

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSTIY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

37th Division World War II Vets

Personal Experience

O.H. 1005

JOHN E. ONTKO

Interviewed

by

Jeffrey Scott Suchanek

on

November 19, 1980

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN E. ONTKO
INTERVIEWER: Jeffrey Scott Suchanek
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S: This is an interview with John Ontko for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program , on the 37th Division World War II Vets, by Jeffrey Scott Suchanek, on November 19, 1980, at 331 Kendall Street in Campbell, Ohio.

Okay John, tell us a little about when and where you were born.

O: Well, I was born here in the city of Campbell. My birth date is June 4, 1917. My whole life is spent in Campbell.

S: Tell us a little about your education.

O: The only education I went up to, high school. that's as far as I went. I have no college education.

S: Where did you go to school?

O: Memorial High School. And from there on, I had a little work off and on. I belonged to the Youngstown National Guard. That's Company H; there was a Company H. That's before Pear Harbor; and then, I guess, when they thought trouble was starting, we were shipped over to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. I remember the day. We were kicking football in the company streets, and all of a sudden, the report come on the radio. Pearl

Harbor was bombed! Well, who knew anything about Pearl Harbor in them days, where it was, whether it was in Australia or Cleveland or in Pittsburgh. Nobody knew where, till about two o'clock in the morning when the bugle sounded. [We had to] pack up. We're pulling out, which we did pull out. Of course, we were scattered all over the states, sabotage and all that stuff.

And then from there, we left for New Zealand, from New Zealand to Fiji Island; and then, from Fiji Island we went to Guadalcanal. [We] sort of relieved the Marines at Guadalcanal when the Marines were at Guadalcanal. Then, we had a couple of combats there, and from there, we hit Bouganville. From Bouganville, we had a little rest period, and from there, we went to hit the Philippines, which we worked our way through Luzon and down towards Manila. [It's] something that I'm not sorry I ever participated in. I think it was a wonderful thing--I mean for our country as far as that goes.

S: How did you get involved in the National Guard to begin with? What made you join the National Guard to begin with? What made you join the National Guard?

O: There was three of us--in fact, Steve Javorsky, he's from 37th. He has passed away. He was, I think, a lieutenant colonel, Kovall. There was three of us at the time decided to join the National Guards in Youngstown. In fact, they called me up one day and said, "What do you say, John? Will you join the National Guards?" Well, we were all young then, so [we said], "Sure, we'll go join the National Guards."

S: What year was that? Do you remember?

O: I can't tell you there. But Captain Perello, he was our commander, like he was our company commander in Camp Shelby before we shipped out. It's one of those things, being young, we said, "Well, we'll do something different." We joined the National Guard. Of course, at that time with what they have today, we had nothing in them days as far as--well, look at their weapons they have today compared to what we had.

S: What were the weapons that you had? Can you remember?

O: Our company was machine guns and mortars, old water cooled machine guns. I don't know if you have ever seen one of them.

S: The one with the big jacket on it.

O: Yes. We had to carry our own water and with our hose. Every time you fired the gun, you had to have water in it. Otherwise, you'd burn up the gun. And then, the

mortars, 81 millimeter mortars is what we had.

What we were pertaining to, one section was always attached to a rifle company. In other words, we gave them protection, machine gun fire and mortar fire. So, that's the way our company was set up for machine guns and mortars.

It's hard to believe after all these years, that you actually went through combat, seeing some of your good friends die, and all the different parts of the country you've been in, different parts of the world you've been in. It's just like one big dream. Every time we sit down and reminisce or when we go to our meetings here, the 37th Division, we usually bring up things and talk about the past. And then, we just say, "John could you believe what was going on? Happened? Some of our good buddies have died back there [that] we left behind.

But, I say it's something I would do again. I'm not sorry what I did. I would do it again. Things are a little different now, in this country--not that I blame the fellows as far as war; because nobody wants to go to war, and nobody wants to die. I think that Vietnam kind of cured everybody of combat. But, one thing I can say--I don't know if this should be said--they should have never eliminated the draft. I think, more or less, all right, you take a bunch of young fellows, one year of training, which would do them good. In fact, you can get the best education you can today in the service. You can pick up most anything, electronics, any kind of mobile unit outfits. They have opportunities today, which in them days we hadn't. All they thought or in them days was guns, guns, and more guns, and I think they should never have eliminated the draft. I think they should have had sort of a training, one year of training or maybe a year and a half. And, they'd release them, and you'd pick another bunch. I think it would be good the young people today as far as getting them interested in something. The world today, the kids today, I don't know what's causing all that's going on today.

All this heavy dope and drinking, what they're talking about. Of course, they're not all bad. I drive a school bus now, and I wouldn't say all my kids were bad. You always find a few that are mischievous.

But, like I say, I don't regret putting forty-one months overseas. Sacrifices, you see some of your best buddies die, things you had to go through, hardship. No proper facilities such as bathing and food and washer. Like I say, it seems like a big dream.

S: Do you think the Depression had anything to do with your ability to adapt to the conditions that you saw during the war? Did that prepare you? What was the Depression like? What can you remember about the Depression?

O: Things were tough them days. I remember the time where fellows used to go out different turns, like, I'd say, from daylight looking for a turn, try to get a turn of work that day. If they didn't get daylight, they'd go out through eleven again trying to pick up a turn, and then, there wasn't. They'd go back out at midnight again and try to pick up a turn. Things were rough, because at that time, I worked in the canteen at Republic Steel; and I seen these fellows come in different parts of the day. I talked to them. "John, I couldn't catch a turn today, but I'm coming back out this afternoon again." Then, if they didn't catch a turn from nine to eleven, then they'd come back on eleven to seven trying to catch a turn. But, things were tough.

I remember then, they had such a thing as canteen books, which you were allowed to buy cigarettes or stuff at the canteen. A lot of times, as they ask for a book, I look up their card, and it says no more credit. And they say, "Well, how come I can't get a book?" I say, "Well, according to the card here, you don't have enough time in." We were allowed to give you a book, a coupon book, which comes to five or ten dollars.

