Interview with Russell Baker

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Interviewer: Robert Young

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Young: I am Robert Young interviewing Russell H. Baker on February 19, 2008. This interview is being done at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's Veterans Remember Oral History Project. Russell, would you please give us your birth date?

Baker: July 2, 1925.

Young: And where were you born?

Baker: Sangamon County. There's no hospital.

Young: Born at home?

Baker: Yeah. My mom had eleven kids and all of them born at home.

Young: What was the branch of your service?

Baker: U.S. Marines.

Young: And your rank?

Baker: Corporal. I was seventeen when I went in. I didn't expect to be a general, you know.

Young: I understand. You were in the South Pacific, is that correct?

Baker: Yep. Two years.

Young: What was the name of your parents?

Baker: The name of my parents? Charles Edward Baker and Grace Ethel Balcanon (??).

Young: How many children did they have?

Baker: Eleven. I was the ninth.

Young: How many boys?

Baker: Only four boys and seven girls.

Young: How many are still alive?

Baker: They're dropping off pretty fast. My older brother died and three sisters have died. So I've still got three sisters and three brothers.

Young: All here in Sangamon County?

Baker: No, I've got a sister in California. Rash (??) Valley.

Young: Your education before you entered the service—how far did you go?

Baker: I got through high school. There was a guy who came around when we were seniors. There was only like twenty-five kids in the class. This was a small high school. Some guy came around from the Army giving a test. I guess anybody who passed the test qualified for OCS in the Army. I was all set to go onto OCS in the Army and a friend of mine, Ralph Hatcher, came to see me. He said, "Why don't we go join the Marines? That's a hell of an outfit." Okay. We went down and joined the Marines. At that time, it was at the old post office in downtown Springfield. It was kind of ironic, but they took me. But they didn't take him. At that time, you had to be between seventeen years and nine months of age and eighteen. He was over eighteen. They said, “Well you're going to have to go back home and wait to get your draft notice. Then tell them you want in the Marines.” They told me to go back and get my diploma from high school. Then come back, which I did. Then they sent us out from there.

Young: What'd your parents think of you?

Baker: Dad said, “You're doing the right thing.” They had to sign because I was under eighteen. Had to sign. Dad said, "Your mama won't like it, but I'll take care of that."

And she did. Apparently they both signed. I didn't know where they signed or when. I don't remember that part.

Young: Were any of your older brothers in the service at the time?

Baker: No. I had an older sister who was in the Army Nurses Corps. Stationed at Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver for a number of years.

Young: Why did you join? Do you remember why you joined? I mean, what was your personal...

Baker: It's the thing to do.

Young: 'Cause we were at war?

Baker: 'Cause we were at war.

Young: I understand. Why the Marines?

Baker: A friend of mine suggested it and said it was one heck of an outfit. I said, “Okay.” I didn't know anything about it.

Young: You didn't know one way or the other?

Baker: No. Back when I first heard we were at war, I was a junior in high school. We were in the world history class, which was the first class after lunch. The teacher was late. J.F. Kirby. He came back and said, "Folks, we're at war. We're going to be." He said the Japs—Japanese—bombed Pearl Harbor. I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. I knew where Japan was, but I didn't know anything about that part. We're going to be at war within the next day. Sure enough we were. If it lasts long enough, I know where I'm going. So I did.

Young: Boot camp. Do you remember boot camp?

Baker: Oh, yeah. Actually boot camp was kind of a breeze to me. Once we got enlisted and we were sworn in here in Springfield in a short ceremony. Went back to Great Lakes Naval Training Station for further examination. Physicals. Some of these tests, they were kind of kind of embarrassing if you're very sensitive. It's just something you have to do.

They stuck us on a troop train and headed it for San Diego where the Marine Corps base was. It took, I think, about pretty close to three days to get there. 'Cause it took a long route, dipped down through old Mexico and came back up. We get there about two o'clock in the morning and they run you off. At that time, the Marine Corps base had a parade ground that was a mile long. On one side of it were all the administrative offices, officers’ quarters, and that kind of stuff. On the other side, off the parade ground were several rows of tents.

That was (??) to pretty fast. They put us in these—counted, you six guys go in this tent, you six guys go in that tent and so forth. I was Platoon 505. 1943. A bunch of guys─ here's your blankets, your sheets and pillowcases, and pillows. I want these bunks made up regulation. 'Cause we were lucky. One of the guys in the tent had been in ROTC or something. Anyway, he knew how to make up one regulation. So we got all made up and I was standing there for an inspection. They came through and passed us and you went to bed for an hour or so.

Some of the guys across the street didn't have that advantage. They just took that bedding and threw it out in the street in the sand. Told them, "Now do it right." That's your introduction to the Marine Corps.

