

Interview with Tony DeVito

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DePue: Hello. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is August 1, 2007. I'm here with Tony DeVito to talk about Tony's experiences in the Battle of Iwo Jima as a World War II veteran, obviously a Marine of World War II, something I'm sure you're very proud of, Tony.

DeVito: Yes, I am.

DePue: What I usually like to do to start with here is to get a little bit of your background. Where and when were you born?

DeVito: I was born in Chicago, January 17, 1926.

DePue: What part of Chicago? Did you grow up in Chicago, then?

DeVito: Yes, I did. I grew up on the Near South Side. I went to Washington Irving Grammar School and I went to Crane Tech High School.

DePue: Would you characterize that as a little bit on the tough side?

DeVito: Yes, it was mostly Italian American, and it was a little tough, but there were nice people, though.

DePue: Part of those old ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago then.

DeVito: Right. Yes.

DePue: You'd say it was a good place to grow up, then?

DeVito: I grew up during the Depression. I didn't realize how poor we were until I got a little older, realized that we were that poor, but it was a nice childhood.

DePue: What did your father do for a living?

DeVito: My father—actually, he had a horse and wagon and an organ, and he used to go down the streets of Chicago playing it, making some money from that. Then when he stopped that, in 1940, when they opened up a defense plant in the neighborhood; he got a job there.

DePue: So it was a very tough economy and very tough times for you.

DeVito: And my mother worked for a lampshade factory, doing piecework. So we were rather poor.

DePue: But you didn't really realize that you were poor?

DeVito: No. When I was a child I didn't realize how poor we were. (laughs)

DePue: Well, everybody was, weren't they?

DeVito: Well, not everybody. When I was about twelve or thirteen, there was a friend of mine. His father bought a '39 Chevrolet for about nine hundred dollars. (laughs)

DePue: Were your parents born in the United States?

DeVito: No, they were born in Italy, both of them.

DePue: Where did they come from?

DeVito: They come from the Neapolitan Province in southern Italy.

DePue: Both of them did?

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: They both came after World War I?

DeVito: My father and my mother's father came here prior to World War I, and they were supposed to send for my mother and her two sisters. World War I broke out and they were separated for eight years before they got together again.

DePue: Did you have an early interest in the military?

DeVito: Just watching movies, watching cowboy movies and stuff like that. I never handled a weapon other than a cap pistol or a BB gun until I got into the Marine Corps.

DePue: You recall Pearl Harbor, then?

DeVito: Yes, I do. We were listening to the radio on Sunday, and they broke through and told about Pearl Harbor.

DePue: You were at home when you heard about it?

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: How old were you at that time?

DeVito: I was fifteen, but I was going to be sixteen the next month.

DePue: Before that time, had you been paying attention to what was going on in Europe?

DeVito: Oh, yeah, Hitler taking over all different countries, and Japan had invaded China and was taking over a lot of China.

DePue: There was certainly a lot of talk about it seemed like war was approaching, and a lot of Americans were thinking, "Well, we don't want to have anything to do with war." Knowing what was going on in the world, what were your thoughts when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

DeVito: My thought was, it was terrible, it was a terrible thing. Enlistments went up real big right after Pearl Harbor. There was lines of men enlisting into the armed forces.

DePue: The immediate impact on the DeVito family, though, is your dad was working in a defense plant by that time.

DeVito: Right. Yes.

DePue: When did you start getting interested in getting into the military? Or maybe was it the military that was interested in you?

DeVito: Well, they had the Selective Service. When you got to be eighteen you were eligible to be drafted into the armed forces. The only people that didn't go were 4Fs that were physically incapable of serving, or people with essential jobs, and they got deferred for that because they were considered more valuable on their essential jobs than serving in the military. Everybody else was drafted.

DePue: Were you drafted then?

DeVito: I was drafted. Right. (laughs)

DePue: Drafted into the Marines.

DeVito: I thought I was going into the Navy. I went with two of my friends. They went to the Navy, but when we got there, they said, "You're in the Marine Corps." So that was it. (laughter)

DePue: You were in pretty good shape, I would guess.

DeVito: Physically?

DePue: Yes.

DeVito: Yes. When you pass the physical, you're considered in good shape.

DePue: Then how quickly after that were you inducted? Was this June 13, 1944?

DeVito: I was inducted in June 13, 1944.

DePue: Then did you go immediately to basic training?

DeVito: Oh, yeah. They put us on a train and went to San Diego, California, to the Marine base in San Diego, California. We got eight weeks of boot camp. They gave us a ten-day furlough, but it took three days to get here and three days to get back, so I just got to spend four days at home. When we went back, they sent us to Camp Pendleton, Oceanside, California, for advanced infantry training.

DePue: You were drafted in the middle of 1944. The Marines had already seen plenty of very tough action in the South Pacific.

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: So what are your parents thinking about you suddenly being a Marine?

DeVito: Well, they were worried, naturally, and my one brother in the previous year had gone into the Army and he was in Europe. He was in Patton's army. And they're worried about both of us.

