

**Interview with Fred Oerly for the
Veterans History Project
Conducted by Mitchell Hughey**

Part #1

MH - Let's begin with your name.

FO: Oscar Fred Oerly

MH- Could you please spell your last name.

FO: O-e-r-l-y

MH: What is your date of birth?

FO: Date of birth, December the seventh, 1922.

MH: What was your branch of service during the war?

FO: In World War II I was in the United States Marine Corps.

MH: And your highest rank achieved?

FO: The highest rank I ever achieved was Staff Sergeant.

MH: Where are we now? Boonville, Missouri -

FO: Yes, we are in the city of Boonville, Missouri.

MH: And the date is November 12, 2011.

FO: Right.

MH: Mitchell Hughey

FO: Fred Oerly

MH: My name is Mitchell Hughey and I'm speaking with my grandfather today and this interview is being conducted for the Veterans History Project in the Library of Congress. Please tell me about your birthday, December 7, 1941.

FO: December 7, 1941, it was a big, big surprise. Things were going like usual and I went to Kansas City to take training in the mechanics of airplane flying and what to do with the motors of the airplanes. I had a friend who lived in Kansas City and he said, "To celebrate your birthday I'm going to take you hunting over in Kansas." He had a friend that lived there and when I got over to this friend's house I said, "I don't have a gun." And he said, "Oh, they'll have a gun." We went across the bridge past the bomber plant and I looked over and told him, "Now, that's where I'm going to be working someday." I was still trying to do a lot of training before the war started and didn't know about the war, but I was waiting on the war then. We went to this friend's house and I asked him about a gun and he said, "Yeah, I got a gun." And when I found out what kind of gun he had, I wished I had not come, for all he had was a 10-gauge shotgun and it was a big goose gun and had double-aught buckshot to shoot at them. Can you imagine going rabbit hunting with a 10-gauge shotgun and buckshot to shoot geese with? When you see a rabbit running why you think, "How far should I let him get?" I found a new way to hunt that day because I could let that rabbit get half way across the field and then bear down on him and take him and I thought, "Boy, this is something else." And I was having me some fun. There was a nice looking girl there with us helping scare the rabbits up and I kind of thought I should show off a bit in front of her. So I shot and I shot and I shot that gun and when I got done shooting the gun and we went to the house my shoulder was black and blue. And it wasn't much fun to even show it to the girl that I thought was so nice looking, the little girl that was chasing these rabbits for me. But on the way home, when we got into Kansas City, I rolled the glass down to see what the news boys were yelling on every corner. It seemed like there was a lot of activity and a lot of movement in the town. The first thing I heard was "Extra! Extra! Japanese attack Pearl Harbor." And that was prior to the war as far as I'm concerned. That's the first thing that I remember about the war. I hadn't been reading too much about anything. Of course I was up on the war in Europe, but we weren't in the war with Japan and it was news to me and I did not expect it.

MH: How old were you on December 7, 1941?

FO: 1941? If I was born in 22, I could subtract that from 41 and get that couldn't I?

MH: You were 19 years old. When the war started, how did your life change?

FO: When the war started I really became serious in my training in aircraft mechanics. I knew I would probably be in this field of occupation, you know. And I did. I got me a good job at the bomber plant in Kansas City area making B-25s for the war. It didn't take me long to make lead man because it was a new thing, a new plant and after I worked about a month I became lead man and hung in the nacelles on the B-25s that came out of Kansas City. This was good experience and this was a wonderful experience for me. I thought I was doing really good, you know, helping the war situation and I was eager to go to work and glad to have the job that I had. But I wasn't satisfied, so I said, "Well, I'm going to join the Marine Corps and see if can catch up with my brother." He'd been in the Marine Corps for about four years.

MH: About how long after December 7, 1941 did you enlist?

FO: I enlisted September 5, 1942.

MH: What did you do in the war?

FO: First I went to boot camp just like everybody does that joins the Marine Corps. I had something kind of special about my time in boot camp, because the day that I joined, Tyrone Power joined the Marine Corps too and I saw him pick up and picked up along side him all the [cigarette] butts that were on the parade field each and every day that we worked there which was part of boot camp training. Things went along very well. I was satisfied to be where I was and I knew it would take me quite some time to get caught up with my brother who was already serving in the 3rd Division of the Marine Corps and my goal was to get up with him. So I asked my mother to give me a letter of intention that I was going to try and catch up with him in the Marine Corps and that I would join his outfit which I was allowed to do. A president of the United States, because he didn't want two persons [from the same family] in the same outfit [requested a letter of intention from one of the parents] and my mother signed this letter and I carried that letter until I caught up with him which was about a year and a half later.

