

# National Park Service (NPS)

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Richard Klassen  
June 15, 2004

Interview conducted by Rose Manibusan  
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Interviewee: Richard Klassen  
Military Rank: Tank Battalion, 2nd Marine Division  
Interviewer: Rose Manibusan  
Hyatt Regency Hotel, Saipan  
Date: June 15th, 2004

**--00:00:00 AUDIO DESCRIPTION**

Narrator: The frame opens with Klassen in center frame and seated. He is white, wearing a white short sleeved button up shirt, and large square glasses. To his left, is a white tall lamp.

**--00:00:17**

Q: The following oral history interview was conducted by Rose Manibusan, Chief of Interpretation, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Saipan on June 15th, 2004 at 10:50 am. An oral history interview with Mr. Klassen, who served -

Klassen: Klassen. [Laughs]

Q: Glass?

Klassen: Klassen. K.

Q: Klass-

Klassen: Starts with a K.

Q: Klass. Who served in the United States Marines, 2nd Marine Division, during Word War II. This interview is being made by the National Parks Service, American Memorial Park. For the record, could you please state and spell your full name?

Klassen: Richard Lee Klassen. K-L-A-S-S-E-N.

Q: May I call you Richard?

[Klassen nods]

**--00:01:19**

Q: Richard, I understand that the National Parks Service has your permission to make this recording, and to retain all literary property rights deriving from it, is that correct?

Klassen: Yes.

Q: Richard, could you please tell us where you were born, and the date of your birth?

Klassen: uh.... Hillsboro, Kansas. April 25th, 25. 1925.

Q: Did you grow up there?

Klassen: Yes. First 18 years of my life was mostly spent in Hillsboro, Kansas. [Laughs]

Q: So you went to school there?

Klassen: Yes. Graduated from high school.

**--00:01:52**

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your immediate family?

Klassen: Uh, My dad — I never knew my mother —but, but my dad took care of the family. I have three sisters and two brothers, and my brother Bill was a, killed in France in 1944, and my dad died shortly thereafter in 1944. And my brother Johnny, was in the Navy, and my brother Bill was in the Army, and I was in the Marine Corps.

Q: And what was your father's name?

Klassen: George. George Klassen.

Q: And are you married?

Klassen: Yes I'm married.

Q: And your wife?

Klassen: My wife's name is Mary. We were married in Oceanside, California. August the 11th, 1951.... September.

Q: Did you have children?

Klassen: It was Armistice Day we got married. And we have four kids. Uh, we've been married, uh, almost 53 years. And... my oldest girl is fifty-something, fifty one I think, and then there's —Liz is two years younger, and Cindy is two years younger, and Jeff, [Chuckles] our son is two [Chuckles] — so my baby, Jeff, is our youngest, and he's forty-two.

**--00:03:41**

Q: Alright, I'd like to take you back in time-

Klassen: Yeah.

Q: Could you tell us where you were and what you were doing when you heard that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

Klassen: Uh, I was in... in my senior year at Hillsboro High School, and so everybody was wanting to get the year over with, so we could — for me it was the Marine Corps. [Chuckles] So.

Q: And how did that make you feel?

Klassen: Well I was really sad about it and I, I wanted to get even I guess. [Laughs]

Q: And when did you join the military service?

Klassen: Uh, as soon as I, as soon as I possibly could I, I, I went and signed up a little before — they were going to draft us all anyway — but I went to sign a little before so that I could get in the Marine Corps instead of the Army [Laughs]. So...

Q: And how old were you when you joined?

Klassen: Eighteen.

Q: And what motivated you to join?

Klassen: Uh, It was just the idea that, to save the world I guess, haha. Save our country, you know.

**--00:05:04**

Q: Can you please describe your basic training as if you were explaining it, explaining it to a young man that's joining the military?

Klassen: Well, were were at Boot Camp for eight weeks and it was, it was a lot of body building and weapons and, and basically discipline was, what Boot Camp was all about.

Q: Is there anything you remember most about your bas-basic training?

Klassen: Oh not really. It was, it was, it was, it was — some of it was tough, and you, you had to be on the ball all the time, but it really didn't affect me very much, whether — what was better than the other. It was just a good — everything was on schedule.

Q: Could you tell us about your first assignment after basic training?

--00:06:48

Klassen: Yes. We, we went to tank, tank school. Medium tank school. And we — I think it was about eight weeks. Yes, it was about eight weeks of tank training. I was tr-, trained to be a tank driver, or an assistant tank driver in the medium tanks.

Q: And um, what was your first assignment? And what, what area did you go to?