DePue: Was he infantry, as well?

DeVito: No, he was artillery, field artillery.

DePue: I guess we didn't mention what specialty you trained in. Why don't you tell us that.

DeVito: I was a rifleman. That was my expertise, handling a rifle.

DePue: And did you take to the rifle and the skills of an infantryman pretty quickly?

DeVito: Yes. Well, when we were qualifying, like I said, I never had a weapon in my life prior to getting in the Marine Corps, and on the rifle range I scored sharpshooter, which is second highest. Expert rifleman is the highest.

DePue: I know the Marines take rifle marksmanship very seriously.

DeVito: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, there were some boys that had handled rifles all their lives and they didn't even qualify. Go figure. (laughs)

DePue: What was the rifle that you were using?

DeVito: An M1 rifle.

DePue: The carbine was shorter, right?

DeVito: The carbine was shorter. That's what the officers used.

DePue: Anything in particular that sticks with you about basic training?

DeVito: It was hard. You had to do a lot of hard drilling and marching. There was one time where there were some infractions that somebody committed, so the whole platoon was called out, about three o'clock in the morning to fall out with seabags. (laughs) We were asleep and we had to get out there in five minutes because a couple of guys did something wrong.

DePue: These instructors had to be all veterans of the South Pacific, weren't they?

DeVito: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: So they knew the bottom line.

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: Did all of the training make sense to you?

DeVito: Well, you had to be toughened up to take what you were going to get into. As hard as the training was, it didn't compare to being out there and being shot at.

DePue: So you thought the training was certainly appropriate, tough, and understood why?

DeVito: Yes. Right.

DePue: You said you were infantry for basic. When did you find out what your unit of assignment was going to be?

DeVito: We went overseas on November 10, 1944. We boarded a ship to go overseas. Now, for some reason we spent a lot of time on that ship, almost two months—fifty-nine days. We finally landed at Guam and we had more training there. Then the whole division, 3rd Division, a few days before the 19th embarked on troop ships, and we didn't know where we were going. We knew we were going somewhere for combat. So once we're aboard ship, they would take groups to a room and show us a picture of this island here, and tell us, "We're going to Iwo Jima," which we'd never heard of in our lives.

DePue: Well, it's just a speck of sand in the middle of the Pacific.

DeVito: Yeah, right. He says, "We're going to be in reserve." He says, "The 4th and the 5th Divisions are going to land first, and we're going to be in reserve in case we're needed." Well, we were needed right away.

DePue: What kind of training did you get while you were at Guam?

DeVito: Long marches and different weapons training.

DePue: Was there any maneuver raining] that you got at squad-level, or platoon-level maneuvers?

DeVito: No, it was more at company level.

DePue: And you knew you were in the 3d Division?

DeVito: Yes, 3rd Division, and our unit was called the 28th Replacement Battalion.

DePue: But typically you guys get divvied up once you get to a division like the 3rd?

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: And you said you were in the 9th Marine Regiment?

DeVito: Right, right, right.

DePue: And were you in the 9th Marine Regiment at Guam?

DeVito: No, not at Guam; when we were on Iwo Jima. When we were at Guam we were the 28th Replacement Battalion and we weren't assigned to any Marine regiment, but once we got to Iwo Jima ... the name "replacements," that means when people get killed and wounded, you've got to replace them, and that's what we were.

DePue: So were you still in the 28th Replacement Battalion when you actually landed at Iwo Jima?

DeVito: Yes, right.

DePue: Okay. Well, I wanted to talk, obviously, a lot about Iwo Jima, but before we do that, any particular memories of getting shipped out in the first place, shipped to Guam?

DeVito: Well, it was on November 10th; it was the Marine Corps' birthday. They gave us a nice breakfast of fried eggs. It was raining. So we got aboard the ship and a lot of guys got seasick right away. For about a day or so I felt kind of dizzy, but I didn't get sick.

Aboard the ship they had the mess hall for the troops. You didn't have chairs; you stood at the tables and you ate your food. The only two good meals we had on there were for Thanksgiving and Christmas, when they served us turkey.

DePue: But it took you two months to get to Guam?

DeVito: Yeah. I don't think they knew what the heck to do with us. We laid up like a couple of weeks by the Marshall Islands, not even moving, and they were sending a couple hundred each day to shore to play softball or just to get off the ship for a while.

DePue: Were you one of those who had the chance to get off the ship?

DeVito: Yes. I went and played a game of softball. One guy took everything off but his underwear, and he got burnt like a lobster. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you learn by mistakes, don't you?

DeVito: Yes, right.

DePue: So you spent then a couple of months at Guam training and then you're embarking to head off to God knows where.

DeVito: Yeah.

DePue: When you actually got on the ships in Guam, did you know you were heading to Iwo?

DeVito: No, we knew we were going somewhere for combat, but we didn't know where. Once we got aboard ship, that's when they showed us a map of Iwo Jima and explained where we were going and what our mission would be.

