

## Maurice "Buck" Harmon

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**Question:** Let's back up just a little bit. You're at Lake Quinault with your wife and -- and who, now 53 years later or whatever is still mad at you for --

**Answer:** Yeah, for reading the paper during our honeymoon. Because first of all the nuclear bomb itself was something that struck everybody, whether you were in service or not. But when I began to read the details of how many people were killed and how many facilities were destroyed and et cetera, I couldn't help but thinking, my God, I was in the 307th Bomb Group, heavy bomb group, for three long years in the Pacific. Innumerable number of missions, innumerable number of friends who were killed. Numerable planes that were lost. All of that put together, all of that put together was minor compared, in terms of damage, of what this one bomb did. I couldn't comprehend that, really. How could one bomb do what our whole bomb group couldn't do in three whole years. And it was just almost impossible to believe. So anyway to answer your question. I was back in the states, was ultimately through Santa Anna to be discharged and the Army couldn't -- or the Air Force or nobody could handle the paperwork on discharging so many people at one time, bearing in mind there were 11 million men and women in uniform. All 90% of them trying to get out as soon as they could get the paperwork, and we were just stacked out, so they gave me a 30-day leave on top of a leave to go home and get married, or whatnot. So the -- it was just a lot of paperwork. But anyway, they asked me once, I had a chance to become a -- with a promotion, to be a base something or other, what was it? Air Field in Champagne, Illinois, because I came back through -- I'm from Ohio originally, I was going to see my family along with Betty, my wife. I stopped off at the base down at Urbana, Champagne, down where the University of Illinois is, and they offered me a big job down there. There'd been a LC badge with this thing after a year. I said no, I'm eager to -- to leave this khaki -- khaki-filled organization and go back home as a civilian. And so that's what I did. And so in 1946 I was discharged.

**Question:** So after the war you were done with -- with the service.

**Answer:** Yes, they -- they requested that I stay in the Reserve for a little while because of some organizational issues, they wanted to try to piece together. And because, bearing in mind that the Army -- the Army Air Corps which we were in, all during the war, began to separate into a single Air Force at the same status of the US Army. So all of that had to be sort of straightened around. We didn't care or worry much about it but the generals worried a lot about it. They didn't know (laughs) who was going to be in charge of what and that led into some interesting wrangles because take - take any one division. Friend of mine was talking about a relative in the Signal Corps and Signal Corps was Army, always had been Army. Hey, we needed a lot of Single Corps work in the Air Force, are they going to stay under the Army or are they going to stay under the Air Force, and so those kind of squabbles kept the generals occupied for awhile. But it was quite an experience.

**Question:** What do you think the message is that you would leave for future generations from World War II?

**Answer:** I was explaining to Wally Hoffman and Bill Sanderfield just not long ago that I felt one very important message was to get across to youngsters first of all a little bit more historical sense of -- of what World War II was about. Especially to get a deep understanding that this war was fought for the United States for freedom and security. There was no folderol type of war which young people are only experienced in. As terrible as Viet Nam was, there was no freedom or security attached to that. The thing in the Middle East, there was no freedom and security aspect of this. This was because the United States of America was under peril. They built -- they built houses -- towers over on Ocean Shores -- where Ocean Shores is. They were afraid of watching for Japanese boats, ships coming in. I mean, it was

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possible to take this country over. Let alone the German submarines over on the East Coast. Which were able, but they never did. They could have fired right on Manhattan, New York, and but. So anyway, freedom and security was very much the issue here. This was no ordinary war. Second was the size and capacity of World War II. Nothing, guns, history ever compared with this thing. Practically, practically every country on the globe was involved in World War II. Minor exceptions in Africa and Asia, but for the most, every damn country. There were vast tolls of people lives that were killed in World War II. Not only military but civilian. Sometimes I ask youngsters, guess, how many people were killed in World War II, oh, two million, three million. Fifty million people were killed in World War II, let alone all those who were maimed, crippled for life. So that's a heck of a large population, 50 million people, to be killed. And then coupled together, all of these things, the geography of this thing. The geography. Boy, did I learn my geography in the South Pacific. My job later in terms of the aspects of armament and ordinance and all those things required me on times to fly around islands to find supplies that we were running out of, and so altogether I was -- I had flown to some 32 different islands down there, most of which I'd never heard of. And I really learned geography, even a bit of navigation. I used to tease the navigators that I learned more in an hour than they learned in cadet school. But anyway, so many of those start things that sign out. But the -- the number of young people right out of high school and the -- the bravery of these young people to lay down their lives for the freedom and security of the United States. I remember on the Island of Tarawa the day they finally decided they better capture this island -- it's getting in the way of our fighting in the Pacific. It was a very -- as I mentioned earlier, very strongly held island. Can't imagine how it was. Anyway they put together a large armada and to this day I have very hostile feelings against the admiral of that flotilla

