

Transcription: Ira Steele

Today is Thursday, August 18th, 2011. My name is James Crabtree. I'm with the Texas Veterans Land Board, and today I'll be interviewing Mr. Ira Steele. We're at your residence here in northwest Austin, Texas.

Ira Steele: Well, I'm a renter.

Yes sir, and 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 letting me talk to you today, especially you being a fellow Marine, I'm very interested in hearing your story. I guess the first thing is just tell us for those that are listening to this interview, tell us a little bit about where you are from, what your childhood was like, before you went in the Marines.

Ira Steele: Well, I lived right around Comanche, Texas.

Comanche, yes sir.

Ira Steele: And I don't know, it intrigued me. At first I just went in the Navy, about four or five of us boys in the town.

You grew up on a farm?

Ira Steele: Yeah. We went down there and that was when I went in the Navy.

You had siblings that went in the Navy?

Ira Steele: War had just been declared, you know. A lot of stuff going around. You could get in the service. I think they said this. There's a billion things to do. I got in it and -

What was it that got you in the Marine Corps? Were you drafted or did you sign up?

Ira Steele: No, I'd been watching Marines over several years. I liked them. I liked what they had. But out there, I was on board a ship.

You were on a ship?

Ira Steele: With.

Oh, you were in the Navy first.

Ira Steele: Yeah.

OK. Were you in the Navy before the war started?

Ira Steele: I don't know, I better not say. We were there in the war.

After the war had started. So you went in the Navy, you were a sailor, and you saw the Marines and liked the Marines, so how were you able to transfer to be in the Marine Corps? Did they make you go to Marine boot camp?

Ira Steele: Yeah, that was some hell.

Did you go to San Diego for boot camp?

Ira Steele: No, another one.

Paris Island?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

You went to Paris Island. So you got through boot camp, then you were a Marine now, and they made you an artillery man, is that right? You were with artillery?

Ira Steele: Yeah, I was, but I didn't get in artillery for six months or so. I was in infantry at first.

Infantry, OK.

Ira Steele: But I liked the artillery. So first thing I knew, I was over in artillery, we had the new guns.

Did they send you to a school to learn artillery or did they just put you in an artillery unit?

Ira Steele: No, I went to school, wasn't very long, two weeks, three weeks.

So you were a canoneer – you were out there pulling the lanyards and lugging the rounds for the Howitzers and that sort of thing?

Ira Steele: Well we would land and tried to stay away from the ____, you get up too close to 'em, they kill you.

Yeah, the Howitzers?

Ira Steele: Yeah, in Saipan.

You were at Saipan?

Ira Steele: Yeah. Guam was the first there a little bit.

Guam, OK.

Ira Steele: And I enjoyed being there.

Tell us a little bit about the Marines you served with. What were your officers like and your staff NCO's and that sort of thing. Do you have any memories of those guys?

Ira Steele: Yes sir, one of the reasons I went over there, because I had a tour in the Navy, ____, go over there, and to join the Corps, and we'll give you a commission. So I said yeah, I'll go, go to Japan.

Now when you were in the Marines, were you married at that time or were you single?

Ira Steele: Just.

You were married?

Ira Steele: Yes.

What did your wife think of you going in the Marine Corps? Was she worried for you?

Ira Steele: Yeah, she was hintin' around. She thought it was all right. But it was pretty rough.

I'm sure, I'm sure. Well, we've all read a lot about what the Marines did over there. I remember when I went to boot camp, that's one of the things they taught us about all the famous battles and that sort of thing. What unit were you with? Your battalion or your regiment?

Ira Steele: I was in a regiment, I don't know, when I was in the Navy, big guns. So when I went in the Marine Corps, I said well, I was already a second lieutenant at that time, and head of one of the four guns, and one officer from each out there, it was quite interesting.

The four guns were like you called it a section?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

Section of guns. It was one officer for each section.

Ira Steele: Yeah. And I hadn't been there very long. They send you out with two people, three people, on patrol, flying out to get some. That was the danger part. I got several of my people killed. I never really got killed. I got a little something in the back one time.

From fragmentation from a grenade?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

But you were OK?

Ira Steele: Yeah, they were foot ____, and there was an explosion, and we'd get over, old border, lot of 'em around, when they started shooting.

Did they give you a Purple Heart for it? Or do you remember?

Ira Steele: I don't know.

Probably. I mean if you were wounded you should've gotten one.

Ira Steele: Well, I don't know. But I liked the Marines. We had some hellacious fights, and the Japanese were very well trained.