S: All the men were allotted these?

O: Yes. In other words, we had a file which you kept a record of all the men, and they had the check number and everything else; and they said, they wanted a book. Well, if they had the time in, they were allowed to get a book, which they sighed for; and if they didn't have the time, well, we weren't allowed to give them any books. A lot of guys depended on it as far as getting their tobacco, cigarettes, or maybe, a sandwich or something. But it was really, really tough.

S: When you say guys came out looking for a turn, you mean they would be hired just for one shift?

O: No, no. This is what I mean. They'd come out--it all depends how many orders they had. So maybe, the boss would say, "I need five men." Well, you now have to go home you see. So they said, "Come around about three again. See if we can give you a turn at three." Things were so bad the guys used to come out every turn and try to get a turn, get a few days of pay. It was really sad.

S: What did your father do? Do you remember?

O: My dad was a steel worker too, Youngstown Sheet and Tube. He must have had about forty-one years at Youngstown Sheet and Tube, and my brother [had] the same thing. Of course, they're both gone now, but we're all steel men, because I spent thirty-two years down there--except they shut down, . . . shut down over here, Youngstown Sheet and Tube. I am one of the five thousand that went out.

Thinking back in them days seeing these fellows come out trying to catch a turn, more or less begging for a turn trying to get a couple days of pay. They had families and children. It's different today. Today, you have all kinds of help. You have welfare. You [have] food stamps. You have compensation. Them days, you didn't have any. Didn't have it in them days, which, of course, is good today.

S: Okay. Now, when you were in the National Guard--you said that you went down to Camp Shelby--you went down then, before the draftees came in? You were down there sort of to set up things, right?

O: Oh yes.

S: Can you remember those days?

O: We set up over there, and it was just a matter of weeks before the draftees were coming in. Of course, the camp is set up battalion-wise, your company battalion; and then, you have your battalion headquarters and regimental headquarters. Then, I said, in two or three weeks, then, the draftees would start to come in because there wasn't too many National Guards.

S: What were you doing during that period of those two or three weeks.

O: We were setting up, doing some small training with the weapons we did have until, like I say, the draftees come in; and then, we formed a company, a full company, which was broke down into squads, platoon, sections, companies.

S: Was there kind of, that rivalry between the draftees and, maybe, the old guys like yourself, the veterans of the National Guard?

O: No, no. No there wasn't. We got along swell. In fact, we helped them out as much as we could till they go on their feet, because that's something that's new. It was new to me when I got in. It's new to them when they got in too as far as getting on a uniform and

trying their boots, their hat, and their coat. [They'd ask], "How do I look?" Of course, like I say, everybody is scared, when the lieutenant comes out and your first sergeant and company commander. You got to be a little rough, teaching, but we got along wonderfully good. We just helped each other out. Then, in a matter of time, we were one big old company. It was wonderful, yes it was wonderful.

S: Were you aware of the events that were happening in Europe? Did you figure that the United States would eventually get in the war?

O: Well, we read a little bit about it, but nobody took anything serious at that time. Like I said, we were in Camp Shelby, and it was Sunday. Yes, Pearl Harbor was bombed on Sunday. I'm pretty sure it was Sunday. We're kicking football, and all of a sudden, the news breaks in. They bombed Pearl Harbor. Well, where's Pearl Harbor. Who know where Pearl Harbor was? Nobody knew where Pearl Harbor was. A guy says, "What's Pearl Harbor? Where's that in? Australia or Canada or where is it at?" But no, nobody took it seriously. In fact, nobody took it seriously until we got on a boat. I remember when we showed off from San Francisco on these big boats and we had, I think, one or two escort escorting us. Of course, we still didn't take anything seriously, because we had never seen any action. I mean, nothing is serious until you see somebody get hurt.

In fact, when we landed at New Zealand, it was beautiful country. People treated us wonderful. We still didn't think nothing about no war or combat. Then, from there, there was talk going around that they spotted Japanese submarines around Fiji Island. So, they shipped us down to Fiji Island, and then, it was a matter of time before the Marines hit Guadalcanal. Then, it wasn't too soon, but we went in eventually and more or less [did] mop up work in Guadalcanal. But, then still, it wasn't that you'd seen anybody get hurt or get killed like that.

So, we hit Rendova. That was our first combat. I remember [about] the time we were walking. E Company was in the lead. We were going through the jungles, hot. Everybody's talking about Sundays or having a beer. I [was] wishing [that] I was with my girlfriend or [that] I could go for a big hamburger, right now. Not thinking. Nobody even had the slightest idea that the Japs are out there waiting for us, and we're going through the jungles still talking about the beer and the milkshakes; and all of a sudden, all hell broke loose. The Japs opened up on us. They completely wiped out E Company.

And, when them shells are coming and you see guys being torn apart and screaming and they tell you, "Dig in. Dig in," fingernails and all, you're digging a hole and [you] get in that hole. That's the only protection. But then, we realized what it was when you see guys dying and moaning and you can't get to them. The medics tried to get to them. Our artillery wasn't set up, because jungles are pretty rough and it was raining. And the 105s, before they got them set up, we were pinned down for three days. They were knocking the hell out of us for three days. Finally, 105s opened up. That kind of quitted the Japs, but they sure played hell with our battalion. I know E Company was completely wiped out.

S: Did you see E Company get hit?

O: Oh yes.

S: Did you have any buddies in there?

O: I had some friends, yes, some friends in there.

And then, they're throwing shells all over the place, and there's nothing worse than a tree burst. I don't know if you know what a tree burst is. When a shell hits a tree or a bomb, the shrapnel comes right straight down at you, come shipping like a bullet right down at you. Like say, when the shells hit the trees and stuff like that, that shrapnel would just come right down and anybody around it would just catch it.

