

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JOSEPH RUSSELL TABER

Ordinance, 312th Bomb Group, Army, World War II

1997

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Joseph Russell Taber (1918-2011). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User: 2 audio cassettes; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master: 1 audio cassette; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Joseph Russell Taber discusses his World War II service as an ordnance sergeant with the 312th Bomb Group in the Pacific. He explains his journey from boot camp to moving munitions in New Guinea, the Philippines, and finally Okinawa. Taber mentions an episode in which he was holding a detonator during an attack. After his discharge in 1945, Taber details the difficulties he faced in civilian life as well as unit reunions and involvement in the VFW and the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch:

Joseph Russell Taber (1918-2011) served with the 312th Bomb Group in the Pacific (New Guinea, the Philippines, Okinawa) before his discharge in 1945.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

Transcribed by Bruce Stone, 2006.

Transcription reviewed by Amanda Axel, 2012.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

- Van Ells: The date is August 27, Wednesday, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veteran's Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Joseph Russell Taber, Jr., originally of New Bedford, Massachusetts, presently of Grant County, Wisconsin and a veteran of World War II. Good morning, sir, and thanks for coming in.
- Taber: Glad to be here.
- Van Ells: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?
- Taber: I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1918. May 26th, to be exact.
- Van Ells: Were you a fisherman by chance?
- Taber: No. And I went to school there, and got out of high school and I went to work for an auto supply company and I went from the delivery boy on up to the [unintelligible].
- Van Ells: Now these were the Depression years. Did you have trouble finding work?
- Taber: No, not particularly.
- Van Ells: Got out of school and found something to do right away?
- Taber: I intended to go to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], is what I intended to do. Papers that I signed for that and tests that I took said I'm not smart enough.
- Van Ells: So the attack on Pearl Harbor came, you were –.
- Taber: As a matter of fact, it was a Sunday and I had a date that day and we were out celebrating my birthday--the shooting out there, heard the news.
- Van Ells: Now at this time you were about what, about twenty-two, twenty-three?
- Taber: I was about twenty-two.
- Van Ells: Little older than a lot of guys who had eventually gone in the service. Well, we'll talk about that. I'm thinking of the draftees necessarily, but you were older, working, sort of established in life a little bit. So when the

attack on Pearl Harbor came and the Americans went to war--what I'm getting at is what prompted you to enlist? Patriotism? Sense of duty? Better pay? I mean you were working--.

Taber: I had taken my draft board exam and I was classified as A-1, and I had friends of mind that had done this and were classified and they left pretty soon afterwards. And so another fellow who was working in the Buick/Cadillac Agency that I had met through my job, got together and we talked, and we said rather than having them draft us, have them put us in the infantry, which we didn't want, we'd go pick out what we wanted when we went down to enlist, and the first one we tried for was the Marine Corps.

Van Ells: Why was that?

Taber: Liked the Marines--didn't like the Corps, but liked the Marines. And I passed the admission test for that and my friend went and took the test and he failed the eye test. So the recruiter said, "We'll take you but not your buddy." And I told them, "If he doesn't go, I don't go." Right there and then we had the discussion and walked out and he was tearing up the papers. Then we went over to the Army and had him go in first this time and we got to the eye test, and they took him back and asked him to read it and he said "No." "You both take two steps forward. Can you read it now?" "Partially." "Take another step forward. Now can you read it?" He says "Yeah." "Okay, read it." So he did and he passed, didn't have any problem after that. And so we both said, "Okay, we'll go," and he says "What branch do you want to go into?" And we talked for a minute, thought about going to the Quartermaster Corps. "Why do you want to go in the Quartermaster Corps?" "That's where the vehicles are and that's what we're familiar with and that's where we would like to be." And he says "No, with the education you fellas have had you shouldn't be in the Quartermaster Corps. Quartermaster Corps is nothing but a bunch of truck drivers." "Well, that's where the vehicles are and they must break down, somebody's going to fix them, somebody's got to get the parts". "No, no, no," he said. "What you want to do is join the Army Air Corps." And we told him "No, no"--didn't care, about it, and he told us all the nice things. You could be navigators. You could be just about anything. We could be mechanics, observers, we could be gunners. No, we still wanted quartermaster. And he said "Well, if that's what you want you should join the ordnance department." We said "That's not what we want, guns and things that go boom" --.

Van Ells: It can be dangerous.

Taber: And he says "Well, that's where the vehicles are," and of course we had complete disbelief in this. And he said "Just a minute," he went, got a

brochure, brought it out, showed us. "Okay, that's where the vehicles are." So we said, "All right". So he says, "Well, where do you want to go?" And he says "Well, we have a battalion that is forming up in Savannah, Georgia and we have one that's in Connecticut." My friend says, "Let's go to Connecticut," and I says, "No. If we get there in there and if I don't like it, I'm going to leave and I am right close to home. So we will go to Savannah, and I would have a second thought because it's so far." And so we decided we'd go to Savannah, Georgia. What we had done, we signed up--we signed up in '41, in November '41, and they gave us an option. We didn't have to go until after the holidays. So we were home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years. Then in January, we went to Camp Douglas –.

Van Ells: Off to Savannah?

Taber: Off to Savannah.

Van Ells: So this is boot camp? Basic training?

Taber: Boot camp.

Van Ells: Would you just describe what your boot camp was like? I was in the service, so initiation into the military--and some of your strongest memories, if you could, elaborate what soldiering you did.

Taber: Well, we took eight weeks of training and everybody in the battalion was acting corporal, acting sergeant, acting whatever, except a lieutenant and a staff sergeant. They were regular Army people. Everyone was acting and still being in civilian life; when they woke us up in the morning you might get an alarm clock thrown at you.

Van Ells: What time did you have to get up?

Taber: 5:30.

Van Ells: Earlier than usual?

