

Wisconsin Public Television  
World War II Stories Project

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
THOMAS DOHERTY  
Researcher Specialist on 32<sup>nd</sup> Division History  
2002

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Madison, Wisconsin

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**Doherty, Thomas F.,** . Oral History Interview, 2002.

Video Recording: 3 videorecordings (ca. 65 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Tom Doherty, a resident of Madison, Wisconsin, discusses his research into the history of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, including a detailed account of their role during World War II. Doherty describes the social activities of Wisconsin National Guardsmen in the 1920s and 1930s and the role of armories as a social hub for local communities during the Great Depression. He comments on the fame earned by the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division during World War I and its “legendary” red arrow insignia. He talks about the evolution of the National Guard in the late 1800s, the efforts of Charles King to bring Guard units up to Army standards, and the successful test of the units in World War I. Doherty touches on the organization of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Red Arrow Division and lists some Wisconsin communities with hometown National Guard companies. He speaks of the money National Guard companies brought to their towns, social aspects of the companies, and the sorts of training they had. Doherty talks about mobilization of the Guard before World War II, including war games in the summer of 1940 and increased enlistments. He mentions that in 1941 many of the trained Guardsmen were dispersed throughout the Army as replacements for brand new divisions. He describes the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s lack of urgency before the attack on Pearl Harbor, preparations to fight in Europe, and the shock of being sent to the Pacific instead. Doherty discusses their arrival in Australia and preparations to defend the Australian coast. He analyzes the effects on the unit of being federalized and the significant losses some communities saw in single battles when local Guard companies had heavy casualties. Doherty tells of General MacArthur sending the 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division on the offensive to Papua New Guinea, despite the fact that they’d been in transit almost a year and had “lost their edge,” and expectations for an easy defeat of the Japanese there. Doherty portrays the true strength of the Japanese forces and camouflaged fortifications, losses to the 32<sup>nd</sup> from diseases such as malaria, and unexpected difficulties of jungle warfare. He mentions heavy casualties to a Marshfield (Wisconsin) company in the 128th Infantry Regiment, who were spearheading the movement towards Buna. He analyzes General Edwin Harding’s reluctance to waste men as the realization came that a quick victory could not happen with his available resources. Doherty tells of General MacArthur’s firing Harding and other Guard officers and installing General Eichelberger, who continued to lose infantrymen. Doherty states the stalemate was finally broken by the arrival of American tanks, crewed by Australian soldiers, which broke through some of the Japanese fortifications. He characterizes the work of Robert J. Doyle, a reporter for the Milwaukee Journal who compiled stories of Wisconsin soldiers. Doherty analyzes the catchphrases “No more Bunas” and “After Buna it was a different war,” and he reflects on the lesson MacArthur and the Army learned about depending on naval support and artillery to fight against fixed emplacements. Doherty talks about a year of rehabilitation for the Division, the dilution of its regional character, and its activities in New Guinea and the Philippines. He characterizes the two Herbert Smiths in the 32<sup>nd</sup>, one from Neillsville and one from Oshkosh. Doherty reflects on the identity of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and its reputation as “among the hardest fought divisions” in both world wars. He refers to his interviews with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Soldiers and relates

the animosity he encountered towards General MacArthur and some of his appointed officers. Doherty comments on the political battles between the Army and National Guard after World War I, and the role of the Guard as a fighting force at the start of the World War II while the Army was training and mobilizing.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Doherty served with the 112<sup>th</sup> Public Affairs Detachment of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division in the 1970s. His major research focus is the Battle of Buna, and he has recorded several oral histories with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division veterans.

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**Context Note:**

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Interviewed by Mik Derks, July 30, 2002

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**Interview Transcript:**

Mik: How you got interested in the 32nd?

Tom: Well, I was a member of the National Guard in the late 1970s, and I got to investigating a room, in the old armory on Wright Street, that had a lot of old material in it. And I ran across copies of a periodical called *The Wisconsin National Guard Review*, which was published by the Adjutant General back in the '20s and '30s and maybe even before that. And it had all these stories of guard activities and guard life from the '20s and '30s that really kind of resonated because I knew what some of these guys were in for, a few years later, when they went off to war. Here were guys--ah--horse cavalry units, riding horses, shooting at targets from horses with their pistols, old fashioned sorts of things. Things you'd associate with the late 19th century. And they were doing that in Wisconsin in the 1930s. And foot infantry was still armed like World War I soldiers with the flat helmets and the old rifles. And there was a social life I hadn't been aware of. Armories were kind of a social hub in the depression years, and I hadn't realized that. Often because WPA money had been put into armory building and during the plush years of the twenties these rifle units and artillery batteries used to have to drill maybe on the second floor over a store on Main Street. But by the late '30s many small towns had state-of-the-art armories and all sorts of community groups used them for bake sales and dances and things of that sort, in addition to athletics. It was kind of a pied piper effect for a young guy in high school at the time. To look down the street and see all these things going on and to think, "Boy, I could be part of that." You know, "I could have a uniform. I could wear this legendary arrow on my shoulder."

