

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

EARL THAYER

108th Combat Engineer Battalion, Army, World War II

2008

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Earl Thayer, (b. 1922). Oral History Interview, 2008.
Master: 2 audio cassettes; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
User: 2 audio cassettes; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Earl Thayer, a Jefferson County (Wisconsin) native, discusses his World War II service as a member of the 108th Combat Engineer Battalion in Hawaii, New Guinea, and Morotai (Indonesia). He details building defenses on Hawaii after the attack on Pearl Harbor, as well as “port duty” in New Guinea. Thayer’s discussion of combat begins in Morotai. He mentions filling bomb holes in runways and Christmas in a combat zone. Thayer details very heavy fighting for the town of Luzon, as well as a mission to remove enemy bombs from under a bridge. Thayer also describes his role in rebuilding parts of Japan after they surrendered.

Biographical Sketch:

Earl Thayer (b. 1922) served with the 108th Combat Engineer Battalion in Hawaii, New Guinea, and Morotai (Indonesia). After the Japanese surrendered, he helped to rebuild parts of Japan.

Interviewed by John Driscoll, 2008.
Transcribed by Liane Baranek, 2010.
Transcription reviewed by Amanda Axel, 2012.
Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript

Driscoll: Here we are. Well, this is John Driscoll and today is July 3rd, 2008, and this is an oral history interview of Earl Thayer, and we're at Earl's home in Madison. Earl, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the beginning? When and where were you born?

Thayer: Well, I was born in Palmyra. Well, on a farm outside of Palmyra in southeast Jefferson County in Wisconsin.

Driscoll: When?

Thayer: 1922, February 11, so I'm eighty-six.

Driscoll: Okay.

Thayer: We lived on the farm for a good number of years and then finally moved from Palmyra to Fort Atkinson, and I went to high school there. Then about the middle of the Depression we moved back to Palmyra on another farm and I went to school in Whitewater and eventually went to college there for two years and then transferred to the University of Wisconsin because my father wanted me to be a lawyer and I said, "Well, that sounds good to me." Didn't take too much time to find myself, as they say today. [laughs] And then I started law school, and in the middle of that was 1941, December 7, and within a relatively short time I was drafted in September--well, actually into service, drafted a little earlier, but active service began in September of 1942.

Driscoll: Do you remember what you were doing on Pearl Harbor Day when you heard about it?

Thayer: I sure do. Everybody does.

Driscoll: I'm sure.

Thayer: I was a student at the UW, and I was renting a room for \$3.00 a month in a couple's home down on Jefferson Street, and I'm sitting in my room studying that morning, and all of a sudden I was distracted by a lot of noise in the street, all kinds of excitement outside. And I thought well, I got to find out what this is, and I went out the door and, of course, that's when I found out that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. No great unusual thing like some of my friends, but that was how I learned about the war.

Driscoll: Then you get drafted--.

Thayer: Well, I tried to enlist but I was unsuccessful. I tried the Navy, I tried the Air Force. Then eventually I said the heck with it and I just waited it out and they got

me sooner or later and we went immediately down to Fort Sheridan where they were then parceling out the day's recruits into their needed military units. And that day they happened to be trying to fill the 108th Combat Engineer Battalion which is an engineer battalion which is part of the 33rd Infantry Division in Illinois, and so that's what I got. That's how I got there, anyway. No choice involved.

Driscoll: [Laughs] Something about the military; you don't get to make many decisions. They do it for you.

Thayer: That's right.

Driscoll: Where from Fort Sheridan then?

Thayer: Well, we were there just briefly and shipped out to Fort Louis, Washington, and we went into training there, of course, and we stayed there probably, oh, seems to me we stayed there--if you don't mind I'm going to check the dates here.

Driscoll: Certainly.