DePue: What are your thoughts now, having probably been paying pretty close attention and your drill sergeants teaching you all the lessons how to survive? What are your thoughts now hearing about Iwo Jima?

DeVito: Well, we were a little apprehensive. When we got there, on the PA system again they said there were Jap airplanes over the convoy wanting to bomb us, and we had an air umbrella that was driving them away. (laughs) So that kept us safe. The other two divisions landed on the 19th [the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions], and then on the 22nd we went because we were needed.

DePue: From what I've read about the battle, this was a huge convoy; a huge number of ships. Were you able to look out from shipboard and see that?

DeVito: Oh, yeah, yeah. A lot of ships.

DePue: That had to be impressive.

DeVito: Yes, right. Then another thing is they said this was going to be a short operation, just take a few days, and it took a month, and it took six thousand killed and twenty thousand wounded.

DePue: I've read that there was twice as many Japanese on that island as they had suspected.

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: Did you observe the initial aerial bombardment or the naval bombardment of Iwo Jima?

DeVito: I think they bombarded it before we got there with naval guns, but then when I was aboard ship, you know, we saw airplanes going in and dropping bombs, dive-bombers.

DePue: Was your particular ship close enough to see the island then?

DeVito: Yeah, we saw the island. We were not right next to it, but we were close enough to see it. It couldn't have been more than a mile or so away, or a couple of miles away.

DePue: So from the time that the actual invasion started with the 4th and 5th Marines landing on the 19th, and you guys went in day three, you said?

DeVito: Yeah.

DePue: That would have been the 22nd.

DeVito: Right.

DePue: What were the Marines that you're with doing for those three or four days?

DeVito: Well, I was on this Higgins boat, and we had this one lieutenant in charge of us, and rather than let the Higgins boat go right to the beach, they wanted to not let the Japanese know that we were landing. We got behind this LST and climbed up the rope ladder to the back of the LST and got on their deck and walked right out through their ramp that they had so we wouldn't be noticed, you know, new Marines coming on the beach.

DePue: An LST is much larger than a Higgins boat.

DeVito: Right, yeah. Well, it's the Landing Ship-Tanks.

DePue: Yes. So the Higgins boat holds roughly about a platoon?

DeVito: A Higgins boat is a little craft that holds about nineteen to twenty personnel.

DePue: But for the first couple of days you're on your troop ship at the time.

DeVito: Right.

DePue: Were people just playing cards or was there training going on, were there classes or lectures going on?

DeVito: I guess we were talking about what was going to happen when we land on the beach. In fact, we got a little circular from our commanding general, General Erskine, and it said, "See you on the beach." (laughter)

DePue: But I've got to tell you, Tony, that seems to me like a long time to be sitting out there with little to do except thinking about, "Oh, my God, I'm headed into combat."

DeVito: Well, yeah. (laughs) But you've got no choice in the matter; you're there and you take what you get.

DePue: Were you hearing anything about the nature of the resistance that the 4th and 5th Division had encountered?

DeVito: No, they didn't say anything about that. The only thing we got was when the Japanese airplanes were trying to bomb the convoy and we had an air umbrella that was driving them off. So that was good to hear.

DePue: But eventually you find out that you're going in, which I would think tells you that maybe things aren't going quite as well as they anticipated.

DeVito: That's right. Yeah, we're going in. You do what you're ordered to do.

DePue: What I'd like to have you do, then, is to take a little bit of time, as much as possible, and paint us a picture of what it's like when you first landed on Iwo.

DeVito: Well, the first thing is you got to go to the side of the ship and they've got a cargo net. You've got to climb down that cargo net, and the sea is going back and forth. The fellows that are down there already, they're trying to hold it steady for you. So you climb that net. You've got your pack and your rifle. Now, if you fall in the water, you could release the whole pack and rifle and not drown. (laughs) We were taught that. So, luckily, I got down without falling in the water.

Then the Higgins boat went a little bit offshore and he cut the motor off, and the thing's bobbing in the water. I had eaten something a little before, and I got sick; I had to heave it out. (laughs) The same way with the officer in charge of us, he did the same thing.

So then, like I said, we came to the LST and we climbed up the rope ladder and walked out of the front of the LST.

DePue: And all of that was just to deceive the Japanese?

DeVito: Right.

DePue: Okay, now that you're on the beach, what do you see?

DeVito: Well, first we've got to unload some of these small ships. They put us to work, so we worked about twelve hours straight unloading. Then it's time to go to bed. So we dig holes in the sand, and before we got in our holes I took the blanket out of the plastic bag, hoping, you know, figuring that everything was going to be dry, and all of a sudden the sides of the foxhole cave in and all the water come rushing in. I'm sleeping in water all night.

DePue: You weren't very far off the beach at that time?

DeVito: No, we were on the beach.

DePue: Describe the terrain you're seeing.

DeVito: Well, you've got volcano sand on the beach, and you look up to our left up high, and you could see Mount Suribachi. When I woke up on the fourth day, the 23rd of February, some guy had a fire going. We were drying our blankets, and somebody pointed up to Mount Suribachi. There was a flag flying. I don't know if it was the first flag or the second flag, but we noticed it and we went about our business.

