

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT STEWART
Janesville Tank Company, National Guard, World War II
2002

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Stewart, Robert, (). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 75 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 75 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 75 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Robert Stewart, born in South Dakota and raised in North Freedom, Wisconsin, discusses his World War II experiences in the National Guard's Janesville Tank Company and as a prisoner of war in Japan. Stewart describes learning to drive a tank at Fort Knox (Kentucky) as well as the tank armaments, companies, and his shrewd captain. At Camp Polk (Louisiana) he recalls being assigned head of mail during war games, weathering a hurricane, catching a bad case of the jiggers, and he mentions being present during the Secretary of War's visit to Camp Claiborne (Louisiana). He claims the replacement depot in San Francisco made an impression on him and talks about shipping out in 1941 to Hawaii and then Manila aboard the *Hugh L. Scott*. Stewart describes taking cover during a Japanese bombing of Clark Field Air Base (Philippines) and hearing on the radio that the United States was officially at war. His battalion was sent to Lingayen Bay (Philippines), and he remembers being outnumbered, pushed back to Bataan, and the unit's surrender. Stewart discusses lack of food and water during the Bataan Death March and seeing a young lieutenant shot for jumping into a river. He described lack of barracks at swampy Camp O'Donnell and different work details such as grave digging and moving bodies or rebuilding bridges. Moved through Bilibid Prison and Moji (Japan), Stewart speaks of work filling cars with ore in a Honshu (Japan) copper mine. He tells of being taken out to the fields one day to catch grasshoppers that ended up boiled in the prisoners' rice. Stewart talks of developing beriberi and being taken to Shinagawa for treatment by unsupplied American doctor prisoners. He characterizes the elation after the war ended and supplies that were airdropped into camp. He speaks about getting deloused and interviewed, and details how all the ex-prisoners ate an amazing amount at their first meal in Manila. Stewart recalls shipping back to Seattle, a train ride through the mountains, official discharge at Fort Sheridan (Illinois), and looking for jobs after the war.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.

Transcribed by Patrick F. Gould, 2009.

Checked by Channing Welch, 2009.

Corrected by Katy Marty, 2009.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

James: Alright. We're talking to Bob Stewart, and it's the 17th of July, 2002. Where were you born sir?

Bob: Gettysburg, South Dakota.

James: Okay, [Approx. 35 sec. gap in tape] and we have to start over for just a second here. This thing's stopped on me. This is, we're interviewing Robert Stewart the 17th of July of 2002. Who was born in South Dakota, but grew up in North Freedom and went to high school in Baraboo, and then moved to Janesville. We are talking about joining the National Guard with the, the Janesville tank company in 1940, ah, shortly after he got out of high school. Right?

Bob: Right.

James: Okay. Now we're going. So the training that involved you learning how to drive a tank or---

Bob: Oh yes. Yeah, we, we , the first stop was to recognize, and I guess you'd call it etiquette to officers, and any enlisted man that was above your grade, you know. For instance we were supposed to not necessarily an , salute an enlisted man, a grade officer every time we met him because we were in close contact with them and they worked with us everyday. And ah, but the fun part was learning how to drive a tank.

James: Do you recall what kind of tanks those were?

Bob: Ah, they were light tanks.

James: Stuarts?

Bob: Ah --

James: Have a 37 mm gun on it?

Bob: Let's see, well , at first the ones didn't have. They were small tanks. 50 caliber was---

James: That was the biggest weapon you had?

Bob: Yeah, on the very first tanks that we had. Then before we went overseas we got the next sized tank and that had the 37 mm---

James: That's the Stuart.

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

James: The one we have in the museum is one of those.

Bob: Oh, I see. Yeah.

James: That was made in Massey Ferguson in Racine.

Bob: Oh, is that right?

James: Yeah. So, was it easy to drive?

Bob: Ah, yes, after you got, got on to it. You had to be very careful though when you were going down a road or street, or whatnot. If you turned a tank too quickly, the outside track would, ah, let's see---

James: Come off?

Bob: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it would --

James: Oh, really?

Bob: Yeah, so that was ah, that was a "no-no". You had to learn not to come into, a -- well, when you were coming into your turn, then about halfway through it then you gunned it a little bit and that tightened up the treads and they weren't so apt to --

James: Was that a gasoline powered or diesel?

Bob: That, that was gasoline, yeah.

James: Gasoline.

Bob: Yeah.

James: And how many men would be in a tank like that?

Bob: Oh, let's see. Those first tanks I think were only three. The driver, and the assistant and then the commander of the tank. He, actually, he actually drove the tank with his feet. I mean, he was --

James: On the shoulders of the --

Bob: The shoulders of the driver and the assistant.

James: Right.

Bob: If he wanted to go right or left he'd –

James: Kick 'em with –

Bob: Step on whatever shoulder, yeah. Yeah.

James: How fast did those go?

Bob: Oh, boy! That was a surprise to me. That was down in Fort Knox. They said, "Well, today we're gonna take a little jaunt down the road, and we're gonna go to a river. "And there we were gonna wash the tanks. And we got out on this highway, and it was a regular concrete highway, but you couldn't feel a thing. I mean, you know, no bumps or anything. It just glided. Oh, you could go fifty-five, sixty miles an hour.

James: Oh, my!

Bob: If you wanted to, but we got up to about fifty miles an hour on that particular day.

James: You didn't drive the tank into the river or anything or into the lake to clean it?