Taber: Take us out, exercise us, run us back in, get shaved and cleaned up--
[unintelligible]

Van Ells: A lot of marching around in formation?

Taber: Yes.

Van Ells: Went to classes, that sort of thing?

Taber: Fact of the matter was we had broomsticks for rifles, and when we walked guard duty we had machetes; there weren't any rifles for us to use, so that's what we did. And after we got through with that, after we got through drilling, we drilled in the morning and then we go back and lie down until we had dinner time, and we'd go out after dinner, drill some more and then come back. And this lieutenant and this sergeant, every day, would set up a gambling casino and that's where he told us to spend our time. We couldn't go anyplace else except on the base; we were restricted.

Van Ells: Did you have any troubles adjusting to military life? One of the things I hear frequently is some of the language was shocking for some young men. Some people don't take well to the discipline. In your particular case did you have any sort of difficult adjustments to make or it went pretty smoothly?

Taber: Not with these, these--well, as I told you, they were all acting and they were--we knew them--and no, no it wasn't difficult.

Van Ells: It wasn't too GI --.

Taber: No.

Van Ells: Not yet? That was coming up? So how long were you in Savannah overall?

Taber: Pretty close to a year.

Van Ells: That's quite a bit of training.

Taber: Well, I wasn't there all the time. After we got through with our basic training there was nothing else for us to do. We were mostly useless. And they put up a enormous bulletin board and you can sign up to go overseas, to Europe, or you can sign up to go to a school. And there wasn't anything on there that had to do with what we wanted to do, and so we both signed up to go overseas to Europe and [laughs] to go to cook and bakers school. And so that went on for about a week. We just waited. One day both he and I got called up, and he went first after visiting with me and he came back and he says, "I'm going to Europe." And I said, "When?" And he said, "I don't know, but that's what they told me." So I went into my interview. A corporal that was talking said, "You want to go to cook and bakers school. I'm going to send you to Aberdeen, Maryland." And I said, "What's in Aberdeen, Maryland?" And he said, "You'll be going to small arms school," and I said, "That's far from cook and bakers school." And I didn't want to do that. And he said, "Well, this test shows that you are mechanically inclined. That's where you should be." And I said I wanted to go where there's vehicles. I said that's what I want to do. He said,

"You're going to Aberdeen." So I went up to Aberdeen, spent about eight weeks there.

Van Ells: Now small arms is rifles or machine guns, shotguns?

Taber: Finished the school and they called me in the office, wanted to know if I wanted to stay there as cadre and teach. I didn't want to.

Van Ells: How come?

Taber: I had a war to fight; that was the way. I didn't want to be stuck; I didn't want to stay stateside all the time. So they says, "Okay, then we are going to send you to Elmira, New York and you're going to mechanics school." And I went there and I was there for two weeks; worked in the Bendix plant that period of time, still no problem with the language and so forth. There were fellows, fairly well-schooled. I came back to Savannah. My battalion had gone down to Tallahassee, Florida. They were building [unintelligible] and so they sent me to base ordinance. So I went down there, there were three other men, staff sergeant, buck sergeant and a corporal. Now in this part, I've got to tell you something first. When I got back, I hadn't been paid and I went to the paymaster one payday and he gave me seventy-eight dollars. I walked out and I counted the money again, and it was still seventy-eight dollars, hadn't changed any, and I went back in and I told him, "You've given me too much money." He says, "How much money have you got?" and I told him and he said, "That's right." I said, "I get twenty-eight dollars," and he says, "Well, you're a sergeant/technician." Nobody had told me this. That's just what he said. I said "Okay." So then I went down to base ordinance talked to them down there, and the sergeant, called me, talked to me. He says, "Can you repair, strip, and repair these .45s?" I said yes. "Rifles?" "Yup." "How about shotguns?" "Yup." "Come with me," and we walked out to a shop where he had a little stack of shotguns stacked up, they couldn't fix them. So they gave me this corporal to work with and he didn't like that, and I don't know how many years he had in, but he figured he would be telling me what to do and he went and told the sergeant that, "Well, when he tells you to do something, you do it, when he's in here, he's in charge, he's the sergeant, same as this other fellow. He's outside of here, that's different, but while you're in here he tells you to do something, you do it." Well, this originally didn't work out too well, although I got along well with the sergeant in charge, and I told him, I says, "I don't want to stay here," [unintelligible] wanted to be transferred. They sent me over to an Air Corps outfit, put me in there and I could see there wasn't going to be any chance for me to make that up. So I told him again I wanted to go to school and they called me in and they says, "Okay, we're going to send you up to Illinois, ammunition/demolition," and I said, "Fine". Started getting [unintelligible]. "Do you want to stay in the cadre?" And I didn't

want to teach, I wanted to get into combat. So I came back again after finishing school and I went down to headquarters and talked to them down there and they says, "Boy, you've been transferred."

Van Ells: Roaring Twenties – Where?

Taber: Savannah, Georgia. When I said 312th Bomb Group. "Okay, that's got something to do with ordnance." They taught me all about bombs and so forth, ammunition. All right, I walked over there, then they found out I was Army Air Corps; oh, my.

Van Ells: Now you imagined yourself having to get into an airplane or something?