But basically, we did a lot of work. Close order drill. A lot of stuff, that's nothing to me. Us old farm kids, we're used to hard work and labor. Some of these city kids had to kind of gimp along, but I didn't have any trouble. At boot camp, three weeks. Close order drill, mostly.

Then we got issued our rifles. M-1 rifle. Serial number 1545405. I'll always remember that. We went to Camp Matthews, which was a rifle range. Did that three weeks, taking courses in proper marksmanship and all that kind of stuff. You'd shoot to qualify. After that you came back for another week of advanced training.

In my case, I couldn't swim well enough to suit them, so I had to stay over a week in what they call the casualty company. That's for misfits, I guess, 'cause I had to learn how to swim. I was finally able to claw across the swimming pool, maybe forty feet or fifty feet whatever. Well, that's good enough.

They put me in another course. I guess they gave us some aptitude tests or whatever, because I wound up in an outfit. We learned a lot of map and compass work. We could take night compass courses and all that kind of stuff. They'd put you out on the edge of camp, and it would be getting dark. You take a certain (??) for so many yards, and you take another heading for so many yards, and make four or five changes. You come back right about where you started at. No trouble. The dials were illuminated and you could change your (??) by changing the face of the dial when you count the clicks. I could hear well enough then to hear the clicks. Came out back where I started. No problem. Some of the guys just goofed off their liberty. I think they wound up in San Diego or somewhere. They could see the bright lights.

Young: So that's how you...

Baker: That was boot camp.

Young: When did you ship out?

Baker: Shortly after that. It must have been sometime in December '43. December '43. They took us down to the docks and we loaded on a ship—the USS George F. Elliot. I had no idea where we were going. They didn't tell us a thing. You got down in those troop holds. Did you ever see the hold of a troop ship?

Young: No I haven't.

Baker: Well, it'd be a metal post probably two inches diameter that goes floor to ceiling. The Navy probably calls it something else. It is the deck to the drop or whatever. At intervals there'd be a rectangular pipe framing with a canvas stitched across it. You let it down 'til it was level, and they're about eighteen inches apart. They put about five bunks on each side of that post. You'll end up like that. In fact, if you had broad shoulders you couldn't even turn over in there. If you wanted to turn over you had to get out and get back in. I don't remember there being any blankets. There might have been. There might have been a pillow. I don't remember any blankets. Didn't need it, really.

You get used the smell. In fact I, after about the first day, they got out, some of the guys were getting seasick. I didn't get seasick. Hey, I'm home free on this kind of stuff, until about the third day, and all of a sudden I got sea sick, too. I tell you, when the guy up above you was seasick and leaned over and there was vomit dripping down the side of your bunk. It wasn't very appetizing.

Young: How many days did it take you to—where did you go?

Baker: I have no idea. I have no idea. Probably close to a couple of weeks. I wound up in New Caledonia, Christmas Eve '43. I tried to get in the Marine Raiders. That was the elite. I was just barely big enough, but I couldn't swim well enough. If I'd been able to swim well enough, I would have been a Marine Raider, but I couldn't hack it. We stopped there and let off one guy, Sweed Luger, a friend of mine. He joined the Raiders. Got a Raider camp there, so I went over with him and then walked back.

In fact, the ship was out there in the harbor and we come back down the hill and saw a big, long line and a building way down at the bottom. There was another guy with me. "What's this line about?" "I don't know maybe, they're selling beer or something, I don't know. We'll go down there and see." So we got in line and we stayed in line for a while and it was moving so slow. I asked the guy in front of me, "What the hell is this?" "That house down there? That's a house of ill-repute." I tell you that's no place for me.

Young: They had a long line, huh?

Baker: Horrible line. I got out of there quick. Went down and got on the pier to get back out to the boat. It was supposed to pick us up and take us to the ship. The damn pier collapsed. We were out there floundering around out in the ocean. But I didn't drown, anyway. I was able to swim well enough; I could stay afloat. I could tread water, that and dogpaddle's about all I could do.

Young: They taught you enough to save your life that day.

Baker: Yeah. In fact, there at one point, they set us out in the ocean on an amphibious tractor. Had a platform, elevated maybe ten or fifteen feet in the air. You put on all your gear. You got a helmet, and a pack, and rifle, and (??) belt and all that jazz.

You're supposed to simulate abandoning ship. You jump off there in the ocean. I jumped off in the ocean. Enough gear just about to pull you down. I can't swim that far. But I could tread water. Fortunately, the tide was coming in and I just tread water for a while. Pretty soon your feet hit the bottom and then you can walk the rest of the way. I guess they had it planned that way, I don't know. Surely I wasn't the only guy in the world who couldn't swim.

