

## Interview with Ralph Contreras

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, May 20, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and I'm here in Dixon, Illinois today with Ralph Contreras. Good afternoon Ralph.

Contreras: Good afternoon.

DePue: Ralph, you had your experiences with the Marines in World War II in the Pacific, and we're going to talk quite a bit about that. I know that you've got a great memory and you've got some very important stories to tell us. But as I always like to do, I want to start with much earlier than that, because I also think you have some interesting things to say about growing up during the depression and then the start of World War II, et cetera. So tell me when and where you were born.

Contreras: I was born right here in Dixon, Illinois, out there by a cement plant, in 1925. August 8, 1925.

DePue: August 8th.

Contreras: August 8th. No wait; that was August 12th, 1925, 8/12/25. I always get that mixed up.

DePue: Okay, August 12th. How did your family end up in this area of the country?

Contreras: Well, they were living in Kansas City, Missouri, and I believe the cement plant drew them out here. There's a cement plant right outside of town, about two miles east of town, and they came to work there.

DePue: You have a Hispanic name; I think it's Hispanic, right?

Contreras: Yes. My dad was from Mexico and my mother was from El Paso, and they met while he was working on the railroad. Then they eloped and went to Kansas City, and then from Kansas City, they came up here.

DePue: How old was your father when he came into the United States then?

Contreras: I have no idea. He must have been in his twenties. I have no idea how old he was.

DePue: Did he ever tell you why he came to the United States?

Contreras: No, we never did talk about his life at all.

DePue: What was your mother's maiden name?

Contreras: My mother's name was Florentina. In fact, they didn't get married until they got here in Dixon, in '25; my older brother was born in Kansas City when they were there. All the rest of us were born here in Illinois, in Dixon.

DePue: Was your mother a native Spanish speaker?

Contreras: Yeah, yeah, she was a regular. Her family was from Mexico, too.

DePue: But she was born in this country?

Contreras: That I don't know. It's funny, we never talked about that. I left home too. I think I was fourteen, something years old, when I left home to work, so I never talked to my dad and mother like my younger sisters. They knew more about the family history than I did, because I wasn't around the house very much like they were.

DePue: You said you had one older brother, but it doesn't sound like he was too much older.

Contreras: He was two years older than I was.

DePue: What's his name?

Contreras: His name was Nelo.

DePue: Nelo?

Contreras: Yeah.

DePue: N-e-l-o?

Contreras: N-e-l-o, yeah. He was the oldest and I was the second oldest. There was fifteen of us altogether at one time.

DePue: Does that count your parents or fifteen kids?

Contreras: No, fifteen kids. My mother gave birth to fifteen kids. A couple died like at birth. She had a set of twins that died at birth and then a couple of others, they died maybe after six months. Back then, when they would have pneumonia, and they didn't have no cure for the whooping coughs and all that, and diseases that they cure now.

DePue: Well it sounds like your father would have gotten to the United States in the early '20s, maybe about that timeframe, because by 1925, you're born here in Dixon. What was it like growing up to two Spanish speaking, Hispanic parents in Dixon?

Contreras: Well, all I remember is that we were dirt poor. The cement plant would close down in the wintertime, so then my dad would have to go Sterling where they had the wire mill. He'd go over there and work, stay there a week, come home on weekends. I forgot what the question was.

DePue: Well, what it was like growing up here.

Contreras: Oh, well we were brought up out in the country. We weren't around big cities or anything. I don't know how I ever got to learn the English language. I don't remember first, second or third grade, how I went to school at Stony Point.

DePue: Stony Point?

Contreras: School, yeah. They had four grades in one room and four grades in another room. There was two rooms, a two room schoolhouse; first to four in one room and fifth to eighth in the other room. I remember as far back as the fourth and fifth grade. That's about as far back as I remember, because I don't remember how I got to learn how to speak, talk American, or write, any of that, because at home all we did was talk in Spanish; we were all Spanish speaking. My father and mother, they knew some English but not, you know, to communicate. They always talked in Spanish.

DePue: You mentioned that you were living on a farm; the family was on a farm or again, the country?

Contreras: There was a settlement out there at the cement plant,. There were Hungarian people out there, Irish, Italian and Mexican families, and they all lived in a little settlement right out there.X. The company had a bunch of blockhouses, and then there was little farmettes, farmhouses for the farm help. The company had a bunch of blockhouses. The cement plant had their own houses

where the people would stay that worked there at the company. They were all knocked down. They were all blockhouses; where they used to be out there there's not a single building left.

DePue: Did you have any idea why there were so many foreign workers there?

Contreras: Well, no I don't. It just happened. The Hungarian people, they had a little farmette. They had a couple of cows and chickens, and they grew grapes and made their own wine and stuff. The Italian people, they had a bar out there and a grocery store, but most of them all worked there at the cement plant.

DePue: What was the name of the cement plant, do you recall?

Contreras: It was Medusa Cement plant.

DePue: Medusa?

Contreras: Yeah, Medusa. But then, it's been sold a couple of times. I can't think of the last ones that bought it out. They finally closed down; it's not operating now. It's completely closed down.

DePue: Do you remember any incidents while you were growing up where you became distinctly aware that, Gosh, I'm different from most of the people I'm going to school with?

Contreras: No, we never had that problem, because there was such a mixture there. The only people we didn't have was any colored people out there, but there was never any prejudice among the whole bunch out there. We all got along real good. We didn't run into prejudice until we come into town, and then we could see some of it.

DePue: Come into Dixon here?

Contreras: Yeah, right here, when we started going to high school and stuff like that. There was a lot of that.

DePue: You would have been in high school, you would have been fourteen around that timeframe, so this would have been about 1938, '39?

Contreras: I graduated from grade school in '39 and I went to high school one year and then when the war broke out, I signed up for the Marine Corps. I was sixteen, fourteen or fifteen, sixteen. I went up to Rockford to sign up and when I was taking a physical, I didn't weigh enough. You had to weigh at least a hundred and fifty pounds. I forget how much I weighed. So I come back and then I went back up when I was sixteen and I signed up. I was sixteen years old and then I went in when I was seventeen; I got called when I was seventeen. So I quit school after that first year. I didn't go back to school.

DePue: Were you working in that first year of school?

Contreras: I started working when I was thirteen, fourteen years old.

DePue: What were you doing at the time?

Contreras: Well, I started working at a drugstore, washing dishes on weekends, and then I got on full-time, washing dishes six days a week, working ten hours a day for ten dollars a week, and six days a week.

DePue: You said you had one year of school then. After that year of school, then you started working full-time?

Contreras: Yeah, well I started working before school, during the vacation. When I got out of grade school, I started working at the drugstore, washing dishes. I don't know how long I was there after I got on full-time, like I said, working ten hours a day, six days a week, for ten dollars a week. So then after a while, I got to be a janitor, so I was scrubbing the floors and washing windows and stuff. While I'm janitor, I was doing stock work, filling up the shelves, and then I got to checking in orders. I was doing all this and putting in window displays. I was doing all kinds of stuff besides the janitor work. It was a chain store. There was about forty different stores throughout the Midwest—Illinois Iowa, Indiana—and they had a supervisor that would come in.

The supervisor come in one day and he says, "Ralph, come on back here; I want to talk to you." I thought I was going to get fired. He says, "How much are you making a week?" And I says, "Ten dollars a week." And he said oh, from now on, you're going to be making twenty-five dollars a week. He says, put on a necktie and get behind that counter and wait on people. So I was still doing the same thing. I was still putting in windows and checking stock, and then I got to be ordering merchandise for the store and everything, and then I finally went in the service.

The company had a share-the-wealth program of some kind. In other words, you made so much money, it would go into your account, and then the company made so much money and so much percentage of whatever you made, they would put in this account, just like a bank account. It was kind of like a retirement fund. So when I went in the service, they kept adding to my account, but not as much money, because I wasn't making any money; but they were making money and so they were putting so much in my account. So when I got back out, I went back to work. By then, I was making forty dollars a week.

DePue: But that's jumping way ahead. We're talking about '46 timeframe now?

Contreras: Yeah, when I got back from the service.

DePue: Okay. But it sounds like you had dropped out of school after just one year of high school.

Contreras: Yeah, I had dropped out.

DePue: How much of that paycheck you were getting, were you keeping?

Contreras: Not too much of it, because whatever I had, I gave it mostly at home, to help at home. There wasn't too much that I kept. I done a lot of extra work for extra money, like I washed windows downtown, in the stores. I had about ten, twelve businesses that I would wash the windows once a week, so that I had a little extra money. But I would give my whole ten dollars to my folks, to help out with the family finances there.

DePue: Who would you say was your strongest influence growing up?

Contreras: Well, there was a lady that ran the Goodfellows Clubs. She ran this out of her home. People that needed clothes like shoes and any clothing, we would go down there and she would supply all that stuff for us. When we were younger, we'd write to Santa Claus on what we wanted for Christmas and we could only ask for one item. So we would write this letter to Santa Claus and I think our neighbors would turn it in to this lady, Mrs. Leidig, which was the Goodfellows. She would see that we got what we ordered for Christmas.

DePue: Was your family pretty religious?

Contreras: Yeah, they were Catholic. When we went to church, we would walk. It was at least two miles outside of town where we lived. We'd walk in on Sundays, walk up to the church. We'd take catechism courses in town here and we'd come in maybe for two weeks at a time and go to the St. Mary's School to take these catechism classes that the nuns would put on. That was the extent of my religion there.

DePue: The first time you tried to join the military, was that prior to Pearl Harbor?

Contreras: That was after Pearl Harbor.

DePue: Why don't you tell us about what memories you might have about the day Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Contreras: I remember going into work and when I got downtown to work, it had come on the radio that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. So all my buddies and friends, we were all kind of, I don't know what it was. We all wanted to get in there and fight the Japs, and everybody was gung-ho to get in there. So that's when I tried to join. I was sixteen. A lot of the guys—there was about a half a dozen of us—we were all going to join the Marine Corps. It turned out, I'm the only one that wound up in the Marine Corps. The rest of them, they signed up in the Navy or the Air Corps. In fact, there was so many people

joining the Air Corps and the Navy, because they wanted to get in their own branch of service. Nobody wanted any part of the Army or the Marine Corps, because they knew if they got in there, they were going to be the first ones to fight. So they came out with an order: after you turned eighteen, you could not sign up for anything, you had to wait to be drafted. And so then when they drafted you, they would put you where they needed most, so guys were being drafted into the Marine Corps, they were being drafted into the Army, which they didn't want to be but they still got put in there. Some of the guys, they would tell them well, if you don't want to be in the Marine Corps, you can put in a request that you don't want to be in here. But they still wound up overseas with the Marine Corps. They never did get out of there.

DePue: Well the military has a tendency to put people where they need them, not necessarily where you wanted to go.

Contreras: Yeah. But I wanted to get in the Marine Corps. In fact, after I went in there, after I finally got in, just signed up, I went in for my physical in Chicago and we waited in line all day long. And then just about I got to have my turn they said well, we've got enough for today, you guys have to come back tomorrow. And I said, well I can't come back tomorrow; I'm from out of town. He says all right, we'll put you up overnight. They put us up overnight at a hotel. So the next morning they took us back. But after trying to get in, you know, having that problem with the weight and then going down there and then having to wait for your physical and stuff, I mean I felt like I was not going to make it. But when I got overseas and started getting shot at, I said what the hell am I doing out here, you know, after talking my way into it.

DePue: Well that gets us back to an obvious question here. When you first started this process and you said you wanted to get into the Marines, why? What was it about the Marines that drew you?

Contreras: Well, they were always the first to fight. Like I said, I couldn't wait to get in there after what the Japs done, you know, and we were all gung-ho. So I just wanted to get over there as fast as I could. Like I said, when I got over there, then I said, What am I doing here. But that was the main thing. I don't know what it was. I just wanted to get in the Marine Corps.

DePue: And it sounds like it took you. When we previously had spoken, you actually were able to enlist in the Marines in 1943. So you've got about a year and a couple months there that were you were fighting to get in?

Contreras: Yeah, when I first went in. I actually didn't get in until '43. Yeah, I finally got in, in '43.

DePue: So you would have been right at either seventeen or eighteen at that time.

Contreras: I was seventeen when I finally got in, when they finally called me up, because I didn't get called up right away. I got called up after my seventeenth birthday.

DePue: Correct me if I'm wrong here, but did your parents have to sign for you to get in?

Contreras: Well, they wouldn't sign, so I had one of the neighbors sign for me.

DePue: Somebody signed as your parents, as your mother?

Contreras: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Why didn't your mom think this was a good idea?

Contreras: Well, you know how the parents are back then. They didn't want their son to go into war, I guess. They were pretty protective back then and you always done what your parents told you to do.