Taber: I hadn't flown and I just didn't feel too secure. So I went over there and I walked in and told them who I was. Guy said to me, "You're not supposed to be back here for two days," and I said, "Give me back those papers." He says, "Nope". Then he told me where I was to go and that I had sixty men over there. Said, "Where are they now?" He said, "Well, we have got most of them on the garbage detail." "Oh, that's nice." So the next morning I called them all out. Now I still hadn't gotten my stripes on my shirt yet so they didn't know who I was. I called them out, they were telling me [unintelligible], said, "We can't sleep here," but this other fellow [unintelligible]. Well, then after they found out who I was supposed to be, got them outside and we walked up to the line, went to our shop, and I started teaching class. These fellows, none of them had been to an ordnance school. They were just raw, same as I had been when I came in, and we had no officer. So I was teaching them, going along real well, and one day this little blond-headed fellow come walking up to me, and he's a second lieutenant, and he wondered who was in charge and I told him I was, and he says to me, "Sergeant Taber, I'm Lieutenant Bass, Fred P. Bass, Jr." I says, "Well, glad to meet you. Glad you got here. Do you want to take this class over?" And he says, "No, you continue and I'll sit in the back here and listen." So we went on from there. He taught and to this day Fred Bass and I are good friends. As a matter of fact, I see him at our group meetings every year. We call each other two or three times during the year. We stayed close. I think I told you this before, that these fellows were, age difference went anywhere from nineteen on up. We had several of them that were machinists that belonged to an ordnance depot, not a combat unit, and they ran from twenty-seven on up to thirty-five, thirty-six years old on. When I talked to Lieutenant Bass about this, and I said they shouldn't be here.

Van Ells: You mean the older guys? Why not?

Taber: They had families; they had wives, kids.

Van Ells: There was a maximum age of thirty-eight or something, wasn't there? Some of these guys were pushing that.

Taber: Thirty-six. And I said if there's any chance, if we have to go overseas, let's get rid of them. The rest of us still in our twenties, some hadn't reached it yet. We weren't going to die. These fellows were old men. So that's the way that went, we finally got rid of them. We worked it down to I think there were thirty-two, thirty-three of us left in that section of the ordnance. And we were quite adept at what we did. I was proud of it. We had five bomb trucks, ten trailers, weapons carrier, and we had two vans, one was a shop van, one was a box van. We were lucky to get all these new vehicles. So we went along quite well. So well, in fact, that the lieutenant got called over to headquarters and they made him acting headquarters ordnance officer, and this was a good thing for us because he would tell us when we went ahead for a practice mission we would send our people out to the ordnance depot to load up the bombs that we were using. And they would sit out there and then when the phone call came to get ready, our clerk would step outside with a flare pistol, fire in the air, and a truck would come in. I was practically on the base before the other trucks had left the base and our ships were up and loaded way ahead of time. The colonel who was in charge of the group thought that this was terrific, doing what we did, that's what we did. And so from there we went on and we went out across the country.

Van Ells: Yeah, I noticed this list you have filled out--Louisiana, Catstown, California--you traveled quite a bit around the country. When did you finally get overseas? Had to be sometime in the middle of 1944, earlier than that?

Taber: Yeah, it was earlier than that. When the group was originated in '42, in January of '42, and--they were just on paper actually--they were activated and they were sent to Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia. February of '43 we were done and after which had been to Rice, Salinas and Stoneman. We left there in August of '43.

Van Ells: For the Pacific?

Taber: We didn't know where we were going. We were going out in the Pacific.

Van Ells: I want to cover that, but I want to go back a little bit, and I want to get some of your recollections of how the military changed as the buildup occurred, how the country changed. First of all, you described having to train with broomsticks for rifles. The country obviously wasn't prepared for war yet. In this year and a half that you were training stateside, could you tell the equipment was getting better, that the country was getting better prepared? What is sort of the GI's perspective on the military?

Taber: From what we had presently, we thought it was terrific. By the time that we had our whole unit going we were getting just about everything we wanted. See, we had all new vehicles and everything at that particular time.

Van Ells: How long did that take? If in January of '42 you were training with rifles, how long was it until you had good weapons, good new trucks?

Taber: By June, we had started to get all that stuff in. As a matter of fact, they had already changed our planes from one type to another. We were still in the attack vehicle at that particular time. As a matter of fact, we changed about five times, different types of planes.

Van Ells: So you got some pretty good equipment fairly quickly, didn't take too long. How did the country change? You know, rationing had set in, for example, get the economy on a wartime footing. Again, as a twenty-two year old man, did you notice much of this or didn't it affect you too much?

Taber: The only thing it affected was our mobility to get around. We were allowed to go off the base. We had this transportation, there were some people on the base had vehicles and we used a great deal of our regiment car for X-number of dollars; they'll give you a stamp to buy gas, and those fellows made some decent money by doing that. But other than that we had no problem. If we were invited to homes--as a matter of fact that's where I met my wife, was down in Savannah, Georgia—she had come from Illinois. Her dad was a supervisor down there. No, we didn't have any trouble.

Van Ells: Well, that sort of brings me to the next theme I was going to talk about, is sort of the GI's relationship with the civilian population before the war. Signs out in parks saying "No dogs or GI's allowed," or "No dogs or soldiers allowed." Civilian population didn't get along with the military population, basically. What was your experience? You didn't feel any prejudice? You didn't find anyone –.

Taber: Yes, I did find prejudice. When we came down from Devons to Savannah, Georgia, we were in the Union Depot, the train depot at that time, and we were at the lunch counter and there were a bunch of us. These little black boys, they came in and they had shoe shine kits, and they were wanting to polish our shoes, and we had no need to get our shoes polished; everything we had was still brand new. We just told them no. The MP's [Military Police] came in and chased them out, told them to get out, called them niggers. That was something **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** that we weren't used to. That was different.

Van Ells: There's an African American population in Massachusetts, but this is something completely outside your experience?

Taber: Yeah. Well, I had good friends of mine that were Negroes back then. When I went to school it was that way. There wasn't that feeling with me; the color of their skin didn't make any difference.

Van Ells: So, sort of a culture shock?

Taber: Well, it was a big one.

Van Ells: Now you were a Yankee too, actually from New England. Did you have much contact with southerners in general, any sort of rehashing of the Civil War?

Taber: I've been holding this, you've been asking these questions. This Lieutenant Bass, when I said he made it quite emphatic that his name was Fred *Lee* Bass. He came from Birmingham, Alabama. I mean he was friendly, wasn't something that [unintelligible] he would still keep Confederate money, "What are you going to do with these Yankee dollars?" That wasn't something that we faced a lot of.