All that time, do you know what it's like? You see someone dying, moaning, and screaming. Of course, you're . . . shaking too, . . . feeling. I was . . . shak[ing] for. . . .

S: Try to explain that feeling when you're getting fired, you're getting shot at, and you're getting shelled. What's that like?

O: It's a feeling--it's not like being numb or anything like that. It's just like, more or less, you're in a state of shock because your thinking back. You just talked about milk shakes fifteen or twenty minutes ago or a good can of cold beer or something; and all of a sudden, you see guys flying around, bodies flying around, guys dying and screaming and moaning. I'll tell you. It took me about a week to get out of it, because when we dug in, we were dug in for about three days. We couldn't move. They had us pinned down. Then, we got our artillery fire, which gave us support; and then sure, that quieted the Japs in front of us. But, it's something you just can't explain. It seemed

like it came out of nowhere, like the sky opened up and it dropped stuff out on top of your head.

S: Was there a lot of infiltrating at night by the Japanese dispersed?

O: Oh yes. They'd infiltrated at night, because nothing moves at night but the enemy. Once you're in a hole, even if you got hit at night, they wouldn't get to you; because if anything moves at night it's the enemy.

S: You were told this?

O: It's strictly enemy. We were always three guys in a hole. One guy would make sure he's awake and anything crawling around is the enemy. No medics could get to you. If you were wounded at night, if you made it by morning, fine. If you didn't why . . . because nobody could move at night. Nobody moves at night but the enemy. And any comes around you, well then, you're supposed to take care of it.

Oh yes, they did a lot of that. The Japs are pretty shrewd. They're pretty smart like they are, today. They're overrunning us with them Japanese cars. But, they were no dummies. They had rifles, flameless. When their rifles would fire--like our rifles would fire at night and you could see a flame. There was no flame in their rifle at all. They were a little better than us as far as their equipment.

But after the first combat, after the first three days, you kind of shake yourself out of it. You realize that it's either them or you. So, you get the different feeling in your system, because you see your buddies get killed and these guys are all wounded and then you get a different feeling. You're just like a changed man. It's either him or you. The first one you see, you open fire; because if you don't, he's going to open fire at you. And then, from then on, it was combat. Fight, fight, fight. Kill or be killed. That's the way it was.

S: After that first combat, did you feel like you were a hardened veteran?

O: Well yes, especially when you see if you can pull through, which a lot of them didn't. . . . At that time, they called it shell shock. They don't call it that anymore. They call it combat fatigue, now. At that time, I remember this big lieutenant we had. [He was a] big fellow about 6 foot 2 [inches], and we're still fooling around. He's trying to teach us all that different fighting. When that happens and as big as he was, as strong as he was--there was a tree with a hole

in it, like a double tree--he crawled in the hold and you couldn't get him out of there with a team of horses. He was shell shocked.

And you see all them guys down there. The medics had to go in there, and they gave him three shots before they calmed to get him out of it. It doesn't matter how big you are or how small you are. It's all up here. If you didn't break then, well then, you're going to go all the way through. Like I say, the first time in combat, if you didn't break then, why. . . .

S: Is there any special trick that you used to take your mind off it while you were undergoing this stressful situation?

O: A lot of us, we used to talk to each other. Like one guy said, "When we go through the jungles, you protect my side, and I'll protect your side," more or less. We're protecting each other, which was good, because you had the feeling, he's watching me and I'm watching him; because there was snipers up in the tree and stuff like that. You get a good feeling just when you work together, sort of a buddy system like they say. And, it was on both sides, either side. Of course, you never know when you'll get it or anything else. You just keep watch through the jungle. So, if we met resistance, then we had to start fighting again. Guadalcanal was just mop up work. Rendova and Bouganville, that was another hell place, and the Philippines was another hell place.

S: Okay, let's talk about Bouganville, then. Did you participate when the Japanese attacked Hill #700?

O: Yes. Yes, I was there.

S: Do you remember, when the attack started, what you were doing?

O: I'll tell you what we were doing. I was down by my mortar guns. In fact, there was some talk that there may be an attack, and we were checking our guns and getting our ammo set up, and everything else. It wasn't not even forty-five minutes after that all hell broke loose. I mean, they were pouring through our guys up there. They were calling for fire, and we were getting some support from the sea, because there was a few firing from over there and there was a couple of destroyers; and they were throwing fire up. Then, our artillery 105 and 155, they were throwing fire up. But I know, we burned out at least two barrels throwing them mortars out there.

S: What kind of shells were you using at this time?

O: Well, there's fragmentation shells. Usually, you throw smoke first to get your sights. You'd have an observer over there. He'd say, maybe, "Left three, four, or five mills or right four or five mills," all depending where the shell hit. Then, once you got it in, then he says, "Now, throw me five shells for accurate firing." But, oh yes, all hell broke loose over there.

S: Fragmentation shells, that was used against troops?

O: Yes.

S: Did you have a high explosive shell that you would use against pill boxes or something?

O: No, not so much at pill boxes. It was all enemy troops, more or less enemy troops. They'd, like box them in. You'd have a gun here and a gun here. One to fire here and one to fire here and one to fire here; and then, you start bringing your gun in a little bit where you make sure you get that whole area covered. So, your fire would be more effective that way. And of course, our machine gunners were over there with them on the line. It was something I'll never forget, because our boys are getting hit and getting killed. And--maybe, I shouldn't say this, but--out in the fire, that's where I got my bronze star. I went out into fire and carried the wounded in. And, we were running short of ammunition; and I, once again under fire, went up there and started bringing some ammunition.

S: For the machine gunner?

O: No, for our mortars and a lot of guys that got hit, under fire, I was bringing them in, the wounded.

S: Were you under attack yourself? Were you getting fire yourself?

O: Oh yes, there was shells flying all over the place.

S: Oh, you were getting shelled, too?

