

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
William Eggenberger,
U. S. Army, World War II.

2004

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Eggenberger, William J., (1924-), Oral History Interview, 2004

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Eggenberger, from Eau Claire, Wis. discusses his World War II service with an Army Anti-Aircraft Battalion training for 90th Millimeter guns. He reveals that he enlisted in the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) which allowed him to stay in college. He describes basic training at Camp Callen (California) and after a furlough, electronics school at Camp Crowder (Missouri). He talks about the math and science courses he took at the Universities of Loyola (California) and Tucson (Arizona), and he mentions that only the top ten percent of his battalion were chosen to attend college. Eggenberger states they embarked from a West Coast port on a Norwegian commercial freighter, they sailed to Finschafen (New Guinea) and arrived on Christmas Eve, 1944. He characterizes the natives as friendly. He tells that they remained at Finschafen for seven months and then they were moved to Manila (Philippines). He recalls seeing the sunken ship in the harbor and the destruction in the city of Manila. He talks about the poor Filipino women who stood at the end of the chow line to get the left over food. Eggenberger relates they were preparing to invade Japan when the atomic bomb was dropped. He talks about landing at Yokohama (Japan) and then going on to Kyoto. He points out the streets were deserted, but after two or three days, the Japanese learned the soldiers were nothing but a bunch of big pushovers, and that they could live together in peace. Eggenberger describes the set up of the communications facility in detail. He reports that he was discharged in January 1946 at Camp McCoy, and used the GI bill to attend the University of Wisconsin. He states that he did not stay in the reserves because he did not like military life. He mentions belonging to the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch

Eggenberger (1924-) served in the Army for three years. During the war, he was stationed in the Pacific theater of operations. After the war, he settled in Cambridge, Wis.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Interview Transcript

- John: This is John Driscoll, and today is March 31, 2004, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, and this is an oral history interview with Bill Eggenberger, a veteran of World War II, United States Army. And we are doing the interview at Bill's condo, in Cambridge. So, Bill, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview. And why don't we start off with telling where were you born.
- Bill: Wabasa, Minnesota, which is kind of a wide spot in the Milwaukee Railroad, on the Mississippi River, north of La Crosse. My dad was a railroad engineer. And he was transferred up to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. So we moved out of Wabasa when I was probably four or five years old. So I really call my hometown Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where I went through most of elementary school and all of high school. And a year and a half of college until I enlisted in the service. The college I went to at that time we called "Mini Creek Tech," because it consisted of two buildings. One was the teacher's college. I guess it was a teacher's college at that time. And I was taking some preparatory courses, hopefully, to go to the university at a later date. And we called it "Mini Creek Tech" because, although the buildings were on the Chippewa River, there was a little creek running through it.
- John: Yep. That is still there.
- Bill: Do you know it?
- John: Oh, yea.
- Bill: Now, of course, it's the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire. And it's much, much larger, and many, many more buildings. An influential place. At that time it was kind of a country-style place.
- John: You mentioned going into the AST--
- Bill: Well, it wasn't at that time called that. I enlisted, I really was trying to get into the Air Corps, but I couldn't because I had a bad eye, as you can tell by my glasses. And you had to have perfect eyesight. Also the Navy required that.
- John: Bill, let me just, there is one thing I forgot. When were you born? What was your birthday?
- Bill: January 11, 1924. I am eighty years old.
- John: That's great. And one of the things I want to get to later on is, do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Bill: Yes.

John: Go ahead with your college, if you want to.

Bill: Well, while we were at Mini Creek Tech, Pearl Harbor Day was December 7, in 1941. And that particular day, in Eau Claire, was a warm day, overcast, not raining but no snow on the ground, and we actually got a game of football going on the campus of the college there. Tag, touch football. And we were playing football when we got the word what was happening. Which was quite a surprise, because all of us were that age. All of a sudden, we were wondering what was going to happen.

John: Yea. Yea. Okay. Then, what was the A--

Bill: ASTP. What it amounted to, I enlisted, and they allowed me to stay in school until, well, I left April 7, 1943, for the service.

John: What did ASTP stand for?

Bill: I'm trying to think of that. Give me a second now. Army Specialized Training Program.

John: Okay.

Bill: And college kids got into it. Eventually, when it took effect, I went to some, what is it in Michigan, for the indoctrination, and then was shipped off on the troop train west – we didn't know where. They never told you anything.

John: Right.