Young: Well, with all that gear, it'd been awfully difficult to begin with.

Baker: That's enough to pull you under.

Young: What was your unit of assignment?

Baker: I was in a replacement battalion. The different organizations would get diminished by death or wounds or whatever. They sent guys in to replace them. From New Caledonia we headed for Guadalcanal, 'cause I was assigned to the Third Battalion, Third Marines. We get there, I think, New Year's Eve of forty-three. When we got there, we found out that the Third Marines Third Battalion was up at Boganville. They were finishing up that campaign there, so they put us to work putting up tents and digging drainage ditches, 'cause it was the rainy season. Lord, it poured for twenty-four hours a day for two or three weeks at a time. Water all over. So we're out their digging ditches by lantern light. Tents were just basically on the ground. There weren't on any decks or anything like that. But they were able to ___(??) a center pole and put it up in the air maybe ten feet. Then you come down to the corners, and they'd be up about right around five feet. That would hold the tent up, and get some stakes in there, and then pull it out of the mud. Trouble is that with all that water, you took your shoes off and put them on the ground beside you and the next morning your shoes were floating down the company street. So we learned real quickly to keep your rifle someplace high so it don't get all wet and rusty. I think we hung them from the center pole, if I remember right.

Young: That was at Guadalcanal?

Baker: That was at Guadalcanal. We were there and after a week or so, the other guys from Boganville came trooping back—what was left of them. We filled in the ranks. They told us we were going to go to Caviang (??), which was a Japanese strongpoint. That was about in May. We were all set to go, and then they changed their mind and decided it was too risky. They decided we're going to head to Marianas [Islands] instead. So we got ready to leave there.

They put you in a boat, like a Higgins boat, and took you out to the ship. You got aboard the ship. There was kind of like a ladder, like a fire escape ladder off down the side. The boat would come up there and tie up and you'd just walk up that and you're aboard. They took us partway on that. Then we stopped and switched over to an LST somewhere out in mid-ocean. For some reason we didn't use that walk plank. This time they lowered a boarding net down over the side. The cargo net

or whatever. It was just ropes squared off. You'd climb down that to the boat that's waiting to take you over to the LST. The boat kind of bobbed up and down.

You had to pretty careful. If you went down too far the boat would come back up and whack you in the leg and break your legs. Quite a few guys did that. You time it when you think it's about right, you let loose real quick and fall in the boat. Then they got over to the LST. For some reason they had a boarding ladder there, and you just walked up that. I don't know why they changed it.

I got on the LST. LST 118. I was one of the first ones aboard. There were no provisions there for the troops. For a box or anything like that. It might have been for the officers, I don't know. For the regular troops, like me, you just roosted wherever you could. I found a pretty big truck there was loaded with sandbags. Somewhere I found a stretcher and I moved those sandbags around. I piled them up, bulking the front of the bed, and then I put that stretcher across the back. It was just perfect length. I got a bunk under a canvas top. If it rained, I didn't get wet.

I wasn't there more than a few minutes when here comes some other guy. Is there room in here for two? I said, "Yeah, if you can find a stretcher." So he found a stretcher. There's were I lucked out 'cause he was a company cook. He told me, "I been assigned to help the crew do the cooking anytime there's anything fried. Fried eggs, fried pancakes, whatever, I'm supposed to help. So I can get you on as a cook's helper, you won't have to stand in the chow line." Hey, that's a good deal. I learned how to fry pancakes and fry eggs, that kind of stuff. No big deal. That way, anytime you want chow, you just go down there and help yourself. I knew all the cooks. That part worked out pretty well.

In fact, I remember I was on that LST 118, and there was a guy named Mike Navort—N-a-v-o-r-t. He was an old-time Marine. A birthday the same as mine—July 2. He thought that gave us some kind of kinship. He was probably thirty years older than me. He had a great big scar down the side of his face. I said, "Mike, where'd you get that?" He said, "Oh, down in Nicaragua with the _____(??). Some clown jumped out of a bush and give me a whack in my face with a machete." But he was always in trouble. He was a buck private. He was going to stay a private. Every time he got a chance he'd get drunk and get in a fight and get busted clear back to buck private. I wonder what happened to him. He was from Petersburg originally.

Young: Petersburg here in Illinois?

Baker: Yeah, Petersburg, Illinois.

Young: Is that right?

Baker: Last time I saw him we were on Guam, and our arrangement was, you get in that hole, you stay there. If anything's outside the hole at night, it's not us. So we hacked out that night, got up the next morning, daylight and look around and there was Mike over there. He said, "Found some dead Japs here." He was pounding on their

jaws with the butt of his rifle trying to get some gold out of their teeth or something. Kind of barbaric, but he wasn't a real gentleman.