MH: Can you tell me about your time in San Diego?

FO: There are a lot of things I could tell you about San Diego. I spent all my spare time going to the zoo. Every chance I got I went to the zoo because I used to go to Swope Park Zoo in Kansas City when I lived up there. It seemed like I was living

alone and didn't get to come home too often so I'd take every chance I got to go to Swope Park. When I got to San Diego I started going to the big, what I would call a zoo, that they had there, which was even bigger and better. I spent a lot of time doing that. When I was in Kansas City, I'd go out and rent a canoe and canoe in the lake that was in Swope Park, but in San Diego I spent most of my time in the zoo. I got liberty maybe one time and I remember that one time we went into a big bar and a fight started because there were so many Navy personnel and Marine Corps personnel and Army personnel all mixed up and the place was too small and a fist fight broke out. The boy that I was with [\[John Lehmeyer\]](#) said, "Follow me", and he got down on his hands and feet and got under the table and we crawled out of this big bar and got out on the street and when we got out on the street he said, "Stand up and walk natural." I stood up and walked behind him and he said, "Walk real slow now," and we walked passed every MP that came to that place to start arresting all the service men; throwing them in the paddy wagon and taking them to jail. We simply walked down to the corner and then ran as fast as we could to get away from that area.

MH: What kind of training did you under-go and where did the majority of that training take place?

FO: After I finished my term in boot camp there in San Diego, I had made a pretty good score on my test and they had started a school in an old Japanese school building which had been abandoned by taking the Japanese and sending them to camps. Everyone in the area of Los Angeles that was of Japanese descent was moved, you know. Those that were proven to be Americans could join the Marine Corps and we had Japanese personnel in the Marine Corps. But most of the Japanese people living in the Los Angeles area were simply gathered up and transported to what we called a campsite and they had to abandon all their buildings and schools. The [US Government] took over their school where they had opened this training session in the city of Los Angeles. Bell Telephone furnished the training for telephone operations and how to handle telephones; what to do with them, how to string lines and how to use a ground contact to run one wire and return the code through the ground. We worked and I stayed there and continued to do that school.

One of the things I really want to tell you about was while I was in this school there was a USO in Hollywood and I was the only Marine that was in this school. The rest were Navy and Army personnel, so there wasn't anyone in charge of me. They gave me what they called "basket leave". I could write myself a leave

and throw it in a basket as I went out the door and they could go over there and pick it up and check it. I would fill out one of those and put it in the basket and head for the USO - and I got to see all the famous movie stars that were in the area. Then later I saw a number of these stars which I had seen and talked to and able to shake their hand, in different shows over in the South Pacific. Bob Hope and Ray Milland and big, big people came over and there would be thousands of men setting around and I thought I was pretty lucky to have set up close and really know what they looked like. These boys who are sitting over the hill will never know what some of the movie stars who spend so much time [entertaining the troops] are all about. They won't really get to even know what they really, truly look like. They won't know how many freckles Rita Hayworth has.

MH: Could you tell me of your perception of the Japanese interment camps? What your opinion was? What the popular opinion was?

FO: It wasn't a pleasant thing for me to think about because I thought it was unfair. If you were to take a Japanese man and a woman and break up a family and say to them, "Well, your son can join the Marine Corps, but we can't have any **BAMSbams [slang for female Marine - stands for Broad Assed Marine(?)]** yet. We can't take any of your daughters, but we will take the rest of you and we'll put you in a camp. We'll take care of you and you'll work and we'll confiscate your property and take care of it and see that you get it back." But I don't think it always worked that way. In fact the Japanese population in Los Angeles was a big part of the population. And for us to go and take the school that they were forced to abandon and make a training thing out of it and have quarters for Army personnel, I didn't feel [it was right] and I think later on that there were a lot of people in America who felt it was an unfair situation.

MH: How long did those camps last into the war?

FO: Until after the war.

MH: Did they last until after the war?