Klassen: Uh, as soon as I got out of that, we got on this boat in San Francisco. I got in August the 11th and I, by Christmas I was in Pearl Harbor. So that's the amount of training I had. Boot camp and tank school and Pearl Harbor. [Laughs] Then, uh, we got on a smaller boat and went over to the Hawaiian, the Big Island, and we took our combat training under the volcano, on the volcano flats. So. And we were there, uh, 'til we got on the ships. We were in that area and we loaded the ships up... and came over here.

Q: Do you remember what ship that was?

Klassen: Gosh no. There was a, I think it was twelve miles of— [Laughs] Honestly, fifty, test warships, it was... spread out everywhere.

Q: Can you describe your duties, as if you were telling it to a civilian?

Klassen: Well, all the time aboard ship we just tried to keep in shape, and exercise, and eat, sleep. That's about all we did.

Q: And I understand you were on the ship for days before the actual assault? Um...

Klassen: Yeah, we left — it might be on this thing [gestures to table out of frame] — but we left — you want me to look?

Q: Sure.

--00:08:34

Klassen: [picks up paper lying on table next to him out of frame and reads from it]

Here, It'll tell me on this thing.

Okay... Hawaiian Islands 30th December '43 to May, 30th of May '44. Marshall Islands Area Nine Eleven, June '44. Marianas Islands, 15 June '44 to 25 March '45. Uh... 15th April '45 to 17th of September. Says Okinaka, Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands... Ryukyu Islands, 1 to 14 April '45. And then Japan, 25 September '45 to 17th, 17th of December '45. So that was my cruise. [chuckles]

Q: Can, can you describe, um, in detail what it was like as you prepared for the invasion of Saipan?

Klassen: Well, we had no idea. We just — we were supposed to — we were pretty well trained, as much as they could, and we knew that once we got to where we were going we were going to have to land. And I, I really at that time, I really wasn't — I don't think I really thought about what was really going to happen or how it, how it would play out.

Q: Was this your first campaign?

Klassen: Oh yeah.

Q: Saipan?

Klassen: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Do you remember, or do you recall your last briefing before the assault?

Klassen: They said that- They told us exactly what to do, and it was just like night before

Klassen: They said that — told us exactly what to do and it was just like the night before, or two days before. We just knew, supposedly how it was going to go, but nobody was really sure what was going to happen, because it was, it was basically 4th of July for at least a month on Saipan.

Q: Can you describe your first impression of the island of Saipan?

Klassen: [Laughs] I, I, after I got situated I did, I did pretty good looking around, but uh, like Snowden said, General Snowden said, we really didn't get that far in the first couple of days, and so we kind of dug in the sand, and when I woke up the next morning water had come up in the hole. [Laughs] So I had a wet butt. [Laughs].

**--00:11:43**

Q: Today marks the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Saipan. What were your thoughts this morning?

Klassen: I was really — I had never really talked about it, to anybody in my family, and, and they're basically why. They said I'd better go up there, so, and my wife started talking to me about it, so we decided to come, and, and I'm really glad we came. To, to think about how this island looked when we first hit it, and we just tore it up. It was full of cane fields, and it, it was really a mess when we left to go to Sai-, to Tinian again. And we, we came back after Tinian and we built us a little camp, a camp near — I don't even know the name of it or exactly where it was on this island, but we stayed here quite a long time.

Q: Hmm. Can you share with us your personal battle experience on Saipan?

Klassen: Well, I uh, just — I was the Assistant Gunner on a Sherman tank, and I had a .30 caliber machine gun right in my hands by the seat. I had a little periscope. Could see fairly good out of it, and when the tank commander said "Open fire," that's what I did. So. And there was a



lot of people running in front of those tanks, and they were — it was sad, because they were about as old as I was too, but they're the ones that attacked us, so, don't feel nearly that bad about that. I never have really. I've always been able to block out most of that stuff, but, but now I'm beginning to think about it, because I'm going to, getting a little older. [laughs]

Q: Did you encounter any of the banzai attacks on Saipan?

Klassen: Well yes. We had them and — they, they, they had a habit — I don't know how many there was, but they really raised hell when they came down the hill, and it was usually at night, and I remember some bugles. Screaming. But we never did — they never did get that close to our units. They ne — they were stopped before. Because being in the tanks, uh, we, we weren't that close to the enemy, because they could slap a mine on our side of our tank or something. Because every time they saw a tank they'd throw every kind of ammunition at us that they had, because they wanted to stop the tanks. It was important to their....

Q: Did you personally encounter any interaction with the local population?