Bill: We knew we were going west. And that was it. We could have ended up anywhere between Washington to California. Well, when we got out in the mountains and dropped down the western side, you could smell kind of like eucalyptus, and we knew we were in California. And I ended up there in basic training, at Camp Callen, California, which is just north of San Diego, no, not San Diego, La Jolla. Beautiful, beautiful coastal town. And spent three months there, in 90 millimeter anti-aircraft guns, an anti-aircraft battalion, because at that time we hadn't gained air superiority, and they were still trying to shoot planes out of the air, pretty much. Before we were even done with that program, it was kind of abolished because we at that time were gaining air superiority across the world.

John: I see. Okay.

Bill: So, at that point, when basic training was finished, they took, I guess I lucked out. They didn't take the whole company that I was in, or battalion that I was in, they

just took the top maybe ten percent and sent them off to college someplace. So I ended up at Loyola University, in Los Angeles.

John: Okay.

Bill: Yea. That is a Catholic School.

John: Jesuits.

Bill: And that is where I started studying, with Catholic fathers, which was very good. Beautiful campus.

John: What were you studying?

Bill: Basic stuff. Kind of a continuation of what I was taking at Mini Creek Tech. Math and science, and things like that. No particular goal in mind. S, and we were right next to Hollywood then. So there were all these things going on the weekends we could participate in. One night we were entertained at the Friar's Club.

John: Oh, wow.

Bill: And that was where I got, who's signature? When she was a young lady. Oh, shoot, it will come to me. Still have it around some place. But, anyway, met and saw some pretty important people at that time. That's fun stuff. I don't have any really horrible stuff to tell you.

John: That's fine.

Bill: And went there for, oh, golly sakes. This was in '43 and I guess it must have been a couple, or at least three months, or so. And then they shipped us to the University of Arizona, at Tucson. Once again, I just lucked out. They took the top ten then that I know of, out of about thirty guys, and I guess I was either number nine or number ten. Not that I was particularly smart, but I lucked out. So, we went to the University of Arizona. That was in January. Sleeping in the dorms down there, open air sleeping porches. And at night you'd really have to bundle up or you'd freeze your tuckus off. It was cold at night but by ten o'clock in the morning we were out on the training field in our shorts and shoes, and doing calisthenics. That only lasted five weeks. And then they decided maybe they should train us to fight the war. So, then, I think I went on furlough and saw my folks for the first time. And was shipped to Camp Crowder, Missouri, in an electronics school. Telephone communications type of stuff. They called them carriers at that time. What they would do is hook up only four channels and hook that up to the carrier, and the carrier was hooked on to a radio, and the radio would beam it. And instead of having to string lines. Spent about nine months there, pretty close to it. And then we finished that school and then they got us on a

troop train again. And we didn't know where we were going. Ended up out on the West Coast again. And I believe, where did we leave? I'm not sure. In Washington, Fort Lewis. I know we came back through Fort Lewis, Washington. We may have left from there. Either Los Angeles or San Francisco, on a troop ship. A Norwegian commercial freighter, which was a voyage of, I don't know, two weeks or so. And in a convoy. And eventually ended up at Finschhafen, New Guinea, APO [Army Post Office] 322, and would you believe, we disembarked in the dark over the side rails on the cargo netting into small boats to take us ashore on Christmas Eve, 1944. So my dauber was really angling low then.

John: Hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve.

Bill: Now, that was kind of a coconut plantation type of thing. The living was easy. We were on alert there for seven months, and never knowing when, or what. But it was a pretty easy seven months. There really wasn't anything to do except take care of yourself. Do your own laundry. The beach was terrific. We'd swim on the beach. There were just kind of three little highlights to my New Guinea experience. One I told you about already, and that was the low light of landing on Christmas Eve. One of the other things, I found a little beach that was south of where we were camping and would go down there sometimes, and take my clothes off, and go for a swim. Somebody had built a structure out on beach. I don't know who, or why it was out there. A pier, kind of four posts and a little platform. And I'd go out there, naked, and lay around and get tanned, and swim a little bit. And when I got tired, I'd come back and put my clothes on, and go back. So one day I am out there, and half asleep. And there were nurses there, too, you know. Of course, they were pretty heavily guarded.

John: Sure.

Bill: You weren't allowed to mix with them at all. So we didn't. But I heard a whole bunch of kind of laughing and giggling and I look up, and here a whole bunch of them are coming down the shore. Well, what am I going to do? I'm out in the middle of the ocean naked. So, they were far enough away yet so I could make a

break for the shore, you know, and go back and grab my clothes, and go back into the palm trees a little bit, and get the clothes back on. So that was one interesting experience there.