DePue: Did you think anything about it at the time?

DeVito: Nope. We were wondering what was going to happen to us. This was our first time in combat.

DePue: At that time you're not taking any fire from Mount Suribachi?

DeVito: No, but the Japanese were shelling the beach with mortar fire at one time, and this lieutenant tells us, "I suggest you men take cover." I didn't know where the heck we were going to take cover. We were on a flat beach.

DePue: Was there any vegetation?

DeVito: No. No buildings. Everything was knocked out. Very bare island. They didn't even have fresh water on there; you had to bring your own water in there.

DePue: From what I've read, black sand.

DeVito: Yes. As I said, when it was wet, then the sides caved in and the water came in our foxhole.

DePue: What did you do for the first couple of days that you were onshore?

DeVito: We did work with unloading supplies, and then after a couple of days, they put us in the truck and they brought us to the front. Drove there with the lights off, you know. Then when we got there, some of those guys were a little confused or

something. There was one guy shot off his rifle repeatedly. I don't know what he was shooting at, but I didn't see anything.

DePue: While you guys were still in the trucks, he was shooting off?

DeVito: No, when we got out. Some sergeant was put in charge of us.

DePue: Were you still in the 28th Replacement Battalion at the time?

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: When did you get assigned to the 9th Marine Regiment, then?

DeVito: That was like a week or so later.

DePue: And until that time you were doing a lot of logistical things?

DeVito: We were doing stretcher bearing and bringing in supplies, and the snipers were shooting at us. (laughs)

DePue: So you were getting a good taste of combat.

DeVito: Yes. Yes, and as a matter of fact, after we were up there a few days, three of the people in our outfit got killed by sniper fire. We saw them. They were laying there and all of three of them were dead.

DePue: Were these people you knew pretty well?

DeVito: Yeah, I knew them.

DePue: You'd gone through basic training with them?

DeVito: No, just through the latter part at Guam.

DePue: What were your thoughts, then, seeing some of your buddies having been killed?

DeVito: Well, it wasn't very nice. It was shocking. And to think it could happen to you, too, and it almost did.

DePue: Talk to me a little bit about the Japanese tactics on Iwo Jima. How would you describe the Japanese tactics?

DeVito: They had a cave system going throughout the whole island and you had to dig them out. The day I got shot, we had a tank that was in front of us doing shellfire. Didn't seem to disturb anything, because when we got there, these Japanese were in this cave and they were throwing grenades out; they were shooting. I wanted to get to some cover, and before I got to it, I got shot. They took me away from the vicinity; naturally, brought me to a field hospital. So I never knew what finally happened that day to the men that were there fighting with the Japanese.

DePue: You were shot in the left arm?

DeVito: In the left arm, right.

DePue: What happened when you were shot? What was the nature of the injury?

DeVito: Well, I was shot high in the arm, it went through the bone; it went through the nerves. I couldn't move my fingers – my left fingers. They flew me to Guam the next day to the hospital there, and they put a body cast on me and a cast on my left arm. That was on for about a month and a half or so, and then they took that off and put on a new cast. Of course, I was at a different hospital. I was back in the States then, in California. They put an arm cast on, and then when the bone healed up all the way, then they took the cast off altogether and I was given physical therapy. Had a couple of surgeries and they couldn't do much for me.

DePue: Did you remain conscious during the whole time when you were injured?

DeVito: Yes, I did.

DePue: One of the Navy corpsmen got you?

DeVito: Yes, one of the Navy corpsman came, he put my arm in a sling, and he gave me the morphine shot, which relaxed me. Then they got an ambulance and took me to the field hospital.

DePue: I know in a lot of previous battles before Iwo Jima, the Japanese oftentimes would stage banzai attacks. Was that going on at Iwo Jima, as well?

DeVito: I think so, because this group I was with, we were passing this one area and there were several Japanese soldiers laying dead on the ground, and it looked like this young officer was laying on top of his samurai sword. This one fellow in my outfit, he lifted the dead Japanese up and pulled the sword and took it as a souvenir.

DePue: I know that the Japanese had a reputation by that time of being ferocious fighters. What did it take for the Americans to dig these guys out of their pillboxes and foxholes and their defensive positions?

DeVito: They used flamethrowers a lot. You would throw a grenade down the hole of the cave and shoot your rifle in there a few times, hoping you'd hit somebody.

DePue: You basically just had to dig the Japanese out hole by hole?

DeVito: Right, yeah.

DePue: Was there much artillery or air support?

DeVito: Not air support, because they'd be hitting us, but I think we had artillery units and tanks and they would fire ahead of time. If the Japanese are out in the open, they

can kill them, but not when they're in these caves. Then you have to shoot them out, dig them out, use flamethrowers, use grenades.

DePue: And being an infantry rifleman, you're participating in all that.

DeVito: Right, yeah.