DePue: Well maybe not always, huh?

Contreras: Yeah.

DePue: How much of that was that they were relying on the income you were sending home every month?

Contreras: Well, I don't know about that. All I know is that all my money was sent home, and I had bonds—they took out so much for war bonds.

DePue: Now you're talking about for the Marines. Once you're in the Marines, you're sending money home?

Contreras: Yeah, once in the Marines. They sent them—I mean I never had them give me an accounting of it. I knew they could use it, so I just sent it home.

DePue: Was your dad as equally against the idea of being in the military as your mother?

Contreras: Well, he didn't say too much. I don't remember just how it was.

DePue: How about Nelo? He would be prime enlistment age.

Contreras: Well Nelo, he got drafted, so he didn't have much of a choice. Then my younger brother, the next brother after me—because we were all one year apart, all fifteen of us—he got drafted also, my younger brother, one year younger than I was.

DePue: What's his name?

Contreras: His name is Jesse.

DePue: Jesse? And what branch did Nelo go into?



Contreras: He got drafted in the Army and then Jesse got drafted in the Army also.

DePue: Did they end up being infantrymen?

Contreras: Yeah. In fact, when I went in and when my older brother went in, we never got home. We never got a furlough once we left home. We never got to come home at all before we went overseas. They usually give you a ten-day furlough; we never did, neither one of us did. My younger brother, when he went in, he got stationed down south someplace in Chicago, so he got home every weekend. And then, when they shipped him to Germany and he was doing the combat zone there for a couple of months when the war ended. So his outfit is going to be sent to the Pacific to help the Marines out there. Well, on the way to the South Pacific, they stopped in the States and the war was over in Japan. So he's in and out and home, and I'm still over there in China, chasing communists over there in China.

I made a mistake when I signed up. I signed up for the duration of the war plus six months. So in other words, you had to serve out the war and six months after the war. So after Okinawa and the war was over, everybody that got drafted, they all got sent home, but I had to serve six months, so they sent me over to China for occupation duty.

DePue: Well again, we're a little bit ahead of the story, but we will definitely get there. One other question about the timeframe, when you actually joined the service, did you have a girlfriend at the time?

Contreras: Oh yeah, I had a lot of girlfriends. I didn't have no special one, no at that time.

DePue: So nothing to tie you down here, huh?

Contreras: No. In fact, I wasn't girl crazy. I'd rather go play ball than take a girl out; I mean that's how backwards I was back then. I wasn't smart enough to have a girlfriend.

DePue: Before Pearl Harbor, were you the kind of person who was paying attention to the news and watching what was going on in Europe and with the Japanese?

Contreras: Yeah, I would follow the news. Back then, the only news you had was when you went to the movie and they had these short newsreels.

DePue: The newsreels.

Contreras: The newsreels, yeah. Then I would read the paper about the war too, see how it was going.

DePue: When you first heard about Pearl Harbor, did you know where Pearl Harbor was?

- Contreras: No, I never heard of it before. All I know is it's Pearl Harbor.
- DePue: But apparently it bothered you. You have this place you'd never heard of before, was bombed by the Japanese.
- Contreras: Yeah, when that happened, everybody was pretty gung-ho. It wasn't like the Vietnam War, when people were going to Canada to avoid the draft. Everybody wanted to get in. But everybody wanted to get in the service they wanted to be in, not be put wherever they needed you.
- DePue: Well tell me about after you were inducted in 1943. Where did you get your your basic training?
- Contreras: San Diego. We got seven weeks of boot camp and back there, they ran boot camp a lot rougher than they do now. I mean back there, drill instructors could hit you and kick your butt and all that sort of stuff, and do a lot of mean things to you. They can't do that any more; they can't touch you any more. A lot of people would get killed in some of the stuff they would do to the guys. In fact, they'd put you out on a forced march at night, and a guy would fall off a cliff or something like that, in the night. So they kind of got away from that, from what it was.
- DePue: Do you want to put any value judgment on whether it was too tough back then, or it's too soft now?
- Contreras: I think boot camp is a lot softer than it was back then.
- DePue: But is that a good or a bad thing?
- Contreras: Well, it was good for you. I mean the way they treated you, it made you fighting mad. You couldn't wait to get at them, you know? The DIs [Drill Instructors] were real rough, tough on you, I mean if you do something wrong. We had, we call it spiff helmets, sun helmets, and it had the Marine Corps emblem.
- DePue: Emblem on there?
- Contreras: Yeah, it's got the Marine emblem and it's got a screw in there that sticks about a quarter of an inch inside, and the DI would hit you on top of the head and then that screw would come right down.
- DePue: A nice trickle of blood going down your nose after that then?
- Contreras: Yeah. And then I was always putting my hands in my pockets; my hands were always cold. We were up in the mountains, at the rifle range, and they kept telling not to be putting my hands in my pockets, but I kept doing it anyway, so they would fill my pockets up with rocks so I couldn't put my hands in there. Then if you would call the rifle a gun, they would make you walk

around. You probably heard that before, you know, you'd walk around, "this is my gun; this is my rifle; this is for pleasure; this is for killing," and all that sort of stuff. And you marched around. Or they would make you run up and down that sand along the beach with your rifle, just keep you running until you dropped.

DePue: Well, here you are a young man; you'd been working half your life already. I would assume you're a pretty tough cookie, even by that age, but did you understand why they were so rough on you?

Contreras: Well, at that time we didn't. We were ready to kill that drill instructor. But after we graduated from boot camp and he invited us over for a beer and stuff, he was just the nicest fellow. You know, we were ready to kill him.

DePue: I'm wondering, it sounds like you started speaking Spanish when you were growing up in the household, because that's what your parents would have been speaking. Was there a distinct accent that you had at that time?

Contreras: I imagine. I imagine I still have one when I talk, I don't know. Some people say that I do.

DePue: Well, today it's very slight. Unless I had known that that was your background, I wouldn't have guessed it at all. Did the DIs focus in on the fact that you were Hispanic, that you were Mexican?

Contreras: No, it never bothered me.

DePue: It didn't bother them?

Contreras: No, it never bothered them. I never had that problem.

DePue: You had other problems, but not that one. What happened then, after basic training experience?

Contreras: Well, after that we went to train. I got sent to 81 millimeter school.

DePue: A mortar school?

Contreras: Mortar school. I got a picture of me with some mortar. I qualified for a gunner. An 81 millimeter is big too, about that big, that tall.

DePue: About three feet high?

Contreras: Yeah. Then they have a 60, which is a smaller one. I trained for that and I qualified for a gunner. In fact, my discharge paper says qualified gunner, 81 millimeter mortar. We trained for it—I think we trained with it for about four or five weeks, then we got shipped overseas. We're on our way to hit Guam, and our squad leader called me over and he says, "Contreras, come on over

here." And there on the deck of the ship—I was onboard ship—a flamethrower. He said, we're going to show you how to operate this and you're going to carry this in when we go into Guam. I never seen a flamethrower before. And of all this time, of the two years that I spent overseas, not never once did I fire an 81, but I never even seen one, in the two years over there, and here I was, a trained, qualified gunner for it. They handed me a flamethrower.

DePue: Tell us what it meant to be a gunner for an 81 millimeter mortar.

Contreras: Well, it's a three man squad. One guy handles the tripod, sets it up, then the other guy handles the plate that goes on, and then the gunner—he carries the sights—he puts the sights on and you sight the target. You have a stick out there to zero in on and then they have forward observers that give you the data for what to fire.

DePue: Being the gunner, does that mean you're in charge of the three-man team?

Contreras: Yeah, in charge of three men. You just sit there on the site, you just set the sights, and then when you've got it ready then you drop that, you drop that in the tube.

DePue: Was this training also at San Diego?

Contreras: That was at San Diego, yeah.

DePue: Well that probably puts you towards late '43 and maybe even inching into '44. Where did you go after that training?

Contreras: After the training, I went right overseas. I went right over here. We went to Hawaii.

DePue: Maui?

Contreras: No, the 22nd was there, but I was in Honolulu. I was at Pearl Harbor.

DePue: So when you went over to Hawaii, you were still a Marine, not assigned to a particular unit?

Contreras: No, I was at what they call a replacement center. They call it tent city replacement center. That's where my brother came in to see me. He was stationed there.

DePue: Was that a surprise, seeing your brother?

Contreras: Yeah, that sure was. And then he was on Okinawa. He was in an Army outfit. He was in Okinawa also, and I knew his outfit was there, so I took off from

my outfit and went to see him. He was artillery, about ten miles behind the lines, living in tents and sleeping in cots.

DePue: Well, it sounds like you're jealous of him, Ralph.

Contreras: He ate hot meals. I just stayed there a couple of days and had some of his chow and rested a while.

DePue: Well again, we're kind of quite a bit ahead of our storyline here. Do you remember what unit he was assigned to in the Army?

Contreras: I don't remember the artillery unit, no.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about meeting him in Hawaii then.

Contreras: Well, like I said, I was sleeping in a tent. That's a picture. That was in Okinawa. There's a picture of us here someplace, him and I.

DePue: We can find that later and we'll certainly scan that in.

Contreras: Well, there's a picture of him and I there someplace, when we were in Hawaii. Then when we met in Okinawa, we also have a picture.

DePue: Well that was many, many months later I'm sure.

Contreras: That was in '44, I think, when I met him, and then I met him again in '45, because we hit Okinawa, April 1, 1945, April Fool's Day.

DePue: How long were you in Hawaii before you were assigned to a line unit?

Contreras: Gees, I don't remember, it wasn't too long. We weren't there too long, in Hawaii. I don't remember how long I was there.

DePue: What unit were you assigned to?

Contreras: Well it wasn't a unit; it was just kind of a replacement center. We weren't assigned to anything. As outfits needed people, they would just call in for so many guys; they'd call for two or three hundred for replacement for one of the divisions, and they would pull them out of there. So that's where I got pulled out of there, and went to Eniwetok, where I joined the 22nd Marines there.

DePue: Eniwetok. Okay, we're looking at a map now. Eniwetok is kind of in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and I'm trying to figure out what island chain that would be.

Contreras: I think that's the Marshals.

DePue: It's basically south of Wake Island, a few hundred miles.

Contreras: Yeah, there's Wake up there.

DePue: And you said it was the 22nd?

Contreras: Yeah, the 22nd Marines; I joined there.

DePue: The 22nd Marine Regiment. What division did the 22nd Marines belong to?

Contreras: Well, they didn't belong to a division. That was a lone outfit. They weren't a division, they were just a battalion. They were a lone battalion, the 22nd Marines.

DePue: It sounds like one of those units that didn't exist prior to the war, that it had been formed during the war itself.

Contreras: No. The 22nd, they were down in Samoa someplace, and they come up and hit Eniwetok. They were down in Samoa and Bougainville Island, down in that area there.

DePue: When you joined them, were they in combat?

Contreras: Yeah, they were in combat right here. That was their first combat there, at Eniwetok, and I joined them right after that. I went in as a replacement there, at Eniwetok. They had lost some guys there.

DePue: Did you get there during the action or after the combat?

Contreras: I got right after there, right after there. They were still burying the Japanese. They killed everybody, every Jap, every living human being that was on that island, they killed; the 22nd killed them.

DePue: I know you're in the 22nd. What specific platoon and company were you assigned to, do you recall that?

Contreras: I don't know if you can see that, the 1st Platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion, 22nd Marines.

DePue: 1st Battalion, C Company.

Contreras: 1st Battalion, the 22nd Marines.

DePue: And what was the job you got? Were you just a standard rifleman then?

Contreras: Yeah. I was a rifleman when we hit Guam.

DePue: Was that the next stop for you then?

Contreras: Yeah. From Eniwetok, we went down to the canal.

- DePue: When you say the canal, the Guadalcanal?
- Contreras: The Guadalcanal they call it. And down at the canal, they had the 4th Marine Regiment. The 4th Regiment was in the Philippines when the Japanese hit, so they got wiped out there in the Philippines. So this 4th Regiment used to have a raider—like the 2nd Raider Battalion—the 4th Raider Battalion; so we joined with the 4th Raider Battalion.
- DePue: Raider Battalion?
- Contreras: It was a Raider Battalion that was reinforced.
- DePue: Was that a Marine unit as well?
- Contreras: Yeah, that was a Marine unit. You've heard of the raider battalions. They raided, like Makin Island in August, '42, where they went in there and raided that island, got out of there before the Japs knew what hit them. They called that the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade. The 4th Battalion and the 22nd Battalion was the first brigade to go hit Guam.
- DePue: When you went into Guadalcanal, it sounds like this was well after the main fighting that had gone on there.
- Contreras: Yeah.
- DePue: And so this was basically under American control by then.
- Contreras: Oh, yeah. There were still Japs, but we used to go on patrol in the jungles, because there were still Japs there up in the jungles.
- DePue: Was that really where you kind of got on the job training on how to be in a line infantry unit then?
- Contreras: Yeah, that's where I started doing all that infantry training there.
- DePue: Any particular memories about going on some of these patrols during the time you were in Guadalcanal?
- Contreras: We went on patrol one time up in the jungles and we found—in the trunk of a tree, they had these big trees. They have big trunks and there was a big open hole there, and there was a twin barrel Japanese gun in there. We didn't know where it came from or what, but there were still Japs around there. They must have had it hidden there. It was a brand new one, just sitting there in this hollow trunk. That's the only signs of the Japs that we've seen there when we were on patrol.
- DePue: Where then after Guadalcanal?