Klassen: The only thing is, we, we tried to get what, what, what we thought were local people behind us, but basically most of everyone — all of them were hiding in some kind of cave. We met a gal, oh, over on our tour, and she's a war baby. She, she was born in a cave while we were fighting, so that was good to know she made it [Laughs]. But it's just a...thing that happened to me [Chuckles].

**--00:16:10**

Q: If you had to s — what do you most remember about the Battle of Saipan?

Klassen: Well, uh, it... I think what got me the, the worst is that we couldn't convince the Japanese to quit committing suicide, you know? And I've seen, I've seen a ditch of people, soldiers sitting all in a row, and, and they had their right shoe off, and they had the rifle in their mouth, and their toe in the trigger, and they just shot themselves, just through the top of their head. Crazy. For the Emperor. That's one of the bad things, and the real bad thing was the — a, a

woman picking up her kid and jumping off of the — I didn't see hardly any of that, but it was unbelievable to think that the world was that bad off.

Q: What were your experiences in, in World War II after the Battle of Saipan?

--00:17:45

Klassen: Uh, Well, we, we kind of went over to Tinian and kind of took it over, and then we went back to Saipan and built that camp like I said, and we stayed there, and it was, it wasn't bad at all. The only bad part was when I got the message from the Army that my brother got killed and then I got a letter from the preacher that my dad had died, and of course I couldn't go home. Then then the, then the next trip was to Okinawa, and we were kind of — I think we were kind of decoys, to let — to try to convince the Japanese that we were going to try to land where we were at. And it was [Laughs] — I don't — I've never seen that much noise and gunfire and kamikaze, and, and, and all of the ships were — some of the ships were fuel ships and when they went up — now there was even talk that some of those Japanese were riding torpedoes and guiding them into the ships [Laughs], and we had several around us that had Japanese airplane engines on the deck where they had tried to destroy the ship. But I never wanted to get off the ship so bad in my life, but we weren't allowed to go, because we were just trying to convince them that they were going to come the other way so we finally went back to, to Saipan, to our camp, and we stayed there until they signed all the treaties, and then we loaded up our tanks and our equipment and ammunition, and we landed them all at Nagasaki Harbor.

And we were kind of, well I think we were the first occupation troops in that area after the war. And we'd kind of go on patrol, and they were just scraping and bowing, and they just gave us everything, you know? And they were, I think they were glad to, glad it was over and they were still alive, because the bomb hit, very, pretty close to where we stopped and took our tanks off. And, and it — I saw one patch where, where there were factories or something. There was only one tree standing up, and, and that — just little chips of metal scattered all over the ground, and, and the only thing that was standing up on the ground of that factory were the, the — those lace that they make out of big iron, steel. That's the only thing that was standing up was them big pieces. Though — But we stayed there, and then, for about a month and a half and then we went

over to Sasebo, Japan. And then it was December, and then uh, we boarded ship and came back, went back to San Diego, and that was December of '45.

Q: So [unclear] were you there on, on — when the surrender documents were signed?

Klassen: No, we were — that's what was up in Tokyo. Yes, we were on the island, we were on — I'm sure we worked with it because it was after... with ...

Q: Did you, did you have the opportunity, or did — or maybe there was a language ba-, bar-, barrier — but did you talk to any of the Japanese civilians, or have the opportunity to?

**--00:22:14**

Klassen: Well they gave [Laughs] I said this little book, I tell you it was about that big [holds hands up to show an area roughly the size of a playing card]. A little leaflet book, and it had the words that you needed, and it had, like, how to pronounce the word in Japanese, and you could talk just a little bit, but, oh there was no real like, liberty while we were there at that time, because they were a little jumpy. As a matter of fact, we at Sasebo, we, on December 7th of '45, we loaded our tanks with ammunition and got, got geared up in case they would have a demonstration or go crazy or something, so we were still [Chuckles] not too, but they were really yes — did everything that we asked and oh, they extended their, their invitations and everything. I did go to a, one time to a house that — her husband had been a pretty important guy in the Navy I think, and she — we did have some lunch, and, and visit with her and — or, or try to visit, and then — but that's about all the time we got out of the military area. We kind of took over a building that probably was occupied by security or like, harbor guards, or military. It was kind of like a barracks. So.

Q: Could you describe — getting back a little bit to Saipan — could you describe the difference between the Saipan battle and the Tinian battle? How was it different for you?

Klassen: Well, it was not near as wild. It, this was a booger. They were, they were right to the end, and it was, it was like a month at least. Anyway, we heard over the news from Washington, DC that we had secured the island [Laughs].

Q: And when was that?

