

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT F. MINCH
Truck Driver, Army, World War II

2007

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Minch, Robert F., (b. 1916), Oral History Interview, 2007

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 89 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 89 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Robert "Bob" Minch, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Army as a truck driver with the 756th Field Artillery Battalion during World War II. Minch was born on a farm in Paoli (Wisconsin) but grew up in Madison. He attended St. James Elementary School, Randall High School and West High School. He relates that before the war, he drove trucks for Ed Philips and Son and became a liquor and tobacco salesman. Minch recalls hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor while driving in his car. As the war began, Minch states he took classes on airplane motors in the hopes of getting into the Air Corps. He ended up being drafted into the Army Air Wing [ca. 1943]. Minch mentions a famous sportscaster named Art Bramhall was inducted with him at Fort Sheridan (Illinois). Next, Minch describes his artillery training at Fort Sill (Oklahoma). He portrays the men in his artillery unit as "a little older, in our middle twenties" and discusses at length his training which involved marching, calisthenics, and drills on the 105mm and 155mm field guns. Minch explains his unit, the 756th Field Artillery, was a special forces unit that attached to different divisions as needed. In 1944, the 756th moved from Oklahoma to Salinas (California) for additional training before ending up in New Orleans (Louisiana). Minch states he bunked in an old cotton warehouse with 2,000 GIs, and he characterizes New Orleans as "pretty wild." He explains the soldiers were happy to be in New Orleans because they took it as a sign they would be sent to Europe instead of the Pacific theater. Minch goes on to describe boarding a troop ship called the *Katae Maru*. He reveals he returned home over a year later on the very same ship. When they passed Tulagi Island and Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands), Minch realized they were headed for the Pacific front. Minch touches upon hazing rituals onboard to mark the crossing of the equator. He reports he was often sea sick and the ship had engine trouble. Minch states he landed in New Guinea and did not see much combat at first; he drove a winch at the dock to unload supplies because other units lacked personnel. Minch explains he later drove the 155mm guns on a modified Caterpillar tractor. He discusses in detail seeing combat on New Britain (Papua New Guinea) where his unit had to take out a Japanese base. He tells of firing anti-aircraft guns from the beach. Minch describes arriving at the staging area in Manos Bay (Philippines) and participating in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in late 1944, a heavy battle between the Japanese and American fleets. He remarks that the fleet in the Pacific was bigger than the fleet that invaded Normandy. He illustrates the adrenalin-rush of combat; Minch did not realize he'd been firing a 20mm anti-aircraft gun towards his own ship until a technician came over to adjust the barrel. On January 9, 1945, Minch's group landed on the island of Luzon (Philippines) with the 1st Cavalry. He states their mission was "to get to Manila as fast as we could" because the Japanese were burning the city. Minch describes passing through Clark Field, which the Japanese had stripped of supplies. Minch frequently comments on stealing

and looting. He mentions the Japanese took anything of value from the Philippines; the Filipinos, who "had nothing" towards the end of the war, stole food, film, and jeeps from the U.S. military; and the American soldiers performed "midnight requisitions," taking jeeps, ketchup, supply trailers, airplane fuel, etc. from other branches of the service and from the Japanese. Minch provides a before-and-after description of Manila which was a "modern city" devastated by the Japanese. He tells how his superior officer allowed his unit some downtime at the San Miguel Brewery outside Manila because they had been advancing through the jungle for weeks and needed rest. He implies this displeased General MacArthur and states "that was probably the biggest beer party that ever was." Minch compares the door-to-door fighting in Manila to combat in the Iraq War. Minch describes operations in and around Manila including attacking a walled Spanish Fort named Inramuras. Next, Minch's unit had to go into the mountains and fight the main Japanese Army. He tells of fighting in one area for six months and sleeping in foxholes. His role as a driver was to position the field guns with his tractor and sometimes transport ammunition to other units. Minch discusses how his team manned the guns, put fuses on the shells, and shot five shells per minute. Minch briefly touches upon a few instances of friendly fire. The 756th climbed the mountains, engaging with Japanese soldiers hiding in caves, until they finally reached their observation post (OP). At the OP, Minch reveals he met General Krueger, head of all the armies in the Pacific. Next, Minch tells a story of driving his tractor and 155mm gun through a river, with water coming up to his waist. An officer in charge of a medic unit ordered Minch to pull five of his ambulances across the river, which he did, angering the colonel because "You don't stop a combat unit. Combat units are number one." Minch states his unit was pulled off the front lines in summer 1945 to repair the 155s and prepare for the invasion of Japan. He reveals he had foot problems, asthma, and amoebic dysentery and was transferred to Headquarters, where he unloaded supply ships at the port. While working this job, Minch recalls learning of the atomic bombing of Japan. He states all the ships in the port shot their guns in the air in celebration, causing some shrapnel injuries. Minch discusses military life at the port. He states there were "a lot of rackets" in the Army and explains that cooks would prepare midnight snacks and charge soldiers a dollar for an egg sandwich. He tells of "requisitioning" ketchup for a buddy to take back to the front. Minch also mentions the Filipinos stole film from the Air Force and set up camera shops where they took pictures of GIs with their airplanes or jeeps. Minch explains he was promoted to Staff Sergeant near the end of the war and stayed on a few months in Japan after V-J day. He addresses his homecoming on the *Katae Maru*, the same ship that brought him to the Pacific. He addresses the difficulty of adjusting to civilian life. According to Minch, "all the good jobs were taken" and his wife of two years left him for another man. He felt he had missed out on having a family and buying a house like his friends who had deferments. Minch also examines the differences in his group of friends before and after the war. He states all but one were in the service, two came back disabled, and two or three were killed, so his social life was "completely different" after the war. Finally, Minch tells of an interesting coincidence: while serving in the Philippines, he would always check to see where motors and engines on Filipino farms were made, and at a sugar cane farm there, he found a motor made in Madison, Wisconsin.