Young: Next question. Did you see combat?

Baker: Oh, yeah. We got on the LST 118. We were on there for fifty days. Because we got up to Mariannas, Guam, Saipan and then Rota. There's not much on Rota. Guam's the biggest of the three. But Saipan was better fortified. 'Cause I guess Japan had possession of that since World War I. Some kind of a U.N. mandate or something. Guam was an outright U.S. possession. So somebody else is going to take Saipan. We went up there and hung offshore. We were close enough; we could see what was all going on. We said, "We'll see if those guys can hack it by themselves. If they can't, we'll go in and help them. If they can hack it, then we're going down to hit Guam."

After a week or so we decided that they're going to be all right. So we went down and hit Guam. That was July 21st of '43. That was the third wave. There, we went in on amphibious tractors. You went down in the hold of the LST and they had these amphibious tractors lined up. They were probably about, I don't know, two or three abreast. They let that ramp down in front, and it's above the water a couple of feet. The theory was that you get a good head of steam built up and made sure that you don't choke out, and you went as fast as that thing will go and jumped right off the end of that ramp. If you went out there too slow, it'd just nose right down and go right to the bottom of the ocean. But when you jumped like that, you made a big splash. You looked up and there was a wall of water above you. You look like you're ten or fifteen feet under the surface. (unintelligible) and pretty soon, by gosh, you popped up to the top and away you go. Kind of a thrill, the first time you did it.

Young: How many times have you done that? Just the once?

Baker: No, we did it once in practice in California. Did it once there in Guam. So we got there. I was on the third wave. On the first couple of waves, every boat made it. 'Cause you still got the cover from the bombardments. See, they had several cruisers out there. I don't think there were any battleships. There were heavy cruisers. They were lying on there with sixteen inch guns and really pounding that beach trying to keep the Japs [heads down] until we get ashore. That worked pretty well. By the third wave, we lost some boats. I understand by the fifth or sixth wave, there wasn't a boat that made it.

But apparently the Japs had some heavy mortars up in the hills. Apparently they had some particular area of water zeroed in and they watched up there. If they'd see a boat head for that, they'd put a shell there and hit that boat. That's goodbye Charlie. That's all. I looked over at one point and a boat just disappeared while I'm looking at it. I didn't see the debris flying or anything. It just disappeared. It's a powerful explosion.

So we got ashore and jumped over the side. There wasn't any exit ramps for that. You had to jump over the side. I think the Japs had dug right in front of me. I said, “Well, I’ll go over and get in that.” The guy behind me jumped out and he stepped on a mine, and I don't know what happened. I missed it, but it blew his foot off. He came hobbling there on one leg. Helped him get situated. We hit the beach. It was Red Beach One. It's over right here somewhere.

Young: We've got a map here. Where's it at?

Baker: We were hitting Red Beach One. Right here. We were the extreme left flank. I knew we were a little bit to the right of where we wanted to be. See, I was in what they call the intelligence section of the Headquarters Company. We knew maps and compass work and all that stuff. We had a little hand-held device called an infonometer. It'd give you angle of incline, so I could draw in contour lines on maps and that kind of stuff. I had a map of the whole thing with a waterproof cover and all that. I was ready for that. I knew we had to go to the left, so I went down there until I found an outfit. The rest of them got all together. But it took probably an hour or two for that. I don't remember now.

I think there were eight guys in our section besides the lieutenant. Norwert Menderecki (??) got hit with a bullet. Put him out. A guy named Beaver got a mortar dropped on his head and put him out. I guess there's a little military cemetery right there in back of that beach. They were there when I left. Unless their folks come and got them and took them home, they're still there. Later on there was a guy, Ed Malec from Hamtronic (??), Michigan. He got clipped in the back with a piece of mortar shell or something and he went out to a hospital ship. They took him out and he was back in a week with a bandage on it.

About the fifth day there was a guy name Jim Abegglen. He was a Jap language expert. He got hit in the leg with a bullet, and they shipped him out. I haven't seen him since, but I heard about him. You can look him up in the internet—James Chrysler Abegglen. I guess two "g"s. His parents both were professors at the University of Chicago. He was kind of an arrogant cuss because he was better educated than the rest of us, a little older and his parents were both professors. After the war he went back to school and got a doctorate in marketing. Went to Japan and later on changed his citizenship. He became a Japanese citizen. He said the hardest part was denouncing his American citizenship. Said, that cost me quite a bit of money for accounting and legal fees. I read that and I thought, “Good, I hope it bankrupted him. I hope I never see him again. If I do, I want to poke him right in the nose.” He's probably eight-four or five years old, now. I recognized him. I saw him on TV and I looked him up on the internet. James Chrysler Abegglen.