O: Yes. In fact, not so much shelled, but we had to be careful of snipers breaking in on our guns; because they wanted to get our guns first; because they did a lot of damage, but not directly. A couple shells did land--of course, that's to be expected. They are shorts, what they call shorts from artillery and from the--see, they would land a little short, which I think a lot of them [were] hitting our own area. That's to be expected.

S: Describe when you went out and got the wounded men.

Can you describe it? Can you remember what you were thinking when you went and did that? How did you know he was out there, for one thing?

O: The company commander said there was a lot of wounded that have to be brought in. You are under fire, see. Well, [I was] getting mad [at] seeing all these guys down there that would yell, so I just started crawling on my stomach. We found this one guy. He was shot, I think, around the neck. First of all, I just grabbed, pulled him a little bit; so I could get away from more fire because fire was all [over] the place, bullets flying all [over] the place. Then, we finally got him close enough, where it's safe enough to pick him up and carry him out of there. Then, we were running short of ammo. Once again, I guess I just didn't give a damn. Under fire, [I] went down and got some ammo for our guns. That's why I was awarded the bronze star. They call it bravery I guess.

S: This wounded man, where did you take him? Did you take him back to an aid station?

O: To the medics, were the medics could work on him right away?

S: Did the men have a lot of faith in the medics?

O: Oh yes, yes. The medics were wonderful. They say they saved many, many a life. They were well trained and well disciplined. Of course, we lost quite a few medics. They were killed in action too; but as far as that could go, they'd help you as much as they could. They were willing.

Of course, like jungles, stopping the bleeding is important. Out there your book would be thin. Your blood was almost like water in the jungles. As soon as you got a little hit, they'd throw blood plasma in you right away. I'd see little shrapnel like this, and I'd see some of them. Blood would just squirt out, just like out of the spigot or something, on account of the different climate.

S: So, you could die of a loss of blood in a hurry?

O: Oh yes. Right away, they put blood plasma in you, right away; because you're bleeding so bad and so fast. If you get hit, like around here or any place else, you lose a lot of blood. They have to put blood plasma.

S: Now, you were at the mortars, right?

O: Eighty-one mortars, right?

S: Were you given a rifle, also?

O: Oh yes.

S: Did you ever use that rifle?

O: Oh yes, many times, yes.

S: Do you know if you hit anybody with it?

O: Well, you got about five or six guys firing at somebody. You don't know whose bullet hit who.

S: Did you have any direct charges towards your particular position?

O: We thought we were going to have it that night. Of course, we held them back. They were ready to overrun us. In fact, they did overrun a few of our trenches, which they wiped out quite a few of our guys; but then, they were stopped. You have first line defense, second line defense, and third line defense; and when this gets rough, you pull. Sooner or later, they're going to stop.

S: You had plenty of time to prepare these defenses before hand. Is that right?

O: Yes. Like I say, it was like one big dream. After it was all over with, you seen a lot of people, good people, killed.

S: Did you have any good friends that were killed on Bouganville? Anybody you knew?

O: Yes. There was quite a few of them, but it's been so long [that] I can't even remember their names. Guys we used to go out together, drink together, gamble together. Like I say, it's been many, many years. Those guys from E Company, F Company that we knew, we used to get together. That's rifle company, and like I say, good times [we'd] drink and eat and gamble; but it has been many, many years. I can't even remember half the damn names.

S: Did you see any USO Shows on Bouganville while you were there, any big name stars that came in?

O: Was it Bouganville or where was it where Bob Hope. . . was it Bouganville? It would have to be Bouganville. There was so many troops, and we were so far back you needed field glasses to see him, yes. Oh I mean, there were ten, fifteen thousand troops. Yes, it was Bob Hope.

When we were in Guadalcanal, he used to play a comedian, sort of comedian in movies. It was on a Sunday.

He had two guys with him, a little bit of entertainment for the troops. Then, all of a sudden, it comes on the air [that] Japanese planes are coming in. There was a destroyer out there and two freighters, and our fighter pilots started warming up to go out there and beat them. Then, they give you--they would be 100 miles out, 80 miles out, 60 miles out, [or even] 40 miles. And, you could hear our fighter pilots wanting each other, "Look out, Joe. He's on your tail," and so forth. Then, the planes came in and refueled and went back up to fight. Then, the planes were coming in after the battle. I think they hit the destroyer and hit one of the freighters, which was beached. Then, the fighters would come in after the fight. It was another thing. You could see some of them come in on their belly, all shot up. You would see someone crash that was shot down. Some of the guys were bailing out in parachutes.

S: You witnessed the dog fights themselves?

O: Oh yes. I hadn't seen it, but they did say Japs . . . coming down your parachute. They used to machine gun you when you were coming down. I never seen them, but I heard stories of that. Usually, [we'd] get one of our planes and would try to stick around and protect him, so they wouldn't come in and strafe him while he's coming down in his parachute.

S: How about any atrocities, any stories of atrocities that the Japanese would do to the infantryman?

O: There was stories, which I didn't actually see myself, that I was told of. This one time, they caught the Marines. They hung them up and used them for bayonets practice. Now of course, I never seen this, but there were stories to that effect.

S: What kind of reaction did those kind of stories have on the men.

O: It would drive them a little bit. They used to tell us, a lot of Japs had gold teeth in their mouth. And, there was some guys that must have been doing, knocking them gold teeth out of his mouth. The reports were [that] the Japs were getting a whif of it and they wanted that stopped. I did see a lot of dead Japs, and a lot of them had gold fillings and a lot of gold, or a complete set of gold teeth, which I'd never seen before. They have them, but they're stories, which I didn't see myself; but fellows go around that did do things like that. It wasn't human, but I don't know.

S: Now, on your way to the Philippines, did the convoy come under air attack at all? Was there any air resistance?