Mik: Why was it legendary?

Tom: Well, in World War I we really had no army--and the Army was built from scratch; there were a few regular battalions scattered around the west and the east, and there were these old militia companies that every state had, and militia regiments. But World War I required a rapid build up of any forces that the Army could put its finger on. And to make a long story short, the Wisconsin National Guard was called up in 1917 and trained under a regular army officer, and was sent to France and was considered by the Army to be its hardest worked division. It had spent more days in combat than any other American division. And it had corresponding casualties. So it ranked up there almost with some of the regular Army divisions that also evolved at the same time--the famous 1st Division--1st Infantry Division. And it when came home this group of guys had just been hometown comrades and so on, by now wore an arrow on their shoulder, this arrow, distinctive arrow patch that was piercing a line, that had been featured in the New York Times. They were kind of legendary all of a sudden. And so for kids growing up ten--fifteen years later and seeing that arrow on the armory, knowing a little bit about what their fathers and uncles did, it was a real attraction. And in addition it was a dollar a week for guys back in the '30s, for young privates, so that was not inconsiderable back then.

Mik: That's fine, but what was the function of the National Guard?

Tom: The National Guard was--evolved out of sort of quasi military companies that appeared almost spontaneously in the 1870s and '80s and '90s. The generation that fought the Civil War was sick of things military, by and large, but their kids kind of romanticized the war. And some of these groups got together just to fight sham battles. Others were essentially uniformed social clubs. And others were kind of rough and tough guys who liked to hike, and shoot, and lived hard. And there were still others that were ethnic, essentially ethnic groups. German groups would get together and drill in the old German style. And the states decided that if these groups were to truly perform as militias they had to have some organization, they had to have some common training. And the federal government got involved later on, and the decision was made that if these groups are going to form a national reserve they need to do it the Army way. They need to train, and drill the Army way. So over the late decades of the 1900s and into the turn of the century it was a period of bringing these units into line with Army standards, and there was an old Wisconsin soldier named Charles King, a West Pointer whose dad was a West Pointer, and the Army was in his blood. And after he was disabled and sent home to Wisconsin, he was affiliated with the guard for the rest of his life. One of his jobs was to go out to these various companies and teach them the Army way--the Army way of drill, the Army manual of arms, the Army tactics. And so he tried to instruct them in the correct way and some guy would turn on him, the commanding officer would turn on him and say, "But we've improved on the Army way. We've added this little two-step and dip that's going to win us the marching competition in Cedar Rapids." So he had to deal with that, and he also had to deal with these grizzled old timers on the sidelines who said, "You're both wrong! That's not the way we did it back outside Vicksburg in '63." So, it wasn't an easy process to bring these various groups into line, and to train them, and coordinate them, and turn them into a legitimate military reserve. And World War I was really the test of that, when they were called up and performed very well. After the war, the Congress decided that these Guard Divisions, these eighteen National Guard Divisions will be the--essentially our reserve force, the Army's reserve force. The Army wasn't keen on that idea; it wanted a different model based kind of like Germany and France had. The image of the Minuteman, the guy leaving his plow and picking up his musket to defend his home, these were the things that the guard had inherited as militia. And it was kind of a--what am I thinking of--it played on the old American values I guess. It went back to the Revolution and beyond.

Mik: There were eighteen National Guard units?

Tom: Eighteen divisions. Eighteen divisions. And one of those divisions was the 32nd Red Arrow Division, which at that time, consisted of Michigan and Wisconsin. What that broke down to was that in Wisconsin there were two infantry regiments, which meant that twelve different communities had an infantry company contributing to that regiment. Two regiments, twenty-four companies across the State of Wisconsin. We also had two artillery batteries, or artillery regiments. We

had two artillery regiments. A medical regiment, a cavalry regiment, and all this multiplied--sort of spread across the state meant that there were dozens and dozens of communities that had hometown National Guard--

Mik: Like what communities?

Tom: Hudson, Rice Lake, Eau Claire, Marshfield, Portage, Baraboo, Manitowoc, Oshkosh, Fond du Lac, Neillsville, Platteville, Beloit, Janesville, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Madison, Stoughton and on and on. Some of the bigger communities had a number of companies. Milwaukee in particular, had artillery and infantry. But typically a town had one. One armory and one National Guard unit and over time that's—the National Guard was spread across the state.

Mik: Yeah.

Tom: It was imbedded in the state, from all across the state. And it meant a little bit of money to each community, which became important and that became a factor politically. No one wanted to lose their National Guard Company, because it brought some money into town. And ah--as I mentioned before, it was also a center of social life for people. So these organizations that may have began off the cuff as kind of "let's play war" for some of them, sixty or seventy years ago, were now really part of the community. Fathers served. Sons served. And in that way it became--more than just a passing fancy. It was a significant part of the--

Mik: What did they do, besides the social functions?