Klassen: [Chuckles] Well we was — but it took a few more — a week or two past that to — and even when, when we left after, in uh, March of '45 I think, uh there was still, we'd still find Japanese, and I think they found some twenty years after that. [Chuckles] So.

**--00:25:30**

It's uh, one of the most terrible things about the whole thing is, when you're that close together and fighting that kind of a battle, you can't let anybody in there to pick up the bodies.

And...that's a terrible — you know, we always figured that we — we tried not to run over anybody but, with a tank, but I'm not even sure if we did, but you just couldn't see that much out of a tank. Only person could see would be the Tank Commander, and he'd have to open up the top door and stick his head out there and I don't think that's a wise idea. So.

Q: So you drove the tanks?

Klassen: No. I, I was Assistant on Saipan, but yes and, I, I drove some in, on Tinian.-

Q: And how'd that feel? A tank is a big target. I mean, you're there -

[Crosstalk]

Klassen: Well, I, I want to give credit to the infantry, because on the back of this tank, each tank had a telephone back there. And they hung on that phone all day long, walking, and directing our gunner on where the target was, and then approximately how far it was, and they never let go of that phone, unless they got — we never did lose one, but I don't see how. But he was actually eyes, because those slots on the periscopes are — I mean, they're really sophisticated now, but not in those days.

**--00:27:36**

Q: Oh... Where were you when the war ended?

Klassen: Uh, I was on Saipan.

Q: And in 1945 you were still t-

Klassen: Yes.

Q: So were you involved in the building of the civilian camps? Camp Suzuki, or -

Klassen: In, in Saipan?

Q: Yes.

Klassen: I don't think so — I don't know if we — no, I can't remember ever being on a civilian detail. We did, I think we were kind of helping what, what island people what, that we really knew about, but I can't remember ever going out on a pro — [Belches] excuse me — a project like rebuilding the camps, you know?

**--00:28:35**

Q: How did you feel about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

Klassen: Well, uh, it, I thought it a terrible thing, but I was glad, because if we'd of, if we'd of ever have to hit Japan, in those days, that, that beach with rocks, little rocks, and it was going like that [holds hand up to camera at a steep angle], about, and across the bay was these big holes in the hill, and they had those big old twelve inch English guns up there, [Chuckles] aimed down at the water, but I'm sure we could have figured out someplace else to hit. But still that's a l-, that's a pretty big territory. And, the, the, the way those people think, they probably all would kill

themselves if they had even the women and kids, because they did it on Saipan. Probably Tinian, but I can't remember any, any bad, really bad stuff about Sai-, Tai-, Tinian.

Q: It's now 60 years later since the Battle of, for Saipan. Can you please share with us why you felt it was important to return?

**--00:30:12**

Klassen: Well, I think, I think it's helped me, a kind of a closure. To think, that the way it looked when I left, and, and now it's a, it's a beautiful island. It's prosperous, and happiness is all over. We went to the first governor's house the other day for lunch, and he introduced us all his family, and all, and all the kind of dishes and they were just really happy and grateful, and we were too. Yeah, it was great. That's why I'm kind of glad I came.

Q: Well it's a honor for us, for you folks to return and to be able to meet you.

Klassen: Yes.

Q: A, a lot of veterans, like yourself, this is the first time they've returned since the battle.

Klassen: Yes. Me too.

Q: And, and we certainly think this time around that-

Klassen: Yes.

Q: - it will be a lot easier on the heart [Laughs].

Klassen: Yes.

Q: And we certainly are, the island-

Klassen: Yes.

Q: -and the people are certainly grateful for all the sacrifices that took place during World War II

Klassen: Yes. I think that's one of the main reasons that I came, too. Just to see how people made out. How they feel. What they're doing.

**--00:31:59**

Q: If you could talk to young people today about World War II, what would you say to them?

Klassen: Well, uh, I'd say we should do everything we possibly could before, uh, we start a war, because I, I don't approve of the one we're in now at all. I think, I think there's too much — well better not [unintelligible]... [Laughs].

Q: Is there anything else you would like to share or add to this interview that I may have not asked, or there's something of, of importance that you think we need to document?

Klassen: Not really. I, I've told you just about everything I know about, because I came here looking for a bunch of cane fields, you know, and I haven't found any at all [Laughs]. So, and, and, it's just, it's good to see-, see what's happened. About anything else — I don't — unless you have a question I, I think it's just about great.

Q: Well we thank you for sharing your experiences with us, and for helping us to document World War II history.

Klassen: Okay. That's about-

Q: Thank you.

Klassen: - the best I could do.

**--00:33:19.**

[END OF INTERVIEW]