Thayer: We were there when President Roosevelt came in September of '42 to review the troops, and so I had made the journey out there pretty quickly after I was inducted, and we were standing there, he passed right--I could have reached out and touched his vehicle but, of course, he never got out of his vehicle as he didn't do in that time. Well, we stayed there until March of '43, and it was pure training; you know, just marching and firing guns and just basic training. That's all it was. We left in March then for, in a flurry of speculation, we must be going to Africa because we were sent to what was called Camp Clipper in California, and we unloaded out near Needles, about forty miles west of Needles, and in the middle of the Mojave Desert. And, of course, that fueled the rumors that gosh, we must be going to Africa and, of course, nobody knew. And we developed a whole city out there out of nothing, sand and sage brush. And we had rigorous training out there, especially daily marches, twenty, thirty-mile marches and you had one canteen of water and we were supposed to make that last and they were falling like flies and they had the ambulance coming up the rear and they kept running back to get--delivering them to the post hospital. And that was tough training and, unfortunately, we had a lot of fellows at that time who were overweight. Some of them couldn't read or write, quite a few of them, and they were finally weeded out because they just couldn't take it, you know? And, well, we stayed there, again, doing nothing but desert training until we got called to move to what we thought was going overseas. Well, we left the continental United States about middle of June of '43 and we ended in Hawaii, so Hawaii was at that time still under what they thought was siege. It was kind of, it really was kind of funny in some ways because I think the Japanese had struck and then ran but, nonetheless, there were fears that they would try another attempt at some kind of an invasion. Then we went to the big island of Hawaii, Hilo, near there, and then we got into building a lot of defenses on the island. Cement bunkers and machine gun outposts that were

built at low tide, and then when the water came in they would--just the top would be sticking out of the water, and they had those things all over and we built dozens of them. We built a lot of roads. In fact, we turned the trail from Hilo over to--what's the town on the north side--well, across the hump as they called it. Between the two volcanoes there was a narrow trail at that time and we built it into a passable, workable road, and that was the first time that the people had been able to go from one side of that island to the other by going over the hump, at least with a vehicle, and so that--I don't know, we did a lot of training. I learned to swim there for the first time. I had swimming training and they put a pack on your back and told you to swim. Well, you know, I darn near drowned before I was able to paddle my way to safety, but swimming with a pack on your back when the tide and the water is coming in, the waves are coming in, that's an experience I don't care to repeat. But it was good training, and we stayed there, oh, I guess until--well, we went to all of the islands, practically. Went through to Kauai and there we got into real jungle training, and we stayed there until May of '44, and then took off for New Guinea in April, and we had a very long and kind of tortuous route of course down across the Southern Pacific because the Japanese submarines were--in fact, at one point we were being, in effect, chased by a submarine and they did a lot of zigzagging, and I don't know whether it was true, the rumors were run rampant and I did not see any torpedoes, but some guys said there were some and so I don't claim to have been under attack, but it was a long trip and a difficult one. We were 5,000 guys on the one ship, and you put 5,000 people on one of those old World War II--who made the ships out on the West Coast?

Driscoll: Kaiser?

Thayer: Kaiser ship.

Driscoll: Liberty ships?

Thayer: And you got an awful lot of people stacked five, six high in the bunks, four floors down or something. Not a way to travel, but we arrived in Finchhaven, New Guinea, which is way on the southern end of New Guinea, and we were really--the 32nd Division from Wisconsin had already been there. That part of New Guinea had been cleared by that time, and they had come over--they owned Stanley Mountains and cleared that side out. We were really assigned to port duty, I guess you could say. We built our own camp again, but built a lot of docks and helped unload. This was by that time becoming a major supply depot, and so our job really--which made a lot of our guys angry that we were still doing nothing but supply stuff. However, some of our officers, I can't tell you who because I don't know, but we got an order one day very shortly after we got to Finchhaven. We were outside of the so-called port, and that's really all it was, it was an old village, but we went a few miles away and built our camp on the edge of the jungle and coral, and the first nights we stayed there we were in water knee deep or more because it was a low level, and until we got our bulldozers going