Tom: Well they trained--in the '20s and '30s, they trained every Monday night, and essentially since these guys--most of them had never been on active duty it was very rudimentary sorts of things that they did. They learned first aid. They learned how to assemble and disassemble a Springfield rifle. They learned marching, and drill, and that sort of thing. So they--as far as the Army was concerned these were not sophisticated trained soldiers. They were the raw material for that. They would come into the Army, organized and ready to start training hard and hopefully be ready to be put into action, sooner than a draftee division would, because of their civilian experiences. And then, every summer, they'd spend a couple of weeks at Camp Williams--the enlisted men, the privates, and sergeants and so on living in tents, and the officers in these cabins up in the hills. At that time they might actually see some of the--throughout the year all they knew about the Red Arrow Division were the guys they trained with. It was a summer camp where they'd actually get together and get a sense of what their strength could be. They'd be gathered together in battalions, and maybe even a regiment when the governor came up and they'd march before the governor. So they'd get some sense of--um--this division; which had essentially melted away after WWI. That it could reassemble at some point if needed. And that they were part of something kind of historic.

Mik: Was there any pre-mobilization prior to Pearl Harbor? Was there a sense the war was coming?

Tom: The depression cut back funding so that the numbers were down. Typically there might be sixty to eighty guys in an infantry company throughout the '30s. In the late '30s and particularly 1940, the alarm had gone out. France had fallen. Poland had fallen. England expected to be invaded any moment that summer. General Marshall and the President decided that--it wasn't just them. Everyone in Washington, I guess. We needed to build up a defense establishment pretty fast. And so, that summer there was a series of war games held across the U.S., including in the Camp McCoy area and surrounding counties. When guard divisions from throughout the Central U.S., five or six of them, gathered in central Wisconsin and the Army sent one of its divisions and there were fleets of airplanes that came. It was really a sight out of the future for people who had only imagined the soldiers marching on the Fourth of July or something like that. The reason for all of this was that the Army wanted to see what it had. How good were these guys? What could they do? They were run through a number of tactical problems and war game scenarios in preparation for mobilization that fall. So for two weeks the guys got to live like real soldiers in the field and heard airplanes going overhead and had to do the sorts of things that armies do. They were just picked up at night and marched through the rain someplace, for no rhyme or reason that they could figure out. It was the kind of chaos that was kind of a foreshadowing of what was to come for many of them. And then in the fall of that year, there was a--in October they were mobilized. At that time their numbers were authorized--they were authorized to double their numbers. So a company that had eighty, or ninety guys was supposed to recruit as many more as they could to get it up to full strength, 200. It was time to increase the strength of each hometown unit. And so, the appeal the guard made to--across the state, I imagine across the country, was to sign up and go with the boys you know. Sign up and go with the men you know. Serve with the people you've served with, and you went to high school with, that you work with, and so on. The unspoken implication being, or else get drafted and go off to god knows where, with a bunch of strangers. It was an appealing--it was an attractive kind of cry--call to these guys. They did enlist a lot of people. Parts of a whole graduating class might sign up together, march down to the Main Street grill and--for their meals and so on, until the time came in late October when the troop trains came and picked them up, and swept them all down south to Louisiana. The numbers really shrank in the '30s. Then they grew considerably in 1940. And they continued to grow on into 1941 when they were augmented with draftees from Wisconsin and Michigan. So it remained essentially a home state unit on through 1941. What happened then was that the Army used a lot of these guys--who had been called up early, who had been through training to train other newer units. So there was constant drainage of manpower out of these--relatively trained divisions into brand new divisions that needed--NCOs and experts of one kind or another.

Mik: Did the army have an idea of--that's what they were sorting out, who they could absorb, and how they would absorb, and what their strength would be if they had to go into full mobilization? Is that what they were working towards?

Tom: They wanted to get a sense of--in particular, how good was the leadership. How good were the officers in the National Guard--company officer--company commanders, battalion commanders, regimental commanders, staff officers. These require well trained, first rate guys. It didn't know what it had on its hands, because a lot of these men had never been on active duty, or had only been on for a brief period for training; and hadn't had the opportunity in their hometown training and their summer camp training, to really do the sorts of things that a staff officer or a commander under a great deal of pressure would have to do, decisions they have to make. And inevitably there were people who fell short of expectations. That's another story--

Mik: So, we're getting nearer, countries are falling one by one in Europe--do you think they were already feeling at that point that it was inevitable?

Tom: No, I don't think so. I think for a lot of these guys, who in peacetime had trouble finding work. Many were in the CCC. Others had just gotten out of high school. They read the papers, but the sense of urgency wasn't there. It wasn't there with the Army in general at that time, and that was a real concern with the top command. We've got to get these guys worried. We've got to get them psyched up. And in fact in the summer of 1941 there was a real **upsurgence** in the number of camps of discontent among soldiers--that worried the Army a lot. So, the sense of urgency really didn't set in until Pearl Harbor I think. And at that point the 32nd had been reorganized from its old WWI configuration of 22,000 guys on foot to about 15,000 mostly mounted in trucks, because everybody thought, "If we're going to go to war, we're going to go to war in Europe, and we're going to fight on the northern plains of Europe and it's going to be a war of maneuver." And in fact the division had been sent to--in February of 1942 to Fort Devens, Massachusetts in anticipation of being shipped to Northern Ireland where an invasion of Europe was expected the next year, 1943. The Army was gathering up troops to send over to Europe. And what happened was once they got to Fort Devens and part of their engineer unit was already sent off. They got a--a telegram came saying, change course. You're going to the Pacific. So they got in troop trains and went to San Francisco. And in April, got on these old luxury liners, some of them just incompletely transformed into troop ships and set off in a convoy under the Golden Gate to Australia. And they arrived there in mid May.