**Answer:** They were out off of Tarawa several hundred yards waiting until the next day to attack. Attack meant hundreds of Marines scaling down the side of the ship and walking in through the tide to attack the island, which was heavily defended. And that evening a -- several native canoes began rowing out to this ship. And they finally got hold of an officer on deck. And in their pigeon English pointed out, very important, very important, we speak to big chief white admiral. The native leader was here. The lieutenant got to the admiral with this information. This guy says he's insisting sir, that you speak with him. He said tell him to go to hell. I got a lot of things to worry about. He ignored him. (crying) Striking a chord again. The next day the Marines, were ordered to attack Taraw

**Answer:** What the chief wanted to tell him about was this tricky tide, you can't trust the tides, they're not normal. They had it -- the Navy had it figured out the time of day and so forth to best let the Marines walk into shore and attack. The water would only be up to their knees. They all got under the water -- the water was up to their nose. They're carrying a gun, ammunition, a backpack, only thing they could get up above the water was their nose and their eyes. The Japanese were lying all around the shore of Tarawa with their 50 caliber machine it wasn't 50 -- it was 30 -- our 30 calibers. And it was a duck hunt. They killed these boys like crazy. Life Magazine carried on the cover of their magazine. Life in those days was the leading US magazine. The American Marines laid out on the shore dead. And this was well additioned that this was the first picture brought back to American citizens that people were being killed in the Pacific. They were so unaware of the Pacific Ocean. And the battling going on there. They couldn't believe -- they couldn't believe that this many Marines were killed in one single landing. It was by the score, laid out on the island, dead. So many more were killed later in the fighting, but it was then a battle, which you anticipated death will occur. But this admiral that ignored that native chief. I'll never forget that. Anyway, why did you ask that? It's terrible what a memory will do. Many of these things I don't think of every day --

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**Question:** Well, it's important -- I mean it's real important to see how all -- all of the pieces --

**Answer:** Well, some of the things come back. And you live through these things for three years, and especially some of your friends that were killed. Those things can get to you if you stop and think about it too much and some of these young good flyers. They could fly circles around me. This one kid, his name was Row, R-O-W-E, I forget his first name, from Minnesota

**Answer:** Real delightful young fellow. An honor graduate. Killed on his very first mission. And things like that.

**Question:** How do you -- how do you deal with that? Maybe there's not an answer.

**Answer:** During the time you -- you pretty much -- I deal with it very poorly from memory, like I am right now. I sort of am embarrassed by -- by feelings about some of it but during the time you don't dare think about it too much. It was happening almost every day and so it was just tough, boy, you're going to miss this guy. But you don't think about it too much. Death became rather something that you had to recognize sooner or later and accept. And it wasn't easy, but you did. I -- I lost, for example, our first -- our first squadron commander, guy from Montana

**Answer:** And had flown in the regular Army before the war. Skilled pilot. Flew -- was flying on a test mission while we were still in Hawaii, and they took him over to an island, Ka-Hee-Hee (sp) which is now a big resort area, it was nothing then. And he took off at dawn and they were testing some instruments, and he flew right into the ocean. He never knew he was flying into the ocean, it was dark. And that was our first report back to our squadron. My God, Commander Coxwell was killed and so was a half dozen other guys. Just checking some instruments. And, well from then on you began to get -- not used to these things -- nobody ever got used to them. But you didn't mourn over them. You just had to take it as another aspect of life. And I suppose the Infantry was even worse, where you fought shoulder to shoulder with a lot of guys, you see them fall in line of battle. But it was -- it was something that you -- just didn't dwell on day to day. You couldn't allow yourself to do that. It -- it wasn't discussed. I mean, they didn't talk about it. Coxwell and his crew went down today. They'd take them off the operation schedule, they won't be flying. That was it. But when you sit here and you ask me questions, it becomes a little more mournful to me.