John: That's good.

Bill: Another interesting thing, we'd go back in the jungle once in a while. The natives there were, of course, friendly. And every now and then they would come parading through, or close by, where we were living. And it was always the elder guy, the chief honcho, was in the lead, and then the eldest son, and then the sons

right down the line, and then the wife would come, and then the daughters right down the line. That is the way they paraded through. And, of course, they were bare-breasted.

John: Yea, sure.

Bill: So that was kind of interesting, because I never saw bare-breasted women parading around before. The young ones, they were attractive breasts. The old ones, they were not too attractive. Anyway, so that was one thing. And then we went back into the jungle one time, and you took gifts so you would have something to give them. We ran onto a little bit of a village back there. It wasn't too thick of a jungle. And we went through that. And we went back in there and met with the chief, and he took us into his main building. I don't know what you call them. And conversed with him. And gave him some presents. I forget what they were. Maybe cigarettes. Possibly, I'm not sure. That was interesting because nobody knew what the other people were saying, but you could kind of communicate by gestures. So, that was interesting. So, the next thing that was diabolical, after seven months, I had just washed a bunch of clothes and hung up a line between a couple of palm trees, and had all my laundry out on the line. And got the work in an hour we were shoving off. So I had to pack wet laundry in the duffel bag and off we went. And we were off to the Philippines. So go up to the Philippines and landed at Manila, through the harbor. A lot of sunken ships. Am I taking too long?

John: No, no. This is fine. This is a great story.

Bill: And that was interesting. Of course, the Japs had already been driven out of there. And in Manila proper, I got some pictures of that. And there you can see the buildings that were hit by projectiles, and bullets, and things. You can see the war destruction. We didn't stay there. I forget where we went. We weren't in the Philippines very long, but where we stayed was in a muddy, muddy field. You'd tramp around in your boots, and when you got in you tent, they were pup tents. And we had the cots, so we were up off the mud, but still, it was wet.

John: Yea.

Bill: And everything had to be hung up, and to get into bed, you'd have to get out of your boots or you'd drag mud into your bed.

John: Yea, I guess so. Sure.

Bill: That was disgusting. And the thing I remember most was in the chow line. People were poor, some of them were. And in the chow line, we'd go through, and at the end of the chow line, if you had anything left on your plate, or in your mess kit, you're supposed to dump it in a barrel. But before you got to the barrel, there

would be women standing there. The men were too proud to do that. So it was either the women or kids. And they'd stand there and hold their plates out, and you'd scoop whatever you had left in there. And they were so appreciative of that. Well, it made you feel kind of humble.

John: Sure. Sure.

Bill: I don't think I did it the first couple of times because I didn't want to have them eating my leftovers. You know. I was too proud, or too something. But then I got smart and figured, that's dumb, because that's how they are. They don't look at it that way. Then, another thing I noticed too about the women, while they were standing around, you know, they'd stand around in groups and gossip, and if they had to urinate, why, they'd pull their dress out in front of them, and they'd be standing there, just talking nonchalantly, and, well, the first time I looked, here is a stream going down there, and I thought, holy smokers. So that is the way they accomplished that. There was a nice river running about half a mile from where we were camped, kind of going through gravel and spots, and stuff, and there was a beach where we were able to take a good bath. So I got a picture in my files, too, of a whole bunch of us down there, naked, take some Cokes along and take a bath, get nice and clean, and every now and then the old man would come along with part of his family, and they would go upstream or downstream a little bit from us and they, too, would go in and bathe, and nobody did anything about it. And he was very protective, you know, of his women, and they had, they wore something, some kind of a dress or sheet, and they'd get in the water, and of course, they could pull it up and wash. They didn't expose themselves.

John: Yea.

Bill: That's about the only thing that I have to say about the Philippines. We would notice at night, sometimes, there were these, up in the hills, fires burning. And we always thought maybe there were Japs up there, camping out, and don't know what to do with themselves, because we were occupying the island. But that was just hearsay. Maybe we were imagining, trying to get a little excitement going. But, anyway, they dropped the bombs then. And we were on our way to invade Japan.

John: Yea, that is what I was thinking. You were standing by, but you were going to be part of the invasion force.

Bill: Yea. We okay, there?

John: Yea. We're fine.