O: Yes, we were attacked. Of course, there must have been, who knows, close to a thousand ships. That includes, cruisers, destroyers, flat tops, all these troop carriers. We were attacked by Japanese dive bombers and these, what they call, suicide plants. They'd dive right into the ship. I seen two of them hit a flat top, five right into a flat top. Yes, we were attacked there once or twice. Of course, our planes went up there. Our ack-ack shot quite a few of them down, but yes, we were attacked when we hit the Philippines.

S: When you hit the Philippines, what was the reception you got from the Philippine people themselves?

O: We landed a Luzon, fought our ways down toward Manila, and after all that bombardment and dive bombing when we hit the beach, who do we see? Starving women and children. You didn't have no candy bars--I don't know for how many years. We had them almond chocolates that were supposed to be real good, a lot of vitamins in them. We had a lot of that C-ration in our bags. Do you know what they were praying for years? Salt. They wanted salt in the worst way. They didn't have salt--I don't know for how many years. Of course, we gave them what we could, what we had, some C-ration in our battle pack and candy bars and whatever you had.

But, we didn't meet no resistance until we'd get in about, maybe 50, 60 miles from the beach. Now, that's what greeted us on the beach was women and children, some old folks.

S: These people, did they seem to all say that they were guerrilla fighters?

O: No, no. Later on, we got attached with the guerrilla fighters, the ones that were against the Japs. And then, there was a lot of them, because I know the second night a lieutenant come up to me, he says, "Sergeant, these guys will take over and protect you while you go sleep. You and your section go to sleep." I kind of was a little worried about that, whether I should trust them or not. They spoke good English, Philipinos, so we gave them our guns; and we finally got some shut-eye, and they guarded us all night while we were . . . these guerrillas. And they were coming in after, from the jungles and everything else. They knew that we hit the Philippines.

Now there was people that went with the Japs. There [were] guerrillas, finally. [We] knew who they were, and they would start shooting them [Japanese soldiers], putting them to death, having trials and what not.

S: Did you see any of that, where they'd, maybe, take a collaborator and put them against the wall or something?

O: Yes. I seen some pretty nasty things, where they lined them up and shot them. They didn't torture them. But, they knew who they were, because a lot of them, these people that were with the Japs, caused a lot of Philipino people to die innocently. Yes, I seen a lot of them where they knew who these guys were. They already had them picked out. They tied them up and shot them down. Quite a few of them were shot down, which of course, that is their country and they knew what they were doing. They picked their own side. Of course, that was all over. That was in Germany, in France, and every place else.

S: Did you get the impression that the initial Japanese was sort of a rear guard action just to slow you up? Was there any major effort made to stop the advance down Luzon or to drive you off the beach at all?

O: No. There was no big attack to drive us back. They bombarded pretty and dive bombed. We didn't meet our resistance till about 50, 60 miles in.

S: Did that surprise the guys that there wasn't that much resistance initially?

O: Yes, we were all surprised more or less. We figured we were going to get a nice surprise when we hit the beaches, but we didn't. And we pushed in that one day, I think, about 50 or 60 miles before we started meeting resistance.

S: Did you have any trouble keeping up with the infantry, that they were going too fast, that maybe with the heavy weapons company had trouble supporting?

O: No, no, because we had to move right along with everybody. Now, you take the 81 mortars. You've got the track part; you've got the tubes; and you've got the base plate. That's all heavy stuff. Plus, you had guys carrying ammo. Of course, one man would try to spell each other off, because that stuff is heavy. But, you moved right along till they told us to stop or, maybe, our recon up ahead met some resistance or something; or they spotted something big up there. Maybe, it's tanks or some heavy artillery pieces, something or some big concentration of gas. But no, we

- kept moving till they told us to stop.
- S: But, the major resistance you met then, initially, was at Manila itself. Is that right?
- O: Yes, before we got down to Manila, then, we met heavy fighting, real heavy fighting.
- S: Did it turn into street fighting?
- O: Street fighting? Oh yes. Manila is something like Youngstown. It was all street fighting.
- S: Were you prepared for that sort of fighting?
- O: Well, we were more or less, trained for jungle fighting. They gave me a submachine gun. I carried a submachine gun. A submachine gun is good for closed quarters, but for the jungle, it's no good. Fire on that is 40, 45 yards, and then, the velocity of the bullet is no good anymore. I remember [that] we were downtown Manila and I dug in right there. It was in the center of town. Left of me was a big company, Armors. I think it was Armors. There was hams, and there was bacon and all that stuff they had on there. Then, in front of me, was a big theater, like we have downtown here, the Warner Theater. It's, I'd say, about the same size as Youngstown, maybe a little larger. Yes, we're fighting there, building to building. There was a big post office. They sealed themselves in there. I don't know, [there were] two or three hundred Japs in there. [We] had to blow them out of there. It took us, maybe three or four days to completely clean out Manila. (End Side One).
- S: John, when you got right outside Manila, from what I understand, McArthur ordered the 37th Division off the road to let the first Cavalry go into Manila first. How did that make you feel?
- O: It kind of made us all mad. It made me mad, I know that. What his intentions were or what he was up to, I don't know, but it kind of . . . at least, my men were kind of peeved about the whole situation. Like I say, we didn't know. We were just ordinary men. The higher echelon above us, they'd give the orders. But, everybody was kind of peeved about the whole deal.
- S: Did you know where the First Cavalry came from? Did you know they were in the Pacific at all?
- O: No, no. What happened there, I just don't know. Like I say, everybody was in the state of confusion. Nobody knew what was going on. All were are was small men. All the orders comes from the top.