Mik: What a shock.

Tom: What a shock, yeah. The Pacific looked really bad. Well, the world looked bad at that time to any American soldier, but the Pacific in particular, because the Japanese had just rolled over everyone in their path. The Philippines, Malaya. They were poised to--apparently poised to invade Australia. And Australia was--anyone who



looks at the map can see how vulnerable they are--that enormous coast. And most of their soldiers were in North Africa fighting the Germans. So Australia was very vulnerable. And when American soldiers landed, just their marching off the ships into the streets made them heroes to the Australians who were feeling very isolated. In fact there had already been a plan to withdraw the population down to the southeast quadrant of Australia and try to defend that. They knew they couldn't defend the whole thing. So when the Americans came, wow, what a relief. There were two American divisions in Australia; both of them National Guard. And they expected that would stay there. They expected their job was gonna be coastal defense, and they would be training to defend the Australian mainland.

Mik: I did have a question: Had they become part of the regular Army at that time?

Tom: They became part of the Army when they were mobilized. They were sworn into Federal service when they were mobilized in October of 1940. So the regular Army--The difference between the regular Army and National Guard, once everyone was federalized was just a paper difference. Regular Army was considered the career guys. Guys who enlisted to serve maybe 20 years in the Army or whatever, and the National Guard were not. But other than that, there was no distinction. They wore the same outfits, they trained the same way, and they were going to fight the same battles.

Mik: But they were full time at that point, once mobilized?

Tom: They were full time. They were in--They thought originally they'd been mobilized just for a year. That was the original understanding. But of course, events took over, and it became for the duration. They were full time, they were living in Louisiana. They were training any division going through its normal evolution of training from individual training to small unit training, then to larger maneuvers and so on--and also undergoing the normal turmoil of any division--some people coming aboard at any given time and others leaving to go to the Air Corps or the Tank Corps or being drawn off to train someone else.

Mik: So, when that happened were they losing some of their Wisconsin identity?

Tom: Sure, some Wisconsin guys were going elsewhere all the time. Some of the Michigan guys were going elsewhere all the time. And they were getting new people as time went by. But the essential identity of each of these units remained whatever it was in 1940. There was a core group of people who were hometown guys and who were followed in the hometown paper. This attraction of going off together had a downside once they were in battle. Once they actually went into combat, and that was that they took casualties together, so that the people back home would get a newspaper some morning saying, for instance, "Seven Marshfield Men Killed in the Same Battle." And a picture of seven guys--seven guys they knew--from headshots in the Army yearbook. And that was not at all uncommon. K Company, the old Kosciusko guard as it was known, from the south side of

Milwaukee, took very heavy casualties in the Papuan campaign. Marshfield lost sixty some guys in the first three days in the Papuan campaign. Everybody did. Madison, Stoughton, Portage, Eau Claire, across the state the hometown units took significant casualties in that first campaign. Lesser casualties throughout the rest of the war, but Buna in particular was a--took a real toll on the 32nd Division.

Mik: Take me through that from Australia, to the first campaign?

Tom: In the summer--sometime in the summer of '42 the word came down from General MacArthur that he was not going to wait for the Japanese to come to Australia. He was going to fight them in Papua. The conditions had changed up there because of other battles that had gone on with the Marines, and the Navy, and so on and in particular the Australians who had--who had been fighting the Japanese across the mountains in Central Papua. That made possible our going on the offensive there.  
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Mik: Where is Papua?

Tom: New Guinea is a huge island just north of Australia. It's kind of like a wall that stands there between Australia and the rest of the Pacific. The Japanese were already in the Solomons and wanted to penetrate this island of New Guinea in order to use it as a launching pad, for invading Australia. They sent infantry into these very primitive mountain passes hoping to cross the spine of the island, and come down into Port Moresby. And if they could take the town of Port Moresby they had Papua, and they virtually had New Guinea. Port Moresby was a coastal town. It had a harbor. It could accommodate--troop ships and supply convoys and so on, and could be used as a launching point for their invasion of Australia. So hanging on to Port Moresby was key to Australia. U.S. troops were also there.

Mik: They were there already?