Bill: So we invaded Japan, no resistance, of course. No shots fired. And we landed at Yokohama and ended up in Kyoto, which is their holy city. And that was

untouched. That was pretty. Beautiful. And we stayed in a really nice place. Had straw matting on the floor. Had to take your shoes off before you went in, which we all did. And we didn't know what to expect. We were armed but we were told, you know, don't do anything unless you have to. But when we invaded, so to speak, all the kids, women and kids, there was nobody to be seen. Hardly anybody to be seen, maybe a few men. Streets were deserted. Because they didn't know what to expect.

John: Yea, yea.

Bill: And it only took them about two or three days to find out, maybe not even that long, to find out we were just a bunch of great big pushovers. We weren't going to hurt them and that we could do them some good, because we had all kinds of chocolate and cigarettes.

John: Yea. The basic commodities of World War II. Chocolate and cigarettes.

Bill: They found out quickly that we could live together in peace, there. And we set up, finally got to do the work we were trained to do, and we set up communications. We were in, I called it the penthouse, but it wasn't, it was kind of in the machinery shop on top of a bank building, and we went in the basement there, and we set up our equipment and our carriers in there, and established communications with some other place. And that was about the extent of that. Now, I was only in Japan, this was late '45, in winter. And sometime in December we got orders to go home. So we packed up, and went home, and I know we came in through Fort Lewis that time, in Washington. And I got home, I think it was, January 6th, of '46.

John: Okay.

Bill: And so, that is about the extent of my war stories.

John: When you got out, did you have any problems getting out, with points? Or any of that stuff? I know, I have talked to guys who didn't have a lot of points, and they had to wait, and wait, and wait until other guys got out first.

Bill: I think it was judged on that, and I really couldn't tell you, but I know that the promotions were coming fast, because I went from a pfc. up to staff sergeant pretty quickly. I didn't do any more as a staff sergeant then I did as a pfc. but that is the way it went. You know. The early guys got to go first.

John: So you got released at Fort Lewis?

Bill: Yea.

- John: Okay, and then you came back to Eau Claire?
- Bill: Yea. Discharged at Fort McCoy. Sometime, late in the evening, went into Tomah, somehow or other, and stayed overnight in Tomah. Grabbed the bus the first thing in the morning and went home.
- John: When you came out, you had the GI Bill. Did you use it?
- Bill: Oh, yea.
- John: How did you use it?
- Bill: I went to school down there, in that fall. '46.
- John: What did you take as a study program?
- Bill: I took, it was called light building. It was in the commerce school. I got my degree in commerce. Didn't do a darn thing with it.
- John: Did you stay in the reserves, or anything like that?
- Bill: No. I was so disgusted with not knowing where you were going and when you were going, and what you were going to be doing after that, and then that experience, that seven month stay on New Guinea, on alert. And then all of a sudden, just like that, you go. You know, that's not really the life for me. And, of course, you have to be some kind of a guy to be a military guy. My brother was a Navy veteran, and he was in for many, many years. He liked it. I didn't like that.
- John: What about like the VFW, the American Legion? Any of that? Those kind of organizations?
- Bill: I'm not really heavy in that. I belong to the Legion but I'm inactive. I never went to that much. I'm not a gung-ho person, so to speak.
- John: What about getting together? Reunions? That sort of thing?
- Bill: Never have. No. You know, I wonder, I know a good friend of mine, I went to high school in Eau Claire. Lives in Fond du Lac now, and they get together every year.
- John: Yea. I've talked to some guys, they go all over the country. I was in a very small outfit. We never had anything to do with each other and now, fifty years later, five of us have got together on the Internet. After fifty years.
- Bill: Well, you know, we were small, too, and the team was small. I went to basic

training with a lot of guys, but they all went hither and yon, you know. We ended up with just a small group.

John: Well, let's see, overall, you were in for how long?

Bill: Three years. I went in on April 7, in '43, and got out in January, of '46.

John: Well, a question I ask all the guys I interview, you lost three years of your life. How do you feel about that?

Bill: Well, you had a duty to give up some time for your country. Well, that is fine. And I think I was well compensated for it, because they sent me to school after it. And my dad couldn't afford it. Not down here, anyway. So I probably would have had to work while I was going to school, which may have been good for me. I don't know, because I played quite a bit when I got down here. I didn't take the most of the opportunity. I lucked out, anyway. No, I don't look at it. Sure, it was lost time, but probably ended up just as good as if I hadn't.