Van Ells: I guess we are ready to go overseas then. You sort of suggested that it was sort of a long, convoluted process. Why don't you walk me through how you got overseas? Must have left from California, but –.

Taber: We were at Salinas –.

Van Ells: You didn't know where you were going to be sent?

Taber: No. We had changed planes in Rice out in the desert, taking desert training. Made changes from our V-72s to P-40s and we thought we were real cracker jacks when we got those because this is a real fast little ship. We sort of kept two, I think, of the old planes and we were using those for targets, as target ships. I used to fly in those quite often. And the thing was I was in the back, and I had to make sure the target got out there. And some of our friendly pilots would see how close they could come. Anyway, invariably they shoot the rope and the target would fall, and so the pilot and I were going to practice and diving down, you know, down below [unintelligible]. Okay, well, then we went to Camp Stoneman, that was our jumping-off point, and they put us on the New Amsterdam. It was a Dutch ship, a big luxury liner, and they had told us after we were on there they had two swimming pools on it and great big salons; everything was going to be really quite perfect. Well, we wound up four decks down in the hold and we had a bunch of swinging hammocks, which was a novel experience for me too, and come to find out one of the swimming pools

had been changed into showers, salt water showers, and the other one was for luggage. There was no playing around in these pools. One nice thing about it was we had two tea calls, one about 10:00 o'clock in the morning and we had another one about 2:00, 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon and a cup of coffee, cup of tea. The other thing that I didn't care for at all were these abandon ship drills, always we had to be in your compartment and when we closed the watertight doors, you were in. That wasn't the nicest feeling in the world. We soon got over that and we would pay more attention to our lifeboat drills. We slept on deck quite often, nice. One experience we had that was strange was that, we were traveling alone, of course, our vessel was too fast, and one day out there in the midst of nowhere, we could feel the ship just slow down just like that, and two big sweeps they had on the bow of the ship went out and they were mine sweeps, and that was a little novel. We saw our first whales out there at that time, saw dolphins out there. One day they called us out for lifeboat drill again and it was raining. It was raining like crazy, and the captain of the ship had said that he was dissatisfied because the way the fellows were falling out and he kept [unintelligible]. And it was at that time that he told us, that he spelled it out, that we were going to Sydney.

Van Ells: So that was the first inkling you had? I mean, you knew you were going to the Pacific, obviously, but you didn't know where exactly. It could have been New Guinea or New Zealand –.

Taber: We were going to New Zealand. They let us off the ship and we took a walk around the streets and marched back to the ship again. We loaded up some supplies and next day we were starting off for Sydney, Australia, and then in Australia we went to Sydney, went to Brisbane, went to Thomasville, from Thomasville went to the jumping-off spot, Port Moresby.

Van Ells: So it was in New Guinea then that you first started in combat operations?

Taber: Yeah, they put us up in Gusap Valley, and that was out in the middle of nowhere, you couldn't get in or out except by plane, and the second night we were there we had a air attack, and this other fellow and I were sitting watching the ack-ack [antiaircraft] fire their guns. We could hear the plane and they dropped a bomb and blew us both into [unintelligible]. And the next morning when we went back down to the office, I met this fellow had a white streak right through his hair. His hair was just turned white. And that was our initial contact.

Van Ells: Now you mentioned before you were stateside, but that you wanted to get into the action, so to speak. I don't know if you used that exact quote, but that was the inference. Now you had it; what did you think?

Taber: I felt that we were alone, where they had put us we were alone. I knew that there was still fighting over in Europe and they had sent everything they could over there and we were getting the bare minimum. That was the bad part. The biggest thing that stuck with me--and this was with me all the way through--was the ingenuity of the American GI.

Van Ells: In what sense?

Taber: They could do anything. They could do anything. You wanted a laundry, they could build it out of nothing. If you wanted a still, they could do that. No matter what you asked them for they could do it.

Van Ells: So you ended up at Port Moresby and then as the war progressed I imagine you went out through other parts of New Guinea, for example. As the war progressed [unintelligible]. As the war we want on you must have wanted to pull up stakes and move on, sort of hip-hop up the coast then?

Taber: Yup.

Van Ells: How often did you have to move?

Taber: Sometimes every three months, sometimes every four months, two or three months.

Van Ells: Now you mentioned there wasn't much to do out there. Why don't you just describe sort of the activities that you did to keep yourselves occupied? How much contact did you have with the folks back home?

Taber: The folks back home?

Van Ells: Did you write letters and --.

Taber: Oh, yeah, wrote letters all the time.

Van Ells: I'm sort of interested in the social life at the camp.

Taber: Well, I could tell you what happened to me; we were up to Gusap, we had transition again. We went from our P-40s to A-20s, and the A-20 was a light-attack bomber ship, tree-top level, and I had to go back down to Moresby to take transition, find out what bombs went in there and how things there worked. So I was down there. While I was there I contracted dengue fever and they stuck me in the hospital. While I was in the hospital, I got a wire from my officer saying I was going to be transferred to headquarters. I don't know what section you were in, but nobody wanted to go to headquarters.

Van Ells: For what reason?

Taber: Well, for one thing, you kind of sat right there looking dumb all the time. And second reason was there really wasn't anything for you to do.

Van Ells: A little too much chicken, was the term.