Bob: Oh, yeah.

James: Oh, yeah?

Bob: Yeah. They had a special place where it was kind of shallow, you know.

James: Not too deep, right.

Bob: Yeah, and we just drove 'em right in and backed 'em out and -- What, I don't know, that was just a part in the training. It wasn't that that would be done in wartime, or anything, not necessarily, you know, but --

James: Right.

Bob: But it did show us, the big deal was, was out of a group of recruits, was to find enough good, real good tank drivers that could handle a tank as well as anybody. And that was kinda their permanent position.

James: Right. How big was your, your company?

Bob: Let's see. Well, if I remember, we had A Company from Janesville, B Company from Maywood, Illinois, C Company from Ohio, and D Company was from Kentucky. But D Company didn't go overseas with us. They went to Alaska.

James: And and, how many tanks in your company?

Bob: Mm, if I remember right, I think about four.

James: Four?

Bob: Yeah.

James: Not many.

Bob: No, no, no.

James: There couldn't have been many men in that company then either.

Bob: Well, no, actually there were more men involved in service work than in the military work, yeah. We, in our company, each company had their own mechanics detailed department, and they were supposed to be able to repair any mechanical trouble that the tank would have.

James: They didn't teach you any of that part?

Bob: No, no, no.

James: You didn't fuss with that. You just drove it and, and shot the guns.

Bob: Yeah, right, yeah, yeah.

James: Was that hard to, to shoot that 37 mm gun?

Bob: I never shot it.

James: Oh, you never shot it.

Bob: No, because as I remember right, the only guy that shot, did most of the shooting for the 37mm, was the guy that was the tank commander.

James: I thought he was busy with his feet on that –

Bob: Well, yeah (laughs) --

Bob: Yeah, well, he also---

James: Yeah, did everything.

Bob: Yeah, because he might not – he might be sitting in a position where he couldn't shoot the gun at the target he wanted so he'd have to tap the shoulder and have 'em –

James: Adjust it.

Bob: Adjust the tank around.

James: He was a noncom sergeant. Was that his rank?

Bob: He was noncom, yeah, yeah.

James: Right.

Bob: Uh huh.

James: Okay, and then the head of your company was a captain?

Bob: Captain, right. Yeah, uh huh.

James: Was he from Janesville, too?

Bob: Oh yes, yeah, yeah.

James: So this is Company A?

Bob: Right.

James: Okay.

Bob: He was a very, he was a very shrewd person. He seemed -- he understood military and he seemed to know what was coming and would give us advance notice to look out for such and such and whatnot, which proved to be---

James: So you know John Sumpter?

Bob: Sumpter?

James: Mm hmm. You don't know him? Did you know him?

Bob: No.

James: Alright. Well, then so, tell me about when you moved out of Kentucky. When did that happen? You went down for the war games in Louisiana.

Bob: Right, yeah, that was---

James: 1941?

Bob: '41, yeah. Let's see, we, we done the, the tanks and the heavy equipment was loaded on a flatbed train --

James: Right.

Bob: And, but we drove the GMC 6x6s we called 'em, trucks, and we went down in Camp Polk.

James: I've been there.

Bob: Have you? Louisiana, yeah.

James: I visited a friend who was down there at the same time with you.

Bob: Oh, is that right? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

James: That was pretty hot stuff down there.

Bob: Yeah.

James: A hot place.

Bob: We got into, we were out on bivouac and we got caught in a, well, later on, years after seeing these hurricanes and whatnot I thought, by gull, we were in one down there, because we got caught in a tremendous downpour. It just flooded the area where we were at, and, like the trucks, the tanks we could, we got out. We didn't have any trouble with them, but the GMC trucks couldn't move, and they had the winches on the front of 'em, and we'd take the end of the cable and take it up to a tree and put it around the tree, and then --

James: Pull yourself out.

Bob: Pull yourself up just gradually from tree to tree until you got to where -- I remember (laughs) the water was so high that it kept rising all the time, and the water was so high that some way or another I scrounged up a couple of card tables. And I put them on stood them up in a platform or the bed of a truck and slept on top of those card tables.

James: Huh.

Bob: (laughs) Yeah.

James: What did you do in Louisiana? Just drive around or did you, did you go with a large groups of tanks in some type of formation or ---

Bob: We were, I don't know how they picked us, but we were put into groups, and I don't know, don't remember just how they called it. You belonged to the "Red Army" or you belonged to the --

James: "Blue Army".

Bob: "Blue Army" or whatever it was and, my job was, I had to be available, I was the

James: Sure.

Bob: Somebody or another. The 1st sergeant picked and the personnel and put 'em in spots of services, and I got put in a – the head of the mail business. I handled the mail and was – the funny part about it is, they, I don't know who, the jeep, or not the jeep, but the command car, you know, was furnished. It came from I don't know from what company, but anyhow, a guy would come every morning and pick me up and take, we would go into Alexandria or wherever and pick up the mail. And I guess my only purpose was to, I was delegated to have the, my signature represented by the Company A tank company.

James: Mm hmm.

Bob: Which was actually a representative of the tank battalion because anything coming through the post office like certified or insured mail, why I had to sign for it. It was my responsibility to get the, whatever the article was that I signed for back to whatever company it was addressed to. And the only trouble of it is, the guy that, the guy that drove this vehicle never knew where we were gonna be. When he picked us, picked me up in the morning. Why, he says, "Well, how do you feel? Are we going to wonder what's going to happen today?" And he didn't know where we were going to be. He -- it was his responsibility to locate the battalion, and the funny part about it was, that not all roads were accessible. You had, if you came to a road, and came to a bridge to go over a stream, why you couldn't go across it. You had to find another route to get across.