and built up some coral base we had to live in the water, and creatures in the water in New Guinea at that time were not very exciting. Well, they were exiting enough, I guess, but they weren't very pleasant to contemplate; lots of snakes, and a lot of guys got very panicky over those snakes. But we got orders from somewhere that we were to collect from our own stores and eventually we got some from the Navy, t-shirts, because the powers that be decided that the New Guinea natives bare from the waist up were distracting the troops and might set up situations that were not pleasant. And so we got the orders to distribute these to the local natives, so we did. I bet we distributed three, four thousand of those, anyway, and the next morning after that we go out on the trails and here comes the women. They had cut two holes where their breasts were and let them hang outside the white t-shirts, which only exacerbated the problem; so much for social engineering. It was a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to change the way people live. We did, about forty miles north, we kept moving north all the time building roads and creating camps for artillery units and just roads for supplies for the other troops and other units outside the 33rd that were still north of us. I think that experience was, you know, it was okay and everything. We had a good camp and all that, but everybody was getting itchy because you're sitting around doing scut work so to speak, and here they were itching to get into the fight. Well, sometime later after they were in the fight they weren't so sure that they had been right about that, but we were really working around the clock just unloading supplies and getting them transferred to smaller ships, and we were just freight handlers, so it was not until I guess probably--well, by that time I--incidentally at that point--well, actually it had occurred in Hawaii. The company commander, a man named Captain Wulash [?] from Chicago had at morning reveille said, "Who can type? Anybody here who can type?" And, of course, he was the headquarters guy and, well, you never should do this, but I raised my hand and it turned out I was the only guy in the company who could type outside of the officers and so I got the job of being company clerk and I handled the mail and kept the records and wrote the daily reports and all that kind of stuff, which turned out to be a very interesting thing to me because I had an interest in history at that time, and so I began to look at my job as keeping track of the history of this outfit and that intrigued me and so all was not lost. In any event, at the same time I started to write a little newsletter that the guys could send home, and it's kind of a, well, it was terrible. It was a corny--because you couldn't say anything about what you were doing--.

Driscoll: Yeah, that's true.

Thayer: In any serious way, and so it turned out to be really kind of an awful publication, but a lot of guys sent it home and they got grateful notes from their parents and loved ones and they said, "Boy, that's nice of you." I used old cartoons and all kinds of stuff. But we did a lot of bridge building there because lots of rivers and streams came out of the mountains to the ocean and so we got lots of experience firsthand, better than any other place that we'd been building Bailey bridges. Bailey bridges are bridges that are put out from one side only and you have to

push it out as you build it and counter weight it at the rear end and that gets to be kind of a trick in some situations, but we became pretty expert at that and it was a good thing we did. We used it a lot. Lots of dengue fever, malaria. Guys didn't want to take their Atabrine, or rumors would go that that's bad for you, you know. Getting the troops to follow healthful procedures is pretty tough. But after a few guys got dengue fever, let me tell you, it changed some minds because they can be mighty sick and--well, anyway, Atabrine was no doubt effective but it gave a lot of eyes kind of a yellow cast and so some of them didn't think that was so good. Oh, incidentally, I called that Company B newspaper I put out *The Snafu Journal*. It was New Guinea's largest nonpartisan, non-circulating, nonsensical newspaper. It was full of much ado about nothing. Well, in September of '44, the 33rd turned from pushing boxes to combat and so we were hooked up with the 33rd Division's three infantry divisions: the 123rd and the 130th and the 136th, and Company A was with the 123rd, Company B was with the 130th--of the engineers I'm talking about--Company C of the engineers would be with the 136th.

Driscoll: And you were with--.

Thayer: I was with Company B of the 108th, so we were attached to the 130th Infantry Division to provide them engineering support. That's building roads, diffusing bombs, building bridges. That was the two or three main tasks that they had. They did a lot of other stuff but, in any event, the Company B was not sent out into combat at that point but the other companies were, and they went to a place called Sarmi. That contained a contingent of about 2,000 men, and so that was the first combat and the first casualties of the war for the 33rd.

Driscoll: Where was that? Was that New Guinea?

Thayer: This is all New Guinea. New Guinea, you go up the West--well, it had to be the East Coast of New Guinea, Finchhaven, Sarmi, Wewak, Hollandia are then way up on the North side, Northeast side of New Guinea, and as you go up the coast of New Guinea you head closer and closer to the Dutch East Indies. So, in October of '44 the 6th Army, U.S. Army of which the 33rd was a part, invaded the Philippine Islands, and the famous statement, "MacArthur has returned," [Actual quote: "I have returned."] you know, "I will return." [Actual quote: "I shall return."] Well, he had returned, and everything that we had been loading and reloading and unloading, whatnot, was going to Leyte and Samar Islands, which are in the Philippines, and we seemed to be again the forgotten division, because the war was now about 2,000 miles from us. Well, in any event, December of '44 we got orders to go to Morotai in the Dutch East Indies. Now, Morotai is a tiny island which had, oh, I guess a couple of thousand Japanese troops on it yet, and they had been pushed back into the jungle. Incidentally, it's about 400 miles south of the Philippines, so the 31st Division went ashore there and pushed them back far enough so that they could build an airport, an Air Force base, from which big bombers were launched against the Dutch East Indies and islands between Morotai and the Philippines and Japan and--however, the Japanese continued to