- S: Do you think, maybe, this was because you were a National Guard unit and you weren't regular Army?
- O: No, I doubt it. I don't think so, because we had draftees. They were all good fighters, all good men. They were christened to two or three combats before we hit the Philippines. They were all good fighters. They had experience. It doesn't matter whether you're regular Army, National Guard, or draftee. You have been through combat two or three times. You were, more or less, christened. You knew what was going on. You knew what to expect. You may expect [that] you're going to live today. [In] maybe two or three hours, you're gone; you're dead. You're talking about new personnel coming in that had never seen combat, but these guys were all christened. They had seen combat two or three times already.
- S: Would you say that the survival rate went up? The more combat you had seen, increased the chance you had of surviving?
- O: The guys learned. You learned how to protect yourself, how to take cover. You learned the different sounds of different shells, like these 77s the Japs had. They had a ricket, ricket noise, whistle, the way they came at you; and after a little while, you'd learn that different sound and the way that shell was coming at you. Oh yes, you picked up. You learned as you went along. Like I say, it was costly to how many people; but you learned as you went along. It's like anything else. I mean, you correct your mistakes as you went along--if you want to survive, that is.
- S: What were some of the common mistakes a green soldier would make? He wasn't cautious enough maybe?
- O: He wasn't cautious enough.
- Of course, I remember the time we got this new lieutenant from overseas. We used to get replacements from overseas, which he never seen combat. Now, it was one night. I don't know what happened. I guess he must have got a little excited. He opened fire and killed three of his own men. Now, these three men seen combats. And see, he wasn't through any combat. He got a little excited.
- S: Did anything happen to him?
- O: No, I don't think. As far as I know, what happened to him, whether they shipped him back to the States or not, I don't know.

But, we had replacements. There were new officers coming from the States, which had never seen combat and a lot of them were real gentlemen. They knew we went through combat, and they didn't want to throw their rank too much around; because he hasn't seen combat. We have seen combat. They had a lot of faith in the men that was there.

S: They relied on you a lot for. . . .

O: Oh yes, yes. They figured we'd been through it. We'd seen it. He hasn't seen it. He has to learn it, maybe the hard way.

S: What was your rank in the Philippines?

O: Staff sergeant. I was staff sergeant.

But, you learn as you go along. One time a bullet comes a little close, well I say, "Well, I should have done this or I should have done that." Or, when the shells start flying, buddy, you get in there and you dig in. You put your nose to the ground. You stay there.

S: Would the guys talk about this after battles? [Would they talk about] the experience they had--that, maybe, they thought might help you in the future, like the sound of a shell or something; and [would] they say, "If you hear this, it's time to hit the ground," or something?

O: Yes, just like planes at night. When we're dug in, those Japanese planes would come in; and they had different names for these planes. I think one was the name--it was Washing Machine Charlie. Have you heard that before? Yes, he'd come and irritate us every night, and we'd say, "There goes Washing Machine Charlie, again." Of course, we wouldn't open fire, because you'd give your position away. That's one thing you never want to do is open fire at night. When they know where you're at, that's when they start dropping bombs.

But, different planes, the sound of the mortar, and the diving of the plane, they seem to make different noises because they're coming down in a dive. I figured, the mortar, the way the mortar sounds, you can tell whether it's a fighter plane; or maybe, it's a two-mortar, dive bombing plane. But, you learn as you go along. You found out your mistakes.

S: Now, in the battle for Manila, were you still with the mortars; or did they give you that machine gun and you were, like, street fighting?

O: No, no. I was with the mortars all the while.

S: Okay, were they calling mortar shots into Manila itself? I understand that at the beginning McArthur didn't want any of the buildings destroyed.

O: That's right. In fact, the way I understood it, he didn't want no dive bombing or anything down there. He didn't want them buildings destroyed or anything. That's why I couldn't understand why there was not enough support such as dive bombing and heavy artillery fire and stuff. That's the way I understand the same thing was with Wall City. You probably heard about Wall City.

S: A little bit, yes.

O: Yes. He didn't want too much destruction as far as destroying. . . . That's something we couldn't understand, why you couldn't save a couple thousand lives.

S: Was the street fighting vicious? Was there a lot of calls for mortar fire? What targets were you told to hit?

O: That's up to the observer. . . . He'd radio them in. We carried walkie-talkies. He had a walkie-talkie; we had a walkie-talkie. And he'd give me the range, approximate range, and I'd set up the guns and throw some shells out there. Then, if it's maybe, too much to the right or too much to the left, then, he'd correct my position; and I'd set up the gun for that position. Especially--say there was a machine gun pocket, or maybe, there was forty or fifty Japanese riflemen in that one area to help blow them out of there. They'd give us the fire, because we couldn't see. We more or less got orders from him.

S: He was your eyes, then?

O: He was our eyes, and he'd give us the firing range, whether left or right. Then, he'd say, "You're on target. Throw me four, five, or six shells." Then, we'd pop on in, one after another.

S: Did you see any of the prisoners that came out of that prison there in Manila?

O: No, I haven't seen any of them prisoners, no. I seen a lot of Filipino people that were--well, how would you say it--that were, more or less, prisoners of the Japs. They didn't collaborate with the Japs. They probably kept them as prisoners, which were skin and bones. [They had] very little to eat, very little clothing, and very little medicine; because I talked to Filipino

guys, and they said that's--some of the people that--I guess, the guerrillas didn't kill them, but more or less, kept them like prisoners. [They] probably used them as slaves, or they were used as laborers or something.

S: Did you run across any places where they had massacred any of these civilians.

O: Yes. We were going up, and we passed a family, ten or twelve [members]. In fact, one woman was pregnant. These Japs, before retreated, they bayoneted every one of them. . . . So, I think they pulled our battalion to see if we could get these people. There was a family, maybe ten or twelve. They bayoneted all of them before they took off. Like I say, this woman was pregnant. They run a bayonet right through her, too.

They pulled us off. We went after them. We were up so far, and then we dug in. I think the order was coming that the Japs were coming at us; so we set up for them. I don't know if you ever probably heard of that Bonzai charge. That scream. The way they scream like fanatics. They come at us, but we were all ready for them, set up for them.

S: Describe that attack. Can you remember what that was like?

O: They have sort of a screaming noise. When they're attacking, like a scream, like--I don't know what you'd say. Whether they were mad, or that was the way they performed their military duties, as far as attack, it was a hell of a noise, the screaming. I mean, it give you the goose pimples. It's scary like.