Tom: A few but not in significant numbers. MacArthur decided it was time to go on the offensive instead of waiting for the Japanese. It looked like they were off balance in New Guinea. They had already beaten us to Papua, but hopefully we could dislodge them from the northern coast where they were building up their defenses. And then New Guinea--Papua is just the east end of New Guinea, but part of that huge island. And Australia had had governmental responsibility for Papua and so had stations and people around the coast of that tropical place. MacArthur decided that he was going to take this north--this coastal enclave called Buna; that had been an old Australian government compound, and native compound on the Northern coast of Papua. The Japanese were building up their forces there. They had retreated there after they had failed to cross the mountains into Port Moresby. It looked like a good time to go on the offensive against them. And he selected the 32nd Division to--to undertake that operation in part because they were so ill prepared. He had another division that was in jungle training. He didn't want to interrupt their training. The 32nd had been in transit for most of the past year. They'd been traveling to--

Massachusetts, then across the US, then by convoy to Australia, then several times in Australia. So they'd really had lost their edge. If they were going to regain their edge they either had to go back--to go into combat or they had to still another camp and begin jungle training. And it just looked like this wasn't going to be that difficult, MacArthur thought. It would be good for the 32nd and it wouldn't interrupt the training of this other division which was well established. So the infantry regiments of the 32nd Division were moved into Port Moresby and gradually inserted by various means toward the north coast of Papua, New Guinea. Some of them started over the mountains. Some of them were flown by bombers to these old airstrips. And some came by these small coastal ships around the edge of New Guinea, the East edge, trying to avoid Japanese aircraft on the search for them, because the Japanese knew that they were coming. So it took quite a long time, three, four weeks before our soldiers were actually inserted in a position in this very primitive jungle terrain to begin an offensive against the Japanese in Buna. They expected it would be fairly easy. They thought the Japanese were sick. They thought they were reduced in numbers. They thought that--they were just waiting to be--to close with the enemy and kind of be destroyed. They didn't think they would put up much of a fight at that time. That was MacArthur's intelligence assessment, which turned out to be very wrong. Instead of a few hundred sick Japanese, it turns out there were over 4000 who had spent the preceding couple of months building a very elaborate web of well camouflaged, deeply dug bunkers, all of which commanded the only approaches to that area of the beach. What this boils down to on a--for a small unit, once again I'll talk about Marshfield. These guys had been crawling along the beach. They'd been shedding their gear. They were getting sick. They were--many of them were coming down with malaria. They went into the jungle without insect repellent. They didn't have Atabrine for malaria. Jungle ulcers, and dengue fever, and other things attacked them as soon as they got there. This was a very primitive setting. It was part swamp and part dense steamy tropical jungle. Physically, it was very difficult to acclimate to, and these guys were not in the best of shape as it was, given that they hadn't been training hard for a long time. So units began to deteriorate somewhat from the time they were inserted into the jungle, and then when they finally reached these narrow approaches to the Japanese positions they found they could go no farther. They tried to attack and move down these paths and guys would just disappear, would be shot. And no one could tell from where the shot came. The acoustics of the jungle and the Japanese camouflage were so effective that it was very difficult to spot from where the fire was coming. The Marshfield guys were kind of the spearhead of this battalion of the 128 Infantry Regiment, a Wisconsin regiment moving along the coast, moving toward the--what they expected to be the Japanese position, when they encountered fire and could go no farther. Their scout was killed. They tried to mount an attack on what they thought were the positions and their first sergeant was killed, staff sergeant was killed. They were unable to really move significantly without running into fire that they couldn't locate and couldn't respond to effectively. The commanding general tried to attack the Japanese from three different directions. They were the only three approaches to the Japanese--to Buna. And he was bottled up everywhere he tried to move. What they found was that it wasn't going to be easy. It wasn't going to go

fast. Here they were at the end of a very tenuous supply line far over the mountains, around the coast that our Navy was reluctant to bring any ships over. Manpower was melting away day by day. And General Harding, the commander, found himself in a kind of World War I situation, in much reduced numbers. He had riflemen. He had small arms. He didn't have the industrial might that everyone identifies with U.S. power. He didn't have artillery. He didn't have tanks for instance, to attack these very well dug in Japanese positions. And so he had a dilemma. Was he to continue to waste infantrymen in a way that it showed it wasn't going to work anyway, or was he to frustrate MacArthur. MacArthur wanted an instant victory, a quick victory. One of General Harding's aides, a Milwaukee man named Robert Winkler, had a theory that MacArthur wanted Buna to fall by December 7, so that on the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor he could say, "We took Buna, we're on our way to Tokyo." It would be very theatrical and he said it would have been typical MacArthur. But it simply wasn't happening, and it wasn't going to happen given the limited resources that Harding had at his command. And Harding had made it known in prewar years as an instructor in the infantry school and as editor of the infantry magazine--that a commander had a responsibility not only to--his panicky superiors, his superiors who were demanding results right away, but to his men, to not waste them--simply to tell his commander, "I'm trying, I'm trying." So--things kind of bogged down on that front.