Contreras: That's when they formed the 1st Brigade. We trained with the 4th and then we went up and hit Guam.

DePue: Okay. Now we're talking about July of 1944, it looks like. So that would be the first time you actually were in combat?

Contreras: Yeah, that's the first action to see. I had to carry the doggone flamethrower in.

DePue: Didn't you feel like something of a pretty big target with a flamethrower strapped on your back?

Contreras: Yeah, actually you were. There's some pictures in one of the books where it will show you how big the flamethrower was. In fact, on the first day on Guam, there was a pillbox that was holding up the whole works, right on the road, they were going up. This flamethrower, you had to have an assistant turn on the valves. You had two valves on the back; one for the oxygen and the other one for the fluid, and then the handle had like a lighter fluid trigger. You'd flip it and you pushed the trigger for the fluid and then flick that thing and as the fluid came through, it would ignite. Well, you had to have an assistant. This kid, this buddy of mine, he was supposed to be my assistant, and we got up there, we were pinned down, because they couldn't get the machinegun and there was all kinds of fire. So I couldn't hit the deck. I had to kind of lean back on them tanks you know. If they ever hit them tanks, they wouldn't find me at all. So I kind of leaned back and I could just hear the bullets going by my ears.

My assistant, he was behind, oh, about from here to the end of that doorway. He was behind a coconut stump and he turned his head like this to say—I don't know if he was going to say something, and then he just, his head went down. As he turned his head, it went down like this. He got a slug right through his head, right through his brain. I don't know if it was a stray or a sniper or what, but he gets it there and I'm right behind him in the open and I'm not hit and he gets killed. That's the way it was. There had to be somebody looking after you, because it happened like that in many instances, where the guy right next to you got it and you're still alive. It kind of makes you feel guilty, you know, "Why is he gone and I'm not?"

So anyway, we got another guy who had to turn on the valves, and we're trying to get up to the pillbox. He says okay and I aimed the thing and squeezed it, nothing happened, not a damn thing happened and I thought, "Oh, this is a fine way to start this war." So I took the damn flamethrower off and threw it on the ground and some guy that got hit had a Browning Automatic Rifle, and so I picked that up, and so that's what I had the rest of the operation. In fact, that's what I carried the rest of the time, is that Browning.

DePue: So that one time you tried the flamethrower and that was the end of that experiment.



Contreras: That was it. After a guy getting killed trying to get up to that pillbox and after we got there and nothing happened, I mean that was terrible.

DePue: Do you remember that first time you went into Guam and the actual landing operation, hitting the beach with the Marines?

Contreras: We were in the first wave; the Japs always let the first three waves come in. We jumped off our Amtrak and hit the ground and not a shot fired at us and said boy, this is nice. We went maybe fifty, a hundred yards inland and then all of a sudden we hear all this stuff going over our head. They were opening up on the fourth and fifth wave. The Japs done that. They let the first three waves in, and figure you get the replacements, your ammunition and water and supplies coming in. I don't know what they figured but that's the way they done.

DePue: So that didn't make any sense to you?

Contreras: Yeah. And so we're hearing all this stuff going over our heads, blowing these guys up. Our chaplain was in one of the Amtraks that got a direct hit and killed all twenty-two guys in there besides him. A Catholic chaplain was in there. Then they started opening on us, started firing down on us, so that's when we started firing then.

DePue: You told us about that first experience when the flamethrower ends up not working for you. What's going through your head at that time? I mean, this is not a smart thing to be doing, walking around in the middle of battle with people shooting at you, with a flamethrower strapped on your back.

Contreras: Well, there's so much going on, you just don't think. I automatically just took the damn thing off and picked up this Browning. Then we had to pull back, so we pulled back and dug in for the night. There was a road. We dug in alongside this road here. We were here, my foxhole was about right here, and right here alongside the road, the 60 millimeter mortars were digging in. A buddy of mine, he got in there where 60s, they were up on the frontline, the smaller ones. So that night, we heard all this commotion down there going on. What them Japs tried to do, they brought that machinegun right down that road. In fact, our lines were right there, they got past our lines, about maybe twenty-five, fifty yards, before they finally got them with that twin barrel machinegun.

DePue: They were walking right down the center of the road.

Contreras: They walked right down the center of the road, shooting, and then they got by our lines. Well anyway, the next morning I went down to look and here's my buddy, sitting in his hole there. He was sitting there and he's dead. I don't know how he got killed or what, but he was in his foxhole, so they must have got him when they were shooting, coming down that line. I don't know what happened. I mean you see a guy dead and you don't know how he got killed or

anything. This guy was married and he had a baby, and every place we went, he'd always take out his billfold and he'd talk to his wife and kid, telling them where he was at and what he was doing and all that sort of stuff. He got it the first night. The two of my buddies got it that same day.

That buddy of mine there, that kid had told me to be sure to write his mother if anything happened to him, and you know I couldn't find his address when I got home, to write to his mother, to tell her he had died and he didn't suffer or anything. Just a few months ago, when I was doing a lot of cleaning up of my old stuff, I finally ran across his address, but here it is, you know sixty years later. There's no way I could get a hold of his mother then.

DePue: Did you know of any of the Marines who basically couldn't deal with the combat that cracked?

Contreras: No. We never had that up in the front, because we never know. That happened after you went back. It happened to me in Okinawa; I mean I cracked up in Okinawa. We called it combat fatigue. Now they call it post traumatic stress disorder. But that's getting way ahead of my time there, what happened on Okinawa.

DePue: What was it that kept everybody going then, in the midst of this brutal combat that you first experienced?

Contreras: Well, like I say, you don't have time to think about it and you don't talk about it. You just go on about your business and just keep going.

DePue: Is that where the training and all that harsh treatment you got in boot camp kicks in?

Contreras: Yeah. There's a picture; him and I were the only ones that were left out of our platoon in Guam that didn't get killed or wounded.

DePue: Who is this, what's his name?

Contreras: That's me there. I'm trying to find this buddy of mine.

DePue: What was his name?

Contreras: His name was Evans. I can't think of his—there was a Gary Evans. Doggonit. I had a picture that was in there.

DePue: Okay. We can find that later. How many people were in a platoon?

Contreras: Well, we had three or four squads. Four squads, if you had about eight or nine men to a squad.

DePue: Something around thirty-five people?

Contreras: Maybe forty-four to a platoon.

DePue: So out of that platoon, after the action at Guam was over, there's only two of you that hadn't been wounded or killed?

Contreras: Two of us that didn't get wounded or get killed. Half the guys who were killed were killed by our own fire, friendly fire. We had naval gunfire, we had airplanes, tanks; all kinds of friendly fire killed a lot of our guys. Half of the guys were killed by our own fire and the other half got killed by the Japs. But him and I were the only ones left standing, out of that. And it's funny, because we were pinned down at a rice paddy. There was a machinegun they couldn't find, so the squad leader hollers, "Scouts out!" Me and my buddy, we looked at each other and we don't have any scouts, what are you talking about? Pretty soon the squad leader, "Contreras and Evens, get across that rice paddy and draw fire." That's what they wanted was fodder, to draw fire. Now they would sacrifice two guys there, to find out where that machinegun was. So me and my buddy, we got up and we just ran across that as fast as we could, and we could just see the machinegun ain't going to open up on two guys. They're not going to give up their position just for two guys. They were going to wait until the whole company comes in the crosshair.

So anyway, the two of us got across there and he says, okay fellas, come on across now. That was funny. It wasn't funny at that time, like when we looked at each other and we don't have no scouts. Then he says, "Contreras and Evans, get across that rice paddy." So they can find out where that machinegun is coming from, but they didn't open fire on us. The snipers did, all around, because I could see the bullets hitting the water, you know the rice paddy. It was about ankle deep water I think, and we got across there and we finally got it.

DePue: Did the rest of the squad come in after that then?

Contreras: Yeah, by that time, they brought up a tank to fire all around and then see where they finally got to it, finally knocked it out.

DePue: Any other action that you recall from Guam?

Contreras: Yeah, there was another time. We got called in to fill in the gap between two different outfits, and they didn't tell us. We went in there and we started digging foxholes, and pretty soon a mortar barrage come down on us, with our own mortars. Somebody forgot to tell them that we were filling in that gap, and they had orders to lay down a barrage right in that area that we were. By the time we got it stopped, a couple of guys got killed. There was a guy right next to me and he was dead, but I don't know what killed him. All I know is that he was dead, and you don't examine and see what happened to him or what. All you know is he's dead. I mean he was right next to me.

Another time, we were at a crossroads and we were ahead of this crossroad about five hundred yards ahead, when our planes were bombing and strafing that crossroad. We weren't supposed to be there until later that day. They had orders to bomb and strafe that. Well, our 37 antitank guns were setting up, and just as they were setting up there, these guys came in there. They made one pass and by the time we got our orange grenades out, friendly fire just killed a bunch of them guys, just cut them all to pieces. I mean that's an awful feeling, when you see them planes coming and you see them rockets and all that, and the machinegun. It's a hell of a feeling. That was another time.

DePue: What's your reaction then? You kind of talked about it a little bit, but what are you thinking when you know that as many of the casualties are from friendly fire as they are from enemy fire?

Contreras: You just don't think about it. We don't talk about it or think about it or nothing; just if it happens, it happens. They say it happens in all wars, so there's nothing you can do about it. We'd just say well, I'm glad it's him that got killed instead of me. That's the way you think.

DePue: Was this a conscious decision or it just kind of happened that way, where you didn't reflect on it?

Contreras: Yeah, I don't know, a conscious, just you know, when it happens and you figure how come him and not me, then it kind of makes you feel guilty. But you figured, well, you're still feeling good because it wasn't you, it was him. I don't know how to express it, when that happens like that.

DePue: So at the end of that combat, your first experience in Guam, there was practically nobody left in your platoon. I'm suspecting that the rest of the unit pretty much got beat up as well. So what happens after that? Did they rebuild the unit?

Contreras: We go back after Guam, we went back to the canal, and then all these guys that got out of that hospital, they started bringing them back. I don't know how many guys come back.

DePue: So people from your unit who had been recovering in hospitals, returned to the same units?

Contreras: Yeah, returned. The guys who were wounded, they didn't get shot up too bad. And then they brought in replacements. This buddy of mine, we both ended up in the hospital when we got back, because we got what they called dengue fever, something like the flu.

DePue: Dengue fever?

Contreras: We call it dengue fever. It used to be malaria;, they called it malaria. You have the chills and all that stuff. So we both ended up in the hospital. So while we're in the hospital, we missed out on the reconstruction of the platoon; all the guys that came back, they were made corporals and sergeants. I would have been made a squad leader, but I wound up in the hospital with a fungus infection on my feet. I had blisters all over my feet. You couldn't hardly walk, because you'd get them on the bottom of your feet and all over, just big blisters. You go to the base station and they would prick them open and then soak them in potassium permanganate. They used to sell that stuff at the drugstore, potassium permanganate. It's a purple powder that you put into water and you soaked your feet in it.

Well I'm getting my feet fixed in there and the company commander had a leg wound and he says oh, "Awful looking feet." And I said, yes sir, and he says, "Do you think you could drive a jeep with them feet?" "Oh yes sir, I could sure drive a jeep with them feet." So he said well, I'm going to make you a company jeep driver and I said, well that sounds pretty good. That took me off the frontlines, but I still had to drive up to the frontlines, taking water and ammunition and all that sort of stuff: supplies, rations and stuff.

So when all of this is going on, all my buddies got to be corporals and sergeants, and so they got to be squad leaders when they went into Okinawa. That saved my life, that got me off the frontlines, because all these guys, all my buddies that got to be squad leaders, they all got killed there in Okinawa. There were bigger percentages of casualties on Okinawa there, than there was on Guam, especially the 22nd Marines. They got the brunt there at Sugarloaf Hill. So I figured that saved my life there, from being on that frontline. But when we got to Okinawa, I still had to go up to the frontlines and take up ammunition and rations and stuff.