Taber: Well, our colonel, he was a good man, I don't doubt that, he was a real good officer. Well, anyway, I wired back to there, said, "I don't want to go," and he says, "Well, I'm gonna go." Aha, now we're getting a little bit clearer. And he says, "I'm going to go," and I says, "Well, you go first." "No, you're going to go first." Well, I told him I didn't want to go. Back in the States along one time I had said to him after we had gone together for a while that I would like to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School] and he said, "What for?" And I said, "I think I would like that." "Well, if you do that, Sergeant. If you apply to OCS I will tell the colonel. You're in the service, you stay here." "Thank you." Well, what happened was he had said to me, "You're a staff sergeant now." I said, "Yeah." "How much you get?" "\$128 a month". And he says, "I get \$128." Well, he says, "You buy your clothes?" "Nope." He said, "I buy mine." He says, "You get fed?" "Yup." He said, "I have to buy my food." He said, "You pay rent?" "Nope." "I have to pay for mine." He lived off the base, he had just gotten married. He said, "Actually you're better off than I am," and I says "Well, I'll buy that for now." Well, anyway, I had gotten transferred to headquarters and I got back up to Gusap again, he said to me, "You can pick one man to come with you up here. Have to have an ordnance man where you would be one and one that would be in charge of vehicles." So I said "All right, I'll take," and he says, "You can't have him." He was one of the assistants I had while I was in the squad room. He says, "You can't have him because there's two of us gone out of there now". He says, "You go out to the squad room, pick out one that you like." So I went out and I found a fellow and told him. I said, "This is who I want." He said, "Okay." I got him. So there's Fred and there was another sergeant and myself, that was the section up there in headquarters. Right next to us was the Alamo section and they had an officer, master sergeant and a corporal. That was the thing that griped me is that I couldn't make master because the tech was as high as you could go, that was the tech we had for ordnance. I was still assigned to the Air Corps. I was assigned to it. These fellows, all these fellows in the section were all master sergeants and that didn't work, but then I had to do most of my work was wait time, have to wait until you got through with the briefings, what the next day's mission was going to be, and then we had to call, make sure we had enough ammunition, bombs, whatever we needed for the next day, make sure they were there so they could get them, and tell the squadron section leaders where to go get them. That was the biggest thing. We had to make sure the vehicles were always running, and I would make inspections all

the time, make sure [unintelligible]. Motor pool sergeants would call you sometimes tell you, "I can't get," whatever, and you'd go down and get that list and you would go down to the supply depot and tell them what you wanted and they would say, "Well, we don't have that, but what do you want?" Most of these fellas wanted combat parachutes they said. So that's the way we dealt, a barter system.

Van Ells: Kind of like Radar O'Reilly on M.A.S.H.?

Taber: Just about like that. That's just the way it worked. And you could get just about anything you wanted. We had an ice cream maker machine. We had a pop dispenser. That's why I say that with these things that you would get these supplies in there to them and they would make it. Bomb trucks, used to have all of their hoisting devices, lifting the bombs up, they were all hand-operated, you cranked them and one of the sergeants in his work with the motor [unintelligible] drive shaft and he would work it, it was good. Again when we were up in Gusap, I walked in the office one day and there was an application for OCS. I had one, and a fellow with me had one. He filled his out and I didn't and I had the feeling then that the war was going to be coming to an end in not too long and I figured that if I was going to become an officer that I would have to stay, somewhere. I was going to have to stay, plus the fact I would be away from the unit that I was in. And so, when Fred came in that day, he said to me, "Who put this on my desk?" And I said I did. He said, "You wanted to go to OCS?" And I said, "Yeah, back in Savannah a couple years ago." "Don't you still want to go?" I said, "No." He said, "Don't tell me," he was the adjutant; he said, "I'll take the application back to him." He said to me, "Well, why don't you want to go?" And I told him. He said, "Don't you want to be an officer and a gentleman?" And I said, "I am, I may be noncommissioned, but I've always been a gentleman." Well, he took the application back, but he wasn't too happy. So from there on out just [unintelligible] did go set up camp. I think that after we left for the Philippines [there were] two things that I didn't appreciate which came as a shock to me. We were passing by the Mariana Islands and, of course, some bright guy on the ship decided to tell us that we are now passing over the deepest part of the ocean, seven miles straight down. That wasn't too good.

Van Ells: Not too comforting for you?

Taber: No. Especially after I had been down in the hold and looked and there's water coming in, right after they had pulled up in front, you know, the water would come in. And I went and told them. "Chief," I said, "you got a leak in your boat." And he says, "Don't worry about it. That happens all the time." It was just a little bit. In the Philippines it was fine; we got along fine with the people.

Van Ells: What else? I was going to ask the question actually what the native peoples of the Pacific that you came in contact with; the Filipinos are Westernized, Roman Catholic. New Guinea's pretty much different, I don't know if you had much contact with the natives.

Taber: The thing you've got to understand is we were never more than six, eight miles from the front lines, okay? In Gusap, we were about a mile. We were up there with the infantry. Did that once, and they told us no more of that stuff, too dangerous. Stop where you're supposed to be. Otherwise we would drive, we had to drive about ten miles through the grass, so high you couldn't see, you had to stand out in front of the Jeep so you could see. And we drove down to a native village that was down there and the thing that was really surprising was some of them spoke English, not American, English. We were there one time and another fellow, he was crippled, he couldn't walk, get along with his hands, and he was singing-- what was the-- "I'm an Old Cowhand (From the Rio Grande)." We turned around and seen where this was coming from, here's this kid coming, and we got to talk with him, and they had sent him down to a mission school and he spoke English pretty well; we could understand him. We traded them for bananas and papayas.

Van Ells: What did you give them? What did they want?