But other than that, we got along pretty good. See, my job would be to guard the battalion CP. About six of us were left. On the first night, we dug a little hole and went in there and slept real well. Next morning I woke up and all kinds of noise is going on. The Japs had infiltrated and there were Japs all over the place. You fight your way through that. I didn't sleep for five nights. You just can't do it. You've got

somebody going to stand guard and all that stuff. We were kind of moving up. Our outfit held the extreme left flank. The ones that were on the right were going to swing around, a little like closing a door, and come across and then work our way back up this way, that being north, I guess. But the Japs had expected us to be further on down here at Tumon Bay. So they came down and we caught the brunt of it for the first couple of days. But then as the other guys came out and lined up out here, then it started evening out.

So we hurried. I think by the tenth of August, they declared the island secure. We got all the way to the end, but we'd bypassed a lot of little pockets of Japs out there in jungles. So we'd go on patrol. Being in the intelligence group, I was supposed to be expert with a compass and map work and all that kind of stuff. Each company was sent out on a reinforced patrol, maybe twenty or twenty-five guys. There would also be a scout, like me, go along to see that they don't get lost. We had to pick out a particular route through the jungle and go along. Once in a while you hit a little snag. You hit a machine gun nest or something. As so you get that straight away you keep on going and you come back. Spend all day out there, just living on C-rations. We had water in our canteens, of course.

Young: Were they just small pockets of resistance, then?

Baker: Yeah, just small pockets. Maybe three or four Japs or whatever. Those guys wouldn't give up.

Young: That's what I've always heard. They fought to the end.

Baker: They didn't give up. In fact, that was generally the deal. Nobody, no quarter. Nobody takes prisoners. They didn't take prisoners; we didn't take prisoners.

Young: How were our wounded taken care of at that time?

Baker: How was what?

Young: How was our wounded taken care of? Did you have a hospital ship out?

Baker: Yeah, they had a hospital ship out in the Bay. It'd be out in here somewhere. It'd be, what's that, east? East of the island. A few scratches and bumps—you would just ignore that; that just went with it. You had to be hurt before you get out to that hospital ship.

Young: What were your first emotions and thoughts about our wounded and our dead that were there? I mean, how did you feel about that?

Baker: Well, I don't know. Just something you expect to see. For a while when I guarded that company CP, once in a while the lieutenant would be in telephone communication with the rifle companies. Well, there was, K Company's got some hole in the line. He would say, “You guys go up there and fill up that hole,” and that kind of stuff. Sometimes I'd be a stretcher-bearer and different things.

In fact, one day I was a stretcher-bearer at Sunedo (??) Cliff. Those jeeps would climb a hill like a mountain goat. Just a four cylinder motor. Boy, those are rugged little vehicles. They used them for bringing their wounded back to the hospital. There'd be a hospital set up at the beach kind of temporary. I went up there. I knew this corpsman named Louie Luck (??). He was from Pekin, Illinois. He had a guy on there with both legs blown off above the knee. He's sitting on a stretcher. He's talking and laughing smoking a cigarette. I saw Louie later, and I said, "Louie, how'd that guy make out?" "Hell, he was dead before I got back down there." He just didn't know it. When you get hit that bad, you don't know how bad you're hurt.

Young: As a young man, then, what were your thoughts about the enemy dead? The enemy. What were your thoughts of the Japs at that time?

Baker: Well, didn't like'em then. I still don't like'em. I don't buy anything Japanese. I encourage my kids not to buy anything Japanese, but they do it anyway. Buy Jap cars and that kind of stuff.

Young: I had a friend that was a Marine and he would never sell an item that was made by Japs. He sold tools.

Baker: Can't blame him for that. The natives, though, on Guam were a Chamorro tribe. They were kind of South Sea Islander tribe. The Spaniards took over that about in sixteen hundred and something, maybe. When did Magellan go around the world? 1516? It was later on in that same century. The Spanish sent a guy out there and he took possession of Guam in the name of the Queen of Spain. As a result of the Spanish American War, we just said, "We're going to take over Guam." That was part of the surrender deal. So then we moved in there in 1898.

When the war started, we had a small garrison there. I understand the Marines did. Probably around forty or fifty guys. They got wiped out pretty quick. I was in there with a guy and I can't for the life of me remember his name. But he had a brother in that garrison. He said, "We're going to find out what happened to my brother." After we got things squared away, he and I walked and walked and walked trying to find out what happened to his brother. Found out he did survive the initial Japanese invasion and some of the natives hid him out. But just before we got there, he got caught, and then he got beheaded. They found his grave but we didn't try to dig him up. He knew who it was.

