.

Mrs. Wells: So far.

Well that's good, that's something definitely to be proud of and especially being married for 60 years. That's really amazing. Well thank you again ma'am for calling us after having seen that story in the Abilene paper.

Mrs. Wells: Oh, well you're quite welcome. He wants me to get your address.

Yes ma'am, OK sure. OK, it's James Crabtree, and it's Texas General Land Office.

Mrs. Wells: OK.

It's 1700 North Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas 78701.

Mrs. Wells: Very good. And you did give me your direct line the other day.

Yes ma'am, that's 512-463-1970.

Mrs. Wells: OK. I'll give him back.

OK, thank you ma'am.

John Keith Wells: Well I guess you heard enough.

Well no sir, I don't want to take up any more of your time, but it's been an honor talking to you today and doing this interview and like I said, we'll make copies of this soon and get it out in the mail to you quickly and you've got my number sir, so feel free to call me at any time.

John Keith Wells: OK, whoever does, well we'll just stay in touch periodically. I'm fired up in my mind about because oh well, I've written quite a bit on the children and I've written quite a bit on other things, and so anyway -

Feel free to give me a call whenever sir. I really appreciate it.

John Keith Wells: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Well thank you sir and have a great Memorial Day.

John Keith Wells: Thank you.

Yes sir, goodbye.

[End of recording]