DePue: Can you describe a typical action, then, while you're on Iwo, going up against a pillbox, for example?

DeVito: Well, I never went up a pillbox; I went against caves. What you do is you throw a couple of grenades in there and then fire your rifle in there and hope you get them.

DePue: And then move on to the next one?

DeVito: Yeah, right.

DePue: So this is close-in action for you all the way through.

DeVito: Yes.

DePue: And your unit's suffering a lot of casualties while you're moving forward?

DeVito: Yes, that's right.

DePue: What were most of the casualties from? Yourself, it was from a rifle.

DeVito: I think it was mostly rifle fire and grenades. They were done with the artillery by then, but they might have had some mortars left.

DePue: Machine gun fire?

DeVito: No, not in the later stages.

DePue: Well, let's discuss your injury a little bit. You recovered in Guam. How long did you stay in Guam?

DeVito: I had to be on the stretcher when I was evacuated. As a matter of fact, they used an airplane to bring me and a bunch of other wounded men from Iwo Jima to Guam. They had like a hospital set up there, and that's when they put the body cast on me.

DePue: Did you consider the care you got at Guam was good care?

DeVito: It was very good, yeah. Good care.

DePue: How did you get back to the States?

DeVito: From Guam they flew me to Hawaii, on Oahu. I stayed there for about a week. Then I got aboard this luxury liner called the *Luraline*. They used to use the

Luraline for civilians that went to Hawaii. It was taken over by the government. They had a sickbay there with beds and the wounded were put there, but they had, all different services on there, plus some civilians. They had first class and second class and all that. (laughs) The first-class passengers could go dine in the dining room with the officers.

DePue: And where did you get to eat?

DeVito: Well, they used to bring the food right to me in the sickbay.

DePue: Was it decent food?

DeVito: Oh, yeah. Yes, the Navy always had better food than you got in the Marine Corps, unless you were in the Marine base.

But it took about three days to get to San Francisco, and then from there I went to Oakland, California, stayed there for a week or two in the hospital. Then they told me I was going to Bethesda, Maryland, which was outside of Washington, D.C., and that was a train trip. That took about three days, but I did travel first class with a berth.

DePue: Why Bethesda, do you know?

DeVito: I had nerve damage to my arm and they had the specialist there to work on it.

DePue: Can you describe the treatment that you got while you were at Bethesda?

DeVito: Oh, very good. I had a couple of operations. They couldn't do much, but they tried. I got physical therapy. I spent about fourteen months there, but I wasn't in bed all that time. I would be ambulatory and I'd go to Washington, D.C., on liberty.

DePue: What was Washington, D.C. like in the middle of the war?

DeVito: Oh, it was very nice. Very nice.

DePue: A lot of this time is after the war's over, isn't it?

DeVito: No, most of it is while the war is still going on. The war wasn't over until August of '45.

DePue: And Iwo Jima was February of '45.

DeVito: February of '45, right.

DeVito: So you had a chance to see Washington, D.C. during the closing days of the war, then?

DeVito: Yes, right, closing months, actually. Don't forget, after Iwo Jima there was Okinawa, and that was pretty bloody; in fact, bloodier actually than Iwo Jima because it was a bigger scale.

DePue: Do you recall hearing about the end of the war in Europe?

DeVito: Oh, yeah. I was on the train going from Oakland to Bethesda, Maryland, and they had word of it, the end of the war in Europe. We were aboard ship coming back from Hawaii to the United States when we heard about Roosevelt dying. And nobody knew who Harry Truman was. (laughs)

DePue: Was that hard to take, an emotional event, hearing about Roosevelt dying?

DeVito: Well, I had my own troubles. (laughs) I wasn't happy about it, but I had enough to deal with, with my own stuff.

DePue: What was the mood on the train when you heard about Europe ending?

DeVito: Everybody was happy, but the war was still going on in the Pacific. You know, before the atomic bomb, they were planning to invade Japan, and that was going to be very costly in life.

DePue: What did you think when you heard about the atomic bomb?

DeVito: Good! The war was over. (laughs) Yeah. A friend of mine and myself, we were in the movie theater in the hospital watching a movie, and they stopped the movie and flashed across the screen that Japan had surrendered. We got out of there and we went to Washington, you know, to celebrate. He didn't have any money and I only had five dollars. (laughs) So we only had a couple of dollars to celebrate with.

DePue: But you had a good time anyway.

DeVito: Yeah, right.

DePue: There has been a lot of discussion over the years about whether or not we should have dropped the atomic bomb. Did you ever have any doubt about that decision?

DeVito: It was a shame that so many people got killed, but I think there would have been more people killed if we didn't, and the war would have gone on longer and a lot of people that came back home after the war wouldn't have done that; they would have been dead. And there's no lie about that.

DePue: Let's take you back to a little bit more about the combat you experienced while at Iwo Jima. You mentioned earlier that you had one near miss. Can you tell us about that?