James: Didn't have maps of that Louisiana area?

Bob: Oh, I guess they had the maps alright, but it was just the idea that according to the rules of the war games, you couldn't go---

James: Oh I see, certain areas were off bounds?

Bob: They're, -- right, yeah, yeah.

James: I misunderstood that.

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

James: Okay.

Bob: And

James: Then that was not too much fun down there?

Bob: No, it wasn't. And how I contracted---I got a bad case of the jiggers, and all around the tops of my shoes, around my ankles.

James: Drove you nuts.

Bob: Oh, they just drove me nuts, yeah. Matter of fact---

James: So did you get a cigarette and burn them off with a cigarette? (Bob laughs)
That's, you know, you take a cigarette and that's the only way to get rid of them.

Bob: I, ah, at that time I never smoked, and I didn't, I didn't smoke until the shells started coming (laughs) over in front of me. Yeah.

James: So, when you finished the war games there, that was still a little time before you went overseas, or did you go overseas shortly thereafter?

Bob: Well, ah, we, we were, we went into, what the heck place was it? Or was it that the, our camp, the Secretary of War came.

James: Camp Claiborne?

Bob: Yeah, and oh, that was a hot deal. We, the tanks had to escort him from the plane to where the meeting was, and oh, that was hot 'cause we were all dressed in our --

James: Right.

Bob: Uniforms and --

James: Standing at attention.

Bob: Yeah, yeah. Oh lord, that was --

James: That was tough duty.

Bob: Yeah. And ah, then they let anybody that wanted to go home, go home for, a you know, a --

James: A month?

Bob: No, for about a week.

James: A week. Uh huh.

Bob: And, I wasn't married or didn't have any real close ties except my family, so I volunteered to stay and help take care of the paperwork and stuff. And, anyhow, during that time we knew we were going over. We were going to move. We were going to go overseas, but we didn't know where. And, anyhow, everybody came back. There wasn't anybody AWOL or -- we came back to the company, why, I think there was about, couldn't have been a week that we just kind of got settled and ah, got packed, ready to move out. Then when the time came we got on the train and all our equipment and went from there to San Francisco. And I'll never forget that, the, the replacement depot in San Francisco. Oh, they had a humongous big building and space. We ate there and they had great food and a lot of it. And boy, a lot of us hadn't really had a good meal, you know for --

James: Down in Louisiana?

Bob: Yeah, I mean, all the while we were in service. So we tanked up in pretty good shape (laughs), and then we --

James: Put you aboard ship?

Bob: Oh, we, yeah we, we stayed around there for three or four days. Back and forth we'd come down this hill, and anyhow, those, a little service boat that went from Frisco out to this little island where we were at. And coming back on the last trip that we made before getting on the ship to go overseas, we stopped at the, a little, just plain old dock. And there was a guy there with coveralls on and white work gloves, you know and all he did was unhook the cable off of the, off of the hoist or whatever you -- and some of the guys thought, "Well, that poor guy, he's, he's doing time," and somebody said, "How'd you like to trade places?" And he said, "Suckers." "Suckers." (laughs). Always remembered that.

James: I'll bet. I'll bet. So, where did the ship go?

Bob: Well, we got on board ship and took off, and I'll never forget going under the bridge --

James: Golden Gate.

Bob: The Golden Gate Bridge. That's the first place where we got any feeling of the ship. We started to get that little --

Jim: Roll.

Bob: Roll, and ah, actually I wouldn't have known that we were really getting a roll, but it just so happened as we went under the Golden Gate Bridge I happened to look up at the bridge and it was going like "this" and I thought, what the heck is going on here? (laughs) But anyhow, then we went from there to Hawaii. I think that took us about three days. And we went on a, what was later considered a "little old ship," you know, kind of a merchant marine. The Hugh L. Scott was the name of it. But anyhow, we got it. Hawaii, we stopped there for, I don't know, at least two days. And I remembered I couldn't get off the ship the first day because of my swollen ankles and whatnot. So I had to stay aboard ship, and the rest of the guys were having a big time sightseeing the rest of Hawaii.

James: When was this? In 1941, do you recall what month that was?

Bob: Yeah, that, matter of fact, we left San Francisco on the 27th of October.

James: Ten '41. Okay.

Bob: And we got to, and we got to, ah, Manila -- Colonel Garn (??) --

James: That's all right. That date is not important. I've got it right here, Oh, you've got another flip --

Bob: Oh, that's what I made --

James: Oh, good.

Bob: On my own.

James: Oh good. Yeah. Alright.

Bob: The spelling probably isn't --

James: November. November of '41. Alright. Eleven '41. Okay. And they had you, you were staying at Clark Field, initially is that right?

Bob: Yeah, that's where we ended up at, yeah. Mm hmm.

James: Mm hmm.

Bob: Yeah.

James: That's an airbase?

Bob: Right, yeah, yeah. And we couldn't figure that out. I mean the enlisted guys---

James: That's where you found out we were at war.

Bob: Yeah, right, that's --

James: Tell me about that.

Bob: Well, this was on the, -- see, the date was different---

James: Yeah, it's a day later.