FO: Oh, yeah, for a long, long time and it seemed like many were very, very slow in being released. I was working out there, discharged from the Marine Corps and working, possibly two years and there still were persons in camps. They seemed slow in releasing them because, well, they had to give their land back to them. They had to give their buildings back to them and that took time and was quite a

confusing situation for the Americans and you know it was confusing for the Japanese people.

MH: Tell me more about your brother Sam Oerly and his experience in the Marines and when he decided to join.

FO: There's really a huge story about my brother, Sam Oerly. Sam joined the Marine Corps three years before war broke out. He joined because we had a cousin Jack who had joined the Marine Corps and was a sea-going Marine aboard ship and he would write letters to Sam and tell him about how great life was in the Marine Corps and how he could enjoy himself and still save some money. At the time that Sam joined there wasn't a lot of money to be made. In fact I can remember when my brother would get up at 4:00 in the morning and go out and shock corn for ten cents a shock and if you worked really hard from sun up to sun down you could make as much as a dollar a day. It was quite something for him to grow up and work hard. And then, when he had the chance to, he joined the Marines. Why he just simply grabbed that chance and was a member of the Marine Corps. When war broke out, he'd been in for three years.

After the war [ended] Sam [stayed in the [martiesMarries](#)] and became quite famous. When they brought him home [in 1966?] to be buried in the National Cemetery at Memphis, Tennessee, the Gunnery Sergeant that came with his body came to me and told me a number of things about how Sam made it in the Marine Corps and what he had done and the accomplishments he had made. According to him, my brother was the only enlisted man to ever be the officer in charge of the flight deck [on an aircraft carrier]. He was officer of the flight deck and the Gunnery Sergeant said he was the only enlisted man who had come up through the ranks, from private all the way up to major to receive that position. And one of the things he did while he was there was he flew the largest helicopter that was made and given to the Marine Corps for them to use. He flew one of those and took two of his buddies, which he could chose, one to fly on each side and he hooked to the top of a lighthouse. He transported it and set it down as the two guys flying on each side signaled him what to do, because it was impossible to see. They didn't have the camera situations like they have today. And he put the top on a tower out in North Carolina. Of course this was big, big news and they made newspapers about the story of setting the top on this light tower. His wife of course, sent me several of these pictures and papers and I thought, "Man, man, man! That's getting quite a way from shocking wheat to flying the largest aircraft carrier helicopter that

there is in the Marine Corps and picking up the top of a lighthouse and taking across the bay of the ocean and setting it on that thing. It's quite something.

He was pretty well known in his rank. He trained a number of pilots. He was stationed in Pensacola, stationed everywhere. In fact, Sam was pretty well known when Jan and I visited him one time in North Carolina. He took us out to where the ships were docked and we went aboard the USS Forrestal and my wife, Jan, got to be the guest of honor for the evening dinner. And these people come in with all white gloves on and stood at attention and we sat down and man, think how big that made you feel? But it makes you kind of careless too, because when they passed the gravy to me I looked and there was a great long ladle with the heaviest silver that they ever had in the Navy and the big long spoon was hanging out of this bowl of gravy and I could just see it lowering as the man handed it to me and sure enough it flopped and fell out in the middle of the table. There was about three men waiting there and it didn't hardly hit the tablecloth till the tablecloth was gone and the table was being wiped up and cleaned up. I was embarrassed, but I didn't say anything. Most of them thought it was funny when they got a chance to laugh at me. They thought that was great fun.

MH: How many years older is your brother?

FO: Two years and two months older than I was. I should say, Sam was born October 7. My father was born on April 7 and I was born December 7. All three of us had the Lucky Seven. We would always say, "That's the lucky seven." Until of course they bombed Pearl Harbor. Then it wasn't considered too lucky anymore.

MH: After you enlisted where did you end up meeting Sam, once you were in the Marine Corps?

FO: On Guadalcanal was the first time I could catch him. I got a phone call one morning and they said, "We have made arrangements for you to join your brother. You pack your sea-bag and you go out to the road and you sit on the road until we get the 6 by 6 over there to pick you up." Well, about three hours later, after I'd sat there in the dust from all the cars and trucks that went by, here come a great big 6 by 6. I threw my sea-bag in there and jumped up in the truck and they took off. And took me off to the other side of the Crousy Island (can't get this) to his campsite. And that's where I joined him on Guadalcanal.

MH: How long did you serve together on Guadalcanal?