**Question:** Do you hold animosity to the enemy?

**Answer:** (laughs) Let's put it this way. Not animosity but I don't forget some of their actions, and especially -- especially Guadalcanal, the way the -- the scenes that I witnessed. Not the actual shooting or killing but the next morning they'd clear enough jungle that we would be able to -- in the Air Force -- see where they were fighting. And you'd see a pair of Marine testicles nailed to a tree. Hard to forget. But I don't hold hostility.

**Question:** It's war. I mean that's -- I'll ask one more question. I appreciate you taking the time to do this. And again you made reference to Viet Nam and the other wards. Totally different than World War II. And a lot of kids -- I think there was just kind of an anti -- when we came out of the '60's, there was a very anti-military and everything like that.

**Answer:** I remember, yeah.

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**Question:** Because people wanted to make an issue of whether war was good or war was bad; military's bad. What do you say to them about -- what is war? I mean, maybe you don't have an answer for that, but I don't it's an issue of good or bad. You didn't go over there -- you went over there for a special reason, when you were called to do your duty, you went for a special reason. And war just happened to be a part of that.

**Answer:** Well, I suppose, and I haven't mentioned a word about this and I'm glad you asked this question because I haven't mentioned the -- the courage and the support of the American civilian body put towards this war, and the younger generations have never experienced that. And so they were ready to join with anybody who was bitching, pardon my English, about the US military regardless of the service, or the US political front, or whatever, complaint, complaint, complaint. Viet Nam, for example, I'm aware that many kids took off and went to Canada and so forth. And an entirely different perspective, I mean black and white difference, 360 degree difference. And you didn't get any of that during World War II, I mean none. They were most supportive and World War II was the beginning of many things we take for granted now. We talk about feminism now and all -- the rise of womenkind in American politics and industry and so forth. It all started World War II. Not literally. A friend of mine said you could trace this back to the Civil War. But in gigantic scope, it started when women took off their dresses, put on overalls, and became Rosie the Riveter. This was an entirely different thing, and -- but the Alliance to the Armed Forces, the support, the dedication, was just so remarkable that we would never, never, never have won the war without that type of attitude. So you didn't hear -- I suppose with millions of people involved, somebody deserted, somebody ran to Canada in those days, but so minor that it was just practically nobody. It was -- we all griped when they -- when they took us right out of college. They were going to take me out of graduate -- they did take me out of graduate school and I had worked my way through college and through graduate school. I had two jobs when I was in graduate school. And I hated the idea that I wasn't going to be able to finish. A lot of time and work effort getting this far and -- but the only thing we griped about, it suddenly comes back to me. Why are they taking us out for the Army when there's not going to be a war. Now this was remarkable in a sense that in spite of the fact that we were this close to war, without knowing it, that none of us knew. Now I was in graduate school which only says that I should have had enough sense and my colleagues should have had enough sense to know how close we were to war, but we didn't. We didn't. And yet when we were called, okay, as the popular song of the -- of that era went, Goodbye, Dear, I'll be Back in a Year. Okay, we're going to sit for a year in the Army, I'm going to learn how to shoot a damn gun and drill and all that crap. So I'll be back, but we didn't anticipate any more than that. And right in the midst of my year, why Pearl Harbor came. But fortunately, President Roosevelt knew that we were near to war through his furious battles with Congress, et cetera, we finally declared war. It took Pearl Harbor to do it, but I think even Congress was becoming aware we couldn't go on on this so-called peaceful attitude and the war wouldn't affect us. So we were ill-prepared, let me tell you, ill-prepared. As a matter of fact I usually use an analogy with a baseball game. You're coming to bat in the last of the ninth and the score against you is ten to one, the last of the ninth, and I figure that's the way we were when war was declared. Especially, I can only talk about the Pacific. We were ill-prepared. We had no idea what it was going to take to beat a so-called little nation like Japan in this war. We thought it would last three months; we'd whip those guys in a hurry. We were ill--prepared as possible. It's a wonder we won the war, especially as quickly as we did. Because we were not prepared at all. So, you make me talk more than I have done in a long time.

**Question:** I thank you, sir.