Bob: Yeah, right. And it was December 8th I think that we --

James: Did they announce something on the PA system or?

Bob: No, we heard it on the radio. And, ah, unless our captain who I thought was a great statistician and whatnot, he, he must have been notified because the only communication we had was radio. And, we had went to church and came back and he had called us all together and he said, "I don't know if you heard the news or anything," but he says, "We are officially at war." And he says, "We got an awful lot of work to do." So he says, "We're going to have to work in little groups." We had to unpack our guns and stuff. They were all packed in Cosmoline. And we had to try and clean them up.

James: Did the tanks come with you on the ship?

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah. Every -- the whole battalion was on this ship---

James: Okay.

Bob: Which seemed just impossible to me. (James laughs) I never could figure out how -- I always thought anything you put in the water would sink, you know? And I never could figure out how a ship could, hold all that material and still stay above water.

James: So it took you several days to unload that ship and get everything going?

Bob: Oh, yeah.

James: Okay, in the meanwhile, were you attacked?

Bob: Well, ah, yes we were. Clark Field was bombed, and we were just across the street from Clark Field. And from the time that we were notified the captain said

we had a lot of work to do, we were, we were in our designated tents and working on everything that they said had to be done. In the meantime, our planes were practicing take-offs and landings and whatnot, and we thought, oh lord, this is a piece of cake. We're pretty lucky to be here. We could have been over in, over in Europe, you know. And we felt quite secure, actually, and our captain had alerted us that we had a lot of work to do and he wanted everybody to pitch in and do their very best. He said, "We'll eat in shifts." And he said -- we had a, we were pretty well prepared for it because we had a 6x6 truck that was stripped down and made into a portable kitchen.

James: Sure.

Bob: And that, so he said, "We'll eat early [**End of Tape 1, Side A. ca. 30 min.**] and by gull, we did. We just was done eating and nippin' canteens and stuff and---

James: Cleaning 'em up.

Bob: Cleaning 'em up, yeah. And we had two guys, brothers in our outfit that were--- one that had his pilot license and the younger guy was ready to get his pilot license. But anyhow, the older of the brothers had a pair of field glasses. And when we heard this roar, you know, he put his field glasses up and somebody said, "Oh boy, look at them airplanes. We're really in good shape now." And he says, "Good shape, hell," he says, "Those are Japanese."

James: What a shock.

Bob: Yeah, right, and you could hear the damn bombs come down. It seemed like they must have been coming down end over end because they "swoosh, swoosh, swoosh" through the air. Boy, and then big trouble, too. Well, it wasn't. Actually it saved us. All of the fuel for the airplanes was stacked in fifty gallon drums, and, ah, just across the street from the airport. And the Japs hit that, and oh, man! That was a -- really took off.

James: Was a sight to see?

Bob: Yeah. Heavy smoke and it drifted over us and it kinda -- I always thought later on, after a year reviewed the situation. I thought by goll, we were lucky to have that smoke, although at the very time it happened we thought, we cursed the smoke because we thought it wasn't doing us any good and we couldn't see, but they came in with, not the bomber type planes, the Japs didn't. They had smaller planes like probably, that would have compared to our P-40.

James: Zeros.

Bob: Yeah, Zeros, that's right. That's what they called 'em, and, they come in and was---

James: Strafing?

Bob: Cleaning up the mess, you know.

James: They were strafing you? With bullets?

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah. And (laughs) --

James: Did you get out of the way of that?

Bob: I was lucky there too. Across from my area where we were camped was, ah, and I never did find out what it was for, there was a nice recently built wall about as high as this table. Not quite as high as this table. Built right straight down in a straight line. I would, (laughs) I would keep my eye on these Zeros, you know, 'cause they were strafing us. I'd jump from one side of the wall over to the other side, whichever way the plane was coming in at, you know, and didn't get a scratch during the whole --

James: So how long did you stay at Clark Field?

Bob: Well, um, if not too right (??), I don't know if I've got that listed --

James: Yeah, you don't have it listed here, but --

Bob: Well, we --

James: You've got the --

Bob: Fort Stotsenberg was the, -- we, ah very soon

James: You had no contact with the Japanese before your leaders gave you up?

Bob: No.

James: Is that right?

Bob: Yeah. I mean, we were shooting at them and they were shooting back.

James: You did have contact then.

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

James: Where were you doing that? Clark Field?

Bob: No, in Bataan. See, our whole unit, or the whole battalion went up to Lingayen Bay. That's where the Jap---

James: That's where you met them.

Bob: That's where they landed and came ashore.

James: And they drove you back down Bataan?

Bob: Yeah, we, well that was all figured out beforehand. There would be a group of tanks and personnel holding a line, and then the Japs would be coming in and closing in on us and so the whole line would pick up and move back. And, the group that was back of us to begin with was then in the front. Then we'd hop, skip back to ---

James: There was just too many Japanese soldiers?

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

James: Is that the reason you couldn't---

Bob: Oh yeah, we were outnumbered so bad, but that's how we finally got back into Bataan.

James: And then?

Bob: And then we were, there were -- then we got kind of integrated with the rest of the people over there like the Air Force and the Navy. In fact, they didn't -- they, instead of being working individually as the Air Force and the Navy they integrated with the rest of the people over there, the Philippine Army and whatnot, and then they were distributed on Batann in certain areas that --

James: Did they ever move you to Corregidor or not?