conduct nightly raids on Morotai, and as fast as we could build--well, then we landed after the 31st was pulled out of there and our job was to complete the cleanup of the Japanese on Morotai and to secure the island's Air Force base because those big bombers would leave in the early morning and they had to have a place to come back to by night. And a lot of times we had to scramble like the devil in order to fill the bombed holes on the runways, metal runways on the sand, screen-type metal and laid down for these bombers to land on, and it was very tricky. The Japanese had a lot of planes in the air around that area and our bombers would get hit going out as well as coming back, but the Air Force finally sent in a whole bunch of P-51s and those twin-tailed fighter planes that would stay up in the air and wait for the Japanese to come and then they would come out of the high sky to attack them, but eventually, of course, the strength of the U.S. Army just pushed those guys back. But anyway, we did the cleanup job at Morotai. We continued to do that until, let's see, it was about Christmastime I think. Seems to me we left there on Christmas Eve, Christmastime, we were loading up. There must have been 500 ships in Morotai and surrounding waters, because they were building up a huge flotilla of ships to take more troops into Northern Luzon. The fight for Leyte was going okay finally, which is a southern-most island in the Philippines. General Yamashita had about 80,000 or 90,000 troops in Northern Luzon north of Manila, and between Manila and the end of the Northern Luzon there was a town called Baguio, which is the summer capital of the Philippines, and they needed to get more troops in to go north instead of south at Manila, and so these hundreds and hundreds of ships were out there, and nightly air raids, and it was still going on at that time on Morotai. And as those ships gathered, there was a lieutenant in our company, he was from Salt Lake City, Utah, a Mormon, and a wonderful tenor voice, and he collected all six or eight of us who liked to sing, and he got us in a boat and he had a little portable organ that he could carry with him and we got on a small landing craft and we went visiting boats on Christmas Eve all through the harbor and we'd get aboard and say, "Anybody interested in a Christmas Eve service come on over here," and we conducted those singing services with a prayer or two because everybody knew they were going into combat. And this guy's name was Monas Harlan, a wonderful man, so we visited some twenty ships during the course of that night, way into the night; interrupted by several air raids, but it was still a deeply moving event in the sense of--especially as you recollect it, but what was startling was the deep silence of the men who we were visiting on those ships.

Driscoll: Let me stop here and flip this tape. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

Thayer: It seemed an unlikely place as a sacred setting, but there was something. It was as if something meaningful was taking place, you know, and as we left each ship we got a round of applause and many a handshakes and touching words of appreciation and thanks, and it seems kind of strange that these were moments in which the tragedy of war was just kind of overcome by dreams of peace, so it was a very moving event in my three point years of service. So off we went on January 16th and we took off in this flotilla, hundreds of ships, convoys as far as

you could see, and we didn't get into--well, the convoy took off, we encountered a huge typhoon, and during that time we were on an LST [Landing Ship, Tank], a huge LST where the front end opens and you can drive in all your trucks and equipment and people and tanks and bulldozers, et cetera. And we had about a thousand ships they had strung out over about forty miles, and on the way we encountered this huge typhoon and the LST would go way up out of the water and just its rear end with the propellers was still in the water and it would crash down, and at one point the captain of the vessel came to our commander and he said, "We've got a tank, we've got a bulldozer." Those things were twenty tons of steel with a big blade on the front, and he says one of those things is loose in the hold and he said, "You guys got to get down there and anchor that because it will punch a hole in our ship," and he said it's already leaking, it's pounding the side of the ship so badly. And so we sent a crew down and I was among them, and we made several attempts. At the time your attempt to grab this thing with big cables, chains with big hooks on them, you had to try to capture it at just the right time when it was a second or two when it was still. Otherwise it would come crashing over to the other side of the ship, and we had a lot of telephone poles, pilings for bridges, but they were like big, long telephone poles on which we had driven this Caterpillar, and because we laid them down in there and just drove over them. That turned out to be a mistake because that was just like on a roller for them, and anyway, we finally obviously captured this thing but not before--nobody lost his life, but a couple of them got pretty badly bruised before they could tie it down, but the captain of the ship was mighty grateful. We lost two or three men overboard on that trip; a couple of new recruits who just simply didn't, you know, this was kind of toward the end of the war, so to speak, because it was in February by the time we got to Luzon, and these guys were being transferred from Europe and they were ceasing to resupply a lot of Europe, and so these guys all had been recruited into Air Force and other. They didn't need them, so they sent them over to us. Well, they didn't like us. They thought this was a junk kind of a tour of duty and they didn't like it, and so they didn't even want to stay down below deck where the rest of us hairy apes of the 108th were staying and were used to staying and knew it was better if we did, so they tried to bunk on the deck and overnight we hit this big storm and they were gone. Nobody saw them, nobody knew. They were just gone in the morning, three of them. I don't know who they were. I can't remember, and I didn't seem to have a record of it. Anyway, we got into Lingayen Gulf, which is north of Manila about eighty miles or ninety miles, and landed at a village called San Fabian, and we started setting up camps inland a bit and began to organize to help the 33rd Division and all of its infantry units push the Japanese back, in the end, off the island so to speak. We headed north to Baguio and, incidentally, one day I received a telephone call. I'm sorry, I can't think of the guy's name. Justice of the Supreme Court here in Madison. He's retired.