Young: That was a rough time for a young man.

Baker: Well, better young guys...well, I don't know. Right now, I'd rather go there myself than see my kids over there.

Young: How did you stay in touch with your family during that time? Or did you? Letters?

Baker: Write 'em a letter once in while. See, neither of my parents had much education. Dad got as far as the fourth grade. I think my mother did, too. When he was starting school in 1890, he lived back in those river bottoms down in the white (??) county. I

think school would probably be three or four miles through the timber, and he had to cross a river to get there. He was lucky to get four years education. They could read and write and all that stuff. But they sure weren't going to write the Encyclopedia Britannica or anything like that. I would write a letter once in a while and once in a while I'd get a letter back.

Young: How was the food?

Baker: Well, the food wasn't too bad. But on Guadalcanal, they served us what they call New Zealand mutton. Goat meat. I didn't know the difference. I tasted all right to me. They'd cut it up and shred it and cook it in a gravy thing and slop it on your plate. It was all right. It was nourishing. The C-rations weren't all that bad. Came in a tin can—maybe half a pint or so. And you had the little key to wind the top off. It had a little thing that opened up and made a little stove. You had a heat tab about the size of an Alka Seltzer tablet. Put it in the little pocket on that tripod and light it and then set your open can on top of it. There'd be enough heat there to heat that can of C-rations. Take your spoon and stir it up, and that wasn't bad at all. There are about three kinds of meat and beans, and meat and potatoes, and meat and vegetables. It wasn't bad at all. I could live a long time on C-rations.

Young: What'd you do on the island for relaxation?

Baker: Well, there was no relaxation. Soon as we got through all these patrols. Set up a permanent camp. In fact, we had a temporary camp for a while and meanwhile they were working on a permanent camp for us. There you start training again, because you get to replace the spots from the guys who didn't make it through. Everybody goes through the same training. And I don't remember...we didn't have any relaxation 'til the war was over. Couldn't afford that kind of stuff.

Young: Did they have any entertainers or USO shows?

Baker: Well, there was one at Guadalcanal. But by the time I got there, the campaign was over. That went down in the fall '42 and the spring '43. I didn't get there 'til the end of '43. There weren't any Japs left on Guadalcanal, I don't think. They had a USO show come in, but I didn't go. I figured it'd be too crowded.

They had movies that showed where you sat out there in the rain. You dropped a coconut tree and sat on the trunk and watched a movie in the rain. I remember one guy laying there—instead of sitting on a log, he had laid underneath a coconut tree. A green coconut fell out of the tree and hit him right in the face. About the size of a bowling ball, it fell twenty or thirty feet, however tall that tree was. Knocked him right in the face. Hauled him out. I don't whatever happened to him. Probably broke all the bones in his face, I imagine. But that was our entertainment.

Now, on Guam, they had a movie theater there once we got things squared away. But they had old movies. We didn't pay much attention to it.

Young: Well, after Guam, the B-29s were there and you were going into Japan.

Baker: Yeah. We were there in July ‘43. We stayed there until about February of forty...if I get my years straightened out. That would be July ‘44 we got there. Okay, so then about February ‘45, they put us on ships again, and we were going to go to Iwo Jima. We didn't know where it was and didn't know anything about it. They told us. By that time we got our section built up pretty well. It was back to strength again. Well, we needed one guy to go to a Pioneer Battalion.

There were about four or five of us who were corporals by that time. We said, “Well, let's pick a guy.” There was a guy named Warren Taylor Garrett from Pennsylvania. Had a wife and some kids. Chances are that Ranger Battalion'd be safer than what we're going to do. So we'll send Warren Garrett over there. Which we did. He got to Iwo Jima and got shot and killed. We get up there and the rest of us were on regimental reserve. Sat out there in a dad gum troop ship and watched the bombardment on Iwo Jima. We're being held for the invasion of Japan. They wanted us to spearhead that invasion when we hit that.

We sat up on board ship and watched. Saw the flag go up on [Mount] Suribachi. Saw that with binoculars. I had binoculars, of course, being a scout and all that stuff. We didn't like it. I got ashore one night. We went and took some supplies in and unloaded it. A lot of artillery flying around but you can't let that worry you too bad. If you move, you probably move to the wrong spot. So better to stay where you are ignore it.

I remember I was onboard ship. Some of our guys would be expert at gunners. Gun replacement there 1.1 inch, four-barrel gun of some kind. I was up there watching the activity ashore and one of the crew come on the intercom. He said, “I guess some of you Marines on board feel pretty good watching some of us do your fighting.” That one guy, he had a mike or something. My name is Shaw. (Unintelligible) whipped the guy who said that. That ended that.