DeVito: Oh, yeah. We were going across this wide open space and then all of a sudden we were getting sniper fire, so everybody naturally laid down flat; we call it “hitting the deck.” We laid there until the fire was over, and all of a sudden I heard “ping!” next to the right side of my neck. The bullet came about an inch away from my neck. I was a little scared then. Then finally they stopped firing, and we got up and got out of there. We went to a safer position.

DePue: Are there any other memorable experiences while you were in combat that you can recall?

DeVito: Well, kind of gruesome, I guess, but one day we were eating K-rations and it was a hot day and there was three dead Japanese laying on the roadway. It was a gruesome sight because they grinded them up. A tank rolled over them. I don't think you want to show that on TV. (laughs)

DePue: No, but that's the nature of combat.

DeVito: That's the nature of combat. When you see somebody dead, they're a dead body, they're decomposing, they're rotting, the insects are eating them. It's not a pleasant thing.

DePue: And from what I understand, the whole island stunk to begin with.

DeVito: Yeah. I forgot to tell you the first thing I saw when I landed on the island. I saw rows and rows of dead marines being taken off the beach. They probably had all been killed on D-Day, because that's when the firing from the Japanese was the heaviest.

DePue: That had to be a rude awakening that you arrived in combat

DeVito: Yeah, you arrive in combat and there's dead people laying there that they're taking off the beach.

DePue: What sustains you in combat – keeps you going?

DeVito: I prayed like heck. (laughs) As a matter of fact, one time for some reason I'd been by myself ... well, there was two occasions I'd been by myself, and I'm going the wrong way. I'm a young punk. I'm only nineteen, and never was out of Chicago before, and here I'm on the other side of the world, so what do I know? I'm going toward the Jap lines and I look up and the sergeant's waving to me to come back this way. If I'd have kept going, I would have got killed.

Another time I was by myself and this older guy comes on me and he says, “Are you Catholic, son?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Would you like communion?” He was a chaplain and he gave me communion.

DePue: Did you get the wine and everything?

DeVito: No, just the wafer. (laughs)

DePue: This is something I've always been curious about. You're out there and you've got to find the motivation to keep going and to risk death on a daily basis. Is it the cause that you're fighting for in the first place, or because of your buddies that are out there with you?

DeVito: Well, I don't know about other people, but I think you're going for survival. You want to come back from there, you don't want to end up dying there, but you don't know if that's going to happen. People like me that came back to survive it, they beat the odds. There's a three-to-one chance you're going to get either killed or wounded. Well, I got wounded; I didn't get killed. But I came back, and I'm eighty-one-and-a-half years old. I was nineteen then. I could have died when I was nineteen, and I'm still living. And I got married, had a family and a life.

DePue: Do you recall anything about when you first saw your family back in the States?

DeVito: Oh, yeah. After they took the cast off and I had some physical therapy, I was able to come home on a week's leave. I think that was in May of '45. And my sister was marrying a sailor the next month, so she said, "Can you come back again for the wedding?"

I said, "Yeah."

So I applied for a leave and I came back again for the wedding. You know how much the train fare was roundtrip from Washington, D.C. to Chicago at that time? Nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents.

DePue: Well, on the pay you were receiving, that's a healthy chunk of money, isn't it?

DeVito: Yes, right. (laughs)

DePue: Did you receive any awards or medals?

DeVito: I got the Purple Heart. Can you see it up here? (DeVito points to the ribbon on his clothes.) This is the civilian bar; you wear it on civilian clothes. And I guess a citation, the Asiatic Pacific Ribbon. Good Conduct.

DePue: And the irony of it was, unfortunately, you spent most of your time in the military in a hospital.

DeVito: Actually, yes. Yes, in inactive service, actually.

DePue: I know that from Bethesda you went to Great Lakes Naval Hospital.

DeVito: Yeah, I stayed there for about six or seven months.

DePue: They moved you there because it was closer to home?

DeVito: Well, the war was over then and it was closer to home and they weren't going to do any more surgeries on me, and so they sent me there just to get therapy. As a matter of fact, even when I got discharged, I went for therapy for a certain amount of time.

DePue: What were they doing with you in therapy?

DeVito: They'd give me hydrotherapy, which was in water. They'd do massage. They did electrical stimulation. It really didn't do anything. The arm was gone, so you just had to accept that and move on.

DePue: How did you cope with knowing that you wouldn't have use of your left arm?

DeVito: I did the best I could. I tried to live my life the best I could. When I was young, I participated in what sports I could. I bowled. I played tennis. When I got a little older, I played golf. When I'm able to, I still go out about once a week.

DePue: Were you left-handed?

DeVito: No, right-handed.

DePue: Did you feel that you were lucky?

DeVito: Yes, I felt I was lucky because I survived, and there's a lot more people with worse injuries than I have. Losing the use of your left arm is not as bad as losing the use of both legs or both arms. Those with multiple amputations, they call them basket cases. How do those people live, you know? Then there's brain damage. I don't have that. There's a lot of things that are worse than just losing use of your left arm.

DePue: I'm sure most people look and they think you got a bad deal, but you look at it differently?