Driscoll: Steinmetz?

Thayer:

Oh, goodness. I know his name so well. Maybe I'll think of it. Anyway, he called me and he said, "I understand you were in the Philippine Islands during World War II," and I said yes, and he said, "Well, I'd like you to join me for lunch some day and we can talk because I was out there too." He said, "I'd like to just share memories with you," so we go to lunch to the Madison Club, and we're sitting there talking about the Philippine Islands and the towns and the areas where we were and kind of just recalling what happened, and pretty soon a waitress came over and she said, "I'm sorry, but I don't mean to interrupt you or eavesdrop, but I just heard the name of my hometown mentioned." And she said, "Why are you talking about my hometown?" And I said, "Well, 1945 in February, we landed right outside your town and went right through it, drove right through it, all our troops." "Oh," she said, "I remember that. I was just a tiny girl and I remember when you guys came." So it was quite--we had a nice time talking with her and she told us a lot about the town that we didn't know, you know. Well, anyway, now we were in the real thick of the fighting for Northern Luzon, and again the big job was to build roads, help supply the infantry troops, but as we went farther and farther north we got into the more mountainous territory and deep ravines and huge mountainous gullies, rivers running down through them way on the bottom, thousands of feet up in the air the mountains went and many times in precipitous steep ravines, and the roads, the Japanese as they backed up blew up all the bridges and so we had to use Bailey bridges in many of those areas to get across and continue the pursuit. However, in that process you'd get to the point where you had to launch this Bailey bridge across the chasm, but you're also vulnerable then to--and the Japanese took advantage of this--they'd place mortars and small artillery up hidden in the caves that they had dug a hole in the sides of the mountains and zero in on that bridge. They knew we would have to come that way because there wasn't any other way. And of course the engineers, while we carried weapons, rifles, our job was to build bridges or roads or diffuse mines and all that stuff, and so you were working and we had to rely on the infantry to surround us and kind of protect us while we were working, and that got to be some hairy situations. We lost a few men to the snipers and the small artillery that was hidden in those caves and could zero in on us until we could figure out, or the infantry could figure out, where they were, and they'd zero in on--especially on bulldozers. They wanted to try to smash the equipment, and I had a guy, Isadore Krzyewski, he was from Upper Michigan, Montreal, Wisconsin, as a matter of fact, part of the time, and he took a blast on his bulldozer, jumped out, and then the next round hit the side of the bulldozer, and--well, we had a reinforced cab on the bulldozer. We learned long since that the driver would be a target so they built a steel cage, heavy steel cage for him and just little slots to look out of, and so he jumped out of the thing knowing he was a target. They zeroed in on his bulldozer and when he jumped out another round slammed into the side of that steel cab and he had his back to it and he must have had 500 pieces of shrapnel in his back. And I can remember that he, of course, fell, and although he was alive and we put him in a jeep and ran him down to a first aid place on the narrow road that we were building, and he told the driver, who was my jeep driver, he said, "You know, it's bad enough being out