Bob: No, I never got to Corregidor. No.

James: So, you got down to Mariseles?

Bob: Mariveles.

James: Mariveles, I mean.

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

James: Is that where they finally captured you? In Mariveles?

Bob: No, no, we, we held out as long as we could with, -- rations were the big deal. I mean there was nothing to eat, and ammunition wasn't very plentiful either. But, ah, oh, let's see. We were surrendered -- we didn't surrender individually. We were surrendered as a---

James: Unit?

Bob: Unit, yeah. Then the Japs, they had their plans, too. They put us in groups of, lined us up a hundred men. Then right next to that line another and they had four abreast and that's how we marched out of Bataan. And --

James: Where were you heading?

Bob: Well they took us to San Fernando which was a fairly good sized little barrie right at the split on the road. There was a road coming this way and road coming this way and they converged into one road when they got across the Pilar-Bagae Road which was the entrance into Bataan. And --

James: So what camp were you heading for?

Bob: Well, the, -- we didn't know where we were going, what the Japs were going to do with us. A lot of rumors, you know, started.

James: Did they feed you?

Bob: (laughs) I am only -- being fed once and that was -- had kind of like a roadside stand like kids would have. They had a big table of rice, and as you went by, if you had the canteen, why they'd scoop, scoop as you went by. You didn't stop to eat it. You --

James: But no water?

Bob: No. Water was a bad deal. Although there was plenty of water. They had flowing wells all the way along that road, but we weren't allowed to get out of line to go get a drink of water or anything. And ---

James: Pretty soon people start collapsing?

Bob: Oh, yes. Yes, and I can remember the same day that I pooped out. That morning there was a nice young lieutenant, American, and I think he should have been in good physical shape, but I think his nerves and whatnot just got the best of him. And we were going across a little you might call it a footbridge, or whatnot. Anyhow, but vehicles went across it. It wasn't that small. He jumped into the, this kind of a right by the bridge was kind of a bigger part of the river, you know.

James: A pool?

Bob: A pool. That's right. See, I can't come up with the right words. And, ah, he was frustrated, of course, and nervous and, he jumped into this pool. And the Japs made no bones about it. They just "pung."

James: Shot him.

Bob: Shot him right there. That's the last we ever knew about him. He was-- actually --

James: How long were you on the road now?

Bob: Oh, goll darn---

James: Roughly.

Bob: Let's see. We surrendered and then on the march, and we got to, got to Camp McDonald.

James: O'Donnell?

Bob: O'Donnell. Right, yeah, O'Donell. Got to camp O'Donnell and oh, that was just a, a horrible mess. They had one spigot. A tube about the size of this, come up out of the ground and the water came out of there. And that stream was just so thin, about as thin as the lead in a lead pencil, you know. And people lined up with their canteens and it took forever to fill a canteen of water. And guys got so that they had, five or six guys get together and they'd take turns standing in line until they got up to the spigot. But there was something odd, or very strange about that Camp O'Donnell. Ah, it was set up evidently as a training base for the Filipino conscripts, and -- the land, it was kinda in a, kind of lower area, kind of almost like a swamp, you know.

James: Like back in Louisiana? (laughs)

Bob: Well, much worse than that, yeah. And it was on worthless land.

James: I see. The soil was sandy?

Bob: Well, it was something peculiar about it. Somebody suggested that that was from volcano ash.

James: Oh, was it dark like that?

Bob: Yeah, and, oh God, we weren't there more than two days or three days when they called for each -- each company had to send into headquarters a certain number of men, and they worked as gravediggers and pallbearers, you might say.

James: Fellow prisoners?

Bob: Yeah, right, yeah.

James: That wasn't a very nice detail.

Bob: Oh, that was a son of a gun. The Filipinos were in with us at that time, and they were dying like flies. The only way they could -- well, the best way to get them to the burial site was lay them on a blanket and then pick the blanket up and tie the two corners together --

James: Uh huh.

Bob: And then put a bamboo pole through it so it make kind of a cradle and then take -- and the odor was just -- you couldn't hardly stand it. You did well if you could -- oh, hold --

James: What kind of barracks did you stay in? Did you sleep in a wooden barracks?

Bob: No, we didn't. We slept right underneath any object that provided shade.

James: Oh, you didn't have any barracks at O'Donnell?

Bob: No, no, not enough to go around.

James: Oh.

Bob: Yeah. No, *that* was the first hellhole. And then, like I say, we were probably there, oh, it's hard to remember just how long we spent at each stop. We were there for awhile. Then they called for volunteers. They wanted a certain number of men. And you either volunteered to go on these escapades or else they took you and --

Unidentified Woman: I just got informed that the secretary (unintelligible) at 2:30.

James: Now I forgot where the hell we were.

Bob: Well, I think we were just leaving---

James: I asked you about the quarters where you slept. You said at O'Donnell, you didn't have a barracks.

Bob: No, no.

James: You slept on the ground, under trees, or whatever.

Bob: Under other buildings --

James: Did you move to Cabanatuan after that?

Bob: Well, no, we went out on work details. And we stayed out. For instance, the group that I happened to go with, we went back to Manila and then we went on work details that lasted, oh, some of some of them lasted a month.

James: To do what?

Bob: Oh, we were rebuilding bridges and whatnot that had been bombed. The Japs evidently wanted to have free access of the whole island so that they could move back and forth freely.

James: Then you moved to Japan?