In late November after the first couple of weeks of stalemated fighting, MacArthur sent his second in command, Harding's old West Point classmate, a general named Eichelberger, to clean house. And he fired Harding. He fired a lot of the National Guard battalion commanders, regimental commanders, brought in his own people. He got MacArthur to allow him to bring in more reinforcements, more of the Michigan infantry and Wisconsin infantry that they hadn't sent up because they weren't able to supply them. Got them sent up and tried the same thing Harding had tried with the same result. Guys would be trying to get through a swamp, trying to get across a narrow creek, trying to attack bunkers they couldn't see. And he took a lot more casualties with nothing to show for it once again. It wasn't until--late December when finally some American tanks, crewed by Australian soldiers, arrived and were able to break through some of these resisting fortifications, to reduce them with maneuver and fire and their own armor, and to bring to bear some--they used some--aircraft fuel, barrels of aircraft fuel, and set it afire on these bunkers, it was a grim business but they could finally break through the bunkers. And then the infantry was effective. Then it could work its way around enemy fortifications and close in on whatever remnants of the enemy remained, toward the beach, on the beach. And finally in late December the battle ended, but it was at--terrific cost.

Mik: When did they first get there?

Tom: They started in October, and they started actually fighting in November. And it wasn't until early January that it was over and done with. The Japanese, those who were still living were trying to swim away. Some soldiers on the beach were

shooting at them. Some of our airplanes were strafing them. Others of our soldiers were continuing to burn out bunkers and search them and so on for any survivors who might be holding out. We took very few prisoners. They didn't surrender much, and as far as I know, any of our wounded or any other American they got their hands on, was never heard of again. There was an officer from the Marshfield Company who ran forward on the second, or third day of the attack and said, "Follow me, follow me!" And a couple of guys did get up and try to follow him. He disappeared in the jungle and was never heard from again. I believe never found. That was the legend among some of the guys who talked about that episode years later.

Mik: So, what was the response in these towns? When their newspaper comes out and ten or fifteen of the--

Tom: Well, I could only guess. I know that--once again in Marshfield, where I talked to a number of people up there many years ago including the sister of one of the sergeants who was killed early. They all waited for some of the original members to come home eventually, and tell them what actually happened, how their brother or their husband died. But I can't give a profound answer to that question I guess.

Mik: I guess it is pretty obvious how they would respond.

Tom: At least, to another point though, there was a reporter named Robert Doyle that the Milwaukee Journal sent over with division. Doyle was a young guy who took his wife's portable typewriter with him, and he just sent back tremendous stories every day, sometimes two or three stories. And his job was to track down Wisconsin guys, get their name in the paper, let the folks back home know what he's doing, how he's doing, how their attitude is, how their feeling about things and a--he compiled--after the war, compiled all the stories into scrapbooks which are now part of the archives. They're just terrific stories that were later reprinted in many other newspapers around the state, so that he was kind of the voice of the 32nd to the home state audience during this period. And he did a remarkable job. He'd cover combine operations. He'd cover support troops. He'd cover the band. His record of those months is a real treasure, I think.

Mik: So, then what happened to the 32nd after Buna?

Tom: There were two catch phrases that came out of Buna. One was, "No more Bunas." That was, I think MacArthur himself said that. And the soldiers said, "After Buna it was a different war." Members of the 32nd, "After Buna it was a different war." It changed the way MacArthur did things. It wasn't going to be anymore of this head knocking if he could avoid it. He was going to overpower the enemy. He was going to out maneuver the enemy. But he wasn't going to send soldiers up against fixed emplacements like this if it could be helped. And thereafter he did maneuver up the coast of New Guinea, isolating pockets of Japanese. Using his airpower and naval support and artillery as much as he could and not depending on guys with rifles to

seek out and destroy guys who were well in place, and could shoot them down pretty easily. So that was the lesson of Buna, and the 32nd learned it. It was inflicted on the 32nd I should say. At the end of the battle there were some infantry companies with two dozen guys who were still standing ready for duty. Everybody else was sick, wounded, or dead. It took most of a year to rehabilitate the division. Take on reinforcements or replacements, and for the guys who came back to get well, recuperate, and rejoin the division. So it was out of duty for most of the next year. But it did go back to action in New Guinea, and it was on Leyte in the Philippines, and in Luzon. It was still fighting when the war ended in late summer of 1945, and in fact, it was to the 32nd division, two young officers of the 32nd division that the Japanese commander in the Philippines surrendered, General Yamashita. That was the end of ground combat in the Pacific.

Mik: Was it further diluted after it was reconstituted?

Tom: Sure, sure it was. Replacements came from all over. They picked up a couple thousand guys from California on their way over from Australia, which was another problem for the commanding general. He had to integrate these people, train them, and integrate them. And as the war progressed, more and more of the original members were injured or killed and were replaced by people from all over, by draftees from all over. But there were still Wisconsin guys at the very end. Some of the originals who fought at Buna, with K Company, the Milwaukee Company, were still with K Company up in the hills on the Villa Verde Trail up in Northern Luzon. There were still some of the original commanders. Herbert--there were two Herbert Smiths from Wisconsin who were key players with the division. One was a telephone company executive from Neillsville, and the other was the postmaster from Oshkosh. And at one point they were the two guys, two battalion commanders whose troops were actually still in the fighting, still trying to find a way through Japanese defenses and succeeded at Buna. Herbert Smith from Oshkosh later commanded the division, when it was called up in 1941. Very unusually he kept command of his battalion throughout the war, all three years of combat. That's--that's unusual for a battalion commander. It's an exhausting and very stressful position. And he hung in there.