there facing the Japanese, but you crazy drivers are going to kill me before you get to the first aid station!" But he just recently passed away; in fact, less than a year ago, and he was a good friend of mine. He lived near Muskego. He had moved there with his wife, and he was still--he was periodically going into the VA hospital. Shrapnel was working its way out of his back, even this many years after the war. He had a good life in many respects, but periodically he really suffered from those festering things as they got closer to the surface. They gave him a lot of trouble. Every little while, months, a few months apart he'd have to have them taken out. One of our first jobs for about the second night we were there, we had a fire fight with the Japanese on a hill that came to be very important to the control of a road that headed north, and it was Bench Mark Hill and Question Mark Hill. There were two of them and they were about 1500 feet high and so gave the Japanese a commanding view over the delta in which we had landed, and that fight for those two hills was very difficult for the infantry. And they finally got themselves isolated halfway up or three-quarters of the way up to the top and ran out of food, ran out of water, and so our job was, we were rushed into the breach to get water to them and food to them because without that they're not going to be much good. Well, that was our first, my first real introduction into combat and it was just nice that the--nice; it was wonderful that the ferocity of that fight was able to be put down and save those guys. Well, the rest of the months toward Baguio were just one day after another of getting through the mountains. We made one--typical of some of the things that the engineers had to do. You can't just build a road, you got to know where you're going, and so it was necessary for us to send out a crew of scouts, so to speak. We had to enlist the aid of the Igorote natives because we didn't know our way around. We didn't know the language and we would be more conspicuous, so the Igorotes would take—we had to scout out a new route for a road and we spent five days behind enemy lines with the Igorotes providing the cover and disguising us as them. They had all kinds of support people who were helping us along the way to figure out how we could, what would be the best way to put a road up through as an alternative to a bunch of bridges that were blasted away and didn't seem possible for us to put Bailey bridges there. We needed a narrower place we could get across a river, and we never encountered the enemy until we were probably a hundred yards from back to base. Oh, there we were. They were between us and the base. We could see our base. We were close, but all of a sudden we faced a bunch of the enemy who had gotten between us and so we got into a fire fight, and the captain of our company did something that was almost kind of superhuman. I couldn't believe this guy. He had a collection of Tommy guns, the old gangland type with a drum of bullets and he had two of those, and he comes running out from our camp firing those two Tommy guns, and I guess the Japanese were so taken aback with this guy shooting at them just indiscriminately with these two guns that they just dropped everything and ran like hell; but without him, we just couldn't have gotten back. The guy was crazy. Anyway, it worked; big distraction. We finally, well, all kinds of things happened. Lots of combat issues and so on, but where we were leading, the engineers had to lead the attack across a river on the northwest side of the road up to the Baguio. It was along the coast, and before we could turn

in to go east and across the mountains into Baguio, and the Japanese held all those bridges, and there was one bridge that was perhaps at least a quarter of a mile long and over a long narrow delta like where the river was coming out to the ocean, and it was a place called Bauang, B-A-U-A-N-G, and the American forces decided that they were going to make a morning assault up that road and across that bridge. But the Company B had to lead the way by clearing the bridge which we had already determined was mined, hundreds of mines at many of the pillars; about every other major pillar in this bridge had lots of explosives tied just under the deck. So our company gets the assignment and they go out. They started I guess about 3:00 in the morning and they creep up to the bridge and they're all in black and they got rubberized cutters, wire cutters, and pliers and so on, so hopefully not make any noise. And they succeeded in getting all the way across, diffusing all the mines, and there was just the one last little piece of the bridge to go, and upon the top was a 250-pound bomb on each side of the bridge at that end, and to each bomb was several sticks of explosives that could be set off with a detonator, and the wires ran down to a small outpost of Japanese who were just sitting there waiting to be alerted and they would blow it up. Well, we got over that far and, of course, the orders were to prevent them from blowing up the bridge. Well, they discovered us before we got there. Somebody made some noise or whatever, but in any event, they come running out of there and our guys had to turn tail and head for the other side, but they were still on the bridge, and so these guys had a good shot at us and they killed several of our group. They raked the bridge and a staff sergeant and several guys were killed and wounded. But by then the alert, of course, had gone to the troops behind us and the tanks and everything else and they moved them up to the safe part of the bridge and they blew the other end off and then we could just put down a small piece of bridge and all across they went on time, but it was a hairy event. Those guys got Silver Stars and Bronze Stars and so on posthumously. That was in March. Well, then the drive for Baguio started to go pretty well. And still very difficult because the Japs were making last-ditch heroic stands, the typical kind of retreating Japanese tactic. They just simply did not care anymore, you know. To the last man. Well, in the middle of April we--I'm not sure, I think it was about the 23rd or 24th of April, we--April 29th, I guess, we finally entered the city with the infantry, captured the city, and from then on it was downhill for the Japanese, although lots of difficult stuff was ahead as they fought toughly. Boy, they were not going to go, so the combat kept on going beyond Baguio, but they were really on the run, so one day, a couple of things happened. We were visited by General Stilwell, who is famous for his Burma Road efforts to get to China earlier in the war, and he had come over because he was brought in by the American generals to, our generals to give them some help on this mountain trail that we were trying to push through and finish the job, so he comes up one day with a whole bunch of 33rd Division brass around him of course, and he was a salty old fellow, and he said that on the way up and around where he was being toured as we were trying to put through the last few miles of road, Stilwell was asked by somebody, "How does this compare with Burma?" And he says, "This is worse." And I was there, I was with him, and the group came to the site where we were building an abutment