DePue: It sounds like once you got done with Guam and you return to Guadalcanal, that your unit was there for several months rebuilding.

Contreras: Yeah. And then that's where the 6th Division was formed. It was formed on Guadalcanal. In fact, it tells here in this book, the 6th Division is the only division that never seen the States. It was formed and fought overseas and they were disbanded in China. They never come to the States as a division like all the rest of them did, the 6th Division.

DePue: One of the standard beliefs about the Marines is that they have a strong esprit de corps, a strong sense of unit and pride in the unit. Did you feel it at that time?

Contreras: Yeah, yeah we did. We just felt that we were better than anybody else, you know, that the Army had a lot of good outfits like the Rangers. They didn't have the SEALs at that time, but the Marine Corps was just the spirit, whatever you call it. In other words, you'd be out there and your squad leaders

says okay, number one squad, go up there and take that hill. It would be maybe eight guys. Where the Army would do, and said they'd take that hill, they're going to bomb it with artillery for a day before they go in and take it. That's the way the Army works; that's the way we thought anyway. So I mean, that's how come the Marine Corps has so many casualties. You wouldn't think twice when they'd say okay, you go in there and you know. Just like the guy saying, go across that rice paddy. You don't think about it, you just go ahead and do it.

DePue: Okay, so July of 1944 is when you hit Guam. You come out of there and then you spend several months, quite a while it looks like, in Guadalcanal, rebuilding. And I've got April of 1945, is when the Battle of Okinawa first started.

Contreras: That's right. We landed there; we were on the first wave. I was driving a jeep and I was pulling an anti-tank gun. We landed on April Fool's day. It was April Fool's Day and it was Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945, and we landed there and not a shot was fired. Boy, we thought the Japs were pulling an April Fool's Day on us.

DePue: I've got one of the maps from the *West Point Atlas of Military History*. This is Map 163, if anybody's got that, and it looks like the 6th Marine Division went in on the northern side of the island initially.

Contreras: Right. We landed right in the middle. The 1st Marine Division and the 6th Division, we went north. Which way is north?

DePue: This would be north.

Contreras: Okay, we went north. And the Army—it was the 10th Army—they they had, I think, four divisions.

DePue: So the 10th Army Corps?

Contreras: Yeah, the 10th Army Corps. So they went this way, where the Japs were. Well, the Japs didn't have no defense. Their line of defense was the Naha-Shuri Line.

DePue: Which is way south here.

Contreras: Yeah. That was do or die. That was, they're going to kill as many Americans as they can, then hold until the last guy. That was do or die right there. That's why they let us all come in without firing a shot. So the first day we landed there, we went right up to the airfield. We took the airfield the first day. I think Yonabaru or Yontan. I forget what the name of it is. In fact, we were right there when a Japanese plane landed, a zero.<sup>1</sup> He landed while we were

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<sup>1</sup> Zero was slang for Japanese fighter planes, referring to their logo.

right on the outskirts there. He got out of the plane and he looked around, and he thought something was funny, he couldn't see nobody around. We were all hidden around the thing there. He had a shoulder holster, so he went to reach for his gun and about two hundred guys took a shot at him, but they got the zero intact. Where's that airfield? The airfield is someplace here.

DePue: Yeah, I think the scale of the map is too large for us to see the details of the airfield.

Contreras: It's called Yontan or Yonabarun. Well anyway, this was worse than Guam. Even though I wasn't on the frontlines, I was still getting shot at. We went north. The 22nd Marines, 2nd Battalion, raised the flag on both the north and south ends; secured this whole piece, this whole island.

DePue: Okay, the northern end of the island.

Contreras: The northern end of the island, yeah. We secured it.

DePue: Okay, so now we're looking at your book, which the title of this book.

Contreras: It's the 6th Marine Division.

DePue: The 6th Marine Division book. And this was published right after the war it looks like.

Contreras: Yeah. This is the area that the 6th Division took.

DePue: The part that's shaded, the northern part of the island?

Contreras: Yeah, we took the whole northern point, the area captured by the 6th Marine Division.

DePue: And the Army units and other Marine units were fighting in the southern part of the island it sounds like.

Contreras: Well, the 1st Division, I don't know if they went in there. No, it's the 6th Division. I don't know where the 1st Division, they were the reverse or what. But anyway, we were getting ready to leave the island. We were secure; we said boy, this was easy. When the Army hit the Naha-Shuri Line, right there, all hell broke loose, so we said, we're going to have to go in there and help the Army out. [added later: Both the 6<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> went south to help the Army.]

DePue: Now, this is a different map here, in the southern part of the island. This shows the southern part of the island, and here's this line that you're talking about I think. Here's Naha.

Contreras: It tells in this book here about the 6th Division capturing the Naha Airfield and the peninsula there.

- DePue: Now, which phase of the operation do you think was tougher for the 6th Division, the initial phase where you guys are concentrating on the northern part of the island?
- Contreras: No, that was rough enough, because that was rough territory. Right here is where we...
- DePue: When you went down south and helped out on the Naha-Shuri Line?
- Contreras: The Naha-Shuri Line. In fact, the 22nd Marines cracked on the Naha-Shuri Line.
- DePue: Cracked?
- Contreras: Yeah, we cracked it after all these casualties. The division suffered eight thousand killed and wounded—8227. We also were credited—the 6th Marine Division was credited for killing eighteen thousand Japanese.
- DePue: And the bulk of these were on the Naha-Shuri Line.
- Contreras: Yeah, and captured three thousand. Now, that's unheard of. All them other islands and we never took Japs, they never surrendered, but they surrendered in big numbers there; three thousand captured. And it had taken Yona-barun and Naha airfields.
- DePue: When you say that the 6th Division, or your particular regiment cracked, what do you mean by saying that?
- Contreras: When they cracked? When they come into the action. Is that what I used? When we cracked, that means we broke through.
- DePue: Okay. I wanted to make sure I understood you there.
- Contreras: Yeah, at the Naha-Shuri Line.
- DePue: But you suffered horrendous casualties in the process, it looks like.
- Contreras: Yeah. This one time on Okinawa, I was a jeep driver and I had to take up to the Naha-Shuri Line. I had to go there with a load of ammunition and water. And I had a gunnery sergeant, and he'd been the Corps for I don't know, thirty, forty years, and he was riding shotgun. As we ran up there and unloaded and everything, and on the way back, a machinegun opened up and just riddled the hell out of the trailer. The trailer stopped the bullets—because the trailer is right behind, you know—from hitting us in the back. We got back to the dump and the sergeant said, "They need more ammo up there, Contreras; you'll have to go back up there again." Well, I knew I was going to have to go over that spot where that machinegun was, but I mean it didn't bother me. I mean, if I have to go, I have to go, period. But the sergeant wouldn't go with me. He said



he's not going to go up there with that machine gunman there. I could have had him court marshaled but I figured well, what the heck, he's an old man. He didn't go, so I had to go up by myself. So then I was really scared, because I knew I had to pass that area where that machinegun was.

Anyway, I went back up there and dumped some stuff out and went back and then nothing happened. So I get back to the dump and I'm showing the guys where the bullets were in the trailer. The trailer was full of bullet holes and the end of the trailer—like there's the end of the trailer and I'm right here—the bullets are lodged right in here. They went through the back and then they stopped there. I was showing the guys and then all of a sudden I started shaking, then I started crying. So they grabbed me and put me on a stretcher, and I remember them loading me on an ambulance, being put in an ambulance. I remember I was passing in and out, I was coming to and I could see people moving around and hearing people talking and stuff like that. Then all of a sudden, I just passed out. I don't know how long it was afterwards, I woke up and I see this woman walking down and I say, "Oh Jesus, I'm in heaven and there's an angel." Pretty soon the doctor come over and he says, "You're all right son, you're all right. You're ten miles behind the lines, you're in an Army hospital and that's an Army nurse. You're all right. So, that made me feel better.

But anyway, that's what I had, I cracked up. I had combat fatigue, we called it. So they kept me there for a couple of weeks, then they sent me back to the frontlines, right back to where I was again.

- DePue: What emotions did you feel when you realized you'd broken, that you had been a combat fatigue casualty?
- Contreras: Well, I just didn't think about it. You figured, oh you cracked up, you cracked up.
- DePue: Well the Marines are taught though, that you're invincible, that you're not supposed to do that.
- Contreras: Yeah, you're not supposed to but it happens.
- DePue: When you went back to the unit, did you get any flak from some of the other Marines?
- Contreras: No, no. They don't mention it. Just, things happen like that. You see a lot of guys crying and stuff like that. I mean, they just take it in stride.
- DePue: It was just part of being in combat?
- Contreras: Yeah, you just figured you just didn't have time to think. Well then one night, we bivouaced over—at that time, we didn't know—but we bivouaced over a command post. The Japanese headquarters were underneath it; we didn't know

that. Anyway, we're behind the lines and we're sleeping, taking a nap in a cave, and pretty soon the word come out that the Japanese had broke through the lines; everybody get out in your foxholes. So we got out and jumped in our foxholes. They were shooting up flares so we could see, and I see a guy out in front of my foxhole. I see a guy out there crawling around, so I had this Browning automatic rifle, so I gave them all twenty rounds and I didn't see him move any more but still, when that flare went up, I could still see him kind of sitting up. So I gave him another twenty rounds and I shot that whole area around there. And then I see another guy get up and run, but the flare went out so I didn't get a bead on him, so I shot another twenty rounds. I shot three clips, twenty-round clips, in that Browning automatic. You can put it on automatic or semiautomatic, so I had it on automatic and just sprayed. And everybody's hollering at me, you know Contreras, there's nobody out there, we're trying to sleep, and they're going on and on, you know. But I could still see that guy, he still wasn't moving out there.

So the next morning I went out there and there's two dead Japs. I had only seen one but there were two of them together, and by shooting all that area, I got both of them. And then the other one, he got up and ran. I didn't get a bead on him. So I says to the guys, "There's another one, I seen him get up and run." So we're looking for him.

Okinawans have a tomb where they bury the remains of a dead person, and the front of it is kind of like a cement slab, like on a side of a hill, and then it's got an entrance about that wide and about that big.

DePue: A couple feet by a couple feet.

Contreras: Yeah. You go in there and you could see the vases on the shelf with the remains. But anyway, this buddy of mine, he's a driver for Company A, he poked his head in there and a Japanese put a gun right up alongside his head

and it went "click-click", it didn't fire. So he comes out there howling bloody murder, "There's a Jap in there!" The Jap wouldn't come out and so we just threw all kinds of dynamite and grenades.

The Jap that I had got, one of them had a saber. I don't know if you noticed that saber I had hanging out there in the hallway. He had a saber and the other one had a rifle with a bayonet on it, and so I got them, and that flag. He had his flag wrapped around his helmet, on his head.

DePue: Well the saber would suggest that he was an officer.

Contreras: Yeah. But this guy that we blew all to heck, he was a bigger shot, and he was a regular Samurai. He had a regular Samurai saber. The handle of the saber was jewels and diamonds, and the handle comes apart and the family will is in there, that's what the regular Samurai is. But we blew that all to heck by throwing all that dynamite and stuff in there. Our general, when we took that

stuff back to him, he had a briefcase full of stuff and says, if you guys would have brought him in alive, I would send you home with a medal. Well, he wasn't about to give up.

DePue: How does a good Catholic boy who grows up believing you're not supposed to kill your fellow man, feel after firing those three clips? Did you feel excited, elated, disturbed by it, when you found these two guys out there?

Contreras: You know, like on Guam, we had a bonsai attack one night and we killed three hundred Japs. You go out there and you just don't think about it. You figure oh, they're just like animals. I mean you didn't think of them as a person. After I got home, I said you know, them guys were human beings just like we were, but they didn't act like human beings. We'd shot all them Japanese up, like three hundred of them and didn't think nothing of it. A bulldozer would come by and dig a big hole and scoop all those bodies in and cover it up.

Funny about that, when we had that bonsai attack, they brought up food, fresh food, the next morning, and I didn't have no mess kit or anything. All you had was the liner of your helmet. You've got a plastic liner and then you've got the steel pot that goes to the top. We used that to boil water and take baths, catch rainwater and all that stuff. So I go down the aisle where all this food was, when they put it out, and put everything right in that helmet. At the end there was fruit cocktail and the guy says, "Where you going to put this?" "Put it right on top, it's all going down the same hole, for crying out loud." So he put it right on top, you know this helmet full of food. And then I sat down on a log to eat and all I had was a big coconut palm leaf to use like a spoon. By the time I got a spoonful to put in my mouth, it was so full of flies because there was so many dead Japs laying all around, you know, from that counterattack. But it tasted good; it didn't kill me.