FO: Well, after a much shorter time there it took me to catch up with him. I'll tell you that. After we were joined together he was my leader or officer in charge of me, so that was all right. I enjoyed that. He was good. I can even remember him [instructing]telling me. He was quite a radioman and was good with the Morse code. I was never too sharp on that. I did better with the talking on the telephone with somebody on the other end that can talk back to you. I often wondered why I was so slow sending Morse code. I think it was that I just had no way of contacting that person. You just sit and wonder are they receiving this? It didn't hit me [click for me] like it did my brother. He could zip through that stuff. He was really good at it. I became a telephone man.

MH: Could you describe that time at boot camp where you were qualified as an expert rifleman?

FO: Well, we had to go to Camp Mathews to qualify and we'd get training. We'd be up there for one week and then we would shoot. To qualify you had to make a score which was considered "Expert", or "Sharpshooter" or the scale went down lower, you know.

I had sign up for a number of correspondence courses because I had not gotten to go to college and this was a chance. I enjoyed writing to the Marine Corps and tell them I wanted to take this course in trigonometry and this course in mathematics. I thought, "This is like going to college. I can sit here at night and write letters to these people." They'd take my tests and scored them. And I took a number of courses when I was in boot camp and even when I was in Los Angeles, what time wasn't spent at the USO I was studying on those courses and see if I couldn't better myself. They were really good to me, I thought, in training me.

MH: Could you tell me about your trip to the South Pacific, what was the ship like, how long it took to get there and your overall experiences?

FO: Well, of course every Marine I suppose the first time they are on a ship and coming from the mid-west, of course, you hadn't been on a ship very much and the first time you get on a ship you are going to get seasick. The trip was a lengthy, lengthy thing and I soon got over the seasickness. We went 38 days and 38 nights, zigzagging one way and then the other way, crossing the equator about six times. We went to New Caledonia -- the farthest point from home that I had ever been. And I could remember when we were on that ship sailing and zigzagging and

going across that I had gone down to the end of the road in Overton, Missouri and sat down along the river and take a look at the old Missouri River as it floated by and think, "Dang, if you had any kind of watercraft you could just shove it in here in this river and you could go anywhere in the world to points of contact by water." If you went down stream, then joined the Mississippi and then went to the Pacific Ocean and here I was out in the Pacific Ocean, farthest away from home zigzagging across the equator and that was quit an experience for an ole boy that grew up in a country store.

MH: How did you communicate with your family during the war? Did you receive packages?

FO: I received packages and we had a lightweight paper that we called V-mail. The paper was very light and colorful and I would write letters home. I wrote to my family quite regular and kept in contact. Except after I was wounded and aboard a hospital ship, I didn't continue to write. I lost contact and they declared me "lost in action". My mother had a hard, hard time those 22 days without notifying her, she told me. My father died before I got to come home and [years later] my mother became ill and she was at my house and I took her to the hospital and she never did get out of the hospital. I went to visit her every night and as I set there and talked to her she said to me, "Honey, I owe seventeen dollars up to the pharmacy in Boonville. Would you go over there and pay them for me?" And I went over there and paid her bill for her and came back and I wondered why she was so anxious to get her bill paid. When I got back she said, "You know that's the only bill that I had. I do not owe anybody in this world." And I knew from the way she was talking to me and looking at me that she was near her death and she realized it. So we sat and I held her hand. I was able to be with my mother when she died. My father had died, you know, while I was overseas, on Guadalcanal, and I'd just been dismissed from the hospital ship. When I was still in the hospital the Red Cross man was right next door to me and when they notified him that my father had died, why, he just typed the notice and put it on the billboard. I was strolling by the billboard one day and thought I'd stop and read the billboard, it was right next door. And I was reading it and down in the corner there was a notice that said, a little note there said, "Oscar Fred Oerly, your father, Henry W. Oerly has passed away." It was about two weeks old. It wasn't a total surprise to me because my sister had written to me and told me that he was very ill and he was going to go to St. Louis to the Missouri Pacific Hospital. He suspected, I think, that he too was at the age and having health problems that he may not make it back. So he bought himself a ticket and what's really funny to me is the railroad, at that time, and I

suppose it still may be in affect, that if you die in their hospital, all you have to do is have the family buy a ticket and they'll take your casket aboard the train and take care of it and bring it to the destination and take it off. The only notice my mother got [that he had passed] was when his brother came up and said, "Martha, they called me today and said that Henry died down at the hospital." He turned around and walked off.