John: Okay. Sure. You know, so many guys, well, I write, and a friend of mine just passed away, Steven Ambrose, the writer. He has written so much on World War II. He was talking to a bunch of vets here, a couple of years ago, and most of them were telling him, "I really didn't do anything." And he said, "Wait a minute. Stop." He said, "You guys were giants. You went off and saved the world." And they all looked at him. And he said, "Even if you issued Ping-Pong balls in Salt Lake City, you were part of an effort that saved the world." And he was right. And every one of these stories is so important. In years to come, when they write, and they are still writing the story of World War II, they'll write about MacArthur, they won't write about the guys who got stuck for seven months in New Guinea wondering what was going to happen. And that is the story that is important. I was a communicator, an electronics technician. We had relay equipment. You say you could just keep four lines at a time?

Bill: Yes. They had great big tubes in them, transformers, all that heavy stuff, and the bay was only like twice as high, something like that. Put four panels in it, and that's all we had. Very ancient stuff.

John: Yea, one of my weapons was a soldering iron.

Bill: But, you know, at that time, it was pretty sophisticated stuff.

John: Oh, yea. What was it like in New Guinea? The weather?

Bill: The only thing we had to worry about in New Guinea was once in a while we'd get a little earthquake, a little tremor, and the coconuts would fall. Just so you didn't get one on the head.

John: Oh, wow.

Bill: It rained, but we didn't have any heavy storms.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: Okay, before going in, well, you were playing football when you heard about Pearl Harbor. What was going on with the guys you knew, your friends and that, then? Like you said, you all knew, hey, we're the age that this is going to, well, what was going on then? What were you guys talking about?

Bill: Well, we used to drill in the halls of the college, I know, to try to get a jump up on basic training. [Laughs] We'd parade up and down the halls, you know. We had the drill master, an older guy and--that's about all we did. And, of course, we were enlisting in the department we wanted to go in. And I was always so dog gone envious of the guys who could get what they wanted just because they had better eyesight than I did. I was a hunk – good physical shape, but I had a lousy eye, and that irritated me.

John: Yea, and it probably didn't make any difference at all. Yea, I put in for flight training and I flunked the hearing test. I play the violin, okay, but they said I couldn't hear. Maybe I couldn't, I don't know. Okay, anything else you want to touch on or get to?

Bill: Well, I hit the high points as well as I can remember them right now. Might be something else somewhere.

John: Do you have, is that stuff from back then? Your album there?

Bill: Yea, just a lot of pictures. I don't know.

John: Sure. Absolutely.

Bill: There is a lot of other stuff in there, too. That is where I got into trouble. You don't want to see this. When I came down here. The fraternity life.

John: Yea. That'll do it.

Bill: Well, it's okay, if you can handle them both. You know, actually, when I look back on it, I was a little immature, even at that point. I should have buckled down and taken full advantage of what was offered to me, and I didn't. I was lucky

enough to survive, anyway. This is the patch that we wore when we were in. I don't know if you are interested in any of this stuff or not.

John: Sure.

Bill: This is the day that I left Eau Claire. My dad and my mom and me.

John: Oh, man. Oh, these are the patches. Okay.

Bill: I think that was the 6th Army, that we were affiliated with. I don't know where we were going there. If it doesn't look--that was at Loyola. Those are some of my class mates, studying.

John: Oh, yea. Great. Great photographs. Yea, those are Jesuits, with their cassocks on.

Bill: That was the stadium there, at Loyola. Now, this was in Missouri, Camp Custer [means Crowder], Missouri.

John: Okay. Oh, yea. These are great.

Bill: We learned to be soldiers down there, pretty much. This is the young guy I was talking about. He would have had a story. He was killed on Leyte now. He went through the same basic stuff that I did. He was in college, too. He went into the ASTP program as different colleges, but then he got inducted into the Infantry, which nobody really wanted to get inducted into the Infantry, but he did. They sent him to Leyte and he got killed there. So I was very, very fortunate.

John: Friendly mud. Oh, look at that. Yea. Oh, these are something. All the destruction, and that. Sure. This is Manila?

Bill: Manila. Pretty old pictures.

John: That is something.

Bill: Now you are probably getting into my fraternity life.

John: Yea, college was hell, wasn't it? Yea.

Bill: That was party time.

John: Okay. That is great. Well, that is a tremendous story. It's one of fourteen, sixteen million stories that go into it. Well, why don't we wrap up then? What I need is a release from you that will allow--

[End of Interview.]