to put in another Bailey bridge, and a guy named Ignatius G. Konopka from Scranton was digging a trench to hold some of the footings, and Stilwell left the party and he walked over to this guy of ours and he grabbed his shoulder and said, "How are you doing son?" And Konopka didn't even look up. He used a series of invectives that we don't use anywhere except on the frontline kind of, and the food is for the birds. Only he didn't say that. He says, "We haven't had fresh meat for weeks!" And the next day we had fresh meat, but the first time we had had anything but Australian goat in a long time. It came off some Navy ship, I'm sure, but, in any event--because we always thought the Navy got better food than we did. In any event, on June 30th the war was over for us. We were relieved of duty. Yamashita's ragtag retreat was now nothing but that. It wasn't an effective fighting force, so they pulled out the 33rd Division and the war was over for all practical purposes. We created a camp and immediately went back to Lingayen and San Fabian where we had landed and within days started boarding ships and underwent rigorous training to do the Japanese invasion. That continued for quite a while until, of course, in August the bombs were dropped on Japan and in September they signed the treaty, peace treaty, and Company B and the 33rd was given an order to load them up for Japan and the whole LST flotilla went to Honshu in Japan and the Kobe and Osaka area, cities totally destroyed. Totally destroyed by bombing, not by the--I mean by airplane bombing, not by the atomic bomb. That was at Hiroshima and Nagasaki which were quite a few miles away but still not that far, and we just simply helped that city to kind of revive itself; did a lot of bridge building again, clearing of roads and trying to help those people get organized for recovery. We were there until, let's see. That was in September. We were there until November. The middle of November we were ordered home and I came back to Seattle on Thanksgiving Day; a great Thanksgiving.

Driscoll: Yes. Oh, yeah.

Thayer: And then there were some weeks of just getting ready to be demilitarized, so to speak, but, in any event, that was my trip.

Driscoll: Wow. That's a remarkable story.

Thayer: As one of my guys said, a fellow, wonderful guy, he said, "It was a million dollar experience but I wouldn't give you a nickel to do it again."

Driscoll: Wow. That's great.

Thayer: I have to say, though, that the military experience for me, despite its difficulties and sometimes harrowing experiences, I think helped me a great deal in my life. **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** Japanese. I could speak a little then.

Driscoll: May I see the sheet over there with the Japanese on it?

Thayer: Yes. It's just kind of alphabet and small--.

Driscoll: Okay.

Thayer: That's some of the guys.

Driscoll: Oh, yes. So that's you.

Thayer: This is close up. I got a Bronze Star. So many guys deserved it far more than I. I eventually became the first sergeant of the company.

Driscoll: Oh, wow. Okay.