Mik: If you were in Wisconsin during Buna--what else going on with war?

Tom: The Guadalcanal campaign was wrapping up. The Marines had been fighting the Guadalcanal campaign I think the summer of '42 and the Army units came in later and kind of finished off on Guadalcanal. The battle of Midway had been fought that summer. That was a critical battle in the Pacific that changed the naval proportions in the summer of 1942. North Africa was invaded sometime that fall. I think in November of '42, North Africa was invaded by our soldiers and the British. So those were the other theaters where we were starting to turn things around.

Mik: The war was really heating up--we were starting to have some--

Tom: Our forces were finally going on the offensive, yeah.

Mik: And the 32nd came out of the war still with never a line they hadn't penetrated?

Tom: Well sure, that's the legend, and it's essentially true. Yeah. The legend was--I'm not going to say the legend lives on. [laughs]

Mik: Why don't you articulate the legend for me?

Tom: Well, in WWI all these units were brand new. They didn't have any identity except regional identities, which the Army played on. You know, they'd tell the guys from Michigan or Wisconsin, "You're not going to let these Pennsylvania guys look better than you are." That sense of a regional identity still hung over from the Civil War, and it was effective in World War I, but they needed, these units, needed some kind of identity. They needed some kind of catchy image of themselves. I think the red arrow was part public relations, and part based on their real record in World War I. They tried other nicknames. They tried Iron Jaws, was one they tried, and decided it wasn't working. So Red Arrow, and a general, a French general, I think his name was Magnene, called them "Les Terribles," the Terrible Ones, because he saw them crashing through these German lines in late summer of 1918 and admired their guts, their fire. So that's kind of the origin of the legend. They fought for a little over three months in World War I. It was the end of the war when the trench warfare finally broke open and it was a war of maneuver, but it was very costly. They took as many casualties in three months in World War I as they took in three years in World War II, as many dead and wounded approximately. But in both wars they were considered to be, by the Army, this isn't something they labeled themselves--but they were considered to be among the hardest fought divisions both times, in both wars. So they had good reason to be--have a sense of pride in the old 32nd, which is something that is important to the Army and to the Guard--that you look back on your heritage with some pride.

Mik: But there is no connection now, between Wisconsin National Guard and 32nd?

Tom: Oh there is. I'm not really qualified to talk about it. The configurations and the names change, but there still is a 32nd Brigade. It just got converted from a heavy brigade. That is, one that's mounted on armor with tanks and armored personnel carriers, and now it's the lightest catch phrase under the new regime is light infantry--people who can travel light, don't need all the stuff to be shipped along, so they can get there faster. And it's--as I understand it, at this point it's undergoing its conversion--throughout the state. And frankly I don't know how they're going to get a light brigade in Wisconsin. It seems a contradiction in terms, but they got to get young guys--guys who are willing to train hard, and that's going to be rough and tough; light infantry. These are guys who carry everything on their backs, sixty--eighty--one hundred pounds, whatever.

Mik: So, you said that when you got interested in the 32<sup>nd</sup> and in the history, you talked to a bunch of the old timers?

Tom: I did. This was back in late '70's, early '80's. A lot of them have since gone. There were several battalion commanders still around. I'll tell you an anecdote and you can use it or not. In late--I think in 1980 or '81, a statue of MacArthur was dedicated in Milwaukee, and that was big news for a couple of days. And I was talking to a former battalion commander on his farm. He was one who lost his job at Buna. And I asked him, not knowing much about anything at that time, if he had been down there for the dedication. He must have been himself either pushing eighty or a few years over. And he turned in the general direction of Milwaukee and he said, "I'd walk a thousand miles to piss on his grave."

Mik: He felt he was unfairly--

Tom: Well, my impression was--this is strictly anecdotal--but my impression was that if guys thought of MacArthur at all, they thought very little of him. And the higher their rank the more animosity they felt toward him. He was over the mountains, he was issuing proclamations, he kind of gave the impression to the press that he was up front leading the troops himself, when in fact, he didn't even know what they were up against in Buna. And he told Eichelberger, the man who came and cleaned house, "Take Buna, or don't come back." That was the famous quote. So where as Harding had a lot of things--a lot of priorities to juggle, including the welfare of his soldiers, Eichelberger came there with one thought in mind, "I got to--I got to succeed whatever it takes." And eventually he did, but only after he got the resources that Harding had been asking for all along.

Mik: But did the old timers generally feel that they upheld the honor of the Red Arrow?

Tom: Oh absolutely, absolutely. For the people who knew him, the people who served directly with Harding, he remained their favorite general for the rest of their lives. He was a--he'd come to reunions, and he was the hero. The succeeding generals were not. One was booed off stage, I'm not quite sure which one it was, maybe Eichelberger. But Harding remained everyone's favorite 'til the end. And they thought he had been done poorly by the Army.