Young: Yeah. They didn't have to invade Japan. What did you and everyone else think of when the bomb was dropped?

Baker: Well, I remember, we were all set to go. We had our cold weather gear issued. This was September ‘45, wasn't it? I think it was September. I guessed it was going to be cold up there because they issued us some cold weather gear. Heavy boots and that kind of stuff. They already had the indoctrination things. We were going to hit the north end of Japan and work our way south, and someone else was going to hit the south end and work their way north. They already told us—women or kids, if they got a gun, shoot them. You or them. So we were ready to go. Then that one night the second lieutenant came running down. He said, “Hey, we don't have to go. They dropped a big bomb on Japan. They gotta give up.” About two days later they dropped a second bomb, I think, and that's the end of it. So we were happy to hear that, of course. Nothing to look forward to, but something had to be done.

Young: It saved a lot of lives.

Baker: Oh yeah.

Young: Probably saved a lot of lives on both sides, actually.

Baker: Probably on both sides.

Young: Then when did you get back to the States?

Baker: After that they started rotating guys home. You got so many points for months in the service or so many points for overseas duty and all that kind of stuff. So the first wave went home. Some of them had been overseas for three years or so already. I was only overseas for a year and a half or whatever. I went out on the second bunch. I got on board ship and took it back to Camp Pendleton, I think. It was just outside of Oceanside, California anyway. They processed us there and put us on a troop ship and headed back to Great Lakes. Then you get mustered out and they gave you some mustering out pay and sent you home. You're right back where you started.

Young: So when were you discharged? What was the date? Do you remember?

Baker: Gosh, I don't know. Sometime in December, probably in December '45, I guess.

Young: What did you do the days and the weeks right after you were discharged?

Baker: At the time it was pretty close to Christmas '45 by the time I got home. Oh, I hung around the house. I was getting ready for school to start and I helped Dad do a little bit with the farming. I started school then back in about August or September '46. Then I moved out and went to live with my sister and her husband because it's closer to town and they had elect—see, Mom and Dad didn't have electricity. Didn't have any electricity there until sometime in '46. So I went to live with my sister and her husband. Then I was going to go to Mendice (??) College, going to drive back and forth. They're a lot closer to town. Better roads and all that kind of stuff.

Young: So how was your adjustment to civilian life? Did you have any help? Or any problems adjusting to coming back to being a civilian?

Baker: No, not really. I don't know why. They didn't worry about that post-traumatic stress syndrome or whatever. They didn't worry about that then. Some guys might have had it. But looking back, I only kept in touch really, with one guy—Joe Dobey. He was from Arkansas. He had a brother here in Springfield—Paul Dobey. He was a State Veterinarian at one point. Joe would come up once in a while to see him. When he did, he'd always come out to see me. My oldest son moved down to Friendswood, Texas. It's on the Galveston side of Houston. Joe lived down there somewhere. He was County Agent for Galveston County. So every time I go down there, I'd go see Joe. I've been in touch with Joe ever since.

At one point we were trying to get a little reunion up, but we couldn't find people. Found a guy named Nate Seeva (??). He just died of lung cancer in the past couple of years. And a guy name Howard Munce, he was a second lieutenant when

we first went there. Later on got promoted to captain, but he was an understudy to Steven Dohanos. Steven Dohanos and Norman Rockwell rotated making the covers for the Saturday Evening Post. He's still in the art business out there. You can look him up on the internet, Howard Munce, M-u-n-c-e. I talked to him on the phone. But he's still living. He's about ninety-five years old, I guess, but he's still going strong. Everyone else I tried to contact is dead. Ralph Strom was dead, and I went to see a guy named Whitey Carga (??). New Hope, Minnesota. Now he's all of a sudden dropped out of sight. I guess he probably died. But just other than myself and Joe and Howard Munce, that's all that's left.

Young: That's all that you know of that's left.

Baker: And Joe's not in very good shape. He had open-heart surgery and a stroke; his wife died from Parkinson's. About two years he remarried. He was married about four months and she died. Now he's all alone down there in Bryan, Texas. At—what do you call them—an assisted living home or something. I talked to him on the phone once in a while.

Young: When were you married?

Baker: October 1, 1947.

Young: 1947. And who did you marry?

Baker: Mary Major. She actually had been a ward of the court. Her parents had separated and her mother had been declared unfit. At that time, they had what they called a Children's Service League that'd take these kids and farm them out to somebody. It's like you're raising hogs. This poor gal took her in and they got paid like thirty bucks a month or something. The county would buy their clothes, pay their tuition, all that kind of stuff. All this gal had to supply was room and board. They had a big garden out there and she put all those Service League kids to work in the garden. There were five of them. My wife had an older brother, Bob Major. There were three other guys. Walter (last name ??) had two sisters, Veronica and Amelia. So there were five Service League kids. That's a hundred and fifty bucks a month. And back in the early thirties, that was a lot of money. They did pretty well. But not much sentiment involved. You're just raising kids like you're raising hogs. So she was glad to get away from there, of course.