DePue: By that time it's just, you're hungry. Well, I don't know where you got this photo album that you had shown me earlier, but this is a photo album of a Japanese soldier. Is that where you got it when you were in Okinawa?

Contreras: I don't know if this is Okinawa or Guam. It probably was.

DePue: But again, after you have all these experiences with dead Japanese around, and then you've got a photo album and it kind of makes you realize they're people just like we are, to a certain extent.

Contreras: Yeah. But you didn't think of them that way, because they weren't human beings. I mean, they were mean guys. They'd capture guys and they would torture them and all that sort of stuff.

You know this kid that stuck his head in there and almost got killed, he got killed later on. We both went up to the front to take a load of stuff. He went to Company A, I went to Company C, and after we got unloaded and

were on the way back, I'm ahead of him a little ways and I heard this big explosion and I didn't know what the heck it was. So I got back to the dump and they said, "Johnson just ran over a landmine." I missed the damn thing but he hit it. That's why I say, somebody had to be looking out after you. How could I miss that and he was right behind me, and he hits it, and it killed him. And then the sergeant went up. He had no business going back up there and he said, well I'm going up there to get parts of that jeep, because they needed parts for his jeeps. He hits a landmine in that same spot and it killed him. He had no business going up there. I mean that's just the way they went, you know? You had to have had somebody looking after you, you just did.

DePue: I know that Okinawa was one of the places where the kamikaze attacks were especially fierce, and that would have been obviously, against the fleet. It sounds like you have two beach landings: one in the northern part and then one went into the Naha-Shuri Line. Did you have any kamikaze attacks for either one of those?

Contreras: No. We both met in the same area and the Army went this way and the Marines went that way, this is how it went. The Army went south and we went north. There was only one landing there. They might have had a different area. Back in here, we had a different landing—it went around Naha and landed behind the Japs or something like that.

DePue: What was it like to observe the incredible naval and air barrage that the landings were getting to begin with?

Contreras: Oh yeah, that was really something, but it didn't bother the Japs at all. They'd get in them caves and then when you start coming in, then they'd open up. It didn't hurt them at all. We threw in rockets and the airplanes were bombing and strafing them, and they were gun firing. They done that on that beach before we landed, and there were no Japs there. The guys that went in the night before to see clear the landmines and stuff like that, I don't know what kind of outfit that was. They said our 16-inch shells were bouncing off their pillboxes, but what they were doing, they were bouncing off them gravesites that the Okinawans had. So we thought it would be a slaughter and that's what it was, but it was nothing. I mean we got in there without a shot being fired, but here's where it all happened, down there.

DePue: In the southern part. This was very much a populated island. This is part of the Japanese main island system. Did you see a lot of Japanese civilians during this fight?

Contreras: Well, there were mostly Okinawans. Towards the end there, down in here, the Japanese were jumping off the cliff, because they didn't want to surrender, and they had family with them. They had women and children, and they were throwing the kids over and the women were jumping over. There's General Buckner that was a General of the Army was up there on that hill watching

them jump off the cliff, so it was almost the end of the operation. I mean the Japs didn't have no artillery or anything, and a shell landed right on top of the hill where all them officers were, where General Bucker was. It was our own friendly fire that killed him. It killed him and ten other guys on that hill. Our battalion commander was there with him.

DePue: Was he one that got killed?

Contreras: Our battalion commander that got killed, yeah. That's another thing. You know, there's a lot of funny things that happened. When we were on Okinawa and I was going up the hill with the jeep to the front lines, there was a lot of ammunition stuff, and there was a lot of the refugees coming down and then there was another jeep coming down. I just kept going straight and I ran him off the road. It wasn't much of a road, it just was a path. So he stopped me. He was a colonel. I don't know, I think he was a colonel or a major. Anyway, he wanted my rank and field number, serial number, and I said, well, I'll never see him again and I gave him my rank and serial number and I said, "I've got to get going up there sir, I've got to get this stuff to the frontlines." Well, when our battalion commander got killed and they got a new battalion commander, and they called us down for a jeep and says, now Contreras, the battalion commander wants a jeep up there to pick him up.

So I go up there to pick him up and who do you think that guy is? That guy I ran off the road. Well, you know, he didn't say a word. He got in the jeep and I take him up to the frontlines, and I kind of hunched over, pulled the helmet down over my head. And we're going up this hill and I'm having a hard time going up the hill and he says, "Why don't you put that in gear son?" The jeeps have four gear drive to give you an extra push. I was all shook up, I forgot to do that, so he tells me how to do it, called me son, you know, but he never mentioned that. Then I went to China with him, so I got to be the driver when we got to China, the battalion jeep driver.

DePue: What was his name?

Contreras: I can't even think of his name.

DePue: Well, you spent quite a bit of time with him though, it sounds like.

Contreras: Yeah. He was a real nice fellow.

DePue: Once you got past that first experience.

Contreras: Yeah, once I got past that, yeah. He replaced that guy that got killed.

DePue: Did it make any sense to you, why the Japanese civilians were committing suicide?

Contreras: They didn't want to be held captive, because they were told they would be mistreated. They said the only way a Marine can join the Marines, he has to kill his parents. That's what they'd tell the Japanese people, that we had to kill our parents to get in. In other words, they weren't to surrender to us. A lot of them did surrender. If you want to take this book and read it, I'll let you take it. I've got a couple of them.

I can give you another one that tells all about how some of them on Okinawa, when they would come out of these caves, there would be a whole bunch of Japanese, some women, and the Japanese would come up to the Marine and he'd hand him his weapons, his saber, then he'd walk back and he'd blow him and his woman up, right in front of us, the guys blowing themselves up. Some of them didn't but a lot of them did that. They'd come up and they handed their weapons to the Marines over there, and then they'd back off and they'd pull a grenade.

DePue: The people who you said now are beginning to surrender, is that both military and civilians?

Contreras: Yeah.

DePue: And some of them that did not kill themselves.

Contreras: The Okinawans didn't kill themselves; it was the Japanese that done that. I mean the Okinawans, they were smarter. We put them in big concentration camps and took care of them. We had a lot of them, we had a lot of civilians, but they weren't Japanese, they were Okinawan, but they were still under the Japanese rule.

DePue: Any other stories you remember of your experiences in Okinawa?

Contreras: Oh, there's a lot of them. I told about meeting my brother.

DePue: Well, tell us about that again, because we were jumping ahead of the story when we first talked about it.

Contreras: Well, I heard that his outfit was there, so I don't know why, but I told whoever was in charge of us there at the dump, I told him I was going to see my brother, that he was back there, so they let me go. So I drove the jeep back to where he was and like I say, he's living in a tent and sleeping on a cot and having three hot meals a day, and every once in a while, they'd get an order to fire and they'd get out there. He was in the 1-5-5, the big ones, 1-5-5. They'd fire some rounds out. So I stayed there for a couple days, visiting with him, and we went around and took some pictures of him and I.

DePue: Are some of the photos you've got here are pictures you took with him?

Contreras: Yeah, yeah. Like I said, on Guam we'd be moving up to the front and moving along, and the guy right next to you would step on a landmine and you'd be all right.

DePue: Were you on Okinawa when you heard about VE Day, Victory in Europe?

Contreras: No, we were on Guam. We were loading ships to go ahead to Japan. All six divisions were going to spearhead. In fact, we run across a map...

DePue: So after Okinawa, you returned to Guam?

Contreras: Returned to Guam, started loading a ship to go ahead to Japan. All six divisions were going to spearhead MacArthur's Army. In fact, we seen a map where we were going to hit main Tokyo itself, and they told us, you're going to have to shoot men, women and children, because they're not going to give up. The people didn't want to give up. They wanted to fight to the last person.

DePue: Did you have any reason to doubt them on that, after you'd seen what happened in Okinawa?

Contreras: No. I figured we would have to do it. You had to shoot them or they're going to shoot you, and they were ready for us. When we got to Japan, all along the beach there, they had all these possible watercrafts you could think of loaded with explosives, suicide. They were going to drive them right into the ships when they got there.

DePue: So this would have been May by the time you got back to Guam to get ready for the next invasion. So you have just a few months there. Do you recall hearing the news about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

Contreras: No, I don't remember hearing that. I guess we did hear about it. We were on Guam when we heard about them dropping the bomb, but the Japs didn't want to give up and they dropped that second bomb. The Emperor is the one that made the decision to give up, because the people didn't want to—the Army didn't want to, they wanted to fight to the last man.

DePue: What's your opinion? There's been a lot of debates since that, about whether or not the United States should have dropped those atomic bombs.

Contreras: Well, all I can say is these people that think that way, they should have been over there and seeing their buddies killed, seeing all the guys they got maimed for life, for crying out loud, and it's them or us. It's just too bad they didn't have it before a lot of them islands, before Okinawa, where all them guys got killed. If them people had relations, sons out there getting killed, they wouldn't think that way. That's the way I look at it.

DePue: How did you feel then, about the news when the Japanese did surrender?

Contreras: Well, we were pretty happy about that, because they told us there was going to be a million casualties when we hit Japan, and we were lucky for that. We said yeah, well we're glad that they dropped that.

DePue: At that time, did you think that the million casualty figure was kind of inflated?

Contreras: No, I believed there would be. You know, the way the Japs were, they weren't going to give up. They were going to do everything, like them people there in Japan or Okinawa, even on Iwo Jima, the Japs that were left, they said they all went out and said, each one of you guys kill ten Americans, because they know they're not going to live through it, then they just go out there and kill as many as you can.

DePue: Did you have a celebration the day you heard about VE, the surrender of the Japanese?

Contreras: No, it was at night and I was laying in bed, because everybody was shooting. In fact, there was some people killed I believe. You know, everybody was shooting, celebrating and stuff. It was at night I believe, when we heard. I don't know what time it was here in the States.

DePue: So a good place to be was in bed at that time.

Contreras: Yeah. And like I said, you didn't think about killing them Japs. You get to thinking later on, well they're human beings just like we are, but still to us they weren't human. We didn't think nothing about it. We never took a prisoner because none of them gave up. We were on patrol one time on Guam, there was another unlucky thing. There was still ten thousand Japs, we figured, out in the jungle.

DePue: In Guam?

Contreras: On Guam. There was a Spaniard that discovered the islands, Ponce de Leon, I believe, so the people were Spaniards; they could talk Spanish and I could understand some of that. One Chamorro—we call them Chamorros, the natives—he was telling his buddies that he was going to get a rifle and kill some Japs, because he knew where the Japs were. So he come to us and told us where the Japanese were and he said he'd take us to them, but he said he wanted a rifle. I said to him I wouldn't give him a rifle, because he's going to start shooting, because that's what he's telling his buddies, he's going to kill some Japs, because they hated the Japs, the natives there in Guam. But anyway, they gave him a rifle. We're on this patrol and he's leading the patrol, and we come to a stream and there's a couple of Japanese that are taking a bath and he starts shooting at them, you know when we told him not to do that.



Well anyway, for some reason our squad leader, where they were washing up, there was a plank going across there. For some reason the squad leaders says, get across that stream there, so we got across there. (phone rings) Hang on.

(pause in recording)

DePue: That's where we have to pick it up. I'll get you started here. Okay, we took a very quick break. Ralph, we were just talking about these Japanese that your patrol discovered in the stream, taking a bath in Guam.

Contreras: Our squad leader said get across that stream, so we ran across that stream. As I got across, I looked to my left and I see a hut there, a shack, and I see a bunch of these Japanese out in front. So I took my Browning and just ran at them and fired my whole 20-round clip. I put it on automatic and fired, just kept running right straight at them. I didn't know what they were doing, but then they finally took off and ran out into the jungle, and then the rest of the squad come up and they started following them up and shooting at them.

But anyway, when I got up—there was a machinegun there. They have what they call a twin barrel machinegun. It's got two barrels and it's got handles on it and if it gets too hot, they just take that handle and pull out the old barrel and put in a new barrel. As I come up along the side, I come up like this, when I was shooting at them. I didn't know at the time, but the machinegun was turned that way. If it had been turned this way, I'd still be laying out there, because they were trying to turn it. They were trying to pick that up and turn it. That's what they were doing when I see them. That's when I fired all this round all around. There were three or four of them laying around the gun there when I got there.

Well anyway, after we secured the area, the squad leader was right in front of me behind a coconut palm tree, and he was shooting at the Japs that were running down into the jungle. I'm fooling around—my piece wouldn't shoot. I couldn't figure out what was wrong, and I looked over here and I see this Jap raising his head, peeking up from under his helmet, and my gun wouldn't work. So I just yelled at the squad leader and he just turned around and shot him and then kept on shooting like that.

What happened, the magazine had, I don't know if it was a bullet or a piece of shrapnel. We wore them right here and we have two magazines stuck in there.

DePue: Right in front of your body.