Bob: Yeah, then there were --

James: When was that? I have it in August 1944.

Bob: '44, yeah.

James: You went back to Manila. You went to Bilibid Prison for a time, and then you moved to Moji Japan in September of '44.

Bob: Right.

James: Then they put you in the mines?

Bob: Then we went north. The very northern part --

James: Honshu.

Bob: Honshu and worked in a copper mine.

James: That's right. In fact I see that. Is this my copy or do you have some copies?

Bob: Well, I would like---the only part that you can have there---

James: I'll just make a copy.

Bob: Yeah --

James: Don't worry about it.

Bob: Yeah, okay.

James: No problem. Okay. Anyway, now tell me about the work in the copper mines.

Bob: Well, that was a --

James: [unintelligible] you move the -- okay.

Bob: Okay. That was a kind of the luck of the draw. I didn't have to, I didn't get called on to work down in the mine, but, I had the job of working up above the mine, filling cable cars that were on cables with the ---

James: Ore.

Bob: Ore, yeah, that had been processed.

James: You had to shovel with that?

Bob: No, it, the stuff came out of a chute, and you worked with a heavy duty hoe, I would call it. 'Cause you had this hoe that scraped this stuff out of the chute if it got clogged and --

James: And you put it in what?

Bob: In these, well, you've seen these manure carriers that farmers have.

James: Was that on track? That moved along?

Bob: That was, no, the only part of track there was when this cable came down on the other side and returned these same buckets. And we had to push those buckets around to the slot where they would line up and the ore would come out of them. And we'd --

James: Was that work heavy work or was it hard or was it pretty easy?

Bob: Well, it was, it got to be -- well, it's so repetitive, it got to be, it wore you down.

James: Did the food get better when you were in Japan?

Bob: No. Well, it, I wouldn't say it got better, but it just seemed to be more of it.

James: Well, that's worth something.

Bob: Yeah, you bet, yeah.

James: How much weight did you lose?

Bob: Well I, let's see. I was down to a hundred and -- about 126 pounds or something like that.

James: How many men from A Company were still with you by that time?

Bob: Oh, very few, because---

James: They split you up?

Bob: We had been split up so many -- some guys went out on details, and some went on a different detail. The only time we saw them was when they came back when the detail was over. You came back to Cabanatuan and was put in the work pool again.

James: I understand.

Bob: Yeah.

James: When did you find out the war was over?

Bob: Ah, that was kind of a funny deal. Not funny, but coincidental. It always seemed to us that -- we couldn't figure out why on August 14th every year while we were prisoners we got the day off. We didn't have to go to work. We didn't have to work. And, the rumor was circulated, and I don't know if it was true or not, but they said the reason that we got the day off was because that was the emperor's birthday. And that was his gracious gift to us that we didn't have to work on his birthday. But I remember this incident happened up in Hanau, Japan. So they gave us, we didn't have to go up to the mine to work, but they gave us regular paper bags and they assigned one bag to two people, in other words, and we went out in a rice field that had been harvested, and they said that they were going to take us fishing. Well, (laughs) what we did, we chased these what we call grasshoppers and put them in these sacks and close the sack, you know, hold it tight so they couldn't get out, and then when it was time to go back to camp, why, we all went back to camp and we went down by the kitchen area and filed past and we opened up those paper sacks and poured all these grasshoppers into a cauldron, we called 'em, of hot, steaming hot water. And that cooked the grasshoppers. And we thought well, that's funny why they'd cook.-- because we figured we were going to take these grasshoppers and go fishing. And, anyhow, the grasshoppers turned up in our rice, were mixed in our rice. So --

James: Did that improve the taste?

Bob: (laughs) It cleared your throat out, I'll tell you that. (both laugh) Anyhow, that's how they got what they used the grasshoppers for.

James: Tell me about finding out the war was over.

Bob: Oh, that came all of the sudden because we were that far up in Japan that we didn't see any planes at all. And, but sometime before that, each day that we went to the mine, walkin' up to the mine or back, why we would hear the Japanese talking about "bee-nee-q." "Bee," I don't know what that stands for, but evidently bomber. "Ni kyu" is twenty-nine in Japanese. "B Ni Kyu" was a dommi, dommi (??) was a bad, bad thing. Come to find out, the "B Ni Kyu" was --

James: The bomber.

Bob: The bomber B29. And, let's see, it was, at that time I was sent to what they called a hospital for what beriberi. I'd swollen up so much, and so the Japanese command that went around and inspected the prison camps and the people in it and how much work they were accomplishing and whatnot. I and another guy was sent by train back to Shinagawa which was a, was a suburb of Tokyo. And there we were supposed to be treated by American doctors. Well, we were treated by American doctors alright, but they didn't have anything to treat us with. No medicine.

James: Who were the American doctors? Were they prisoners?

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, I forget his name now.

James: That's alright.

Bob: It's been so long, but -- it's been so long.

James: Is that when you found out the war was over?

Bob: Ah, well, let's see. No, no, it was at that camp that we found the war was over. In fact, in a copy I gave you there is the exact copy of the commander of the prison camp. And it was an exact copy of ---

James: I want to know what you felt. I don't care about that.

Bob: Oh, well, we just, well you know how kids act when Santy Claus comes. They're happy. They hug each other, and they dance around. Well, that's exactly how we acted. We just, we were elated. We just kinda couldn't control ourselves.