Young: And how many children do you have?

Baker: Me? Five. Two girls, three boys, all doing well. All good citizens. Hard workers.

Young: You've done something right, you and your wife.

Baker: Well I guess. Mostly, my wife raised the kids. I was out working somewhere. When you have five kids, you make a penny any way you can get it. I worked at the bank for about eleven years and wasn't making any money. So I went to work with the Department of Transportation for about thirty-seven years. In the meantime, I was

helping on the farm out there. I knew a guy—Virgil Newman—best friend I ever had. Worked for Virgil, driving a tractor, working nights, weekends and all that stuff. Worked for a local auctioneer doing a lot of clerk and cashier at auctions. Any way to make a few bucks. And my wife stayed home and took care of the kids. It worked out pretty well.

Young: Sounds like it did.

Baker: I've got kids that can do anything. My youngest son is a journeyman electrician and a journeyman carpenter. My oldest son works for the phone company making these computerized switchboards where you don't have to have operators. The computers don't go on strike like the operators. It's so complicated, I wouldn't know what it was if you told me. He's about ready to retire now.

Young: That sounds good. Been with the phone company that long then?

Baker: Yeah, he's about ready, he'll be retiring in another year or so. In fact, my oldest daughter is retired. She was a nurse. Registered nurse in the mental health field, and finally retired from there a year or so ago.

Young: How'd your experiences influence your thinking about war or the military in general?

Baker: I don't know how.

Young: How to answer it?

Baker: I wouldn't know how to answer that 'cause I...I guess it influenced my thinking.

Young: How'd it change you as a person? How do you think you would have been without the military?

Baker: Oh, I don't know if I'd be any different now. It's hard to tell. My brother Floyd is about a year and a half younger than me, or two years. Once I learned how to read, I read every book I could get my hands on. But Floyd, he wouldn't. I doubt if he's a read a book in the last forty years. He's a real good mechanic and I can't fix anything. So you'd think we'd be like two peas in a pod but there's that much difference in us.

In fact, I still have the first book I ever owned. I wanted a book. I remember that I was eight years old and I got a book down here at Cole's Bookstore. I don't know why this happened. My Mom and Dad took me to town and down in the basement of Cole's Bookstore are all these books. I looked around. I had that book in mind. A guy name Paul Shelby wrote *(Unintelligible) of Abraham Lincoln*. He'd been editor of the Springfield Journal and a personal friend of Lincoln's and wrote this book. It cost two dollars and seventeen cents. I still have the book. My Dad was working for a dollar a day. I'm thinking that the people's he's working for must have realized that we needed a little help. They probably gave him the money to do it. I'll

never know now what I didn't know then. Mom and Dad, of course, are both gone. But two dollars and seventeen cents was hard to come by back in 1933. Dad was working for a dollar day on the farm.

Young: You still have that big love for books.

Baker: Along with about ten thousand others now.

Young: I notice here at the library that you always have a book, you're checking out books. What advice or wisdom would you pass on to the future generations? For your grandkids?

Baker: I don't know. They probably don't listen anyway. You got to let them make their own mistakes. I got one grandson that's in the National Guard. He just got back from a year in Baghdad. But he's going to school. He wants to work for ATF but he's got (??) works for ATF. He's going to Afghanistan, I guess, in August of this year, along with the unit. But he's the only one in the military. When Vietnam was going strong, my oldest son was in the Army Reserve. He had a high draft number. Some guy come out from the Army Reserves and talked him into joining the reserve, which he did. And he went through basic training and all that stuff, but his unit never did get called up. My second son had a high draft number and he was going to join the Air Force. He went out there and had some dental work that had to be done. They said, "You can go back and get that done and come back and see us." But before he had to go back, the war in Vietnam pretty well wound down and they changed the system to all volunteer army. So he didn't have to go.

Young: Is there anything else you'd like to say about your life, or anything you'd like to tell people?

Baker: I'd probably do the same thing over. Of course, if the country goes to war, you go. Stonewall Jackson at one point—of course he was wrong fighting for the South but—he gave a speech to his church. He told the boys that at some point, your country may have need of your services, and when that time comes, you draw your sword and throw away the scabbard. You just stay there 'til it's over. That's the way it ought to be.

Young: Thanks Russell for sharing all your experiences with us.

Baker: Okay, Bob. You want these maps back probably.

(end of interview)