DeVito: Well, actually, some people that I've known for years, this one fellow told me, he says, "You know, the way you do some things, I don't even notice that you don't have the use of your left hand." So everybody has different views. When I was going to dances when I was a young man, it didn't bother some girls to dance with me. Other girls, if they noticed that I had a paralyzed left arm and hand, they wouldn't want to dance with me any more as soon as they noticed it. But other women, it wouldn't bother them one bit.

DePue: And you didn't want to mess with the women who had a problem with it anyway, did you?

DeVito: No, right.

DePue: Tell me about your fellow Marines. What did you think about the Marines you served with?

DeVito: I had some good friends and some of them were not so good. (laughs)

DePue: Do you think you were ready for combat once you got there, were well trained?

DeVito: We were trained as well as could be expected, but I think the fact that they needed people out there, they sent us out with not as much training as we should have had. But they needed men out there, so ... Funny thing about it, one drill instructor in basic training, he says, "What are they doing, scraping the bottom of the barrel?" (laughter) It was later in the war and we were a bunch of kids, seventeen and eighteen years old. The only guy who was about twenty-three, twenty-four-years-old, he was the old man of the platoon when I was in boot camp.

DePue: How about the NCOs and the officers that you worked with?

DeVito: Some I liked, some I didn't. I'm going to be candid about it.

DePue: Any particular ones that stick in your memory?

DeVito: Well, this one fellow, he was real nice. He was a second lieutenant and I liked him very much. I had him when I was on Guam and I saw him a couple of times when we were on Iwo Jima. We weren't together on Iwo Jima, but I saw him on a couple occasions.

DePue: Who was your best buddy when you were on Iwo Jima?

DeVito: Well, on Iwo Jima I didn't have any special best buddy, but when I was in the hospital in the Bethesda, Maryland, I had this sailor from Mississippi. Him and I used to hang out together all the time.

DePue: That's an interesting combination, a kid from Chicago and Mississippi.

DeVito: Yeah. He was from Mississippi and he had a thick southern accent. He was short and I was short, so I guess we got along together.

DePue: Was he the guy you went to D.C. with?

DeVito: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DePue: You mentioned General Erskine who was your division commander. Did the guys you were with have a high regard for General Erskine?

DeVito: Well, I never saw him in person, but he'd send us memos and stuff. He seemed to be all right. In that book there [refers to the book]—3rd Division—there's a picture of him being congratulated by Holland Smith at the end of the Iwo Jima campaign.

DePue: What did you think about the Army, or did you guys not bother about the Army too much?

DeVito: Well, my brother was in the Army, but I know a lot of them, they called soldiers 'dog faces'. (laughter)

DePue: Wasn't that part of the training to be a Marine, to kind of take a disregard for the Army?

DeVito: Well, some people, I guess, but not everybody.

DePue: How about your opinion of the Japanese?

DeVito: They were fanatics. They were crazy. Like that movie *Patton* that George C. Scott was in, when at the beginning he's giving a little talk and he says, "You don't want to die. You want to cause the other guy to die." He says, "We like winners, not losers." Well, if you're dead, you're a loser, as far as I'm concerned, unless you died for a good cause, you know. But if you're beat, you might just as well surrender instead of committing suicide. A lot of them committed suicide.

DePue: So you didn't understand why they

DeVito: No. Well, a lot of their culture was to die for the emperor, and it's a dishonor to surrender and be a prisoner. The American thing is try to survive if you can.

DePue: Do you recall any particularly humorous incidents, maybe at Iwo Jima or afterwards?

DeVito: One humorous one was at Iwo Jima. Somebody had a bunch of macaroni and beef C-rations heating up in a big can, so I took my mess kit and I took some and I'm leaving there, and this old officer, I think he was a lieutenant colonel or something, or a major or something, and he sees me with it and he says, "Hey, son, is that good?"

I said, "Well, it's not too bad." (laughter) I mean, what do you expect from C-rations? It was hot food.

DePue: Were you able to keep track of any of your friends from the military life after you got out of the service?

DeVito: No. For some reason, though, they had a 3rd Division reunion in Chicago. When I went there, I put on the board where I took training, the ship I was on, the hospital I was in. Nobody answered it. There were a lot of people from Iwo Jima. I didn't know them, so I just became acquainted with them while the convention was going on and conversed with them about different things.

DePue: What did you end up doing after you were discharged from the Marines?

DeVito: I went to work for my old company for a short time.

DePue: What company was that?

DeVito: Cinch Manufacturing. Then I went to a business school for a short time and then I got a job in an office, an office job at Cinch Manufacturing. Then I went to several other companies. My last company that I worked in until I retired was Ideal Roller and Graphics. I worked in the office there.

DePue: Do you think that your disability had any effect on your career afterwards?

DeVito: Well, to a certain extent. I couldn't do physical work because I can only use one hand. You need two hands to do physical work. So it was logical that I would get into clerical work.

DePue: You didn't take advantage of the G.I. Bill, then?