Taber: Cigarettes, candy. They didn't say what they wanted, we just gave it to them. All of them had red teeth, they were chewing betel nuts. Never tried that. Coconuts would be good. One time we sat with nothing to do in the afternoon. We decided we were going to go up on the other side of the river, up through the mountains, because they checked on the Japanese in the caves. I don't know, curiosity. There were four of us that decided we'd go up there, and so we had rope and we had backpacks with stuff in it, and got guns and ammunition and we started off. And, of course, this river, now originally we were going to it every day taking baths and whatever and there's no problem. But to cross it, we never tried that before, and the current on that thing was something you wouldn't believe. One fellow finally got across and I was coming behind him and I could just feel the water pulling at me, pulling me down the river, and I hollered, "Throw me the rope!" And he did. He threw the rope to me and I got it and I was pulling him right into the water. He kept telling me, "I'm going to let go." "Don't you dare!" And I get up on the other side and there's one other fellow that was swept down. I don't know where he went. He came back, and the other fellows in the company turned around, went back. So there's two of us on the other side and we didn't know how we were going to get back unless we jumped in there and it took us down the river. Well, there was a native boy that came by and some fellows on the other side said to him, "Can you get this rope over to them?" And he said

"Yeah." So he went up away from us, jumped in the water and he could come across. He can come across like that and we can't--there's something wrong here. So we got the rope, and he took the other end of it back to the other side to where our camp was and we tied the rope on to the bumper of a Jeep and just--we just jumped in the water then and let it swing us to the shore. That's how we got out. And so the three of us got together afterwards and I says, "How did he get across that river and we couldn't?" "I know. Stripped out of our coveralls, kicked our shoes off and walked across." Lost my pistol, my belt, wrist watch, class ring, my billfold--water just took it right out of our pockets. My belt was in there and then-- Oh, we were attacked on the strip. I had been called down the line. They had a live bomb, made them come back. The [unintelligible] man didn't want to touch it so they called ordnance. We went down and defused it and I had a detonator in my pocket, and I turned around to find it there, called the [unintelligible] man to bring me something. He was gone. He wasn't about to stay there. And so I put safety wire, whatever else was left, and I took off in my Jeep to come back and the planes are coming back from a mission and I was driving, watching, and I was thinking how nice it looked to see them coming back. Went straight across the field. There must have been twenty of them. Well at the tail end, there was one that didn't look like right. Although it looked like one of our planes it just didn't look right, and I was watching the road ahead of me and I could see pockmarks coming up the road, and I said, "What the devil's wrong with that clown?" Looked up, saw a great big red disk on there. That Jeep and I parted company real quick and I jumped into a foxhole for the anti-aircraft gun. You never saw a guy bury a detonator so fast, you betcha I dug a hole that [indicates] deep, covered it up. Matter of fact, two of our ships turned around and chased those Japs. There were four of them coming in and they shot down one of them, chased the others away. They were moving out there afterwards to see what it was like and we shot some of the guns and brought back **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** some stuff [unintelligible]. That was quick. I did have, of course, an anti-personnel bomb they found on the airstrip. I took that back up to headquarters with me and Fred was sitting at his desk. Tossed it on his desk [laughs] should have seen him disappear. It wouldn't go off. He didn't know that. Came back in, "Where did you get that?" I told him. "What are you going to do with it?" "It's for you. It's a present; keep it." It was one of those that just wasn't going to work. And as I went through the Philippines, made one trip to Mindanao. I was just over there because we went over the planes on our strip. It was raining like mad [unintelligible]. Then from there we took them off, which was close to [unintelligible]. And I expected we were going to Japan.

Van Ells: Now as the war progressed--I mean you were in New Guinea, you were subject to attack by Japanese planes. As you went through the Philippines and then to Okinawa, did you find Japanese resistance slacking off by that

time? Could you tell that they were losing the war? Were there fewer air attacks or were you always subjected to –.

Taber: No, we were attacked in the Philippines, too, first time I was there. They were armed, you know –.

Van Ells: So from your perspective you couldn't tell that the Japanese were [unintelligible].

Taber: Only way to do that was the fact that we were going up, moving, so there must have been something. But you've got to realize that we didn't clean all them out [pause in tape]. It was supposed to be secured over there. We would go over there, we would get shot at. They weren't friendly. There were some of them left; we didn't do the clean up [unintelligible].

Van Ells: So when the war ended you were in Okinawa. Do you recall V-E Day [Victory in Europe Day] at all?

Taber: All we knew was that, yeah, they had surrendered over there.

Van Ells: As a GI in the Pacific, do you recall your thoughts about the end of the war?

Taber: Only thing we hoped for was they would send some stuff over to us. We been here long enough by ourselves and that was the way we thought. And then when we saw some of them coming over it made us feel lot more secure knowing they were there.

Van Ells: Now as I think you mentioned, your next move is going to be Japan. Were you making preparations for any particular operations? You know, what sort of preparations were you making for the invasion?

Taber: Well, Osaka is where we were gonna go.

Van Ells: And you knew that before V-J Day [Victory in Japan Day]?

Taber: Not that, well, I shouldn't say they weren't fighting, but we knew that was going to be the--because we could see in Okinawa just how embedded they were there, and I think it was Okinawa was the most [unintelligible]. They would see a Jeep coming down the road, they would jump on, push it to the side of the road in the bushes--didn't have anything to do [unintelligible]. They would have people working for them, have to be gone from there, you know? And as far as preparation is concerned, we had to change planes again. They were now with the P-32s which was the biggest ones they had. As a matter of fact, when they came in, first saw when it flew in, we always took them to the rebutments terminal. This one

flew up past the rebutment, hollering at it to stop. He stopped, reversed his props and backed in, which was something we hadn't seen. Now we went from two-man ship, going to carry anywhere eight to sixteen men, bomb loads and [unintelligible].

Van Ells: But the Japanese did eventually surrender.

Taber: Oh, yeah.

Van Ells: Well, first of all, I suppose the first event would be dropping the atomic bombs. I was interested in your recollections of these particular events, the dropping of the bombs. Do you recall your reaction, and the reaction of those around you?

Taber: We were glad when they did it; they [Japan] didn't want to stop. They had offered them the opportunity to stop. They didn't want to do it. It's your health, not mine. They did it. It wasn't a case of "I'm sorry we did this."

Van Ells: And then V-J Day came which was probably, I assume, I suspect, was greeted with a little more celebration than V-E Day was?