Thayer: When we landed in Japan and got off in Yokohama Beach, we took a train into Kobe and Osaka, several hours, slow train, but on that ride in, the night we landed in the dark; we got on and before dawn we were going along on the train slowly, and we were stoned I'll bet a thousand times on the way. Japanese sitting in the bushes along, or the wreckage would throw stones at us. At first it worried us. We thought we were going to have a very hostile reception; that turned out not to be true. There must have been some feeling, and I guess I wouldn't blame them but, after all, they suffered badly too, but the Japanese were at first very fearful. We were regarded with great fear that we might be this rapacious bunch of bad characters who were going to take advantage of everybody, but that eventually they--within days the Japanese started coming out of their--they had all retreated inland, inland to the hills, and the city was virtually desolate. Well, there wasn't much left anyway, but they had been living there in the wreckage, and they came out of the woodwork and were friendly and we found a group of people with whom we could work if we could communicate, and they quickly, as conquered people often do, they find ways to make a little money and they could sell you beer and vegetables, and when I found out how they raised their vegetables I wasn't too eager to eat them because they used the honey pot every morning to irrigate their crop but, in any event, we were--I was dumbfounded by one thing. Maybe I shouldn't have been, but we had our morning report. Everybody would assemble on the street. We were living in a broken, well, a bombed-out school. It was half-standing and we occupied it as a place to stay, and in the morning we'd gather on the street and count heads and report, get your assignments for the day, and as the first sergeant I had to stand out in the middle of the street in front of these guys and give them their orders and so on. All of a sudden coming down the street is a band of young girls, probably twelve to fifteen, sixteen maybe at the outside, and kind of uniforms, marching in as a troop just in formation and marching really in cadence, and they walk right past me and, of course, all these guys were whoo-who-who-who, doing all kinds of noises and I was trying to shush them up but that was useless, and it turned out that this was a group of young women who were going down to a house of prostitution and they marched to work and marched back from work. It was just unbelievable. When we found out what it was I could hardly believe the way it was conducted, but in any event,

it was a fact and, of course, that led to its own problems. In any event, after the war I gave up on the idea of being a lawyer.

Driscoll: Oh, did you?

Thayer: And said I wanted to follow my instincts and become a journalist so I went to journalism school at the University here in Madison, graduated in 1947, was hell-bent to be a newspaper man or the owner of a newspaper or both, and I had an opportunity in Michigan. Incidentally my, oh, what do you call the person who is kind of a, a mentor. My mentor at the university was Professor Frank Thayer who was an attorney by profession and he was on the faculty of the journalism school here and wrote a number of books on legal affairs and law in the press. In any event, he was a wonderful guy and he proposed that we buy together a newspaper in Michigan. And we go over there and look at it and examine it, and fine, we could have bought it for I think \$90,000 in Central Michigan. I've forgotten the name of the town off the top of my head. It was a small weekly trying to be a daily. It looked like it had promise but I was to put up half of the money. I didn't have a dime, much less \$45,000. I went to my banker, so-called family banker who, of course, asked the usual questions; you know, what do you got for collateral? I said I got myself and my ambition and he didn't believe that that was good collateral so I couldn't get the money. My family didn't have it. They had lost the farm during the depression and were barely getting by by the end of the war. I couldn't get the money so I gave up that idea. Then I come back to Madison and started shopping the newspapers. I had written quite a bit of freelancing for the *Cap Times* and *The State Journal* at that time, and I thought well, I got a chance here, and I think they were offering \$175.00 a month and I didn't think that was enough. I needed to support myself and my wife, and the State Medical Society of Wisconsin was looking it turned out for a public relations type person. It really wasn't public relations then. It was just simply a person to write--deal with the newspapers and radio and television and so on, mostly radio, and they paid \$200.00 a month, and so I eventually said I think I'll take that. I went with them in June of '47 and I left them in March of 1987.

Driscoll: Oh, okay.

Thayer: In the process I became the chief executive officer and had a wonderful, wonderful life. It was a career that I couldn't have imagined; both as to its challenge and to its enjoyment.

Driscoll: Wow. That's great.

Thayer: I have had a great life, but as I started to say briefly, I think that the military gave me a wonderful boost in learning how to discipline myself, how to organize, how to conduct your life in such a way that you can organize for success and it really was a marvelous experience in many ways.

Driscoll: You know, I've done over 160 of these interviews and I've never had any man or woman complain, you know, poor me, why did this have to happen to me, you know? And most of you, just like all of them, young man, world ahead of you, coming out of the Depression and this thing happened and you got pulled out and sent in harm's way, and people didn't like the food, they didn't like the officers, you know, that's normal, but there was no sad stories there, you know, poor me. It's a remarkable story. That's great.

Thayer: That's true.

Driscoll: Well, this was fantastic. Wow. These stories are so important. God, they really are. Okay. Well, look. What I'll do is, in fact, when I leave here I'll take this file and drop it off at the museum and they'll transcribe it. It might take them a couple of--

Thayer: Oh, I'd expect it would.

Driscoll: But they'll send you a copy of it and it will be down there on file.

Thayer: I waited sixty years to tell it. I can wait a few more weeks.

[End of interview]