DeVito: I went to school with the G.I. Bill.

DePue: Okay. Let's kind of conclude with some generalized questions, if you will. Most people would look at you today and would think because of your injury, because you were at Iwo Jima and you saw the kinds of things you were talking about, that you sacrificed an awful lot, that you paid a pretty heavy price. Do you think, looking back on it all, that your sacrifice was worth it?

DeVito: Well, World War II was a fight for survival and it was a total war. I think if you're going to have a war, it should be fought like World War II, where you fight to crush the enemy, get the war over with, and then have peace. I don't believe in these limited wars that we've been having since then. They don't make sense. They don't accomplish anything, except getting more American kids killed. My opinion.

DePue: Obviously your life was changed, but maybe there were more subtle ways that you changed or your outlook changed because you were in the Marines and you were at Iwo Jima.

DeVito: Subtle changes? Well, I don't know. I'm still the same person. Well, there's a lot of post-traumatic stress that people have from all wars. I think the thing about me is I was in the one battle, the one campaign, and even though I got pretty badly wounded there, I wasn't subjected to it for too long a time to acquire the post-traumatic stress. Now, there have been times where if I think about it, I get a little wound up about it, but it's history; it's gone. I have a life to live. Like I said, I got married when I was twenty-eight. I had three daughters. We raised our children and led a normal life.

DePue: Did you talk much about your wartime experiences with the family?

DeVito: Not a real lot, but if they ever wanted to know... It was real funny, the daughter of my one niece, for our last Veterans Day, was in grammar school and they wanted veterans' stuff. So I sent her a whole bunch of stuff, and my niece said her daughter had a whole wall, because there's a lot of people in our family, you know, not just

World War II, but Vietnam era and other eras, and she had all this paraphernalia she had up on the wall.

DePue: Sixty-some years later, suddenly Iwo Jima is in our memory again. We just recently had the movies [Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters From Iwo Jima*].

DeVito: Yes. Oh, yeah, one more thing I might just as well mention to you. When I was in the hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, this James Bradley, the Navy corpsman, his son wrote the book [*Flags of Our Fathers*].

DePue: Right.

DeVito: I met him briefly. He had come there after the bond drive. They were all on the bond drive, and he came there afterward, and somebody, I guess, pointed me out to him, and he came up to me and talked to me, and we talked for a few minutes.

DePue: I would imagine it was refreshing for him to talk to somebody who was at Iwo Jima who had understood what he went through, versus people who are trying to take advantage of him all the time.

DeVito: Yeah, right.

DePue: What are your thoughts now, having been at Iwo Jima, which is one of the most famous battles of World War II?

DeVito: Well, a lot of people get the misconception after they raised the flag that the battle was over. The battle was only three days old. It went on for another month.

DePue: Does that aggravate you?

DeVito: It kind of peeves me a little bit, and peeves a lot of people, too, because that wasn't the end of the battle; that was just the end of the beginning.

DePue: From your experience at Iwo Jima, and Okinawa was a lot of the same kind of very gruesome ...

DeVito: It was on a bigger scale.

DePue: Maybe if they go into Japan it would continue on an even larger scale?

DeVito: That's right. That would have been huger than Okinawa. Right. I think the unique thing about Iwo Jima is it's such a small island, five miles in area, you wouldn't think that so much fighting and killing would go on in such a small area for so long a time.

DePue: From what I've read, the percentage of American casualties versus the force that went in is the highest of any battle in World War II.

DeVito: I believe it. More Marines got the Medal of Honor from that campaign than any other.

DePue: What do you think that people today should know about in your experiences, not maybe just about Iwo Jima, but about your recovery as well? What should we know and remember about that?

DeVito: Well, I'm among the youngest of World War II veterans, and I'm eighty one and a half years old. There's a lot of them that are much older than me. Your life doesn't last forever, and they're dying. Just that it was the last war that was absolute, a total war, and we were fighting for our survival. Heaven help us if Germany or Japan would have won. Instead of them being our allies, they would still be our adversaries and we would be kind of under their thumb, you know.

DePue: What advice would you give us today?

DeVito: Well, like I said, if you're going to get in a war, it should be a total war. That's my opinion. I mean, maybe there's people who won't agree with me on it, but if you have a total war and you crush your enemy, it's over with.

DePue: Any final comments for us, then?

DeVito: One more thing. When I was in the hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, I had an operation. I want to mention this because I thought it was very nice of him: Douglas Fairbanks Jr., he died, like, seven years ago; he was an actor, and he was in the Navy during World War II and he came to visit us at the hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. I had been operated on the day before, and he stopped by my bedside and talked to me for about five or six minutes. He was very nice to me, and I really appreciated that. That's about it, that I can think of.

DePue: Thank you very much, Tony. You know, fortunately, most of us don't have to live through and struggle with what you experienced at Iwo Jima and for the rest of your life. I want to thank you for what you've done for this country and thank you for giving me the opportunity to interview you today.

DeVito: Okay. You're welcome.

[End of interview]