George Lake – Life during WWII

By George Lake

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Box 2 Folder 9

Oral Interview conducted by Matthew J. Walker

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
GL: My name is George Halvor Lake.

MW: Where were you born?

GL: In Blanding Utah among the Indians.

MW: What day where you born?

GL: July the 18th 1924.

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

GL: I was about ready to turn 17.

MW: What do you remember about that day?

GL: I remember getting ready to go to school, and I went down to the service station, which was the only place of gathering in this town…because the population was like 210, and they had just got the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and the thing was happening and we had people from around there that was in the service so everybody was concerned. Yet it was a shock to say the least.

MW: What did you think when you heard about the attack?

GL: Well immediately, school was not far from being out…and immediately I thought about going into the service, just as soon as we could. Everybody from right, from the start become very patriotic, and they had Japanese people out in our area that we knew right from the start was going to be taken some place besides there. So it was total confusion in that thing.

MW: Did you serve in the armed forces during the war?

GL: Yes I did. I was in the U.S. Marines. We was the first replacement to the marine barracks in Pearl Harbor after the bombing and throughout the pacific throughout the entire war.

MW: Were you in combat?

GL: Technically maybe a little bit, Midway Island, but not serious combat.

MW: Where did you serve?

GL: First off, I was at Pearl Harbor, and I was a guard there at Hickam Air Force Base…and…learning all the weapons and how to…I was a special weapons person and done a lot of guard duty, have a lot of experiences that…you just don’t forget. Before the war was over I also guarded Japanese prisoners of war.
MW: What was your rank assignment extra?

GL: I was just a PFC in the Marines.

MW: Did you meet any or make any new friends in the war?

GL: Well, I happened to be put in a platoon with 640 men, and there was me and one other guy who was Mormon. Most of the people had never heard about Mormons. It was pretty interesting to see the different way of life than I was used to.

MW: Did you meet any old friends from home?

GL: I had one guy who was in the Air Force whose name was Hatch that dropped me a flight jacket just because I was a little older than he was and I was at Pearl Harbor, and he heard I was there and looked me up and brought me a flight jacket. I thought that was pretty nice.

MW: How did the military train and prepare you for combat?

GL: Well, they taught us how to swim, if you didn’t know how. In my particular case the DI came down the side was all sitting on the pool kicking our legs and he said, “Does anybody here think they can qualify?” You had to swim the two lengths of the pool which was quite long, and the guy sitting next to me that was from Utah said when the DI said, “Hey fat boy, I think you can make this!” And he said, “No, I don’t swim a stroke, but this guy next to me does.” And that was me and the next thing I remember they’d thrown me in there and they were giving me artificial respiration. Needless to say the next day I learned how to swim.

MW: Is there anything that you wish they would have told you?

GL: I think they kept a lot of that stuff pretty quiet as to what was really happening, but I think it was a good idea that they didn’t tell you a lot of that stuff.

MW: What was your image of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito during the war?

GL: Well, from the start why, there was a lot of publicity downgrading these people, and the nation on a whole was very united in saying, “Hey these guys got to be handled. We got to kill them an’ win this war.” Patriotic was number one.

MW: What is your opinion of Japanese and Germans now?

GL: I had a hard time, me being in the car business you would think about buying a Japanese car right after the war, I didn’t think they would ever sell in the United States. Now they’re one of the most popular there is. Views towards people of that race has definitely changed.
MW: When did you first hear about the German Concentration camps?

GL: In about 1940 we knew through some of the news reports that there was concentration camps of some kind where they really killed off the prisoners and stuff like that. You would get it on the radio. We didn’t have television to see it but…

MW: How did your life change as a result of World War II?

GL: Well, after they had taken me into the service really I wouldn’t of had to gone because I was raised on a farm. I went down and told them that I wanted to go into the service and volunteered to do that. I thought that I could go into the CBs so I could learn about life in general. When I went to the recruiting office they took them by quota. I talked to them about the CBs and they ignored that. They also ignored being in the army or the navy and when I came out I was a U.S. Marine.

MW: Was there any trauma that stayed with you like post-traumatic stress disorder or anything like that after the war?