S: And, they would charge right at you?

O: [The Japanese came] right at you, right at the guns, right at you. [We'd] open fire and just keep mowing them down. [We used] machine guns, bars, rifles and just keep mowing them down. Those rice patties, you've seen rice patties the way they come through. They come charging right at us.

S: Until they were all dead?

O: Yes, yes. We mowed them all down, yes, cut them all down. We were waiting until they got so close to them. We opened fire on them.

S: Okay, did you take a part in the attack on Wall City itself?

O: No, not directly. Directly, I didn't take--myself. Of

course, the rifle companies made attack on it. I don't remember whether we used our mortars at that time or not. I don't recall. I remember going through Wall City. Like I say, it has been a long time ago.

S: Okay, after the attack for Manila was over, then what did you do?

O: They gave us sort of a little break, like sort of a little rest period. Now, when was this when I got picked out on points? See, because I had high points. I was in the National Guards. We were going up towards the mountains, up more in the jungle, [and there was] some more fighting. One battalion was leaping the other battalion. One battalion was on the line a couple, two or three days; and then, the other battalion would take over three or four days. That's after we had that little break in Manila. I remember that one day they told, "Sergeant, turn all your equipment in, field glasses, compass." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "You're going home." "Going home?" You think it's a joke, but it's not a joke. "Turn your equipment in! You're going home. Turn your compass in, you're field glasses." I turned it in. I still didn't believe it. They put us on the trucks. We're riding and riding.

Of course, there's snipers still here and there and everywhere. I still couldn't believe it. We got back, went as far as the beach. We were in a camp there for about a week or so, and I still couldn't believe it. There was some small details that had to be done. I got on the boat, and I still couldn't believe it. When I was way out in the water I said, "Well, I think I'm going home now."

S: Yes, do you remember what ship that was?

O: Gee, I don't know.

S: Was it a liberty ship?

O: No, no, it wasn't a liberty ship. It was a transport. I can't think of the name.

S: Did you ever listen Tokyo Rose?

O: Oh yes.

S: What did you think of her show?

O: Well, for a while everybody is taking it as a joke. She come out with some of that beautiful stuff she had. She really held a line. Oh, she really held a line. I heard some of her tapes that have been broadcast, just

like this tape here. How nice and sweet she was about the American boys that went out to fight. Why lose your life for nothing? Your loved ones are behind. Your sweetheart is waiting for you; your wife is waiting for you; or your family is waiting for you.

S: Was it more that you listened for the music rather than to . . . ?

O: Well, the music was good, too. She played good music. A lot of it I say, when they taped it, like this and we played the tapes over. The music was good. I'll tell you, she was far from a dummy. She was pretty well educated.

S: In between action, what would the guys talk about. You would get together, and what would you talk about? Would you talk about home? Would you talk about the war? What would you do?

O: Out there, we didn't have the best. We had no caviar. We didn't have no T-bone steaks. We had no fresh food. After a couple combats, you're not talking. . . . You're talking about something good, maybe a good bottle of beer, a nice big T-bone steak, his girlfriend back home, or something like that; because out there, you didn't get too much fresh food.

We did when we were up to Bouganville for awhile. Once in awhile, we'd get some fresh cabbage, fresh meat--not too often. We got a lot of mutton from Australia. I don't know if you've eaten mutton.

S: No.

O: No. Usually, he says, "When, they start giving you good fresh foods that means you're going back up to the lines again."

S: That was a signal?

O: That was a signal, yes. Everything come, I don't know if you remember, dehydrated in them days. In other words, the onion, the potatoes, and the carrots. You have to soak them overnight, and then, they blow up. That's what we used to eat. They become potatoes, onions, and carrots would become carrots. (Laughter). Like I say, it's one big dream. It's hard to believe that I went through something like that.

S: How about mail. Did you write home a lot. Did you get a lot of mail from home?

O: Yes. It all depends. Now, if we were in combat, everything was held up as far as mail. I know a lot of

times, in fact, we were on the transport and they brought mail to us when we were on the transport. But, as long as you are out, say out in the jungles, you're moving fast or in combat, well that's all held up you see. They can't bring that mail to you. But, after you got a break something, well then, they got the mail to you. Why, you'd get the mail. Or the same thing as, like a kitchen truck. If they got up to you where fighting wasn't too fierce or something like that. Well, they'd kind of fix us up a little food to eat besides that stuff we carried on our pack.

O: Well, you couldn't write too much because they'd censor it.

S: Did you ever have letters censored?

O: I think my sister did tell me where pieces were cut out. Say you write a letter and maybe you put something in there and they don't like it, they just cut the piece right out, here and there. Like I say, we couldn't say too much. What can you say? You're lonely; you're tired; you're hungry. You're hungry for a good steak; you're hungry for some good potatoes, and you're hungry for a little entertainment.

But, as far as saying anything else, where you're at, what you're doing, you weren't allowed to put that in there because it was all censored. You couldn't tell when you were going to combat. You couldn't say what outfit was to the left of you or what outfit was to the right of you. More or less, you just let them know that you're still alive. Let's put it that way, because you couldn't write what you wanted to write. Of course, they'd tell us that from the beginning. Don't mention any kind of different outfits along side of us, or different guns or tanks or anything like that. Anything pertaining where the enemy could get a hold of.

S: And use.

O: And use, yes.

S: What kind of treatment did you get on the Navy ships?

O: One of these ships, I think it was coming up Christmas and New Years, so what they did was they give the Army the dark meat at Christmas and the Navy all the white meat, which caused a lot of trouble. In fact, there was battles. And New Years, vice versa. They gave us all the white meat and gave the Navy all the dark.

S: There were actual fights?