And they wouldn't surrender, is that right?

Ira Steele: No. They wouldn't even talk to us about it. They told us you don't talk about surrender, you know. Well, it isn't like that. But I killed a few of them. I think it's just -

What was your rank at that time?

Ira Steele: Second lieutenant.

Second lieutenant.

Ira Steele: I was as first lieutenant.

So you were a second lieutenant when you got over there.

Ira Steele: Yeah, and we had a lot of interesting things. First I'll talk about the military was just kind of what you'd expect. You did a lot of work. You didn't have much to eat. Well I'm saying it wasn't had nothing to eat, but we had food.

Yeah, you had C-rations?

Ira Steele: Yeah, C-rations.

Were you able to get mail from home very often?

Ira Steele: No, I'd get mail about once a month. But I hadn't been there long, so artillery was some big guns. The Marine Corps they said well, we're gonna get in two or three batteries, and so I went down there, saw some kind of interesting stuff.

What are some things that stand out to you that you'd want people to know about your service over there?

Ira Steele: They were brave, some of those, they were pretty brave.

Yeah, I imagine.

Ira Steele: One thing brings to mind, the first guy I killed in the war. They sent me out with two fellas, and they said where you gonna find them? He's down there, me and Carey. Well, I had one guy ahead of me, and all of a sudden he got killed.

Now where was this? Do you remember where you were?

Ira Steele: Guam.

Were you walking down a trail? Because you were scouting, right? You were kind of doing a scouting patrol?

Ira Steele: No, we were fighting. See, they were headed for Australia.

No sure, I understand it, but at Guam, when you had that incident where you had to kill your first Japanese soldier, you said you were out with two other Marines?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

Were you scouting out an area?

Ira Steele: Yeah, we had some key information. How big of a unit we were gonna attack? They said you go find out how big they are. It was pretty rough with us. I think I started out with five officers and me, five men, and I was one officer. Three of them I think got killed, or two of them they killed right away. I got, never got ready to kill or hurt bad. I was an artillery person in a sense. I was wounded back, put tails in that thing, and one other thing I seen, one side they don't tell much about, that's the women. The women over there would just help us. Maybe two or three of us, we could see, and these women are going after in a predicament with officers, and he'd say, I want four of you officers come down here, go in there and how beautiful they are.

Because they were very much supportive of Americans, right? They didn't want the Japanese on Guam.

Ira Steele: Very much support. And their men, some of them men been over here more, and we were ___ somebody and they'd feed us, and it was pretty, I think after the first guy I killed, I knew he was coming down a path.

Could you hear him before you saw him?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

Waist high.

Ira Steele: Yeah, and so we were crawling on our belly, and I was down there kind of empty, shot my man, and I shot him first. That was the worst on Guam.

Guam was the worst?

Ira Steele: Yup. We landed on the very end of it. There was the next ___ between here and Australia, so that _____. But they never did get there. We killed 'em. And I knew a guy he was a little bit going down this way. He raised up a big, long gun.

What type of weapon did you have?

Ira Steele: I had a pistol in my pocket. I had a rifle I carried, a short rifle. And my men carried long rifles. I carried a short rifle. Most officers had that. He got up the thing and he hung in a

brush. I think men and women, anytime we killed 16 of 'em. But that was the first one, and I just remember it. Made me feel real funny to shoot a guy. I killed him and sad, assigned to me. He was keeping up a score. He killed 15, 12, 13, on that one trip. I had some bullets around 6 inches of my head.

I'm sure you came really close to death in a situation like that.

Ira Steele: Almost a third of my battery group were killed. After that, made to the third, and they said we need somebody to take over. And you've had more experience than they, and I was ____ officer at that time. And it was interesting because we'd go down there and spot the people in the day time, they'd kill you. So we'd go in there and spot 'em. We ____ one of them, go down in ____, and ____ and we knew that.

Yeah, you can do a lot of damage with artillery, I know that.

Ira Steele: Yeah, and hit that with small stuff. Later up in Guam, Saipan, Bougainville, and I was, well, there about six months I guess. They put me in charge of the battery. I think I lost over a third of my people, killed, and more than that wounded. We killed a lot of the Japanese. I mean the Japanese had long rifles, and in a crevice, that's when I first shot, I'll never forget him.

What about Japanese artillery? Did you ever face off against any Japanese artillery?

Ira Steele: They had artillery.

Did you ever see them using it or square off against them?