Biographical Sketch:

Minch (b. 1916) was born in Paoli (Wisconsin) and grew up in Madison (Wisconsin). He attended St. James Elementary and Randall High School which became West High School. Before the war, Minch worked at his family's farm and as a truck driver for Ed Philips and Son. He was drafted into the Army and joined the 756th Field Artillery unit, driving tractors and running 155mm field guns. Minch fought in New Guinea and the Battle of Leyte Gulf (Philippines). After the war, he returned to Madison and worked as a truck driver and liquor salesman for thirty years, eventually settling in Windsor (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.
Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

Interview Transcript

John: Okay. Today is March 29, 2007, and this is John Driscoll. I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives. And we are at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, in the conference room. And this is Bob Minch. Bob is a veteran of the United States Army in World War II. Bob, thanks for coming down and agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Robert: I was born on a farm about two miles out of Paoli, Wisconsin.

John: When?

Robert: June 16, 1916.

John: Good. Okay.

Robert: I was the youngest of three kids. Three children.

John: Brothers? Sisters?

Robert: Yes. One brother and one sister. And stayed on the farm until I was about five years old, and then moved to Madison. My dad rented the farm out. Went to St. James Grade School. And moved over to Randall School. West High School wasn't built then, so we had to go to Randall School for one year. And then moved into the new West High School when it was built, see. So, let's see.

John: Okay. What did you do after high school?

Robert: Well, during high school, we still had the farm. You know, in summer, we'd go out and work on that farm. What was going on, on the farm, I started to drive trucks. Can I name the names of the people?

John: Sure.

Robert: I started to drive trucks for Ed Philips and Son. Even before I was working for him. He was a neighbor. The owner of the company was a neighbor of ours. Real nice gentleman who owned the company. I worked for him. And, of course, went to the same job for almost, worked for that same company for over thirty years. I did get to be a salesman, a whiskey salesman, in the later years. Wholesale whiskey, candy, tobacco, all that stuff.

John: As I mentioned earlier, do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?
Robert: Yes. I was going to work, or I was going up West Washington Avenue in a car when it was announced over the radio. Pearl Harbor. Yeah.

John: Okay. What did you think when you heard that?

Robert: Well, it was, we were in the draft before that. And I didn't have, I had a little number. And I knew I was going to be drafted sooner or later, see. So I went and took airplane lessons, and went to some classes at night on airplane motors. I wanted to get in the Air Corps, because it was a lot nicer than the infantry.

John: Okay.

Robert: When I got drafted, they put me in the Army Air Wing.

John: Okay. When did you get drafted?

Robert: What date?

John: Yeah. About.

Robert: Oh, I'd have to look.

John: Okay. Were you drafted after Pearl Harbor?

Robert: Oh, Yeah. I was drafted after Pearl Harbor. And I was married then, too. I was married. And they had to send us to Milwaukee. I was sent to Illinois, first.

John: Fort Sheridan?

Robert: Yeah. And there we were, I was with Art Bramhall, his name was. He was a famous sport, you know. Course, he was along, and over the announcer came, "Art Bramhall, report." He was in sports, and everything. He was sent back to Truax Field. There was quite a controversy over it, you know. So they sent me to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Where there was a big artillery school. And it was one of the oldest camps, because it was there when they were fighting the Indians. Huge, huge place. And it was a lot of callisthenics, because you had to be pretty tough. Before you would eat breakfast, you had to go through this big course. Because those guns were heavy, you know. And the shells. You had to be, I remember, boy, we had an outfit that really was tough. And they were all a little older men. Then weren't, we were in our middle twenties.

John: Okay.

Robert: Of course, it was day after day, on them guns, you know.

John: What kind of guns?

Robert: Well, we trained on 105's. But when we got to the camp, you know, we'd go on those long marches, you know. And not used to your feet. My feet were sore all the time.

John: Yep.

Robert: One time, the sarge said-- you know, there was a lot of land there that was taken over by the government. Big barn there. So he marched us in the barn and said, "Fall out." And we stayed there, and stayed there. And marched back to camp. And he said, "Everybody look tired. Everybody look tired."

John: Smart sergeant.

Robert: Yeah. Another one, we were on a trip our for two days, you know, marching. And raining to beat heck. And here was another barn and, of course, we had all our equipment, too, that time. And so a lot of us sneaked over into the barn, you know, where it was nice. You didn't have to tent. And in the middle of the night. And we got up in the morning, and everybody was gone. We had to walk back to camp. In the artillery, you know, we had to practice to move in fast, and get out fast. In the positions, you know. The positions. So that was the training. It was quite--almost as bad as boot camps are today, maybe worse.

John: Sure.

Robert: Well, anyway, we formed the 756th Field Artillery. There are some pictures. Then we got the 155s, the big ones. And we had real fast prime movers, brand new, fully tracked, where all the gunners could sit in a circle, right in the vehicle. Yeah, it had a big airplane motor in it. Hundred octane gas. I was the tractor driver. I was one of the guys, that was a truck driver in my life, and I was a truck driver in the Army.

John: Normally, the Army, if you were a truck driver, they'd make you a bugler.

Robert: Yeah, so it was getting kind of cold in that camp where we were. So they moved the outfit to California. The officers had quite, you know, they wanted to get where it was warmer. So we moved to California, and we trained there for a while.

John: Where in California?

Robert: It was right around Salinas.

John: Okay.

Robert: It was right on the water. It was, our camp was almost on the water. And that was, you know, sort of a real nice place. They had a big place where the orchestra came and played music.

John: Oh, Yeah? Okay. Wow. Okay, when was this? Was this '41? Or '42?

Robert: No, it was '44.

John: Okay.

Robert: Yeah, '44. Well, then we moved out. We got inspected, and they said we were ready to go overseas. So we got everything all loaded up on the trains, you know. You practice everything. You practice all the time. So, we headed, it would be toward New Orleans. We got on the train, and everybody was so happy because they knew they weren't going to go over to the islands in the Pacific.

John: Okay.

Robert: We got to New Orleans, and our barracks was a huge, it was either a cotton warehouse or tobacco. I don't know. There was 2,000 GIs in there.

John: Wow.

Robert: It was right on the water. It stuck out on the water, you know. Of course, that town was pretty wild, believe me.

John: Oh, Yeah. New Orleans. Yeah, it's got a reputation. Really something.

Robert: And there, the boat finally came up, and parked right next to the warehouse. Up the gangplank, and got on the boat.

John: Okay. The ship that you got on, here is a newspaper that says, it's mimeographed, it says, "Separation express." And it says that the ship was the *Katae Maru*. Okay. And that was the one that took you over, and you said that was the same one you came back on.

- Robert: Yeah. And, of course, we got on the ship, and when you cross the Equator, of course, they have all these parties. Unreal, you know. The officers would get paddles, you know, and you are going through the courses. Well, we got over towards the battle area, and of course, the motor blew up. And, of course, we zig-zagged. And the motor blew up.
- John: Oh, man.
- Robert: And there we were sitting there like ducks. Stuck on the sea, you know. And at night, I did see, a couple times, the big PBY planes flew over real low. You know, to check us out. And, of course, I was way down in the bottom of the boat, then. To guard the water-tight door.
- John: Okay.
- Robert: You know, if a submarine hits, no matter who is on what side of the door, as soon as we would get hit, bolt the door down. That was my job. And, of course, I would sit there and get sea sick. And the motor was so big, you could crawl into it. To fix it, you would have to have a ladder to go up in the pistons. That is how big the motor was. Well, we finally got to the island of Tulagi. That was stinking already. Guadalcanal was right next to it. And the fighting was over. So we sailed on to New Guinea, and there is where the boat came in. And instead of the fast prime movers to pull the guns, we got great big International diesel tracked Caterpillar tractors. Because those fast ones weren't good in the jungle. And so that was a surprise.
- John: Yes. Yeah.
- Robert: And then, like we were getting ready, and they came and they had big boats. Big boats would come in loaded with supplies, and they had nobody to unload them. So our officers, we all did, our unit would go down and unload them. So I was used to none of the labor, of course. I was a driver, so they put me on a winch. On one of the winches. Those boats are probably five or six stories high. I mean, they go way down in the water. None of us had any training for this kind of business. And, those guys were so smart. Like I had no trouble at all. It is really a trick to run them, because you have to take the stuff out of the hold, and then lift it up. And then swing it over, and swing it over the side, you know. You had two lines. In no time at all, you know, we would go way down, and lift it up like this and go over, you know. And we unloaded cargo. We got so good at it. I think we unloaded the whole ship of these big barrels of hundred octane gasoline for the airplanes. And they came, and they wanted us to stay there. We had a bunch of guys who could do anything.

- John: Okay.
- Robert: But our captain said, “No way.” He said, “We are a highly trained fighting unit and that is what we came for.”
- John: You didn’t want to be longshoremen.
- Robert: No. That’s the way they did things in those days because they were shorthanded.
- John: Yes. Sure. You’ve got a bunch of GIs, though, most of them could do anything. You could always find somebody.
- Robert: You know the food was unbelievable. Rusty cans, you wouldn’t know what was in it until you opened it up. We were getting actual World War I rations.
- John: Oh, Yeah.
- Robert: From Australia. And, of course, you know, New Guinea was just one road up the side. We didn’t get in any real fighting there. But then we got off quick and took our big LST boat again, and we moved over to New Britain. And this was where the real Japanese base was. So, rather than wipe them out, MacArthur left that base there. By-passed it. And, of course, we had to sit outside and shoot our guns at that. They called it harassing fire. All night. Road junctions, and all that stuff. And then it came time to get in the biggest bunch of ships; it was a heavier fleet than hit Normandy. We had, it was quite interesting because nobody knew that, you know, we had just as big a fleet as hit Normandy. Stronger. We had more battleships.
- John: Why don’t you start at Manos Bay, there.
- Robert: Okay. [Reading] “We arrived at Manos Bay, a staging area for the invasion of the Philippines. The 7th Fleet had almost a thousand ships. Three thousand landing craft. Twenty-eight thousand men. With six battleships. Eighteen aircraft carriers. Eighty-six cruisers and destroyers. Plus the 3rd Fleet, with a hundred and six warships. First task force hit the island named Leyte. Fighting there was as bad as it could be in the jungle mountains and marshes. The Japanese had a big fleet left. They had seven battleships, seven aircraft carriers, fourteen heavy and seven light cruisers, and thirty-five destroyers. These two fleets battled it out with heavy casualties, between December 13th and January 13th. Japanese suicide planes sunk twenty-four American ships and damaged sixty-seven others.” You know, I bet people don’t realize how big that was. As far as you could see, there were ships. I was on, of course, I was on the LST, which they only have a crew, you know. They don’t have people manning the guns. Of course, I was sitting in a 20

millimeter anti-aircraft gun. And, you know, it is exciting. You get excited. And, of course, I had a guy there with me with thick gloves on. Asbestos gloves, because the gun barrels get hot, and then they bend. So they got to change barrels. Well, anyway, I am sitting in the seat, and the sky was just full of it with all these ships throwing it up. And this guy told me, "Well, you didn't get an airplane, but you almost got one of our life rafts." There is a guard around each gun so when you swing it, it will hit it. And it will tip the gun so you can't hit your own ship. Well, anyway, "Was I really firing that thing?" "You bet you were." See, I didn't even know I was firing it. I probably was so excited.

John: Yeah.

Robert: You get in something like that, well. And, of course, the metal was falling down. There was so many shells up the metal was falling. We had one guy get a great big gash on his head. You know, the stuff was coming down like rain. That is how many guns were firing.

John: Yeah.

Robert: And when we got to the Philippines, the first group, we didn't get into the one island, so we had to wait out. Our group landed on Luzon. The island of Luzon. And that is when--our section of land--there were three different landings, and we were in the middle one. So we didn't have too much, there was no Japanese there. Of course, we were about a day later, because they had the big guns, and they had to run the ship up on shore, and then put pontoons out. And run into land, the heavy equipment. Everybody was in a hurry, you know, to get off the beach.

John: Yes.

Robert: Of course, anything went. We saw a trailer there, just sitting on the beach, you know, with a tarp over it. It was full of stuff. So we hooked onto it and stole it. Later, when they looked, it was all full of windshields and glass. When you go in combat, you take all the glass off the windshield. That is what it was. A trailer full.

John: We're doing fine. We're doing great.

Robert: We had so many, we were a bastard unit. I don't know if you know what that means. But we were a special unit that wasn't attached to no unit. We went where the trouble was. But we were finished every day. We ended up with, we landed with the 1st Cavalry. And their job was to go up the middle of the valley, and two other armies on each side. We were supposed to go in and get to Manila as fast as we could and attack the city of Manila. And we had a lot of-- I didn't write too

much about that, because it was just moving, moving, you know. But we got to Clark Field, of course, and the Japanese had all the goodies. Radios, and tools, and equipment, when they left. They kept retreating all the time. And, of course, they buried it. And after the fighting, they bury everything. So you can't use it. So after they left, all you could see was GIs around with shovels trying to dig up all this stuff.

John: I'll turn that over in a minute, but go ahead. This is fine.

Robert: Of course, the biggest battle we had was the city of Manila. MacArthur had said clean up all the diesels because we are going in for a parade. Because it was a million and a half people. It was a modern city. The Pearl of the Orient, they called it.

John: Yep. Let me turn this over.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

John: Okay, you said you were coming into Manila?

Robert: Yeah. It was, you know, the Japanese, there was 250,000. See, the main Japanese Army was on the island of Luzon. Two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers.

John: Oh, wow. Oh, man.

Robert: And on the way up there, on the outskirts of Manila, was this big San Miguel Brewery. And, of course, these GIs, infantry, and everybody who was connected with the whole armies advancing hadn't had any rest from New Guinea, all these islands. No alcohol; there was very little cigarettes, and no alcohol. You know. I smoked cigars back then, and you couldn't get cigars. There was nothing. The food wasn't good, either. Let me tell you. But, all of a sudden, these GIs, and everybody, got in the beer. I got a picture that shows one of the water tanks with foam coming out of it. Out with the water and we filled everything with beer. So, MacArthur is steaming, "Why aren't they advancing?" They were advancing. All these commanders and officers, they knew the troops needed a rest. You know.

John: Yeah. Yeah. Sure.

Robert: So for three days there was no advance. And they finally did tell MacArthur what was happening. Everybody was in the beer. That was probably the biggest beer party that ever was. Of course, it was warm, you know. It didn't set so good on your stomach. Well, anyway, Manila was burning. The Japanese had set the city on fire. And, of course, there was no parade. So this whole bunch of Japanese

marines had moved into the city, 16,000 marines moved into the city, to defend the city to the death. And it was door-to-door. I always have to say that it is like Iraq today. You know, we didn't fight for the city but they had to go through the city, just like the do in Iraq. Door-to-door, and, of course, we kept blasting with our guns. You know, we would fire. With our big 155s, we would drive them right up. One place we drove them all night long. Put sand bags up, and the Japanese were on one side of the river. And, of course, we were on the other. Well, we got one gun in position. Lots of times, in the fighting, there is no room to put our whole battery. There was four guns to a battery. And we got the one gun, we sand-bagged all night and the next morning, opened up in the morning. That gun fired 150 shells at Walled City. It was called Inrarmuras. The walls were around thirty feet thick. It was built by the Spanish. It was a Spanish fort. One of the old things. Well, that is where they ended up. Well, during that night, I'll tell you. I was kind of excited like. While we were sand-bagging, this one guy said, "I ain't doing no more work. I haven't had nothing to eat for days, no sleep. Tired and dirty." It so happened there was a guy standing right next to him. He had a star on his helmet. He was a general. You know, they were directing to shove off in the morning, to cross that river, you know. To attack the Japanese and the big fort. So it was touchy. But the general says, "Soldier, don't you know there is a war on?" And he called the guards, and they took him away. Well, we never saw him again. One of my buddies. You know, they got hundred and hundreds, probably thousands of men ready to shove off across the river.

John: Yeah.

Robert: That was unbelievable. You had to be there or you never could explain that city burning, fighting. That city was almost wiped off the, it was one of the worst cities, destroyed cities, in World War II. They had big buildings, like universities, post office. It got pictures of them. You wouldn't believe it. In order to get the Japanese out, they had to smash the building down, and that was it. We fired, we were two units of 155s, fired probably, I don't know the exact, in fact, I had the figure. Fired over probably 1,500 shells. In the fighting in the city.

John: I can believe that.

Robert: So it was one place where I took a rag and put it over my nose. The flies were so thick. So over a hundred thousand Filipinos were killed in that area. Most of them by the Japanese. Some by our artillery fire. So that was the end of the city. Of course, the civilians were starving. No firewood. Food. Nothing. So then, we were ordered out to fight the main body of the Japanese Army. The main Japanese Army had fled into the mountains. Philippines is all mountains. Really rough country. Then we got orders, the city was taken. It took over thirty days before it was secured. Now, one place I went to a bank. And the money was on the floor.

The looting was unbelievable.

John: I can imagine.

Robert: Everybody took everything. Well, I am in the bank, you know. I was on patrol. Even though you are walking through money in the bank. And of course it was Japanese script. Everybody picked them up. I got some at home. And then we got to MacArthur's penthouse. He had this penthouse. And they told us not to go up there, because there still might be Japanese. We went up anyway, you know. And of course, it was all smashed. I sat in this big chair where he commanded. He was commander of the city for years. Well, Manila, there is lots of stories to tell about that. But we were ordered out to help with all these other divisions. The 1st Cavalry had done their part. And I think it was the 44th Division, too, we were helping. Well, anyway, we moved out. Whenever they needed artillery, we had to run and go. There was fighting in different parts. You know, where the divisions were. Well, there were so many incidents, like when we pulled up one time in a position. We had scouts out. Best officers, they would be with the infantry, and they would always look for a place to spot our guns. When we would go on attack. They were right up there in the front all the time. We would pull our guns right up, almost to the Japanese, you know, point blank. And they didn't have any real heavy stuff, because they were on defense. They did have one gun that we caught in this one place, and dug in, and started firing. And all of a sudden, over came a huge noise, and the shell hit the ground. And it was so big it dug a hole, you could put a house basement. I'll tell you how big the shell was.

John: Okay.

Robert: Well, anyway, every four minutes, a new one was coming. That is how long it took to load the big gun. The only thing that helped was the shell would bury itself in the ground, and then it would blow up. You didn't, the shrapnel, you know. The Japanese guns did that. They buried themselves, the shells. We had one shell, Japanese shell, fell right under one of our 155 guns, right under it. Turned that gun completely around.

John: I'll be darned.

Robert: You know. Nobody got hurt. I blew the tractor driver off the seat, though. I think when he heard it, he jumped. At the same time. The first thing you do when you hear a shell is jump for cover. So, anyway, we were, the gun was, nobody could find it. It was quiet for quite a while. And, finally, the 158th Regimental Team attacked that gun. What it was, the gun was in the thing. They would fire, and a building would move over, on rails. The gun would fire, and when they were loading it, the building would move over. And then they would pull it back again,

and fire. They couldn't find it for a while. That company got the Presidential Citation that attacked that area. So we fought quite a bit. It was awful scary.

John: Yes.

Robert: Yeah. I was in a foxhole once, and mortar fire was coming in. Heavy mortar fire. And, of course, all you can do is sit there. You know. And I am sitting there, and I said, "What am I doing here?" You know. I got that in the book, too, because it's kind of comical. Because when I was young, there was a University of Wisconsin ski jump. It was the awfulest ski jumps. But it was way up on Bascom Hill. And way up, the ski jump. And I went. I skied. And I liked it. I climbed up that jump, and I am on top of that jump. Looking down. And thinking, "What the heck am I doing?" I should know better. It wasn't, I wasn't a gung-ho one. But when you are in a foxhole like that, sometimes you want to get up and charge, you know. The next time, you don't. You are almost tired, you know. Kind of different.

John: Yeah.

Robert: I could tell a lot of stories. Got a little place, once we got there and got into position. We were, the officers were told we were going to attack this Japanese stronghold there. And nothing was working. Nothing was going on. So, when I got the gun in position with my big Cat, then, see, my job was done. Then I would either do ammunition or do other stuff. You know. Because my job was done. So, they needed ammunition. What they didn't bring. They always say, bring up the ammunition. But it wasn't so. You had to go get it. So, of course, I volunteered to go back on the truck and get the ammunition, you know. I thought maybe I would get a good meal, because it was in the back. All the supplies, and so. Yeah, about three hours later, we got there. Here was our shells. There was one Filipino there. Nobody else. "Where is our army?" "Where is the supplies?" Well, that's how it was. It was unreal, kind of unbelievable. The situation, you know. Well, we had quite a few encounters that way. We always were on the run. And we had no tents. The gunners, I was in the tractor. And, early on, in New Guinea, we had two car seats welded on this tractor, on the big Cat. So there was a plush seat on each side of me. And, of course, the captain rode, or the lieutenant. You know. And the gunners all had a ride on the gun. Hang onto the gun, or the cart we had the ammunition in. Each unit was separate, the tractor and a small ammunition cart, and then the big gun attached onto that. In one area, we were six months fighting. And that is how we battled. Slept on the ground or in a foxhole. And, of course, you were sort of separated. There was four guns to a battery. And, of course, they spaced it so you wouldn't lose the whole unit. And, of course, you just stayed with that group. And, so many instances. We were, this happened in Manila. It was quite amusing. We would, lots of times you wait. It isn't steady, you know. You wait for firing. Of course, we were, we went up and sitting and laying around in

this Filipino house. They are on stilts, you know. That is how they build them. And, of course, we were in there. I had my shoes off. And helmet off, and sitting there, resting. These Japanese shells started coming in. Of course, out the windows. There is a ladder going to these houses, but we were sailing, out the window and got to our foxholes. Left my helmet behind. I picked my shoes up but there is my steel helmet. Well, I am in a foxhole without a helmet. And that didn't feel good.

John: No. No.

Robert: That is how it went. In training, we'd all just sit there and each person on that gun, I had, they would say shift and train. And then the next guy, shift and train. Each man could do any job on that gun. Every man could take over any position. There were nine men to a gun. And, of course, the shells weighed ninety-six pounds apiece. And the powder train weighed about thirty-five pounds. You see, the powder is in sections, and the officers say six bags, and then you cut them. You cut the bag with the six and the other bags, of course, you had to dig a hole because that powder, you know. Everything was dangerous. And the we had nitroglycerin fuses. And, of course, then the gun is in position, in the firing line, it depends on how far distant it is. You have to dig a hole back of the gun. The recoil drives right down. The gunner sits there, pulls the lanyard, you know. And this one time, he pulled the lanyard and he slipped in the hole and the gun barrel came right down on him.

John: Oh, Jesus.

Robert: Squashed him. You know. Went in that hole.

John: Oh, man.

Robert: So you do have accidents. We had people killed from friendly fire, too. Because it, they just don't know. Each unit.

John: Yeah.

Robert: Infantry was coming up. We were ahead of the infantry. One time we got in position and, of course, the infantry didn't come up. We were ahead of the infantry. And we were there at one point, we were there for almost half a day. Not a shell came in from the Japanese. But as soon as that infantry started to attack, the Japs had it all. The Filipinos told us that they had the distance. When they were in their stronghold in the mountains, in the mountain, there, they knew. They practiced with their mortar fire, you know. They would know where they were landing. Well, when that infantry came up to where our guns were, the mortar fire

came in just like rain. And these infantry guys got, you know, shell-shocked. They were walking around, you know. Blood. See, the Japanese were, we kept flushing them, you know. They kept retreating. They kept, and we got a call. The 11th Airborne had flew in and they needed help, and they were pinned down. So, we went on a forced march. Two Japanese, it was land that wasn't taken. We went all night. We pulled them guns through. No roads. Up half a mountain. And on the right side, they would say, "Hug the wall. Hug the wall." Because on the other side of the span there wasn't a road. It was more of a drop down, you know, on that side. Miles down that mountain, you know. So we had to hug, at night. We finally, they said we had Filipino guerillas on the side of us to protect us if the Japanese got into any trouble. But I didn't see any. We got to where the 11th Airborne was. And they got two guns half-way up this mountain through the trees, and got the guns right where the OP was. See, the OP was where the officers was. Where the officers would fire the guns. You know. Observation post. We had radio and, we had radio and wire sections with us. But we got to where, up ahead. I happened to be there, and a whole bunch of guys, ten or twelve. I don't know. A group of 11th Airborne soldiers there in a group, and all of a sudden, this smoke came up. And mortar fire lit right where they were.

John: Oh, man.

Robert: Yeah. You know. Of course, when the smoke lifted, there was no one standing there. Well, anyway, we got these two guns. They were pinned down by Japanese dug in and, I am almost sure, it was attacking this airport. Where this Japanese air strip was. And, of course, it was heavily fortified. With caves in the mountain. Caves. And coconut logs and fortifications. You know. So we got those two guns up there, and we pulled into position. Right next to us was the 11th Airborne artillery. With the pack 75's.

John: Yeah.

Robert: They flew in with pack 75's. Well, you know, our big guns was ten times bigger.

John: Yes.

Robert: But they stayed there. And the officers said, by the way, General Krueger was at that position. And the general that was head of the whole armies in the Pacific. General Krueger. He happened to be there on the opening of that. Well, anyways, our officers fired on them, two or three shots. They had the gun barrel, it wasn't up in the air. It was straight, even down a little bit. And it was just almost like bore sighting. And at first, we either fired two or three, one at a time. You see, when the officers, they know practically where it is going to light. Well, you could see where the shells were hitting. We were that close. Then we waited, you know.

And then you could see the flashes from the machine guns coming out of the Japanese positions, you know. And then he said, gave the command, you know. Five shots. Well, that first shell...

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

John: Okay, there we go. We missed that part about seeing the shell going and hitting the cave. Want to tell that again?

Robert: All right.

John: The officer had just said fire.

Robert: Yeah. When you are back of these guns, you can see the shells go all the way. Leave the gun and go right into the, wherever it lands. You can see it. And, of course, when it goes out, it drops a little. And, of course, the infantry officers were there and saying "don't shoot at our infantry," you know. And our officers said, "No, it isn't going to hit the infantry." They were pinned down by the Japanese fire. So that first shot, out of the five, you know, and our gun crew could, believe it or not, could shoot five shells in a minute. They were so highly trained. Well, anyway, that first shell was actually through the barricade where they had it and right into the cave where the Japanese had their stronghold. And it blew them right back out. It looked like somebody was shooting back at us. Great big cloud of things. And the officer had glasses, of course. See, I didn't have any. He could see real clear what it looked like. You know. They had gone through, had shot four times, and the officer said, you know, the other shell was in the gun. And he said, "Oh, go ahead, shoot it." You know. At that particular spot.

John: Oh, man.

Robert: Yeah.

John: One five five, that's about six inches, isn't it?

Robert: Yeah. And, of course, our shells, they had fuses. They came with just a big hunk of shell and then you had to screw the fuses on and set it whether you wanted it timed, or anything. We were one of the first units. I don't know if we were the first unit, or not, but along the way, they came up with a position, and they called it these new shells that would explode ten feet above the ground.

John: Okay.

Robert: Or hit the ground, these shells. Well, when we used them everybody had to be

away. The only guy left, of course, was the guy with the lanyard. To shoot the gun. Because they didn't know how well they worked, you know. We were either one of the first, or the first to use those type of shells. You could set it so the atmosphere or the ground, it would explode before. And that is where the damage is. That is when you took the shrapnel. So, and they were after-- even our enemies, I guess the Germans said that our artillery was fantastic.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Robert: In practice, you know, in camp when we were training, there was an officers' school there. Artillery school for officers. So we would have to go out with the guns and these officers, two miles away, they could probably shell right on a small object.

John: Oh, yeah?

Robert: It was very, very accurate artillery. And, of course, when you are in position, like your officer will say, "Gun Number One, adjust!" So then we would fire, you know. They would fire one or two. But every gun, all twelve guns, every gunner would be on their guns following their same instructions.

John: Okay.

Robert: Even though they wouldn't fire. They would follow instructions. So this time it was perfect, and then, of course, when he would say. "Battery, Fire!" Then all the guns would fire. See, each gun, when you get in position, the men would run out with the surveyors. They would run out way ahead of the guns. So you could tell exactly where that gun was in the world. That spot. That spot it was in.

John: Okay.

Robert: So that is how they did the job. The officers said, "Number One, adjust." Everybody had to follow.

John: The Number One gun.

Robert: And you could also fire more than the twelve. Battalion fire. That meant when everything else. When the twelve guns would fire. All at the same target. So, we did an awful lot of damage to the Japanese.

John: Yes. Wow, that is remarkable.

Robert: It was, I happened to, I didn't read that story for quite a while, but I did go through

it a little bit. But I can remember—oh there is a lot of other stories in there. One place, we came to the water, you know. The river. We had the bridges all down. We came to the river and, of course, I could drive through the water. We had a snorkel. They had snorkels on it. So I could be sitting in that big Cat seat and water right up to my waist, like this. And in the water, you know, pull the guns through. So I happened to be Number 4 gun. We pulled out last, out of that position. I was the last gun to pull out. And, of course, I had the staff sergeant with me, sitting next to me. All of a sudden, here comes, and I heard, “Stop! Drop the gun!” He was a top officer. I don’t know. And of course, the sergeant. And I don’t know, but something tells me it was a general. Now, I’m not sure. But it was either a colonel or a top. He stopped the gun. He said, “I want you to go back and pull the rest of my unit across the river.” With my tractor, you know. So, we dropped the gun, and I’m going down the river bank and going across. And they hook up about five ambulances. It was an ambulance detachment going to the front. A medical unit, going to the front. So, I am pulling it across and, geez, all of a sudden, the Jeep comes back. Oh, the colonel was mad. He said: “You don’t stop a combat unit. Combat unit is number one,” you know. “You don’t do that.” But this other guy who was sitting there laughing, he got his outfit across the river. He did what he was supposed to do. You know? They always say you do--

John: Yeah.

Robert: Yeah, we did a lot of midnight requisitions, too, in some places. You know what that is.

John: Oh, Yeah. Did you have any time off, when you were in the Philippines?

Robert: No. Just between going to positions. Yes, sometimes. Not a lot of times, but one time we were going into position. It was an airstrip. And, of course, you can’t stop. I mean, here sits an airplane, you know. Blocking what they called bananas, and stuff. Plane. So, when we got in there, that airplane was full of gas. Japanese. Full of gasoline, because one of the guys opened up one of the gas things and it was right up to full. That baby, you could have taken off down the runway with it. It was hidden in the trees, of course. It was hidden. So we went and got in position. There was nothing going, so we went back. By the time we got back, it was stripped already, you know. I sat in the seat. It was a Jap Betty plane. That is a two-seater. And, you know, I could hardly get in there. It was so narrow. Of course, it was all made out of fabric, you know, no metal. But that is how narrow that seat was. Yeah. So a lot went on. Every day, was something going different.

John: Yes. How long were you in the Philippines, from the beginning?

Robert: A little over a year. We landed-- our unit landed January 9th [1945], on the island

of Luzon. And I was still in the Philippines when they dropped the atom bomb. That was about a year or so later. When the declared war was over, there was still fifty thousand Japanese soldiers in the islands. Japanese. They came up and surrendered. And they started with two hundred and fifty thousand of them, so we killed quite a few of them.

John: Was there talk about you being in the invasion of Japan, before they dropped the bomb?

Robert: What was that, again?

John: Was there talk about invading Japan?

Robert: Oh, yeah. Before. Yeah, we were pulled off the fighting about, well, probably, about a week before, to get the guns new barrels lined. The guns were wore out, you know, and you had to get new liners for them. The 155s inserts, you know, to put in the new gun barrels in there, getting ready to attack the island of-- I've got it. I happened to be in the meeting where it was. We would have had six hundred thousand soldiers, they were loading up the boats to attack Japan.

John: That would have been terrible. You know, you would have been fighting little girls and grandmas.

Robert: Casualties, they said, would have been enormous. Yeah, we had six hundred thousand men, but by that time, when we got back into position to do that, of course, I was in bad shape. My feet were bad. And of course, I had-- it was common in foreign countries-- I had amoebic dysentery.

John: Okay.

Robert: Which I didn't know. You can get dysentery, and it isn't so bad. It was common. So I went to the hospital. The first time, I didn't know anything. I was bleeding from the rear, you know. We had, uh--and so I went back to one of the hospitals. These were field hospitals. They said, they put me in a chair. It looked like a potty-chair, you know. It had a hole in it.

John: Yeah.

Robert: Like this. And you'd sit in it. And they'd strap you in, of course. Then they pulled the plug and the chair turns over. Then I got a proctoscope. Then they found I had amoebic dysentery. I had the worst kind. Of course, I was an asthmatic person, too. Twice, I had to go to the medics for my asthma. And of course, the doctors said, "How did you get in the service, in the first place?" So, I got transferred, and

they transferred me to Headquarters, Second Ports. And that was to unload all these ships that was coming in. Thousands. Sometimes they could unload twenty-five ships at a time. The ports were so big. And all this stuff was coming in to attack Japan. There was food, Jeeps, whole fields full of Jeeps. Another field full of everything. This field had, like the one they put me in a weapons carrier with a radio. And I was supposed to direct the trucks going to the depot.

John: Okay.

Robert: And, of course, I had passes to get on every ship, to tell them where to unload, and when to stop unloading when the trucks couldn't move stuff that fast. There would be a line of trucks for a mile, waiting to unload. All this stuff coming in. Just mounds of it. And, of course, they had Filipinos. They would steal it. They had to put armed guards on top, to sit on the load, armed. Armed guard. Sometimes, they would even kill the guard. The whole truck would be missing, full of food. It was unreal. There would be soldiers from the merchant fleet, sailors from the fleet, or merchant army, they would be on the corner selling, they had a half a case of cigarettes, selling cigarettes. And in the field, when we were fighting, when we were on the battle lines, we were lucky if the guys were getting three cigarettes a day.

John: Yeah.

Robert: And that's how it was, the looting. I figured it out, between five and ten percent probably was looted. Because these Filipinos, I don't blame them. They had nothing. They had no food, they had nothing. They had no shoes. The Japanese had taken everything in the four years the Japs were there. They loaded up ships and took everything that was of value back to Japan. And so they didn't have anything. So when the stuff was there, they were going to get a little of it. I'd have done the same thing. It was unreal. Unreal situation. Just unbelievable.

John: How long after the war did you stay in the Philippines?

Robert: Well, I didn't go home with my unit. See, I wasn't with my unit then. See, I was only a T-5 in the artillery. And I never got back to my unit. Although I did see, all of a sudden, one of my, from Wisconsin. Must have looked me up. Because he went on board. See, I had a pass I could board. I got the passes in these books here. I could board any ship when it came to the docks. I had a real good clearance.

John: Good.

Robert: So he went with me. He came out of that trip, I know he had a gallon of ketchup, I

think. And a gallon of some other condiment. The combat units never got that stuff.

John: Yeah, right. [laughs] Good.

Robert: So he went back to camp loaded. Yeah, well, it was a little item that—You know, a lot of armies got rackets. So while we were on our LST, we were waiting. We waited, you know, you do a lot of waiting on ships, to get into position ‘cuz you are in the middle of this whole fleet. So, every night, about when it got dark, you would get in line and go around the fantail, the back. And the cook, the cook would be there. You know, you’d get one egg between two slices of bread for a dollar. And that line probably-- everybody was always hungry. The food was very hard to get because we were, even in combat--anyway, imagine what that cook made! A lot of rackets. Another racket was in Manila. You would be going up the street. It was right after the war. And there were no supplies, photographic supplies, coming in—nothing was coming in. There would be a photo shop where you could get your picture taken. Well, that was with Air Force, airplane film. [John chuckles] Yeah. Same way with a vehicle. When Manila got pretty cool, you would see these nice shiny cars, all chromed up and everything on them. Well, that would be a scout car, a regular army car, all fixed up. You couldn’t even keep-- you had to have almost a guard on a Jeep. It would either be stolen by the Filipinos or the troops. We stole one, too. Everything was big, because when you get on board an LST like that, you got salt water, you see.

John: Yeah.

Robert: Well, they do have fresh water. So, we would go out and get a Jeep, steal it from some other outfit. The captain of the ship, they’d raise the Jeep up and put in on the hold, and paint it blue. Then he’d have a vehicle. And that went on all the time. And then, of course, we’d get fresh water for showers. Once in a while we’d get better food, too.

John: What happened when you heard the war was over? When you heard Japan had surrendered?

Robert: When they heard about Japan, every ship in that whole harbor started to shoot their guns up in the air. Everything. And, of course, the same thing happened like in combat. The metal kept coming down and, I think, quite a few people got injured. There was all these shells, all this shrapnel. Yeah, it was unreal. What a relief. Everybody was tired.

John: Then, when did you get back?

Robert: Well, see, I didn't get back, then. I was made a sergeant, and they wanted me to stay. They had, I was just a plain sergeant, then. And then they made me a staff sergeant. And I didn't, I wanted to get home, too. I stayed on, I don't know, it must have been two or three months, I think. Well, then there wasn't ships to take you home. Because the ships were on the way from Germany, loaded with troops to come help us fight the Japanese. So all these ships were on the water. And, of course, when I got home, I got on this same old boat that I came over on. The *Katae Maru*.

John: Oh, God.

Robert: I got the newspaper. Same thing happened. This motor in that boat, that boat was so old.

John: This is a remarkable story. Wow. What did you do after you got out?

Robert: After I got home?

John: After you got out of the Army?

Robert: Well, bad story. When I left, I had an apartment with the wife. When I got home, my wife had found somebody else. So I didn't, right away, we stayed together a little while. My wife was almost an instant stranger. She was a beautiful girl. But, so I ended up living with the folks. I was thirty years old, and I had to start my whole life all over again. But I went back, I got it in the story. I didn't go back to work right away. And, of course, when I got back, all the good jobs were taken. So I started driving a truck again. And, of course, I ended up as a liquor salesman again. But the part that most soldiers don't realize, I mean, people don't realize-- that two of my friends that didn't go in service, they got deferred, they had boughten a house, they had families. And, of course, we missed all that. We were gone. I was gone for just under four years. Three years and eight months, or so. They don't realize that can happen. See, I found, before I was in the service, I belonged to a pretty big gang. I grew up during the Depression, you know. I mean, Depression, and so did this same group. We had quite-- and every one of them except one got in service, whether they were drafted or enlisted. We lost two guys, two of our gang come back with their legs off. Two or three were killed. That was the end of the gang. So we had to, sort of, some of us who were left did start going together again after that. But it was completely different.

John: Yes. This is a remarkable story. Man, this is something.

Robert: Well, there is a lot more to it.

John: Oh, sure. Let's wrap this up. Let me ask a question I usually ask. You were a young man. You were just starting out in life. Just married.

Robert: I had been married two years.

John: Okay. But, then, bang, you ended up going in harm's way overseas. What did you think about that? Afterwards?

Robert: Well, nothing. It was a glorious experience. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Uh. Something you never see...

John: Yeah. Okay.

Robert: Unreal. I was always one, like when we would go to see, I'd see a gasoline motor where they were making sugar cane, you know. This is farm land where we fought, you know. And I'd have to go look at the motor and see where it was made. I got to one place where this motor was made right here in Madison, Wisconsin. In the Philippines! It was running the sugar.

John: I am going to shut this off. This is a remarkable story--

[End of Interview]