Contreras: So when I put the magazine underneath it wouldn't fire, because it had either a bullet or a piece of shrapnel. I don't know what it was, but that's how come it wouldn't fire. So I took out that one and put another in, and then to check it, I just aimed it at that Japanese and I blew his whole head off, just pulled the

trigger, twenty rounds, and thought nothing of it. I mean, I didn't feel bad at all. He was dead.

DePue: Was the magazine that had the bullet or the piece of shrapnel, did that possibly save you from getting injured then?

Contreras: Well yeah, if that wouldn't have been there, I'd have got hit right there.

DePue: Right in the gut.

Contreras: There was a big hole there. It had to be a bullet but I don't know what it was, because there was no mortar firing or any stuff like that. The only thing that was firing was the rifle.

DePue: Was this incident prior to the peace being announced then?

Contreras: No, this was on Guam. This was on Guam, when it happened.

DePue: Was that after August of '45?

Contreras: That was after we secured the island and we were out looking for Japs out on the island, in the jungles.

DePue: Was this then before you went to Okinawa?

Contreras: Yeah, that was before we went to Okinawa.

DePue: Okay.

Contreras: That was before we left Guam.

DePue: I was a bit confused, because you said after Okinawa, you returned back to Guam.

Contreras: Yeah, we did. After Okinawa, we went back to Guam. We were there twice.

DePue: Were there any lingering Japanese enclaves that were still resisting when you returned to Guam?

Contreras: Yeah. Even forty years after the war, they were still surrendering. In fact, not too long ago, some surrendered there at Iwo Jima. They went there for, I don't know, some celebration or something and this Jap come up and turned himself in. They had interpreters and stuff. This one Jap, he still had his weapons with him and he demanded that they give him a receipt for his weapons, so when he got back home, he'd have proof that he was still fighting, that he didn't give up. They didn't want to lose faith in other words. They don't want to go home defeated. But he was still fighting.

DePue: After Okinawa, when you return to Guam that second time, were you involved in any combat then?

Contreras: No, Okinawa was the end of the combat.

DePue: What happened then, after August of '45, when the peace has been signed and the war is over?

Contreras: Well, I went to China for active patient duty.

DePue: Did you stop in Japan en route at all?

Contreras: No, we went right straight to China.

DePue: Did the entire 22nd Regiment go, the entire 6th Division?

Contreras: The entire 6th Division. The 1st and 6th Divisions went. Part of the 6th Division, like the old 4th Regiment. They went to Japan in honor of the old 4th Regiment that got wiped out there in the Philippines. The 4th Regiment got to go take over occupation there in Japan. Part of them went there. The rest of the 6th Division went to China. In fact, when we got to China, our company commander said, I'm going to send ten of you guys in and clear the docks; we're going to be unloading in the morning. So ten of us went in with no weapons at all, just our dungarees. We're walking down this pier and here comes a couple of Japanese walking towards us with rifles over their shoulder with the bayonets on them, and I said boy, I hope they know the war is over. So we finally met up when we got right up to them and then they kind of bowed down you know, and they went on their way and we went on our way. That was kind of a scary moment.

DePue: I'm looking for a map because I wanted to see where exactly in China the division was sent.

Contreras: Tsingtao.

DePue: Tsingtao, is that how you pronounced it?

Contreras: Tsingtao, yeah. It started with a T, but they call it Tsingtao.

DePue: Yeah, it's T-s-i-n-g-t-a-o.

Contreras: Right there it is.

DePue: Okay, which is basically in the straits of—?

Contreras: Right in the North China Sea.

DePue: The North China Sea and right across from—?

Contreras: Korea.

DePue: In fact, it looks like it would almost be right across from Seoul, if you were to draw a straight line there. What was the unit's mission there?

Contreras: Well, we went there to lock up the Japanese, surrender all the Japanese in the whole China. This is our area, the 6th Division. The 1st Division was down in here, and we took over all the surrendering, all these Japs right around there. And then, there was kind of a European settlement. Americans lived there in a section of town, Americans and British and Germans, all different nationalities. So when the war started, they locked up all the people that were against Japan, and locked them up and the other people stayed there. When we got there, we set the Americans free to go back into their homes, and the British and whatever other units were there from other countries. So we had a jeep patrol in that area because the communists would come down from the hills and rob the people there and stuff. They were raising a lot of heck. In fact, we were fighting the communists there in some parts. There were Marines getting killed that were riding shotgun on the coal trains, and they were getting shot at from the communists. That was in Tsingtao.

DePue: And it looks like you got there October of 1945.

Contreras: Yeah.

DePue: What was your expectation, being in Guam? Did you think the war's over, it's time to go home?

Contreras: Yeah. I didn't think I'd be going to China.

DePue: Now you told me earlier, this is because you had signed up for the duration plus six.

Contreras: Yeah, yeah. I had to go; I had to.

DePue: Were there a lot of the troops then in the 6th Division that headed back home?

Contreras: Yeah, a lot of them. All the ones that got drafted got to go home right now. They didn't go to China.

DePue: Well. I would think you would be sitting there saying hey, wait a minute; they get drafted, I enlist, and I get stuck doing this.

Contreras: Like I said, that's the way I signed up. I should have just signed up for three years.

DePue: What were your impressions of the Chinese people? Did you have any encounters with them?

Contreras: No, they were nice. In fact, the Chinese people liked the Americans. I don't know why we ever let them go. We should have helped Chiang Kai-shek. You know, we left him high and dry. I think we should have helped him with the communists; we wouldn't be having the trouble we've got with China now.

DePue: Do you have any specific stories dealing with the Chinese?

Contreras: When we got to China, we had a jeep patrol in the American sector, keep them safe from the communists. As I was going out there one day, I seen this beautiful gal walking down the street. I've got her picture there someplace.

DePue: Right there.

Contreras: And I said, "My, what a pretty girl." She wore a long kimono, strictly Chinese. She wouldn't even look at me. Anyway, it was in a neighborhood where we patrolled, so I asked a Chinese peddler selling apples on the street corner, and he could talk English. So I asked him, I says, "I'm trying to get close to this gal but she won't even look at me." He said, "Oh, she's strictly Chinese, has nothing to do with Americans." I says, "Well tell her I'm stateside Chinese next time you see her. Look, I've got slanted eyes, my skin's yellow from taking that Atabrine for malaria; just tell her I'm stateside Chinese. He must have told her that because the next day, when I patrolled out there, I picked her up and she got in the jeep.

So we got in the jeep and we were driving into town. What she was doing, she was going out in the country to visit her girlfriend. Her girlfriend was married and had twins, and she'd go out there to visit her girlfriend, and I always seen her walking out that way. So I got her in the jeep and I'm heading back towards town, and I seen an ice cream place. I motioned to her I was going to stop and get some ice cream, because I couldn't talk Chinese and she couldn't understand English. I don't know how in the hell we got together, but I jumped in to get an ice cream cone and I come back to the jeep and she's gone. So I waited until the next day to see that peddler again, because she would stop and talk to him. He said well, what happened is that she didn't want to be seen with an American. She didn't want her family to be seen with an American. I said, I told you to tell her I'm stateside Chinese.

So anyway, she didn't want to be seen with an American soldier, so that's the reason she jumped out of the jeep and walked on home, so her friend wouldn't see her. Because see, she still dressed Chinese, didn't dress like most of them; they had western jeans and shirts and all that stuff. She still wore a kimono clear down to the floor.

DePue: Well, you obviously had a chance to meet her again; otherwise you wouldn't have these pictures in your photo album.

Contreras: Yeah, yeah. We finally got together. I'd go out there and pitch a little liberty and stuff. Yeah, that was something.

- DePue: Do you remember her name?
- Contreras: Yeah, Mae Ling was her name. I believe it's in the back of the picture, Mae Ling. I thought she was a real pretty girl, because I hadn't seen a woman for all the two years in the South Pacific, nothing but natives.
- DePue: What was your impression of China? You'd grown up in the United States, in the midst of the depression, in the rural areas. You'd grown up a poor kid having to work right away. Compare your experiences in the United States with what you were seeing in places like Guam and Okinawa and now China.
- Contreras: There were pretty poor people in China, the China we were in. I went back to China ten years ago, but I was further south, where the richer people down there. Up here, these people were dirt poor just like I was, so I kind of sympathized with them. We'd be out there dumping garbage and stuff, and the Chinese would be out there grabbing stuff, whatever they could, out of the garbage that we'd be dumping. The guys would be dumping the garbage right on top of them and they still would keep on digging for food. They were real dirt poor there, the Chinese.
- DePue: The Chinese that you knew, did they feel a connection with the communists? You talked about having some run-ins with the communist Chinese.
- Contreras: It was never mentioned; the communists were never mentioned. You know, there were bar owners. I got to know a bar owner real well. We called him Shanghai Charlie, and we'd stop in to see him. He invited us to his home and then his wife would fix us dinner, fix us apple pie and stuff like that, that we never had before, so that was kind of neat. I liked the Chinese; they were real good people.
- DePue: Did they like the communists? Do you think they were in favor of the communists taking over?
- Contreras: Well you know, it was never brought up, because we had nothing to do with the higher ups, you know, as far as the mayors and stuff like that, what it was like. We never had any problems with them. They never mentioned communists or anything.
- DePue: While you were there, was this region of China controlled by the nationalists?
- Contreras: Yeah, they were still nationalists. There was one area where the communists had control of. We didn't go in there and we just skipped that area. We didn't bother with them. We didn't bother with the communists at all.
- DePue: Any other stories from China that you can recall?
- Contreras: No. I kind of liked it. In fact, I wanted to stay there. I didn't want to come home, because I was driving for the major battalion commander and he had a

house in town. The officers could rent a house in town. I'd take these five gallon cans, the gas cans, or use them for water cans. I'd take about five of them full of water and take them to his house and fill his bathtub with them. And then I'd call him up and I'd ask him, you know, if you're done with the jeep, if you weren't going to use it any more, and then he'd say no. So then I asked him if I could use it to pitch liberty and then he'd say, go right ahead, son. So I would go into town with the jeep and then pitch liberty. They'd have these rickshaws that you would ride into town.

But I'll tell you, I liked the Chinese. They'd have a big pool area, like a swim pool, where the water was hot as you could stand it, and everybody would jump in there and soak; women, men, in the nude, just jump in there and soak. Then when you got done, there was little cubby holes, where you'd go in there and they'd give you a rubdown, and the whole thing would cost you like five cents. So we'd do that every day. It kind of relaxed you to go in there and soak, and then get a rubdown for five minutes. It was real nice for five cents.

DePue: Well, it sounds like it was a whole lot better than Guam and Okinawa.

Contreras: Yeah. But you know, another funny thing, like I said I like to think of the fun part. It wasn't funny at that time. We used these pots, like I said, to catch water.

DePue: The steel pot, your helmet.

Contreras: Steel pot, yeah. At night, the guys there on Guam, they would put their ponchos out to catch fresh water if it was going to rain, the plastic poncho we had. Well, they told us at night, you don't fire your weapon because you'll give away your position, so if there's any Japs around, get them with your knife. I said gees, I ain't going to let no Japanese get that close to. But you know, you could smell a Jap at night; they had a distinctive smell. They all carried a straw mat that they used to sleep on, and you know how straw gets wet, how it has that stinking smell. That's what a Jap smelled like, so if they were around at night, I could smell them. You could smell that smell if they got close enough to your foxhole.

I would take a case of grenades with me when I dug in, and whenever I'd hear a noise, I'd pull the pin and throw a grenade out there. Every once in a while, every little noise I heard or if I could smell a Jap, I'd throw a grenade out there. The next morning there would be a dead cow or a dead pig or some chickens out there. This one night, this guy put his poncho there and I just riddled the hell out of his poncho, it was full of holes. But like I said, I wasn't going to use my knife on no Jap. I wasn't going to get that close to them.

But anyway, in the morning we'd make coffee. We'd pool our rations together, so we used this pot to make coffee in. We made a fire and then got it

hot. You don't dare move out of your foxhole at night. Anybody that moves out at night gets shot at. It would be a Jap. The only thing that moves at night is a Jap, so you never got out of your foxholes. You would use your pot to relieve yourself in. So one morning it was my turn to make coffee, so I grabbed the pot and made the coffee and then I started drinking it and the taste was kind of funny. In fact, it tasted kind of salty. I should have kept my mouth shut, because I damn near got killed by my own guys right there. I said to the guys, "Boy, the coffee tastes kind of funny, don't it fellas?" "Yeah, Contreras, what helmet did you use?" I said, "This one right over here." "Well, you dumb so and so, that's what we used last night." But it didn't kill us you know; you boiled the water, it didn't kill us. At that time it wasn't funny, but when you think about it, it was funny.