James: So the Americans came to camp and started bringing in some Red Cross supplies and things?

Bob: Oh, the Americans flew over and dropped---

James: They dropped fifty gallon drums --

Bob: Right, yeah.

James: Had food and ---

Bob: Yeah, bulk food and clothing and stuff like that.

James: Did you eat too much and get sick?

Bob: Oh, well, that was the funny part about it. You know, we didn't get sick at all. And such a change in diet. For instance, some guys just craved chocolate and others couldn't care less.

James: So then pretty soon you had to find some Americans and some jeeps coming to get you out of that camp.

Bob: Well, that was already arranged for us. I suppose it was the Americans that arranged the---

James: Sure

Bob: Exit. We, we got up in the middle of the night at Hanawa, and they marched us in a group and marched us downtown in this little village of Hanawa and it had a railroad station, a little narrow --

James: How many of you by this time?

Bob: Oh, goll. I mean, you mean of the company---

James: How many prisoners?

Bob: Prisoners, just plain prisoners, yeah

James: How many?

Bob: Well, I'd say, because we had picked up British prisoners, I'd say around 300. And we were put on this train and we went on down the line, and I was still under treatment if you'd call it that for this wet beriberi. They sent a little Japanese medic along with us to escort us on the train. Every time the train

would stop, why the Japs would, the populace would stop and stare at us, you know, like we were men from Mars or something like that.

James: Probably what you looked like [unintelligible].

Bob: Yeah, yeah, ah (laughs) and let's see --

James: So that train took you where, Bob?

Bob: Oh, yeah, we -- that train took us to where we were officially---

James: You got aboard a ship?

Bob: Yeah.

James: Was that at Yokosuka?

[End of Tape 1, Side B. ca. 30 min.]

James: Outside of Tokyo?

Bob: No, it was Shiagawa I think was the name of the --

James: Okay.

Bob: It was just a, like a fisherman's wharf, you know. It was just a small place where you could get off of a boat and get onto the land. And that's where they put us through the, we went on this ship and the first thing they did was take our clothes off and throw them overboard. Then they run us through a spray to delouse us and whatnot. And then, that took a day or so, and then we got back on the train and went down to Yokohama.

James: Oh, okay.

Bob: And that's where we were officially interviewed by Americans, the liberators, that liberated the---

James: You had a medical checkup?

Bob: No, not so much a medical checkup as -- that evidently was considered a medical checkup when we went through the spray and whatnot. Went down to Yokohama and they, oh, interviewed us and asked us how we were treated and if there was anybody that you thought was overstepping their agreement of the, League of Nations was it?

James: Similar --

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

James: So, then you got a ship and started home?

Bob: Then, yeah, we got on an American ship --

James: Did that take you directly to San Francisco?

Bob: No, that took us to Manila.

James: Oh.

Bob: We went back to Manila, and, boy, this was where it was something else. Back to our replacement center, and this replacement center was evidently set up for people who had built enough points to be discharged.

James: Well, you had all the points you needed.

Bob: Yeah, but they didn't consider that. They considered getting us home I guess, was the big thing.

James: [unintelligible].

Bob: Yeah, and, anyhow, the very next -- well, when we arrived at this replacement center, the first meal that I could remember was going through a line and they gave you a couple of little pancakes and bacon or sausage or whatever. And we'd go through that line and come back and get in line at the tail of the other line and kept that up until, oh, its [unintelligible], and the guys that (laughs), the American guys that were working in this galley, they just couldn't understand. They couldn't believe that we were, could eat that much. Now, on top of that, there was a Red Cross tent, and they served coffee free, and I don't know what else they had. Anyhow, that's where a lot of us got acquainted with each other 'cause as guys came into this replacement center, why, we always looked for somebody we knew or --

James: You find anybody from Company A?

Bob: Oh, yeah, yeah. And that's when we got back together again and talked over old times.

James: And then from Manila you took another ship back to the United States?

Bob: Yeah.

James: Did that go to San Francisco?

Bob: We thought it was going to go, and the ship people thought so, too. And I can remember, I always tried to remember events by certain dates. And I can remember that date was very significant to me because the day I got on that ship that was taking us back home was on my birthday, October 8th. And I thought, boy this is something.

James: Great birthday present.

Bob: Yeah, yeah. And we were supposed to land at San Francisco. In fact, my cousin and her husband had moved from Wisconsin to Seattle for work in the Boeing plant. The Boeing airplane deal. And he was the type of guy that was always up on everything and always wanted to be -- have a personal witness of anything. He found out that -- I don't know how he found out, but he found out that this ship was supposed to land at San Francisco. I can remember the name of the ship. It was a nice big ship. In fact, it was still on its maiden voyage. It was the Clip Fontaine from Holland. Anyhow, we had -- well, it was quite a job to keep from getting seasick and whatnot you know.

James: So, once you got home, then were you discharged rather quickly?

Bob: No, no. We, we got, instead of going to Frisco, we went to Seattle and then went to Fort Lewis. And then from there, I don't know how they picked it, but we had all our possessions that we had in a barracks bag, and they were thrown in a big room and they were just stacks of them. They said, they called off the names of the people that were going to go to the next evacuation. And I, luckily, climbed up on this goll darn pile of barracks bags, and we had our names on the tags and found my, as if I knew it was there all the time, happened to reach down and pick up my own barracks bag, and all we had to do was take it over to the guys and they took care of it.

James: Did that go home with you or did they mail that to you?