GL: Yeah, we had on Midway Island a plane that went on bomb patrol, and I was on guard duty maybe 300 yards away. There was this big building they put the planes and stuff in, and this guy had been up on dawn patrol and when he came back in why they had a beer I think and came into Midway Island. This pilot was a good guy; he said he would just go out and run this other guy’s shift because this other guy was drunk. Well, as he went to take off like this he goes into the air, and he makes a loop and it is quite often they did before they headed out to sea. He blacked out and the plane hit on that thing and exploded ammunition, bombs everything all over the island. Luckily, I seen the plane entering there and I laid in a gun emplacement, but it had about a foot of shrapnel in it from explosion.

MW: How did your religious beliefs help you cope with your military experiences?

GL: Well, I was the only LDS boy in that 640 platoon, needless to say I was influenced by the wrong direction. With that background I could have done much better.

MW: How did you contribute as an individual and in your community to the war effort?

GL: All of you make sacrifices during that period of time, and of course they had the war bonds, and we would, you know try to buy the war bonds so they could use the money for the effort. As a marine you do what you are told so contributing was sometimes not volunteering.

MW: What did you do to entertain yourselves?

GL: They kept you pretty busy. You had to have your shoes shined every day. They wandered through, and if they found anything wrong why then you got written up and
would have extra duty. And like one of your extra duties was to take your rifle and have you put your arms straight out like that and put your rifle on it and they will tell you when you can put it down, nobody else. And it gets pretty heavy after a couple, three, or four minutes, maybe longer. And they would also run you around the parade ground out there, many other ways they can keep the discipline.

MW: What kind of food did you have?

GL: Well, you know that was one of the first experiences I had in this food is that everybody liked to drink this milk, and so these guys would talk about cattle having a calf and everything [to] try to get these guys to where they didn’t feel like they wanted to drink milk so the other guys could drink more. So the food…well, it was pretty good until we got overseas and then you got into some of that rations that they had: the K-rations and stuff. There wasn’t much you liked about it.

MW: What do you remember about rationing?

GL: When on Midway Island you was completely dependent on the food that came in from Pearl Harbor and sometimes those ships would have a problem, they would have to turn back and stuff, and there were times we have K-rations.

MW: How did the war affect the community when you came home?

GL: Everybody thought you was a hero when you came home because you had the uniform and the decorations and stuff and…I got discharged at Mere Island in San Francisco, and I hitchhiked to Reno, Nevada, and every car that you put your thumb out to would stop for you.

MW: Did you know any young men who did not return from the war?

GL: Yeah, there were several in that platoon, probably better than half of it didn’t return. All them guys went in on the invasion. I didn’t. I was in the special weapons in the bigger ammunition firearms and at the time they were having the most trouble, I was being trained for flamethrower on tanks.

MW: When you came back how did the people’s families that had lost young men cope with losing?

GL: It wasn’t easy at all because they was people that I went to school with. There was two of them that was killed. And the school I went to we had the largest class that had ever graduated from South Summit High School. There was twenty-four of us.

MW: Did you have a father or brother who served in the military?

GL: No, I was the only one.
MW: What ways did you keep in touch with friends that were in the military or could you?

GL: Couldn’t.

MW: Keep in touch with family at home at all?

GL: Yeah, but I was pretty lax on writing letters. It was mostly just to my girlfriend out in good old Francis Utah that wrote me letters.

MW: What are some of the most vivid memories of WWII that stand out to you?

GL: Well, one of the things that happened to Pearl Harbor that has never been talked about us getting ready for the invasion of Japan. And they lined up all these things that were going to pull the gas over to the invasion of Japan and someplace, somehow, somebody either smoking cigarettes or whatever set that thing off and they lost 261 men. The whole island was on fire because of the explosion and stuff that took place, and we were instructed to never talk about it.

MW: When was that?

GL: That, the exact date I will have to look up I’ve got it written down in there. I can’t remember the exact date, but it was just before the invasion of Japan. And very recently they released a movie on it. I haven’t seen it. You couldn’t believe how much fire! You couldn’t imagine! It looked to me like the whole place…If you had any words to say to God you were saying them because you thought it was going to get you as well as the rest of them! It was that big!

They asked me to tell you that I was a guard for FDR, Roosevelt when he come over to Hawaii. He stayed at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. I was at the main gate when he came in with the two or three cars that followed behind him. And then he spent the night there, and that particular night for some reason we had a rise on the ocean and when I woke up in the morning, we all slept on the floor in the Royal Hawaiian Lobby, and there was about four inches of water that you was sleeping in.