DePue: Well, I'm sure that's what passed for humor when you're out there.

Contreras: There was a lot of funny things like that there.

DePue: How long were you in China then, before you got shipped back home?

Contreras: Well, we got there in, what was it, October?

DePue: October, right.

Contreras: And I got to come home in January.

DePue: By that time, were you ready to come home?

Contreras: No, like I said, I wanted to stay, because I was driving for the major and the colonel. I think he was a colonel. I was driving for the colonel and I had it made. I had easy duty, didn't have to worry about getting shot at and I had a girlfriend there. I could have got into the black market. Being the colonel's driver, I could go out of the compound we were at, with gas and oil or any hard to get stuff, and I could sell it. But I didn't want to get involved with that, so I would just give it to friends, Chinese friends, people that had nice looking daughters, you know?

DePue: Did you get a chance to meet Mae Ling's parents?

Contreras: No, oh never. I don't suppose—that wasn't allowed. We didn't talk about it. There were just a few words we knew just to get by on, I guess.

DePue: Was there a place when you're in China, where a Marine could get a good beer or a little bit of alcohol?

Contreras: Yeah, there were taverns there.

DePue: Civilian taverns?



Contreras: Yeah. Never seen any Army people there at all, Army Chinese at all. In fact, when I went to China back in '01, we were down in a nicer part of China, I never seen any military personnel. A lot of security, you know they've got so many people, that they have security. One in ten people is a security guy; they're among the people, to keep an eye on people I guess and stuff, but you never heard talk about communists. Even when I went back, they never talked. I never seen, in fact, a Chinese soldier while I was there.

DePue: Tell me about coming back home then.

Contreras: Well, we got on this ship to come back home. We got out of there just in time.

DePue: Was it the whole unit or individuals now?

Contreras: Individuals. It wasn't the unit. The unit disbanded there in China, so many of the guys were trying to come home. We got onboard ship, got talking to a guy and he was from Oregon, Illinois. He'd been in the same outfit all that time but we didn't know each other then. It took us thirty days by ship to come across the Pacific there. I got home about midnight and the only person to greet me there was a dog. There was a stray dog running around. No people, just the dog and he was glad to see me. (laughs)

DePue: This is here in Dixon now.

Contreras: Dixon. I went on the Honor Flight last... When was it? It must have been in October or November that we went on that Honor Flight to Washington. You know, all these people that would greet us. I mean it was unbelievable. Like I said, I told him, I said I never had anything like this when I got home. I told him about that dog greeting me when I got home. But when we got back from Washington to Moline, I mean the people, there were thousands of people at the airport, and they had a line formed, two lines you know, and we walked down between them and they were all welcoming us home, shaking our hands and all that sort of stuff, when we got back from Washington, at Moline. It's unbelievable, the people that were there greeting us. And at the end, there was two busloads from Dixon and Sterling that was there to greet us. Some people that I know was there. Some of the guys that went, their family was there, they went on the bus to greet us. That was really something. That's something I never got when I got home.

DePue: I'm going to ask you a few questions then, kind of more in the general nature. It sounds like you came home because you finally had enough time and you had enough points in the system.

Contreras: Oh, I had my six months in. I had my duration of the war plus six months.

DePue: How did you stay in touch with your family while you were overseas?

Contreras: We just wrote back and forth.

DePue: Well, some of these places weren't exactly easy places to get mail to, I would think.

Contreras: I don't know, they got mail out some way. No matter where we were at, there was always (mail call). Right before we went into combat, we had a day there where we could write letters and stuff, to be sent back home.

DePue: When you were in the midst of the fighting in either Guam or Okinawa, in the middle of the campaigns, were you still getting mail?

Contreras: Yeah, we'd get mail call. Even when we were right up on the frontlines, we'd have mail call.

DePue: Was that one of the highlights of the day then?

Contreras: Yeah. One of the highlights of the day was mail call.

DePue: What was a typical mail call like for you?

Contreras: Well, I don't know. I don't remember getting too excited about it or you used to talk about it, but you were glad to hear from people back home.

DePue: Who were you getting mail from?

Contreras: My folks and some buddies of mine. There was a couple of girls that would write to me and I would write back to them.

DePue: Did you keep any of those letters?

Contreras: No, I don't think I did.

DePue: You talked a little bit about the food, surely, not one of the highlights of your time in the military. Was there a particular C-ration or K-ration that you liked?

Contreras: No, the C-rations were better than the K-rations. K-ration was just like a little cracker box that had the stuff you're supposed to get your energy from, like a Hershey bar or different things. But then they come out with these C-rations that were canned stuff, where you could open it up, just like a can of soup or something like that, spaghetti or different stuff. But the Army had what they called a 10-in-1. It was a big box, about that big and about that deep, and we'd get to an island, after a combat, and we'd look up these Army outfits and we'd go and steal these rations from them. I mean they had a lot of good stuff in it. They called them 10-in-1s.

DePue: Was that because it was serving ten people, supposed to serve ten people?

Contreras: Yeah. It had all kinds of coffee and it had canned fruit you know, canned fruits and stuff. It was real good, crackers and bacon. We would fry the bacon

and then use the grease; use a graham cracker and there would be cheese, and we had something, you know, like a cheeseburger.

DePue: Do you remember having seen any entertainers that made it out to your part of the frontlines?

Contreras: No. We never got to see anybody, any of the entertainers. There was a lot of them out there but they never got up to the frontlines, mostly the people in the rear. Never seen any up on the frontlines.

DePue: Did you guys get copies of *Stars and Stripes* occasionally, to catch up on the world news?

Contreras: No, we never got any of that stuff, *Stars and Stripes*.

DePue: So when you're in the midst of combat, how well do you know what's going on around here.

Contreras: Well you don't. You don't know what's going on around you or nothing. All you know is your little world right there, trying to stay alive, that's all. We didn't worry about what else was going on. I just didn't bother about what was going on.

DePue: Were there many rumors flying around?

Contreras: No, we didn't have too many rumors about what was going on.

DePue: When you're not in combat then, what do you guys do to keep yourself occupied?

Contreras: There's supposed to be like a rest area, but it's not. They give you a piece of jungle and you've got to clear it up, so you can make a camp out of it and all that sort of stuff. There's always something going on. And then you start training, you get a replacement and you start training all over again. You start having maneuvers and all that, out in the jungles, you know, so there's always something going on like that. It's not like you just had nothing to do all the time. There was always something going on.

DePue: From 1943 until January of 1946, did you get a chance to go on a leave?

Contreras: No.

DePue: Not one?

Contreras: No. Like I said, when we got done, we went to the canal, then when we got done with Guam, we went back to the canal and then when we got done at Okinawa, we went back to Guam. Those were our bases but some outfits, their bases were Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, so their division would go to Pearl

Harbor and they'd be pitching liberties at Pearl Harbor, or they'd be pitching liberty in Australia, they'd get to go to Australia.

DePue: Pitching liberty, was that the phrase that was used?

Contreras: Yeah. They went for recreation, they'd go to Australia. The 1st Division went there a lot. So we always went back to the jungle, all them two years I was over there. We never got to pitch liberty in a town.

DePue: What I know about GIs—and Marines I don't think are too much different—there must have been a lot of complaining about that.

Contreras: About the GIs and the Marines?

DePue: About not getting back; you know, some guys get to go to Hawaii.

Contreras: Oh, it never entered my mind. We didn't know that at the time, where the other divisions were going until we got home and read, you know, like you read in the book, they went back to Australia, they went back to Pearl Harbor. We went back to the jungles.

DePue: Any particular humorous events that you remember when you're not in combat, not on line?

Contreras: I'm sure there's been a lot of them. I just can't think of any right now, right offhand.

DePue: Well you've done a great job of telling us lots of stuff up to this point. You have one of those memories that I envy, quite frankly. Tell me about once you get back to the United States, what you end up doing. Did you go back to your same job?

Contreras: Yeah. I got back and went right back to the drugstore.

DePue: After you'd seen what you'd seen though, and some of these things you've been telling us about, did you have a hard time readjusting to being a civilian?

Contreras: No, not too much. Maybe the first couple days that I got home, I know I got up and had some of the stuff that kept coming, like nightmares and stuff. I'd get up and sleep on the floor. I had a hard time getting used to the bed after sleeping in foxholes all that time. And then when I went to China, we had cots; that wasn't too bad, got a little used to it. The transition went pretty smooth. I didn't have too much of a problem. Some guys did.

We had a guy that would cut the Japanese, cut the ears off. That was a no-no. He'd cut the ears off and I don't know, he put them in a jar. I don't know where he got the formaldehyde to keep them. But anyway, we got onboard ship and they fed us steak when we got onboard ship and when he

seen that piece of meat, he just went berserk. He went haywire, cracking up, what we would call combat fatigue. I don't know if it reminded him of him cutting the Japanese. It must have bothered him some way, that he was going nuts when he seen that piece of meat. He went berserk.

DePue: When you were doing your training, do you think to a certain extent the training was oriented around kind of dehumanizing the enemy that you were going to be facing?

Contreras: I don't know. I imagine there was part of it in there, but you never think about it.

DePue: You've had a long time since that time. What's your feeling now, having been in combat and had the experience where you know you've killed Japanese and you've seen plenty of Japanese and Okinawans and Americans and plenty of others who had been killed in combat.

Contreras: Yeah, well you know, when I stop to think about it, it seems like it's all a dream. It don't seem possible that I was there and I'm here home and going through life again you know? It just doesn't seem like it happened. I know it happened, but it didn't bother me, getting back to civilian life. You're just thinking about the guys that got killed and you didn't, and you think why them and not me. It kind of gives you a guilty feeling, but it happened, it happened. But it don't seem like it actually happened. I mean like I lived my whole life here and I think right before that, I was in the doggone war from crying out loud, but it don't seem like it's... I don't know what the feeling is.

DePue: When did you get married?

Contreras: I got married in '47. I wasn't out a year, I don't think, when I got married. I got home and everybody was married and I said, well that's the thing to do.

DePue: Did you know her before you went overseas?

Contreras: No. No, I didn't know her. I met my wife—there's a picture there.

DePue: What's her name?

Contreras: Her name was Norma.

DePue: What was her last name?

Contreras: Her last name was Fahs, she was a farm girl.

DePue: F-a-u-s?

Contreras: F-a-h-s.

- DePue: That sounds like a German name.
- Contreras: Yeah, I believe the family come from Germany. Then I had two kids.
- DePue: Was your war experiences something that you could talk to Norma about? Did you tell her a lot of these stories?
- Contreras: No. It seemed like they never seemed to care to hear about it, they never asked. Same way with my kids. I mean, they didn't seem interested in any, and I never told them any war stories. They never asked. A lot of times I'd say a few things about it, but they never asked about any more, so I never talked to them about it very much.
- DePue: Were there other occasions, with other people, you'd get together with Army buddies and share these stories with each other?
- Contreras: Yeah. I belong to the Marine Corps Club and the VFW and the Legion, and we'd get together and thrash out old stories.
- DePue: Did you use any of the GI Bill coming back?
- Contreras: Yeah, I did. I took a course in business administration. Then I went to high school and got my GED.
- DePue: When was that?
- Contreras: That was back in the '40s sometime.
- DePue: Late '40s then.
- Contreras: It was '48 or '49, I went back to school. I went there for a couple of weeks. The counselor was a principal himself, and you done so many studies, then you had a test and they go according to the average test of the average graduate. So that's how I got my GED.
- DePue: In June of 1950, the North Koreans invade the south. Did it occur to you at that time, you might be up to be called out again?
- Contreras: Well, no; I knew I wouldn't be called up, but when we got discharged up at the Great Lakes, they talked to us for a half a day about signing over. If I had signed over, I'd have been the first one back there in Korea. That's what happened to a lot of them. I had a buddy that was in Okinawa, he was in the air wing, and he had it made. He'd kid me about, you know, he had to track through knee-deep mud to get to the mess hall to have dinner, when I'm living in foxholes; he's telling all this. So he went out west to work with a friend that got him a job out there, and his friend got him to sign into the Reserves. So when the Korean War broke out, well he got called back in. He was in night radar, he was a mechanic in night radar; he was an expert at that. So when he

got called back in, they gave him a rifle platoon. He didn't know a rifle from a shotgun, because he never had that type of training, the air wing guys. So they gave him a platoon, but then they found out his MO or whatever the hell they call it, that he was in night radar stuff, which was just something new at that time, so they put him right back in the same outfit he was in, to Korea. So he wasn't up on the frontlines; he was repairing these planes, the night radar or whatever that was. He had to fly into Japan for parts, so they would fly him; these flyers, they all wanted to fly him. He says, "Recommend me to fly you over there," because they would go into Japan and pitch liberty. So he'd have to pick certain guys to fly him over there, and then they'd come back and he'd buy all kinds of stuff for people. They gave him a list of stuff that they wanted, and he'd get parts for the planes and stuff like that. But anyway, he got right back in the same outfit.