Bob: No, that went home by itself. In fact, it was home before I ever got started. We had a free telephone call to home, and it was already home, and my brother had went through it and checked everything out, and he asked me if he could have a cigar. There was (laughs) -- I had about four or five cigars in there. I said, "Yeah, help yourself," -- and he had a big treat on the cigar.

James: And then you got out right after you got home?

Bob: No, we went, that train took us from -- that's a trip I'll never forget. Oh, that was -- actually, it was beautiful going across the Rocky Mountains on the train and the engine would be going around the curve and you'd be back, way back, and he'd already gone around the curve and you lost sight of him, but it was just actually pretty, a pretty view. And that's where, oh, the whole bunch, we stayed pretty much together.

James: When? After you got home?

Bob: No, for on this, when we got to Seattle. Like there were guys from Company B right along with us. We all kinda integrated and---

James: When did you get back to Janesville?

Bob: Oh, I didn't get back to Janesville ---let's see. I landed at Seattle four years to the day that I had left Frisco to go overseas. At -- this train car that I was on had an awful lot of company B guys which we knew quite few of them, but on this free telephone call that all of us had, there was a lot of guys that were married when they went into service, and when they got the free telephone call they found out that their girlfriends had married somebody else and, certain people had passed away and whatnot. It was kinda of a sad---

James: When did you get back to Janesville, Bob?

Bob: Let's see. I've gotta kinda track this down. I got -- well, we, the bunch I was with went to Clinton, Iowa to Fort Schick or, yeah, Camp Schick General Hospital. And I spent, I got sent home, dis - well, not discharged officially yet, to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and there's where I got my official discharge. And that was in April.

James: '46

Bob: '46, yeah.

James: Did you use your GI bill?

Bob: No.

James: What did you do right after you got out of service?

Bob: Well, the heck of it is, I had to start from scratch because I had no seniority in any union or anything so I had to start as a new employee wherever I went. So, I spent a lot of time in the employment office.

James: [unintelligible] club?

Bob: Yeah, right, yeah, yeah. And I ah (laughs), I spent a lot of time at Parker Pen and also at General Motors until I finally, an opening finally came and I got in.

James: An opening where?

Bob: At Parker Pen factory or the General Motors factory in Janesville.

James: Which did you work at?

Bob: Actually, both of them. Yeah, yeah, because when there was a layoff for any reason, always got laid off because I had no seniority.

James: But sooner or later you did.

Bob: Yeah, yeah. And then I, the opening, they had an opening, an exam for civil service exam for a rural mail carrier. And as a kid, I thought a lot about the mailman and by golly, I got chosen to take the job, so that's, I worked---

James: How long did you do that?

Bob: I did that until I retired, and I retired in 1938 [sic] or somethin' ---She says that's the end of it.

Unidentified Woman: No, 1983.

James: Eighty- 1983.

Bob: Oh.

James: Did you join a veteran's organization?

Bob: Ah, no, not officially, No, I---

James: And so you never had a reunion? A reunion of Company A?

Bob: Oh, well, we had, a, we, all, they started ah, well, all through the United States they started an ex-prisoner of war group that included the prisoners from the European theater.

James: Right, I know about that.

Bob: Yeah.

James: I just thought maybe, perhaps your Company A would at least, locals would have another special group that would meet who were prisoners who were prisoners, that's all.

Bob: Oh, well, yeah, actually the only real contact that we had with other groups was through the ladies auxiliary. They --

James: Keep in contact with anybody that was in Company A that lived in Janesville? Was there anybody else there?

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

James: How many?

Bob: Well, not very many. Out of the---I think we came back to the States after it was all over and all accounted for, I think there was about thirty-three guys that came back.

James: Out of?

Bob: Out of the hundred and some that --

James: Hundred and what?

Bob: A hundred and a few odd numbers that had left.

James: Alright. Yeah, the "99 Club." Heard about that?

Bob: No, I don't remember that, no.

James: The survivors?

Bob: Oh, yeah. Well, they had a big reunion actually of Company A. And they dedicated a monument that's still in Janesville.

James: That's what they call the "99".

Unidentified Woman: "99" [unintelligible] Janesville?

James: [unintelligible] There's a "99 Club."

Unidentified Woman: Oh.

James: [unintelligible] just finished [unintelligible] a new book about -- there's a book written about this.

Bob: Oh, yeah? Uh huh.

James: Well, that's Okay, thanks.

Bob: Ah, there's one thing. I don't know if you've read this before or not, but on the last page of this that I had --

James: Well, this is 1920 --

Unidentified Woman: He's gonna make a copy of this, Dad (??).

James: Well, I'm gonna make a copy of all this.

Bob: Yeah.

James: So he can read it at his leisure.

Bob: Yeah.

James: I don't want to read it now.

Bob: There's --

James: I'm not interested in what those people say. All I have ever been interested in is what your feelings are.

Bob: Oh.

James: The other stuff I can read in books.

Bob: Oh (laughs).

James: I've read it a hundred times.

Bob: (laughs) Oh, yeah?

James: I know all about that.

Bob: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, well that's --

James: But your feeling and your experiences, that's all we're looking for here.

Bob: Oh, yeah. Well --

James: The grasshoppers, see, that's the kinda thing I like.

Unidentified Woman: Mm hmm.

Bob: Yeah (laughs).

James: Okay.

[End of Interview]

Total time ca. 75 min.