Ira Steele: Yeah, they would open up, we gave 'em ____, and in ditches. As soon as they quit, we'd go back at them, and funny thing about them, they seemed to have ammunition and then bring, and send somebody back.

To get more ammunition, sure.

Ira Steele: But I don't know, we killed several people.

Did you ever have any doubt in your mind that we were gonna win, that the Japanese were going to be defeated?

Ira Steele: No, not in the Marine Corps. In the Marine Corps, you were a Marine.

That's right.

Ira Steele: We killed an awful lot of them. And the women that were there, surely you remember which taking over a little area, and 10 of us trying to get some food to eat.

Sure, it was real sparse during the war.

Ira Steele: Better than eating off of C-rations. I think he wounded about two or three of us. Didn't hit me, but I got out of there, around a corner, and I said what _____. After a while I looked and somebody up on a limb of a tree, big tree. And I waited a little, and she moved over, then I get him, fell, and went up, and it was a woman.

It was a woman was gonna shoot you all?

Ira Steele: Yeah. They had some pretty good women. Women had good eyesight. I shot that one off of there. Of course that's the first one I killed. I was head of an artillery section, and they came back at us. Sometimes we stay low, get behind trees, down in ditches. Said hey, you're running out of ammunition pretty sure, and we send somebody back. When I did, we were up at ____.

What do you remember about Saipan and Bougainville? Anything about those places that stand out in your memory?

Ira Steele: Well, Saipan was beautiful. It was pretty hard. We were 14 men and a foursome at first, and then we ____ and begin back. Well, we back 'em up, and we went back and lose two or three of 'em.

What was the weather like? Was it hot?

Ira Steele: Yeah. It was interesting, very interesting people, first time I ever did see 'em. Guam, particularly. We had one hell of a fight on Guam, and we pack up once and went back in again. It was quite an experience. Once in a while I was ____.

What do you remember about your commanding officer?

Ira Steele: Well, at that time I was with the first platoon I rode up for, second lieutenant 1st Platoon. He was a major. I remember him.

Was he a pretty good CO?

Ira Steele: Yeah, he was. But then they attacked the Japanese and did a darn good job. And I think I said, I think I lost 12-14 men. But he pushed 'em back. It was hot on there, a big river. I had been __ carry guns in the Navy, so they first put me in a mortar.

Do you remember what ship you were on in the Navy?

Ira Steele: The only time I was on a ship was going across and back.

So when you were in the Navy, you weren't on a ship then.

Ira Steele: Yeah, it was a little runner, it wasn't ____ for four years. When I got through with the thing, I think at first I got one thing here I remember, first guy you kill, the first time I ever killed a person. That's when he was in a _____. I says the grass is pretty tall, and he was coming at us, and I was coming this way, kind of a trail. He stood up with a big gun, look at the grass. I stood up and shot him.

What were your thoughts at that moment?

Ira Steele: One that stuck with me all these years.

You were saying it stuck with you all these years, the memory of the first person you had to kill.

Ira Steele: So many I killed, 12 I think it was, killed 12. I said now why _____, and Guam, a lot of their women have men, will go over in the Navy, in food service and so forth.

And they cooked C-rations for you, right?

Ira Steele: Yeah. We'd been eating C-rations for six weeks or something. Mainly the officers -

Get some good food I guess.

Ira Steele: That's the first time I ate a good meal. They were really nice.

Do you remember where you were when you learned that the war was over?

Ira Steele: I was over there almost three years.

You don't remember that day when you heard hey, that the war is over, Japanese have surrendered?

Ira Steele: Oh yeah, we were gonna come back before the war was over.

Oh you were home before that?

Ira Steele: No. We were fighting 'em, and they were backing up. It must've been 20 miles.

What island were you on when the war ended?

Ira Steele: Guam.

You were back on Guam?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

Do you remember how you felt?

Ira Steele: Well, I felt like I wanted to go back and fight 'em again.

Really?

Ira Steele: Yeah. But of course, they had killed a lot of our people. And several of us that had wounds and so forth. They were pretty good fighters.

When the war ended, did you come back home to Texas?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

And did you get out of the Marines at that point?

Ira Steele: No, I came back to California, back to San Diego.

Did you stay in the Marine Corps long after the war ended or did you go ahead and get out?

Ira Steele: I stayed in there for three years.

Three more years.

Ira Steele: And then _____. _____ first lieutenant, and I had a first captain.

So you picked up captain?