Taber: The antiaircraft guns went up all over the place. The sky was full of it; pretty, really something to see. Then after that they would deactivate the group and sent us back home again.

Van Ells: Yeah, by this time they had a point system. You must have had quite a few points.

Taber: I had quite a few points.

Van Ells: Even though you weren't married by this time I don't think.

Taber: No, I got married after I got back. Yeah, I had enough points. Funny part of it was Fred Bass, who by this time was a captain, was going to go home at the same time. And he left two days before I did, and I was back in Luzon at that time in the waiting area, replacement depot. And he comes walking into my tent, he and another guy I was working with and he says, "How are you going home?" "A boat, I guess." He said, "I'm going to fly." Well, anyway, that was the last time that I saw him, wished him well. Told him I hoped I would see him again sometime. We came back by boat, and I don't really recall those things. Liberty ship, that's what we came back in. And then about one of the first things I had was KP duty [Kitchen Patrol] and that was fine duty. Automatic potato peelers, we were in charge of bringing up all the ice cream and fresh fruit, stuff like that. They always told us, "Take what you want." We had a good time coming back and got back, back to Stoneman, and got a train. I took the summer

off, came back there and stopped in Texas and we had to spend the night there, two nights there [unintelligible] came back and got back to camp and got discharged.

Van Ells: So before the end in '45 you were free and clear, discharged?

Taber: That was one of the [unintelligible].

Van Ells: So now it's time to get on with the rest of your life then. What were your priorities after the war? What did you want to do and what did you do to go about getting your life back on track?

Taber: Got married. That was the smartest thing I did.

Van Ells: That must have been pretty soon after?

Taber: Yes, I was married December 6th.

Van Ells: Now you mentioned your wife is from Illinios?

Taber: She's from [unintelligible], Illinois.

Van Ells: She come out to Massachusetts, or did you come back out here by this time?

Taber: Out here?

Van Ells: Where you went after the war.

Taber: Where I went after the war? I told you I met her in Georgia, that's where she lived. She came up to Chicago because that's where she lived and that's where I met her. I went home. I came out, met her here and got married. Then we went and lived with her sister and brother-in-law and I went to work for Walgreen Drug Company. I didn't want to be back on these folks, I didn't like the way they change.

Van Ells: In what sense?

Taber: People change, congestion. As a matter of fact, meeting my wife's family, I was listening to them talk. I had to get away from them where everything is quiet. She thought something had happened to me. I don't know what would have happened to me if I would have stayed there. I went and laid down in bed, tried to quiet down. But that was the thing I noticed the most when I come back hard to do. It wasn't where I could go right down like that and do it and know it was going to be done. I wasn't in charge anymore [unintelligible].

Van Ells: It was difficult once you got back.

Taber: It was difficult.

Van Ells: So you came to the Midwest then?

Taber: I worked there for, oh, over a year. They were going to send me back to Connecticut, told them I didn't want to go. They said, "Okay, we will put you in a bus [unintelligible] to downtown Chicago." From about that time my brother-in-law came and said, "I found a nice general store in Cuba City, Wisconsin. The people that own it are going to retire, the family doesn't want to take it over. What would you say if you bought it?" Why not? We had a good life, make a change. So we did; lived there for ten years. But I always wanted to come back. There was just a difference in opinion East coast, West coast, South and here; lot more friendly, more open.

Van Ells: So you're settled out here. The Department of Veterans Affairs, I'm naturally interested in the use of veteran's benefits in some way. Were there any programs that you used?

Taber: Used the Better Homes program.

Van Ells: So federal or state, do you remember?

Taber: It was federal. And then when I was in training I took in Chicago, I then used the GI program on that.

Van Ells: Did these benefits help you get reestablished?

Taber: Right.

Van Ells: Any sort of medical or psychological adjustment you had to make? For example, you mentioned you had dengue fever. Did you have any manifestations of this after the war?

Taber: About ten years after.

Van Ells: What happened?

Taber: Just laid me right down, put me to bed for three or four days. It's gone; doesn't happen to me anymore.

Van Ells: Did you get a pension at all from the VA or was this something as you were out-processed this was--so it hit you, you said ten years down the road, sort of hit you?

Taber: Every year we got one.

Van Ells: Did you go to the VA at all?

Taber: No. I knew what it was, told me that's what was gonna happen.

Van Ells: Thought never occurred to you then?

Taber: I figured that that was for guys that didn't have any legs or arms, stuff like that. Not for me.

Van Ells: I got just one last area that I want to talk about, that's veteran's organizations, reunions and that sort of thing. First let's talk about the major groups, the American Legion, V.F.W. [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. You mentioned that you did join some of these groups. I'm interested in why.

Taber: Why did I join? So we could talk and swap stories with people that had been through the same experience I had. I was in the V.F.W. [unintelligible] and I did that because my mother had said, "When you get out of the service you join the V.F.W." She said, "All of veterans are in there and they will know what you've been through. Don't join the American Legion." "Why not?" Said they [unintelligible]. The American Legion is what I'm in now. I'm commander of the office.

Van Ells: I was going to ask you did you join for social reasons or if you were an active participant in the organization in terms of what made you get involved in that. You did join but you don't necessarily have to. What made you get involved initially?

Taber: You mean as far as office holding?

Van Ells: Yeah.

Taber: They came to me and wanted me, whatever they wanted, and I said "Well, I could do that. So that's okay." I figured if I was able to do it, fine; if I couldn't do it, no.

Van Ells: And you mentioned reunions and you have got the booklet here. When did you start getting involved in reunions of your unit and how did it all come about?

Taber: First one they had they held down in Memphis, Tennessee and I didn't go to that one. They had one about three or four years later in Chicago and I went to that and I was disappointed.

Van Ells: In what sense?

Taber: Because there weren't more than forty or fifty people there.