Mik: Maybe talk about the regular Army versus National Guard?

Tom: There was an Army establishment; it was very small after World War I. There was a battle between the guard and the Army after World War I, a political battle fought off, fought in front of Congress. The Army wanted to establish a large national reserve, a federal reserve army on the model of France and Germany, one that would be answerable to them, guys who would be drafted by them and trained by them and be part of the--directly responsible to the Army. The National Guard said that's not our heritage. We're not like France and Germany. We got--we're--we have citizen soldiers. We have the Minuteman and that's our heritage, and the National Guard is



the heir of that tradition, and you've got to work with us. And a--it just wasn't--the Army made some pretty striking arguments. At the time there was a lot of concern about--immigrants from Southern Europe and Central Europe in our cities and so on who weren't being assimilated, who were looked upon as possible subversive--potential subversive--scratch that. Potential Communists. [laughs] And the Army said we can take these guys and we can train them. We can turn them into Americans. We can teach them job skills and we can purge them of any alien ideology that they might be--might be festering among them. So it made some pretty scary scenarios before congress, but ultimately the Army's proposal was too expensive and it was deemed just not politically right. It wasn't the right way to go for this country. So the marriage between the regular Army and the National Guard was essentially a shotgun marriage. The Army--the congress said, "You two will get along. Army you will serve as trainers and help the Guard maintain some minimal standards during peacetime, but we're not going to have the big establishment that you want to maintain left over from World War I." So the regular Army, in 1941 when the war broke out, the Army was in the Philippines. There were pockets in the U.S. They were in Iceland, I think, and here and there, but only in small, small units. The Army didn't have any big maneuver divisions to respond to the Japanese with at that time. And the National Guard was the kind of interim provisional body that was to fill in between the start of war and the establishment of big massive divisions that would follow, the draftee divisions that would follow. When we see pictures of D-Day and--Okinawa and so on, with all that fire power and all these airplanes and everything, that's the military that was established in--that was built in '43 and '44 by and large. The military that was available to fight in '42 when the battles began was the small regular forces and the National Guard that had been called up in 1940. **[End of Tape WCWW2-007]**

- Mik: So this is happening in eighteen different National Guard units? They have a regional character that's being absorbed?
- Tom: Well this was true after World War I, yeah, up until World War II. I'm not sure what the situation is now. What happened with the divisions after World War II, but the Congress kept these eighteen divisions as the Army's reserve force, in kind of skeleton-ized form across all the states.
- Mik: But I'm just taken by this whole idea that when--as you say, in '42 when the fighting started, you had these regional armies that were in action in various places.
- Tom: Well, some of them were in action and some of them weren't. Some of them went to Europe early but didn't really get involved until the invasion of Italy or France. So there were--two divisions that were active in 1942 and one of them was the 32nd. 41st Division from Washington and Oregon also went into action after the 32nd, early in 1943. And there was another division in North Africa, I believe. And I know the Texans were fighting in Italy. And a Virginia division landed on D-Day and took these extraordinary casualties from one small town that we were talking about. That's where they put the D-day Museum was in this town in Virginia that

had suffered so heavily on D-Day. All these were guard divisions that I was talking about. Yeah, the Army said after World War I, after debating this, "What is our national defense structure going to look like?" They said, "Well, we'll just keep the National Guard. We'll keep these eighteen divisions." They acquitted themselves well in World War I. There was a lot of political pressure--to--from home--home towns and home states to keep them in some form. And the Army got less than it wanted and the Guard got just about everything it wanted after WWII as this debate was going on. I'm sorry after WWI. But then in the early '20s there was a terrific reaction against the military generally, a disappointment with the outcome of World War I, a sense that it didn't turn out the way it was supposed to have turned out and a disillusion with the army, a resentment toward the army. It had taken over life in America so much in World War I, and on the floor of the capitol building here in Madison, legislators were saying, "Let's not fund our National Guard anymore. You know, it's bad to train people for war. It's bad to have ROTC at the university. And furthermore a lot of our healthy young guys are going to summer camp and they're learning bad habits. People drink up there and carry on. And we can do without any of this." So the Guard survived but it took a big hit in the '20s. And this vast structure that the congress had envisioned with the national defense act really started to shrink in the '20s and when the depression hit it--shrank even more. So the division--all the divisions were really just a ghost of their WWI selves until they were called back to duty in 1940 and fleshed out with new recruits and new weapons.

Mik: But did the Depression also feed the National Guard?

Tom: Oh, absolutely, yeah. It was a social life for a lot of guys. It was a little bit of pocket money. There were guys in Milwaukee I talked to in K Company--This was primarily a Polish unit, guys of Polish origin. And some of them said, you know, their dad was not working. Food was hard to come by. The few dollars they could make at drill went a long way. Also armories were used for different things, and their armory was used for professional wrestling on weekends. So these guys could make some money setting up the chairs and the ring and then tearing it down.

**[End of Interview]**