O: Oh yes. There was fights and whatnot. And they have a tradition, too. I think, once a week is it, for breakfast you get beans. Did you ever hear of such a thing? You get beans. Beans for breakfast was a tradition. Of course, infantrymen aren't into this junk. Well, there were little squabbles, but then latter on everybody become friends.

I remember the one ship we were on. We had to take turns, like watch at night, for submarines or anything like that following us, anything you'd see out in the water or gun watch. [On] some ships, we had our own guns set up, like 50 calibers and stuff; and this buddy of mine, he got acquainted with a couple of cooks on the ship. So I guess somebody was . . . or something. The first thing I know, in two or three days he said, "Come one John." I went down in the transport, and oh, they had some good food down there; and then, later on, the cook, he baked three apple pies. Oh, it was really delicious. You don't get that stuff too often. You're eating, I'd say, about 20 feet below the water line down in the ship. You're down below the water. But, it was a feast. It was like a big feast for a king or something.

S: What did you do when you got home?

O: When I got home? For a while, I couldn't realize I was home. I was living with my sister at that time on Regent Street. . . . a week or so. Pop it up, and pop it up again and stay out all night and pop it up again and pop it up again. And you realize you're home. Then . . . you sit down, you start thinking about some of the people you left behind.

S: Did you lose a lot of good buddies over there?

O: Yes, good friends of mine, from different Companies that I knew, like E Company, F Company, G Company. See, you got to know each other, like in Camp Shelby, we'd go through company areas that are going to the canteen or service club. So, you meet guys. We were in heavy weapons. They were rifle companies, so we got together. We met at the service club, and we had a few drinks together, laughed a little bit, joked a little bit.

S: How would you find out that they got killed? Would you see them get hit?

O: Well, no. Say, suppose we had F Company. Like I say, our mortars and machine guns were with F Company or E Company or G Company. Well then, we knew the guys that got killed, because the rifle companies, it was rough on them rifle companies. They were right there with

the rifles. You're the spearhead. You're the spearhead.

S: Would you see them get hit or would you run into somebody and say, "Hey, where's Joe so and so?"

O: That way I heard some and then by just an accident. The night I was volunteered to get this ammunition I'm firing, and I was crawling; and of course, there was bodies laying around, our boys that were killed. And, I just happened to be facing this one guy, and I knew him. He was laying there dead. He was shelled. That was just by accident. I bumped into his body like that crawling on my stomach, too. But . . . a lot of good people I knew. When you come home. Later on, you realize after you settle down a little bit, sit down and think of all the places you've been through, all the people I met, people you left behind alive and dead.

Some of the people treated us pretty good, like in the Philippines the people are nice. New Zealand the people are very nice. Fiji Island, we were a lot different tribes out there, which they were nice. They were nice people. But then, as years go along--you still don't believe today--[you ask] did you actually go through all that? Many times, I sit down here and reminisce. I think about those days. Did I actually go through all that, all the time spent there, the combat?

S: Were you surprised that you made it? Is every soldier surprised that they were one of the ones that came home, or was it more like, I don't know, just an unlucky thing that they boys didn't come home, that they got killed?

O: Well, I'll tell you, we used to have a priest there. His name was Father Punda. He was from Milwaukee. And, being a Catholic, whenever we got a chance, we said the rosary. He'd come there and stand there in mud . . . in mud, sometimes up to his knees, and we said the rosary. And being a Catholic, I had faith in the rosary. Prayed the rosary. Like I say, being a Catholic, I think the blessed Mother and Almighty God just got me through it that's all. Had a lot of close calls.

S: What was the closest call that you had that you can remember?

O: When I was bringing the wounded in under fire, I thought for a short second there, because the bullets were whizzing every place and just going overhead. . . .

- S: You had the feeling that someone was shooting directly at you?
- O: That's the way they were flying at you, boy. I mean, you could hear them bullets were just whizzing right by you and you said, "Well, maybe this is it. Keep moving, moving, moving, moving." You can't stop. You've got to keep moving because, if you stop you're a target. As long as you're moving why. . . .
- S: Was the Army a good experience for you?
- O: Yes it was Yes it was. You learn the discipline--maybe it's discipline or courtesy, respect for each other. Discipline, like I say, your higher echelon like your first sergeant, lieutenants and company commander, yes, I think you learn quite a few things. Of course, you find guys that went A.W.O.L. You probably know what that is.
- S: Yes.
- O: Most of them guys were because maybe they drank too much, they got left behind someplace or the [government] considered them A.W.O.L. So what do they do? Put them in the stockade for a couple two or three days. But yes, you learned courtesy and respect, discipline, which you must have, which is, I think, lacking bad in this world today, discipline, courtesy, respect.
- S: Okay, the last question I want to ask you is, what kind of impression do you think you left on the town of Hattiesburg, Mississippi?
- O: The people are nice. They treated us nice down there. There was a lot of places that were off limits to the soldiers. See there was MPs. In other words, there I were a lot of places that we weren't allowed to go, just certain places. I don't care where we went, there would be MPs, off limits to soldiers. But, where we did go the people were nice. They treated us nice.
- S: You didn't get any feeling that maybe there was still a feeling of antagonism, because you were from the North. You were a Yankee sort of?
- O: No, no we had guys in our outfit from the South, good soldiers, good fighters, good people with rifles. We had them from the South. We were all one, all fighting for them same cause. Of course, in them days, as far as the South and the North, we were all one then. War was war.

S: Okay, I'd like to thank you for this interview. You've provided us with a lot of information.

O: Some of the things just come back to me a little bit. Like I say, it's hard to remember them names of some of the guys that got killed out there that I knew many, many years ago. I'd say that's about thirty-three years ago. Guys that I used to chum around with, have a little drink together, play poker together or go to service club, drink together. But, like I say, it has been many, many years. In fact, there's a lot of guys from our own company [that] I can't even think of their names. Just like the guys that just hang around like Steve Javorsky, Pecchio, Peluse, Trimacco and a few other guys.

S: No, this is fine, thank you.

O: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW