

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT M. ROTH
Infantry, Army, World War II.

2000

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Roth, Robert M., (1924-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Robert M. Roth, a Mauston, Wisconsin native, describes his World War II service with the 172nd Infantry in the Pacific Theater. Roth talks about enlisting, basic training at Camp Roberts (California), and being shipped to Guadalcanal via Nouméa (New Caledonia) with the 25th Division. During his few days on Guadalcanal, he recalls sleeping next to the cemetery, hearing many funerals a day, and later learning one of the funerals had been for a Milwaukee friend's brother. Roth talks about clearing out Japanese troops on several small islands, including Arundel, Bougainville, and Munda (Solomon Islands), and joining the heavy weapons (H) Company of the 172nd Regiment, 43rd Division. He comments on desperately needing a change of clothes, having poor food in the field, and having wonderful food in New Zealand. Roth touches on duty as a baker and as a Jeep driver. He portrays Hollis Matthews, an airman from Boscobel (Wisconsin) whom he met overseas and who let him come along on a bombing mission to Rabaul. Stationed for nine months at Aitape (New Guinea), Roth touches on spending time at the beach or hunting for tigers. He details his participation in the invasion of Luzon (Philippines): seeing a kamikaze plane fly over the ship, having to swim in deep water during the landing at Lingayen Gulf, where many men in his company drowned, and encountering more Japanese than expected. Roth talks about combat, having a dud shell land near his foxhole, and burying dead soldiers along the road. He tells of being strafed by Japanese Zeros and shooting one down with a machine gun. Surrounded near Clark Field, he speaks of firing until ammunition ran out and earning a Silver Star by retrieving the unit's machine gun during the retreat. Roth comments on sustaining several minor shrapnel wounds and being hospitalized for malaria. He talks about setting American prisoners of war (POWs) free at Cabanatuan and seeing ex-prisoner-of-war Jonathan M. Wainwright. Roth details duty guarding "Casa Blanca," General Douglas MacArthur's home in Manila, portrays MacArthur and his family and staff, and recalls playing pinochle. Roth mentions being demoted when he was on leave in New Zealand because his train broke down and he was marked as absent without leave for two days. He talks about soldiers who kept young rhesus monkeys, one of which was thrown overboard on the ship ride home because it wouldn't pass customs. After the war, Roth discusses going home aboard the USS General Pope, getting fresh milk and donuts, keeping in touch with friends from the service, and using a GI Bill loan to buy a cement block machine for the family business. He recalls leave in Auckland (New Zealand) and describes the menu at the Imperial Café. Roth talks about catching lobsters while on Arundel (Solomon Islands) and bathing in salt water.

Biographical Sketch:

Roth (b.1924) served in the Army during World War II at New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Luzon. He married, raised six children, and eventually settled in Lyndon Station (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000
Transcribed by Linda Weynand, 2012
Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2012
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview Transcript:

Jim: Okay, talking to Bob Roth. It's the 26th of July, year 2000. So where were you born, Bob?

Roth: I was born in Mauston, Wisconsin.

Jim: And when was that?

Roth: That was on March 15th, 1924.

Jim: I see. And when did you enter military service?

Roth: On the 8th day of February, 1943. Mauston.

Jim: Were you drafted or—

Roth: No, I volunteered.

Jim: You volunteered. Okay. And where did they send you first?

Roth: We went to Milwaukee for a physical.

Jim: Right, you passed that.

Roth: Yes, and went to Fort Sheridan to get the shots.

Jim: Everybody remembers the shots. [Roth laughs] Okay. And where did you have your basic training?

Roth: Then we went by train to, ah, just a minute—

Jim: Great Lakes? San Diego?

Roth: No, no. I was—

Jim: Maryland?

Roth: No. It was near San Luis Obispo. Camp Roberts, California.

Jim: That's where you went right off the bat?

Roth: Right from Fort Sheridan.

Jim: Okay.

- Roth: Thousand miles through Texas we went. We went in the top by Arkansas and clear down around through El Paso.
- Jim: You took a long route to get there.
- Roth: Yeah, that's the sweetest way. [laughs]
- Jim: Oh, I see. How long were you there in California?
- Roth: We left there—it was the end of June because I arrived at Nouméa, New Caledonia on the 26th, which is today, 1943.
- Jim: So then what specialty did they move you into?
- Roth: Well, I was in the infantry. I was in the 89th Infantry Battalion.
- Jim: I see. And just a regular soldier, no special expertise?
- Roth: No, none.
- Jim: How long was that training there?
- Roth: Thirteen weeks.
- Jim: Where was your first real duty then?
- Roth: You mean after I left there?
- Jim: After you got all your training.
- Roth: Then they shipped us up to Pittsburg, California, waiting to sail overseas. We left up there on—I finished my training on the end of June and we left up there not long afterwards, a few days, and then we took the Army Queen to San Francisco to load on the USS Sea Witch. Then we traveled from there to Nouméa, New Caledonia.
- Jim: Was that island under control by the time you got there?
- Roth: Yes, it was. Yeah. Well, I shouldn't say under control; it was pretty much so. Every once in a while they'd get a few, but they were a long ways away from where we were. We were right at Nouméa.
- Jim: That landing had been before you got there, obviously.
- Roth: Yeah, they had some Marines in there.

Jim: Right. What was your duty there?

Roth: Wait for a ride to Guadalcanal.

Jim: You were just pausing in Nouméa?

Roth: Yes.

Jim: You got off the ship for awhile?

Roth: Yes. We did.

Jim: Gave you a can of beer?

Roth: No beer.

Jim: No beer?

Roth: No beer. Poor water. We slept two nights there. They had issued us a half-blanket. And you'd just wad your clothes up and use them as a pillow, part of 'em.

Jim: This outfit was the 43rd Division, right?

Roth: Not yet.

Jim: Okay. What were you then?

Roth: Well, when I got to Guadalcanal I was in the 25th Division. In those days it was the only overseas division the United States Army had. And we were there, oh, gosh, a few days. We just kind of hung around here and there. They had a lot of funerals there, and we were right alongside the cemetery.

Jim: But combat was slowing down by then?

Roth: Well, yes. There was the 38th Division, I think it was, had some rifle companies up in the mountains a little bit, just more or less checking it out. They were gone. They fought on one side of the island and they were running off on the other side, the Japanese.

Jim: How long were you in Guadalcanal? A couple months, or—

Roth: No, no, just a few days. We were there, I'm gonna say four days at the most. And then we went by LST to Munda. That's in the New Georgia Islands. Then we went—[The interview was put on hold while a three-

pronged extension cord was located, all recorded but not transcribed.] I was going to tell you this story while I was in Guadalcanal.

Jim: Wait a minute, now, I've got to get you back on. Alright. Now.

Roth: While we were in Guadalcanal we slept right next to the fence where the cemetery was. In fact, it was the north side of the cemetery. And there were several of us, and a lot of us from Wisconsin. This one young lad, we were kinda together in alphabetical order, and his name Zichowicz [?] from Milwaukee. The first day we were there, I think it was, or the second day—it was the first day—there was a funeral early in the morning, like 8:30. And we were there, and of course they had the Taps and they had the guns and the firing squad and everything, and then that was it. Some days they'd have ten funerals. This day it just so happened they had one. About six weeks after that when the mail caught up to us up on Munda, on the New Georgia Island, Irv Zichowicz [?] got a letter from his mother telling him that his brother Stanley got killed. He was a B-24 tail gunner. Give all the dates and everything and we were at Stanley's funeral and never knew it.

Jim: Oh my goodness.

Roth: That day, the time of day, and everything.

Jim: Bizarre. So, where did you go next?

Roth: Then we went to Munda on a LST. We stayed there. Oh, we pushed several islands. We'd run 'em off an island and we never knew where they went because the Air Force and the Navy couldn't find out where. Didn't catch any boats, you know, or pick up—of course, they didn't have the stuff to pick 'em up like they do now, either. We stayed there for a little bit and then we moved on out to Arundel and we went to Bougainville and many smaller islands, but when I say smaller islands, they're probably eight miles long and a mile and a half, two miles wide. But they were small. And then we come back to Munda. Our clothes were all tore up and muddy and we had gone eighty-nine days without washing up. Your clothes would stand right up; they'd have to have a corner for them. [laughs] Then one day we got the notice we're gonna go get clothing, gonna load us up. So an LST come there and took us to Guadalcanal. We got on a big ship and we went to Auckland, New Zealand and we stayed there. We got our clothing and everything. We were gettin' pretty thin up there; the food was terrible and not much of it. We got down to New Zealand and the food was excellent. You had any kind of meats you wanted, from lamb, pork, chicken, duck, geese, you name it, beef. I worked in the kitchen as a baker because I was taught that at home. My mother taught me how to bake and cook. I done baking three days a week.

And then two days a week I drove Jeep for the—I can't think of what they call that; he's over the police. There's a name for him. I drove him two days; he had a Jeep. And then the days that I didn't drive him, and the Jeep wasn't working, I could use the Jeep if I wanted to go to town, take my buddies with me, four or five of them.

While I was on Munda I met a fellow in the Air Force from Boscobel, Wisconsin. I didn't see him often. I saw him when we left Munda, that's when I met him, and then when we come back there—we might have come back once in between, and he was down at the airfield. The pilots had a big home there they'd built for 'em they called Maude's Mansion. This Air Force man, he was a flight engineer. His name was Hollis Matthews, from Boscobel. And I'm walking down the street in Auckland, New Zealand, and who do I see but Hollis! "So what are you doing down here?" He said, "I just got my fifty missions in and they sent me down here to a headshrinker to see [laughs] if they're going to keep me or trade me." So anyway. I'll never forget the last day I saw him. I didn't see him then for a day or two, but I knew when he was leaving, so I got to town. I had the Jeep, the big policeman's Jeep. I met Hollis and I said, "How are you doing?" He said, "I passed in flying colors and I'm going back to Munda," which he wanted to do. And he said, "But I'll tell you, Bob, don't ever get caught in one of these things where you gotta go see that psychiatrist because he was batting flies in the room with a flyswatter and there was no flies in the room at all." And he said, "Every time the nurse went by he'd give her a little tap on the hind end." That was the story. Then we left there and we went to New Guinea. Aitape, New Guinea. And we were there nine months.

Jim: Any combat there?

Roth: Very little. We did run into some resistance on the—

Jim: Was that your first experience in combat?

Roth: No. Up at Munda.

Jim: Munda was?

Roth: Yeah. We were in combat many times, like a day or two, and then there were no more Japanese and then we'd go someplace else.

Jim: You were in a rifle company?

Roth: No, I was heavy weapons. I was a first gunner on a .30 caliber heavy, water-cooled machine gun.

Jim: The old Browning?

Roth: Yeah. We got into Aitape. We set there and they made some, once in a while—I didn't go on them because of being in the Heavy Weapons Company, H Company, 172nd Battalion. We didn't go on patrol. Once in a while we'd take a run up to the beach or something. Man, did we see tiger tracks. So one Sunday when there was nothing to do we got a bunch of guys together, I think there was eight or ten of us, and we went hunting tigers. We saw a lot of fresh tracks on the beach, but we never saw a tiger. But I talked to an Englishman—they had something to do with the island, the English—and I asked him about it. He said, "Oh, yeah, I've seen 'em here." He said, "We have some natives clear up in the Owen Stanley Mountains, way up on top. You go there before you leave here." And I did. We went up there and stayed two nights and never slept a bit either night. They had all these hand grenades set out around camp. There was probably fifty of us. The place is swarmed with wild pigs and they're hitting these wires and the hand grenades are going off and you can't sleep, that's all. [laughs] The first one went off and I was scared to death along with all the rest. So anyway, we stayed there ten days and then we went back down. And the nights got terrible cold and the days were a hundred and twenty degrees down below. We laid around there for awhile until we got ready to go for the invasion of the Philippines at Luzon.

Jim: You were never overrun while you were in the machine gun situation?

Roth: I'm coming to it.

Jim: Oh, not at Munda though?

Roth: No, in the Philippines. That's where I got my Silver Star.

Jim: That's a story I want in detail.

Roth: I'll get it. I hope. We got ready and we waited around a little bit, this and that and everything, and finally the ship come in and it was the USS Walker. We loaded aboard that and we went on up in toward Mindanao and everything in the Philippines. We had been to Fiji before that and other islands on our way from Munda before we went to New Zealand. Some of us got off the boat. I didn't, because of the machine gun, but the rest of 'em, the riflemen. We landed there then in the Lingayen Gulf at 4:00 a.m. on January 9th, 1945.

Jim: January 9th?

- Roth: January 9th, 1945. The Navy and the frogmen had all reconnoitered the area where we were going to get off. When we pulled in we were quite a ways from land and the kamikazes really got after us.
- Jim: The boys on the beach?
- Roth: No, in the ships while we were coming in.
- Jim: Oh, before you got in.
- Roth: The Japanese. There must have been fifty kamikazes. The thing of it was, they weren't a powerful airplane and they weren't fast.
- Jim: They were just Zeros.
- Roth: Yeah. From where they leave, they could never get back. It was a suicide deal; it was for the emperor. If they got killed it was for the emperor. One of 'em went over the front end of our ship. I believe if there were wheels on it I think I could have touched 'em. It hit the front of the ship, the other one, but it didn't hurt much. It hit 'em on an angle and it just kind of blew out. While we were in Nouméa, though, the USS Enterprise, the carrier, was there and there was twelve planes blown off the front of that. We went right, from here to the road, probably seventy-five yards from it; got a good look at it. Then we got off the big ship, went down the rope ladder, tripod and all. If you don't think that's something to do, you hang on with one hand on the tripod and the other hand on the rope—the rope's about that big—and I'll tell you, it's really terrible. A lot of them dropped off and never saw 'em again. Missed the Higgins boat and that was it. When we got in, the Higgins boats went in about seventy-five yards from land and we got out. They said, "OK, it's safe. Go ahead." They dropped the front end, or opened the front end up and out we went. We got about half the seventy-five yards and it was thirty feet deep. They hadn't been there; the frogmen hadn't been there. Of course I was a swimmer; in early years I was in Boy Scouts and I had a Junior Red Cross Lifesaving award and Senior Lifesaving award. So I swam with that tripod; it weighed about seventy-five, eighty pounds.
- Jim: The tripod is for the machine gun?
- Roth: Yeah. My partner had the piece—that's the gun. Because if I'd had the gun it'd been top heavy and that'd have been the end of it. I'd have to let it go.
- Jim: Yeah, you'd have had to let go of that.

- Roth: Either that or drown. I don't know how many men we lost, but we lost a lot of 'em. I talked to a guy that was a pilot on an artillery observer. He said about three days after we went in and the big boats had left, he said that harbor was just surrounded with sharks. They were eatin' them guys up.
- Jim: So you got ashore?
- Roth: Yeah. We landed ashore. We kinda cleaned our pieces up a little bit so they'd fire and we started in. And boy, we run into a lot of Japanese that wasn't supposed to be there.
- Jim: At the shore?
- Roth: At the shore. At a little town—Riban [?]. We finally made it there. Then we headed toward Damortis and we couldn't go any farther. We went through most of our ammunition with the machine guns. We were right on a little mountain and right down below was rice paddies. We had pretty good shootin' there. See 'em get up and run, you know, and we'd let 'em have it. We set there for about two or three days until we got the low-level bombers, the A-20As and the Billy Mitchells to come in. And they bombed them, and they had holes dug all over where they lived. Up in the mountain—probably a mile away, maybe not even a mile away—they had a big hole with a door on it. They'd open that door and run that big gun out and fire it. It'd light the whole sky up. Where we were, we could read a newspaper when it fired. Finally we called in and got what we called grasshoppers—the artillery observers—and he got an eye on one about seven o'clock at night. It was, I think, only one big gun. A lot of smaller ones, like a 37 mm and somethin' like that. But what we had, the big one must have been a World War I gun, probably a 16 incher or a 10 inch or something; a big one. Half the shells they fired didn't go off. One of 'em landed right near our foxhole—Frank Thompson's and I foxhole—not over eight feet away, and you should have heard it. It was like you dropped a big truck in a mud puddle. “Ka-splash.” We got up in the morning and there it was, and the ring was still in it, the ring where you pick it up to load it and unload it.
- Jim: That's why it didn't go off.
- Roth: It didn't have a detonator. But there was quite a few we found later.
- Jim: You wouldn't be telling that story if that detonator had been there; that's a big shell.
- Roth: No. What we did was, we had things pretty well secured then. We got in there and the engineers come in and dug a big hole, had a Cat there. The hole would be at least ten or twelve feet wide and probably fifty feet long.

The guys we lost, we put 'em in mattress covers and laid 'em in there. I wonder if it's still there. Nobody knows where it's at.

Jim: It's overgrown now.

Roth: Well, it was right alongside a road. And it was a cement road that led to Rosario, which was the summer capital for the island of Luzon, where Manila is. Then we moved from there. We got the All Clear—everything north and west and east. Then we started down toward Clark Field and Rosario and Tarlac.

Jim: You're in the 43rd Division now?

Roth: Yes.

Jim: So you switched over then?

Roth: Yeah. When we landed in Munda is when we got from the 25th to the 43rd. I was in the 172nd Battalion, H Company, Heavy Weapons. We started down. Where them Zeros come from we never know and we never did find out. But they come down the valley, and I'll tell you did they spray us.

Jim: In daytime?

Roth: Yeah. Yes. A Zero makes a lot of noise; they got a big, heavy hum to 'em. Because Wash Machine Charlie'd come over at night and throw them grass cutters, we called 'em, right out of the cockpit, it seemed like. You could hear 'em coming, [whirring noise], "Boom" they'd go! We shot one down.

Jim: With what?

Roth: A machine gun. I set it up and Frank put the piece on and we knew there was another one coming, we could hear him, and we got behind in a bunch of brush.

Jim: You could angle it up enough to do that?

Roth: Oh, yeah. Well, he was low. He was like the top of the house. They started on him right there, and as he got down here—of course he was going faster—I led him and led him and led him. It wasn't long and about a mile down the gulch, down he went.

Jim: It was like you were shooting ducks.

- Roth: [laughs] I don't know if I hit him or he run out of gas or what. But anyway, we thought it was quite something.
- Jim: That's quite a feat.
- Roth: Yeah. We kept goin' and we went on down and we got down in by Clark Field and we run into a snag. It was Japanese; they were behind us, in front of us, and on both sides. They had left a gap open and we got in and then they closed it. So we set up and we fired until we didn't have any more shells.
- Jim: How big a group were you then?
- Roth: I was H Company then.
- Jim: Just your company now?
- Roth: Yeah, but just only part of it; we'd lost a lot of guys. Most of 'em drowned on us. We got down in there and we shelled them and they pulled out on us, kinda, or they backed up. So we went to get out of there and back they come again. And my gun is there, our machine gun. I said to Frank, "We're not leaving that there." Even if we just take the plate where the trigger is; you could loosen it and knock it off and it wouldn't fire. So that's what I did. I took the plate with me, the butt plate. We went back. The artillery shelled 'em a little bit, and I don't know where they went or anything, but we went back in and I crawled on my elbows and knees and went back in, got it and drug it out.
- Jim: The rest of the gun?
- Roth: Um-hmm. And that's how I got the Silver Star. Would you give me that cup of water settin' there, please?—**[End of Tape 1, Side A]**—I'm getting' dry. [laughs] But that's how I got the Silver Star. Nobody'd go with me.
- Jim: Were you wounded?
- Roth: No, not there. I have got a lot of shrapnel, lots of it. I can show you.
- Jim: From grenades or artillery?
- Roth: Some artillery, but mostly grenades.
- Jim: You weren't wounded seriously, though?

- Roth: No, never seriously. I probably had fifteen or twenty times I was cut on, to cut the shrapnel out, here and there, this and that.
- Jim: Oh, people took it out?
- Roth: In the hospital. Sometimes in the dispensary, but the hospital. I had malaria a lot.
- Jim: Didn't you take your pills?
- Roth: Yeah, I took the Atabrine; I didn't think that was very good. It didn't even taste good. It was terrible. We went without water for three days. Try it sometime.
- Jim: Were you put in the hospital with your malaria?
- Roth: Yes. I was there twenty different times, sometimes for a day, or maybe two days or three days, until my fever got down.
- Jim: When you were in the Pacific, or was this after you got back home?
- Roth: No, while I was in the South Pacific. We got things calmed down. Then we went over to Cabanatuan and opened up the prison camp and let a lot of prisoners out. I think, I don't remember for sure, but I think General [Jonathan M.] Wainwright was there in that prison camp. I don't know. But anyway, he ended up in the Santo Tomas University and it was 120th General Hospital for the Army, and he was there. And it's unbelievable. He's a tall man and he was skinny, and his skin from his hind end hung clear to his knees. Later on he died, but it was a while afterwards.
- Jim: He was the guy that took it in the shorts for MacArthur. MacArthur let—
- Roth: He done the work and MacArthur got the—
- Jim: Yeah, right.
- Roth: Dugout Doug. Then when we were in the Philippines we had it pretty easy for a while, and then they would take us and put you on some kind of a duty, haulin' food to wherever for the guys. Our squad—no, two squads—got to guard MacArthur's home, which was a big city block with a wrought iron fence around it called Casa Blanca. And there was General MacArthur, his wife Jean, his son Arthur, and General MacArthur's bodyguard Willoughby—I can't think of his first name, big man—General MacArthur's Jeep jockey that'd been with him forty years, and a young West Point graduate, a major, that was Mrs. MacArthur's bodyguard along with little Arthur. He needed five bodyguards, that kid; he'd drive you

nuts. The old man would come home; he never spent over forty-five minutes in his office a day.

Jim: How'd you know that?

Roth: Because I was there. He would leave; the jockey'd take him. Oh, there was days he didn't need—when he went someplace he always took his bodyguard, Colonel Willoughby. Otherwise he didn't. So Willoughby would be there, and the young lad that was Jean MacArthur's bodyguard. They loved to play pinochle, so I had a friend of mine, one of our boys, he knew how to play, and I did. He was from New Jersey—I don't know what town in New Jersey—but he was a Jewish boy and his dad owned Hollander Furs, the world's largest buyer of Alaskan seal. I'll tell you, we really skinned them two in pinochle.

Jim: You played with MacArthur?

Roth: No, no. Manny Hollander was my partner. And there was Colonel Willoughby and Major whatever-his-name-was; they were MacArthur's guard and Mrs. MacArthur's guard.

Jim: So who did you play pinochle with?

Roth: Well, Manny Hollander and I were partners and Colonel Willoughby and Major so-and-so, they were partners. Way in the back of the yard in our tent. When MacArthur was there, then Willoughby had to stay pretty close to the house. When Mrs. MacArthur was there it didn't make too much difference to the major, he was around there.

Jim: Did you have a chance to meet the General?

Roth: Oh, sure.

Jim: You told him you were from Wisconsin, right?

Roth: No, I didn't talk to him at all. He saluted me and I saluted him, and he said, "Good morning, Soldier." He had an American flag on the front porch and he never saluted it when he went in or when he went out of his home.

Jim: He didn't have to. [laughs]

Roth: I thought we all had to. That's the way I was trained.

Jim: He was never felt he was the same as everyone else.

- Roth: No, he was very odd. He smoked a stinkin' pipe and he lived on one end of the house and the house was longer than from here to the other side of the road out here, probably seventy-five yards long or a little more and probably fifty feet or sixty feet wide; big home.
- Jim: They had to have room for the servants' quarters.
- Roth: Yeah, there were servants' quarters, and there was just everything, but that was all that lived there was MacArthur's crew, and then we went in there. We were there for two weeks, and we ate like kings.
- Jim: You didn't have to eat with the regular troops then?
- Roth: No, no, no, no, no, no. We ate by ourselves.
- Jim: How did you get this special duty, Bob?
- Roth: Well, I don't know. I really couldn't tell you. They wanted somebody to go there and guard. They said we'll take turns.
- Jim: You stood guard over that area?
- Roth: We were there, yes, but it was locked up. The fence was always locked.
- Jim: I'm trying to determine what they wanted you to do, Bob.
- Roth: They wanted us to be sure that nobody got in there, crawled over the fence I suppose, but the fence was probably seven feet high with points on top.
- Jim: So you marched around with carbines?
- Roth: Yeah. Well, a .45 I had, because Heavy Weapons had .45s. The riflemen had the regular M1s and the officers had the carbines.
- Jim: What was your rank at that time?
- Roth: About the same as it was when I was there; I could have been a corporal at that time. I made corporal just before we left there. I was nineteen months overseas before I—
- Jim: As a PFC. [laughs]
- Roth: No, it was longer than that. When I got to New Zealand I lost it.
- Jim: Oh-oh.

- Roth: We went to Wellington on the train and I had a six- or seven-day pass. We got down there and the train broke down and we just sat around down there and we were gone more than the seven days and I lost two days AWOL on my discharge.
- Jim: And the stripes?
- Roth: And the stripes. But it wasn't long I got 'em back and then I made corporal and I was satisfied. I didn't want those stripes. When you get stripes then you gotta "Yes, sir", "No, sir".
- Jim: You got a lot of responsibilities.
- Roth: "Will you do this for me?" "Will you run over there for me?" I didn't want that. I got through my two weeks there, then we went back to camp and we stuck around camp there awhile, and one of the guys that was with us—not in our squad but in the squad right next to us—found a little monkey, little rhesus monkey. He was about that high. I don't know where the mother was, but he got him and he brought him down when he was coming down through. He fed him bananas coming down through, and when we got over, we let the prisoners out over at Cabanatuan, and then we went to another place, the tents were set up and that's where we stayed by a little river that was about fifteen feet wide. You could bathe in there and everything, but ohhh, it come right down out of the mountains and it was thirty-two degrees. You didn't stay in there long, you didn't really get a good scrub job, but you got wet. We had that little monkey for awhile, had him in our tent. The guy'd come over and just to be with us, you know. One of our lads, a colonel, a Japanese colonel, got after him with a saber and cut him up bad and they shipped him out. That bed was for him but he wasn't there.
- Jim: What do you mean, a Japanese colonel?
- Roth: At night they had raided us when we were up by Damortis and they had a beautiful saber, oh. I had that saber for quite a while until we got into San Francisco and the guy over the loudspeaker said, "If you've got anything to declare you'd better get it out here and declare it. Don't hide it, or else you'll have to stick around here for awhile." Give you all that baloney. I never seen anybody. I threw it overboard. He threw the monkey over.
- Jim: The monkey went overboard too?
- Roth: Yeah. One of em. The other one, the mother come and got it in our tent, and did she make a noise. Oooh. She knew where that little one was; she could smell him I suppose, and she tore the mosquito bar right off that bunk. She got that little fellow and away she went.

- Jim: Well, good.
- Roth: Never seen no more of him. Then we hung around there awhile until the 14th of August, 1945 and then we moved, I'm trying to think of where it was, and we got ready, we got on a ship.
- Jim: It was time to go home, the war was over.
- Roth: Yeah. We got on the ship and we sailed out into the ocean and then we sat around. And that's terrible, you know, when you're used to running your hind end off and then all of a sudden there's no room to run. Then we went in to Japan and to Tokyo on September 10th. We stayed there until we left on the 30th on the USS General Pope. There was 16,500 of us on that ship. It was a big ship and it was full.
- Jim: I talked to a guy three days ago who was on the ship with you.
- Roth: On the Pope?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Roth: Oh, it was a big one.
- Jim: I know. Those were called AKAs or troop ships. They were all named after generals.
- Roth: I don't know one from another, but I know I slept in the front end. You get up and go through the galley and you eat breakfast, and you end up on the fantail and you stay there all day, and you come back, there are only two meals a day, and then you come back through there and you go to your bunk.
- Jim: Before you get back home and discharged, I want you to describe what the prisoners of war that you released in that prison were like. Tell me how they looked and did you talk to them.
- Roth: I never saw any people who looked more ragged and sick and unhealthy.
- Jim: They could walk but not very well?
- Roth: Not very many. Lots of 'em we carried. Carried out and they put 'em in the meat wagons they called 'em, the ambulances.
- Jim: They must have been just like sticks.

- Roth: Oh yeah, and they had sores.
- Jim: Jungle rot was—
- Roth: Jungle rot, lots of ‘em had jungle rot, and they were the sickest-looking people and they had a terrible smell to ‘em. It would remind you of somebody their hair had never been washed in maybe years. They treated ‘em like dogs. My dad was superintendent of the German prisoners at Camp McCoy in Sparta, Wisconsin.
- Jim: Oh, really?
- Roth: Yes, he was. They were fat and clean and everything. He got that job because he could read, write and speak German and French, ‘cause that’s what I am. He had that job for a couple of years.
- Jim: So did you watch these guys? They couldn’t eat much.
- Roth: Well, they didn’t feed ‘em anything there; they rushed ‘em right off. Most of ‘em went to Santo Tomas University, or the hospital; that’s what I was told.
- Jim: To be checked out?
- Roth: Yeah.
- Jim: How many did you release when you were there? A couple thousand?
- Roth: It’s hard to say. Yes, probably more. I’ll tell you why. They released some where I was and then over here, and over there and over there. It was a big prison camp—I mean big. I looked it over pretty good from what I could see, part of it, and I couldn’t see where they had any storage for food to amount to anything, or refrigeration or anything like that. I’m not saying they didn’t have it, but I didn’t see it.
- Jim: They didn’t.
- Roth: Terrible. Just terrible.
- Jim: But you didn’t have a chance to talk to any of the men?
- Roth: No, we weren’t allowed to. They said, “Don’t say nothing, don’t talk or nothing.” We just said “hello” and “goodbye” and nothing else. They took ‘em away and then they went through, what do they call it? Indoctrine or something before they could pass their medical to go home. They got ‘em

out as quick as they could. Most of 'em were flown home. Those that were in pretty good shape probably went by ship.

Jim: So you got back to the United States on your ship and then what?

Roth: I got off at San Francisco right down at the dock and we were coming down off the ship, and the kid behind me—the USO had a stand there and they had fresh milk, which we hadn't had in a coon's age. We had fresh milk when we were in New Zealand, but that was a long time then. Anyway, we come down there, he was ahead of me and he turned around and he said, "Look, harmonized milk!" [Jim laughs] It said homogenized of course, you know. They gave us a glass of milk and a doughnut, one doughnut. I had room for fifty, probably. We ate pretty good, but it was a long time between meals on the ship. The food was alright, but not like at home.

Jim: Did you have a chance to eat in any of the restaurants in New Zealand?

Roth: Oh yes, I did.

Jim: Tell me about that.

Roth: Oh boy, they had great food. We used to go to the Imperial Café.

Jim: In Auckland?

Roth: Yes, right downtown Auckland. They had everything that you order in a dinner, like a steak or lamb chop, or any kind of meat you want, pork. [brief silence] The menus were about that wide and about that long, and you name it, it's on there. Everything comes with a: steak and eggs, steak and lobster, steak and shrimp, steak and oysters, steak and eggs. Oh, I don't know, but that's the way it is. A good big sirloin steak, that big and that thick, just the way you wanted it done, with whatever you wanted on it, was two and six—forty-one cents. The first day we were there we ate seven times. So help me God, I'm telling you the truth. [laughter] There was a bunch of us. And we'd been together from Day One. We'd lost a lot of friends, but these guys—we had gotten some replacements when we went to New Zealand. But it was a good bunch of boys, a lot of them from Texas and Oklahoma. I went to Troy, Texas, my wife and I, to see my foxhole buddy, and Oklahoma to see a buddy of mine I was with; we got him in New Zealand. And I've been to Oklahoma City to see a guy that we got in New Zealand. We've been here, there and around, you know, look up a few here and there.

Jim: Does your division have reunions?

- Roth: Once in a while, but there never was anything for the 172nd Battalion or H Company or anything like that. I get the VFW magazine.
- Jim: So you just had a handful of friends that you still keep in touch with?
- Roth: Oh, yeah. And then I've been to Jacksonville, Florida, a guy that was with me the whole way that I met on the way to Camp Roberts. And a guy in Montana. Several places that I've seen 'em.
- Jim: Did you ever use your GI Bill?
- Roth: Yes, I did. My father was a contractor in Mauston. He and I bought a cement block machine. We had an old one, and I borrowed money and we bought a new one; it was made in Bessemer, Michigan and made cement blocks up there because they built a lot of houses, a lot of buildings. \$4,000.00 worth.
- Jim: You got a good loan, a five percent loan, right?
- Roth: I don't know if it was that much or not, even.
- Jim: Less than that?
- Roth: I don't know for sure. I was thinking three, but maybe I'm wrong.
- Jim: I'm running out of things to ask you now.
- Woman: I have a question. When you were guarding MacArthur's house, did they feed you from his kitchen?
- Roth: No, they did not. We didn't play for money on pinochle, we played for food. [laughter] But our truck from our company brought our food there, too. We hadn't had good food for a long time, so we didn't have any problems eatin' it up. We did have a refrigerator in the tent.
- Jim: This is right after the war, so they had no trouble getting food.
- Roth: Yeah, it was in the latter part of July and the first part of August, because I got on that ship the 14th of August—or 16th of August—and we kind of rendezvoused until he signed the thing on September 2nd, 1945.
- Jim: Signed the Armistice?
- Roth: Yes.
- Jim: Very good. Thank you. I think I've run out of questions.

Roth: It seems like I forgot something; maybe not, I don't know.

Jim: You've got a great memory, excellent.

Roth: Well, about all I've got. [laughs]

Jim: Oh, don't say that.

Roth: Oh, Matthews from Boscobel, he gave me a ride on a B-24, which is absolutely a no-no.

Jim: When was that?

Roth: When we were on Munda, just before we left to go to New Zealand.

Jim: He took you on a mission or just flying around?

Roth: Mission to Rabaul. You're flying just like this. We had about eight thousand pounds of bombs or something on, I can't remember now, which is nothing in comparison to today. We got up there and we dropped them, and when we dropped them we went [unknown gesture].

Jim: Everybody had that.

Roth: I just about went through the bottom of the plane. [laughs]

Jim: The load is so heavy that the minute they're let go, the plane just—

Roth: Yeah. They dumped them just as quick as they could and turned around and come back.

Jim: I'm sure he's happy they didn't catch you on that plane or it would have been his ass.

Roth: Oh, yes, and mine too. Another thing, when we were on Arundel, we used to swim; we had a swimming place there, it was salt water. And we used to wash up there. You don't use soap in salt water because it gets like honey, you get sticky. Day after day we were waiting to leave there. We had cleared the island off. We were catching lobsters that long. I'm not kiddin' you. I'd never saw one before in my life. We'd take the tail off and throw it away and eat the claws.

Jim: Wait a minute. You've got that turned around.

- Roth: Yeah. There was nobody there; there was thirty of us on an outpost on Arundel.
- Jim: You threw away the best part of the lobster.
- Roth: Absolutely. We threw away the tail and the body and ate the claws. The claws are good too; they were big. And they're the easiest thing in the world to catch if you know what you're doing. We learned how to do it. He don't go forward, he goes backwards with the tail, just like this. So anyway, we had a broom handle and we'd put a jig in it and wired it in there good. Put a little thing on it. The guy walks up to him in front, and he don't pay no attention to behind, he's looking like this, and spear him from behind, 'cause if you get any closer he'll just go backwards and away he goes in a big cloud of mud and you can't see him. We had a gas barrel that was cut in half and we'd fill it full of water and cook 'em in there. Claws only. Every time I think of it, how goofy can you get? [laughter] But I was just a kid. I was the youngest guy in our company. I was eighteen.
- Jim: Now you're seventy-six. Almost.
- Roth: No, no. I'll be seventy-seven on the 15th day of March. I've been married fifty-three years. It'll be fifty-four on the 11th of January.
- Jim: Very good.
- Roth: Yeah. Long time to live with the same woman. But it must be livin' because I'm still here. [laughter]
- Woman: Six beautiful children, I saw the picture; very handsome.
- Roth: Did you look over there? Go over there and you'll see the old fellow on his 50th wedding anniversary.
- Woman: Okay. I was looking at the ones back there.
- Roth: You see how the other half live.
- Woman: These are wonderful.
- Roth: My oldest grandson, right here, got married two years ago.
[Roth & woman talk in background about family]

[End of Interview]