Ira Steele: Yeah. I was kind of interested in the people over there. The women there ____ to eat because some of those men, _____.

Gone in the Navy.

Ira Steele: They were serving for the United States Navy, food and so forth. And they treated us real good. I'll have to say, they didn't treat the whole outfit, but the officers. I went back over to see 'em one time.

Oh you did? When was that? Was it several years later?

Ira Steele: Just about the end of the war. They were very interesting people. They were ____ going down to Australia. They would get _____. That's where we stopped 'em, and they kept supporting their own cook.

When did you get back home to Texas?

Ira Steele: It was like one month and three years.

Did you go back home to Comanche?

Ira Steele: Yeah, I did.

What did you do when you got out of the Marines?

Ira Steele: Ain't anybody gonna farm much, but that's where I came from. I think I've said I kind of enjoyed it. I liked the Marine Corps. You had somebody and I even had one person to three people with me, and when I went on patrols, and sent me out on patrols. We killed one person more, and one time all of my men got killed except me and one more killed. And that shook me up a little I guess.

Sure.

Ira Steele: And I stayed over there until the end of the war, because they had another thing they wanted me to do. _____.

Was your wife happy to see you when you got home?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

You hadn't seen her in over three years, right?

Ira Steele: About three years, over three years.

Did she stay in Texas during that time?

Ira Steele: Yeah.

How did you end up in Austin?

Ira Steele: Well, I was ____ in Comanche, and I came back in there after the war was over. I can't imagine ____ training people in artillery, and training some people in shelling activity. But I thought it was very interesting anyway. The people, they were so simple, when we had come over there. They were just ____, they would be ____ sick people, but ____ and sometimes we would lose two or three of us and send somebody and say you are invited to dinner. Anyway, we didn't have, the food was lousy, so me and ____, that was _____. That was good food.

I bet it was good because you certainly remember it.

Ira Steele: That I remember. Good food and they gave me a little package of something to bring back with me, and they were wonderful people.

That's great. Did you move to Austin because of a job? Is that how you came to Austin?

Ira Steele: Well, I was in Comanche. But I came back to Comanche and Austin, but it was an interesting experience.

I'm sure.

Ira Steele: But the war was there, I guess ____ first time I killed a guy. That one stick with me a lot. That guy had a big, long rifle in the grass, and I hit him before he ever got to us anyway. And then on and on. Pretty rough. I think we lost about 30 of my group.

Yeah, it was a tough war, definitely a tough war.

Ira Steele: It was a tough war.

Yeah.

Ira Steele: You hate to _____. Then all of a sudden you get back and worse thing was, you had to write.

The letters?

Ira Steele: Letters to the family. Sure was a good guy. He just -

Yeah. So those were hard letters to write I'm sure.

Ira Steele: They were. I had some officers there about then my second or third year. I just moved up to captain.

Yeah, there's really nothing you can say to a family but just try to tell them the best you can I guess.

Ira Steele: That's right. Pretty hard to write that stuff. Your son got killed, or his wife.

Or husband or brother, sure. No, it's not easy. Yes sir. Well sir, I know everybody at the Land Office in the State of Texas appreciates you for your service and what you did for our nation, and this program is just one small way of saying thank you for that, and more importantly it's a way for us to save some of your memories so future generations can listen to this interview and hopefully learn something from it so it won't be forgotten.

Ira Steele: Yeah, well _____. After Guam, we got some better artillery, better weapons, and particularly we didn't have pretty good artillery ____, and that's one of the things that helped us. Gave us some better artillery.

Artillery is crucial, that's for sure.

Ira Steele: I had _____ that lady, I had her gun, so that was ____ and oh, I don't know, they had so many clothes.

If there was one thing, because we have archives that go back several hundred years. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo, and we have Stephen F. Austin's original register that he kept for the settlers, and we're going to add this interview to the archives so potentially hundreds of years from now people could listen to this interview. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this a long time from now about the Marine Corps or your service or any of that sort of thing?

Ira Steele: Well, I thought about it a little differently. _____ over there fighting us. We captured them and they would be just as nice as they could be, and even if they did ____ you, and these women at home would fix us up primarily the officers, fix a meal for us. Man, they were good. Of course we were supporting them. We fought the Japanese. The Americans were fighting the Japanese.

Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to let me interview you today and as a fellow Marine, I especially want to thank you for your service to our nation, and once a Marine, always a Marine, and I really appreciate it. So semper fi, sir.

Ira Steele: Semper fi.

Thank you very much.

[End of recording]