Van Ells: When was this 1980s, '60s?

Taber: No, no, it was in the '50s. And there were only about fifty of them [unintelligible]. So I didn't bother with it again until it was in Cincinnati, that was about in '73, I think. Went there, and by that time Fred had called me and he said he was going there and he says, "Will you be able to make it?" So we met again there. Been all over the country.

Van Ells: What makes you go to these reunions?

Taber: Just to see them. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to see them. My section is one of the few sections that's still together. And the other thing that you have to remember is this 312th Bomber Group stayed together. It wasn't a case where it was broken up and put in different sections; the same bunch of people all the way through.

Van Ells: Which is unusual.

Taber: Uh-huh [affirmation].

Unknown: An Army Chaplain did the marriages for several other guys in the unit.

Van Ells: Is that right?

Unknown: He was out at Niagara Falls many years ago. He sponsored the reunion and renewed everybody's vows in marriage; remained friends after all these years.

Taber: Interesting part of that was when we got married, I had asked him to come down. He couldn't because of some other--and the priest that was in my wife's parish knew him. He had the chaplain come out--Father Schneider his name was--and so now he said, "No, I can't make it." That was fine. We're in Chicago, we are in a hotel and it was perhaps 2:00 in the morning, and the phone rang and I picked it up, and the first words I hear is, "This is your happy Chaplain." "Oh, how are you, Father?" "Fine, yes. But tell me something, be honest now, do you have a woman in the room with you?" And I says, "No, I haven't, Father." She was in the bathroom. And he said, "Oh, yeah", and I says, "How did you find out where we

were," because we didn't know where we were going to stay. He checked and found out. I don't know how he did it. And we corresponded with him a long time. He's close to ninety-seven.

Van Ells: Still going, huh?

Taber: He's retired. His kid called, said he's in the VA hospital.

Van Ells: You've exhausted my line of questioning. Is there anything you would like to add or anything? Anything we skipped over or you would like to go back to?

Taber: No.

Van Ells: Well, thanks for your time--you were going to say something?

Taber: You said you wanted to know what the fellows did when they were in the service and what they did to keep themselves entertained. Gambling, you mentioned this, and that was a big thing. When I wrote to my wife and she said--because she always asked me "What are you doing?" She never knew what I did while I was in the service. I figured that was my problem and I would tell her, "I'm going to go play bridge," and she would tell her friends, "He said he's going to go play bridge, but I bet you he's really going gambling." What I actually did was play bridge, all four of us. Recreation officer, he would always come up and play with us fellows and we always had a good time doing that. And when I played--I was in munitions so--we had a stage show that we put on, so we would do that.

Van Ells: That's something you did yourselves. Did you get a USO show, just out of curiosity?

Taber: Yeah, we had Dinah Shore, stateside, and went and heard her [unintelligible] and the fellow we had in charge of R & R [rest and relaxation] for that time says "No, she doesn't have a big enough name." [unintelligible] and Bob Hope was there.

Van Ells: That's stateside?

Taber: No.

Van Ells: You were overseas then?

Taber: Yeah, he was there. There was one show came to us, had a couple girl singers, saw the girls, and a couple of fellows I'd never saw. Saw [unintelligible].

Van Ells: Now did these shows make you homesick or did they boost morale, or both?

Taber: No, they were good for them, they were good for them. You worried about them being there, but that was a big thing. Biggest thing was worrying about them being there, not being used to the stuff [unintelligible]. And the sound of a girl's voice was a big thing. When the WACs [Women's Army Corps] first came in, one of the installations that we had contact with, we would call, first time we got was this woman's voice. Gee, I, don't forget, we've been waiting for two and a half years. That was quite a shock to the system. Everybody wanted to, they would just call for no reason at all, to hear them talk.

Van Ells: Now if I recall correctly you mentioned good old American ingenuity; in virtually the same breath you mentioned a distillery. You actually have seen this type of thing?

Taber: Uh-huh [affirmation] –.

Van Ells: Because there's the famous--Hawkeye's famous distillery on *M.A.S.H.* Was there something similar?

Taber: Cooks had one that was in Kentucky. Colonel found it, tore it up. Then we did our own. We did fruit juice, canned fruits, regular alcohol, put it in a five-gallon can, bury it, of course test it every day.

Van Ells: Now I don't imagine you went into the service with the knowledge of how to distill alcohol; you had to find this out somehow. I was interested in how this sort of knowledge gets passed around.

Taber: You watch.

Van Ells: Is that good old American ingenuity?

Taber: Yeah. They could surprise you. Where we had our tent, I told you about the ice cream machine and the ice making machine, a block of ice right in front of the fan, fan would blow across, makes it nice and cool. Because it was hot there. They had gardens. They said the sun was so hot you couldn't grow most of the stuff. These fellas were smart enough that they would take a parachute and cut it, spread it over and the sun wouldn't beat down so hard. Grew the tomatoes and melons, half the time didn't get a chance to see the roots of this thing because you had to move. There was a hope.

Van Ells: Well, I suppose there's therapeutic value to doing it [unintelligible].

Taber: We played softball. Not baseball, softball, because baseball you hit the ball too far you couldn't find it. Read.

Van Ells: Did you get *Yankee Magazine*, that kind of thing? How often did these things really circulate? Didn't see that too well.

Taber: I think if you went to headquarters outfit you would find that. We worked the photo lab, we had a photo lab unit, they had a light box [unintelligible].

Van Ells: I imagine mail was pretty important?

Taber: Uh-huh [affirmation]

Van Ells: Was there much of it, the writing letters?

Taber: Oh, yeah. Letters especially, we changed our APOs [Army Post Office] so often.

Van Ells: Very interesting, any thing else?

Taber: I don't think so.

Van Ells: Okay--you are on tape, so--thanks for coming in.

Taber: You bet.

Van Ells: I appreciate it.

[End of Interview]