DePue: Do you recall hearing any of the stories and what your feelings were when you're hearing stories about the Marines and the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, where it went so badly for them?

Contreras: I got a few buddies that were there and they talked about it. They belong to our club, the Chosin few. That was something. It's bad enough fighting the war and cold, but then they had to live in it too.

DePue: And fighting the communist Chinese.

Contreras: Fighting the communists, that was something. They didn't listen to [General Douglas] MacArthur. If they listened to MacArthur, they wouldn't have had that problem. That's always been the problem; they don't listen to the right people.

DePue: In what respect, when you say they were not listening to MacArthur?

Contreras: Well, MacArthur told them about chasing them, and the Chinese would come over the line there, the Yellow River, and shoot down our planes and we couldn't fly after them and they'd go right back into China. And then when he told them he said, we ought to just go in there and chase them.

DePue: Go into China?

Contreras: Into China. He thought we ought to just fight them now, because you're going to be fighting them later, but they wouldn't listen to him. No, don't go shooting at them or starting a war with them. Well, you see what happened.

DePue: Your particular generation gave birth to the generation that ended up going to Vietnam as well. What were your feelings about Vietnam, especially a lot of the protests that you alluded to before?

Contreras: Well, I didn't have any feeling one way or another. I had neighbors that were going to Canada to get away from the draft.

DePue: Did that make you mad though?

Contreras: It didn't bother me at all. More power to 'em. If they don't want to go in there, they don't want to go in there. It didn't bother me at all, even though I had to go. But I went and volunteered.

DePue: Let me jump way ahead here. You talked about going to China in 2001. What spurred you to go to China then?

Contreras: Well, this lady that I know, her son is over there; he's a teacher. So she had me go over there with her. Her husband was the owner of Bill and Dick's Barber Shop, Bill and Dick. His name was Bill, and Dick is still there; then she was a barber there too when her husband was living. So when Bill had colon cancer and he had an inoperable tumor and he knew he was going to die, he made all the arrangements for his funeral and everything and he told his partner, he says, you can have the barber shop, as long as his wife stays there and works and long as she wants to. Well, they didn't figure she was going to barber past sixty-five. She barbered until she was 70-something. She just retired last year from the barber shop there.

So anyway, we were real close friends; her husband and I were real good friends, we were the best of friends when he passed away. So we chummed around together a lot. She wanted to know if I wanted to go to China with her, so I went to China with her, to see her son over there. A teacher is a big thing over there in China; I mean they're just king-of-the-hill over there. We didn't have the right papers to get into China, so we flew into Hong Kong and then we took a ferry into China. When we got there, we didn't have the right visas or something. The travel consultant here told us we didn't need whatever it was, a visa. We had a passport, but it was a visa I think, we didn't have. We had to have it and they wouldn't let us in, and we couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand us. I mean we were scrambling there back and forth, you know, and we couldn't go. We had to stay there and I said boy. Just about then, her son come in there and he mentioned he was a teacher. As soon as they heard he was a teacher, boy everything was all right. They went and got somebody that could understand English and he told them what the situation was, so they let us go in with him, as long as he was a teacher, but he had to take us down to someplace there in China to get a visa so we could stay there for a couple weeks.

DePue: Any impressions of what it was like? You'd been there in China in 1946, and now you're there fifty-five, sixty years later. What were the differences that you saw?

Contreras: Well, like I said, this was a richer town than where I was before. I was in the poor part and this was a town of four million people, a real clean town, no crime; they don't have nursing homes, they don't have jails. If you commit a crime, you get shot the next day, no matter what the crime was. I believe when



we were there, some banker, I don't know, embezzled money or something, and so they just shot him the next day. So they don't have no jails, and teachers are the big thing, especially. They're allowed to have two kids and usually if they have a girl, a lot of the poor people, they get rid of a girl. They put it up for adoption or get rid of them some way, because they want a boy to take care of them in their old age. That's what the policy is; the kids have to take care of their parents. So you see a lot of people, a lot of grandparents with the kids, taking care of the kids, because the father is working for an education to take care of them, because there's no nursing homes either. The man's got to take care of it.

But anyway, he was going with a Chinese girl there and she kind of took a liking to me, because they had come to the States a couple of years ago to get married, and so she had me give her away. Her parents are pretty well-to-do, they were both doctors of some kind, and she's an engineer herself. So she's a pretty well-to-do Chinese.

DePue: Her parents are still in China?

Contreras: Yeah.

DePue: And she's over here in the United States?

Contreras: No. She just comes to visit and she just came here to get married. They got married here in the States and then they went back.

DePue: That's interesting.

Contreras: She's an engineer there and then he's teaching English, and on the side he teaches English to all the corporate big wheels there; like at night, they have a meeting at the hotel and they do nothing but talk in English. They want to learn how to talk English.

DePue: Let me ask you a few questions just to sum things up here. What's your feeling, this many years removed, about your Marine experience? Are you proud of that?

Contreras: Yeah, I guess so. I'm just glad that I done it when I done it, that's all.

DePue: You're like a lot of other Marines. There's no shortage of things that remind people who come to visit you here, that you were in the Marines. It's all over the house.

Contreras: Well my kids, I wish they'd quit doing it. They're always getting me things—you know, I don't know how many clocks I've got, Marines. They give me watches and anything that's got to do with the Marines. Every Christmas, I get it. I finally had to tell them, don't be getting me any more of that stuff, I've got enough of it.

DePue: So all the things we see around it's because your kids have given it to you?

Contreras: Yeah. I got two Purple Hearts.

DePue: Well, I don't know that you told us about the Purple Heart experiences. Well, you told us about the one where you said you got combat fatigue. Did you get a Purple Heart for that?

Contreras: No. You have to bleed to get a Purple Heart. We got hit by a grenade; it hit three of us. We don't know where it came from or what.

DePue: Is this Guam or Okinawa?

Contreras: This was on Okinawa. We were going up north and there was three of us, kind of sitting around. I don't know what we were doing but all of a sudden there was this big explosion. A grenade hit right among the three of us and I got shrapnel in my face. I could see my teeth right through here.

DePue: The bottom part of your teeth.

Contreras: Yeah, I got a hole right there. We have the metal mirrors and I looked at it and I could see my teeth right through that hole. When I went to the aid station, I was there for a couple weeks, but after a while you could hardly tell. But every once in a while, while I'm shaving, I hit this lump there. Like when it's going to rain or something, it seems like it puffs out where the shrapnel hit, and I get nicked and I cut myself all around my mouth here. One of the guys got a piece of shrapnel hit right there.

DePue: On his wrist?

Contreras: So we never seen him again. I went back.

DePue: Did it cut one of his arteries there?

Contreras: Yeah, it cut that whole artery there. He got sent out to the hospital ship and never came back. I just got that shrapnel and they gave me a Purple Heart. When I put in to pay for my prescriptions, they put me on category thirteen, and I was supposed to be in three. And I said they put me in thirteen and I went back to them again and says, I got the Purple Heart; that should be in category three. Well, your discharge don't say you got the Purple Heart. Your discharge says wounded on Okinawa, April—whatever the day it was, in '45, but it says you got wounded, but it doesn't say you got the Purple Heart.

So I wrote to the awards people and I said, I need a list of all my medals, because I've got to prove to the VA that I got the Purple Heart. And I get a letter back saying, you already got your medals. I didn't ask for medals, I asked for a list. So I wrote a real nasty letter to the general that signed the

letter, and I even cussed at him. I said, I didn't ask for medals, I asked for a list so I could prove that I got a Purple Heart.

DePue: Well, the orders would help with that.

Contreras: Yeah. Anyway, a couple weeks later, I get a Purple Heart in the mail.

DePue: So actually, it sounds like you earned one Purple Heart and you just have two medals to show for it.

Contreras: Ain't that something? That's how screwed up that is. They never did give me a list of my medals. I said I got my medals, I just want a list of them, because I didn't have a list of them, as proof. What had happened when I got the Purple Heart, it was sent to my folks. The Purple Heart wasn't sent to me. The general gave it to me himself in the hospital. He wrote a letter home that I was wounded. And my sister still had that letter, so I took that letter down to the VA and then I get a lot more stuff from them by having the Purple Heart.

DePue: How do you think the experience of being in the Marines during the war, and seeing some of the things that you saw, how did that change you? Did it change you?

Contreras: Well, it probably made me more religious I guess. I figured that I was saved for something. I figured you know, maybe the big guy up there, he saved me for something, but I don't know what. So I just retired from everything, all the stuff that I had been doing. I got a big write-up in the paper, the newspaper, all the volunteer work that I've done in the last fifty years. So that's why he saved me, but I never thought about it before until I just got to thinking about it, you know. This is what he saved me for, to help the other people out.

DePue: What are some of the volunteer things that you've done?

Contreras: Well, I was in hospice for ten years. I don't know if you know what hospice is.

DePue: Yes.

Contreras: You went to visit the people there who are terminal. And it's funny, all the people that I visit is people that I've known most of my life, that were dying. I went to visit with them a half a day or so. I'm in the Toys for Tots Foundation for 50-some years, gathering toys for needy kids. I volunteer in the baseball program, the softball program and the kids' baseball program. I was involved for forty years with them. I was a YMCA board of directors and the Moose Club and the KCs, doing volunteer work, a lot of community stuff. So that's what I was saved for I guess.

DePue: You were saying you're also in the city government?

Contreras: Yeah, I just retired. May 1st was my last day. I was in twenty years as a City Commissioner. The 1st of May was my last day and I dropped everything. I dropped going to the meetings, all these meetings, all these organizations. Well, in fact this morning, I was out selling peanuts for the Kiwanis Club. This is peanut day today. In fact, from 9:00 in the morning to 11:00, so I've got to do that tomorrow morning too. They give us a spot at a grocery store or a store downtown, and you stand out there and people donate and you give them a bag of peanuts. The KCs, they're Tootsie Rolls, so I go out there and give out Tootsie Rolls for donations. In the Moose Club, I done a lot of volunteer for them. I've got a list of stuff. They had a write-up in the paper of all the stuff that I've done.

DePue: Well, I think we'd like to get a copy of that, so we can include that with your interview here. What would you want people to understand, from your perspective, about the experiences you've had, especially during World War II? What lesson would you want them to learn from this?

Contreras: Well, just look out after your fellow man. Look out after them. Like I said the Marine Corps, no man left behind. Guys get killed or wounded and we'd pull them out of there and not leave them. If we had to retrieve them, then take them with you and not leave them behind. So that's the only thing I can figure out, is just help people out when they need it. Like right now, I'm taking care of—it just happened by accident—some guy had a stroke and he's kind of a handicap. He's kind of an ornery guy; he's hard to get along with. He can't get nobody to do anything for him, mow his lawn for him. He can't get along with people. He has healthcare people come and check on him because he had a stroke and he'd just give these people all kinds of problems. There's just an ornery streak in him.

So I stopped in; he's a former Marine. I stopped in and talked to him for a while and I told him I'm a former Marine, I'm just looking out to see how you're doing and stuff like that. And he says, why don't you stop in and see me once in a while and yeah, I could do that. So I go over there every morning. I take him a cup of coffee every morning and pick up his mail, because he's handicapped and he has to walk with a walker and he can't get around too good. I take him downtown to get a haircut, but he's still ornery as hell and we still get into arguments. He yells at me, I yell right back at him; that's the only way he understands, and we get along real fine.

I was laid up for a week, not having to do anything, so I haven't been seeing him. I went to see him the other day for the first time and he said, boy, you're a genius, all this stuff you do for me.

DePue: Then he appreciated it, huh?

Contreras: I said, I can have your neighbor pick up your mail for you and bring it in for you. No, he doesn't want to be involved with people. He doesn't want people coming in the house or nothing. He's real funny that way.

DePue: Any final words for us you'd like to leave behind as the official record?

Contreras: No. I don't know what that would be. Just look out after your fellow man, I guess and help out people when they're in need. That's about all I can figure out right now.

DePue: Ralph, I want to thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to listen to this. I've got an excellent interview. Sometimes these aren't necessarily the easiest things to talk about and I appreciate you bearing with us and being open enough and candid enough to tell us these stories.

Contreras: You know it's funny; I can remember stuff that happened sixty-five years ago just as clear as day, it just comes right to you. I couldn't tell you what I done last week, what I had for dinner or what I had for breakfast or what, but I can think of what happened during the war. That just sticks with you and it just doesn't go away.

DePue: Well, we're the beneficiaries of that. These are tough times you were talking about and I do appreciate you telling us. Thank you, Ralph.

(end of interview)