

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JOHN H. WALTERS

127<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, Army, World War II

1997

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**Walters, John H.**, (1912-2003). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 80 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 80 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

John Walters, an Eau Claire, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 127th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Infantry Division in the Pacific Theater of operations. Walters talks about being drafted into service and leaving his ten-month-old daughter, basic and field artillery training at Fort Bragg (North Carolina), having an operation for hemorrhoids, and being assigned to the 127<sup>th</sup> Infantry with no infantry training. He recalls the ship ride to Goodenough Island (New Guinea). Walters reflects on basic training and observes that, compared to the northern men in his artillery training unit, the men from the south in his infantry unit were less fearful. He describes fighting at Aitape (New Guinea) including his first night in the jungle, sniper attacks, taking cover from machine gun fire behind trees, bathing in crocodile-infested streams, and being relieved from duty after fighting for seventy-five days. After two weeks of amphibious landing training, Walters landed at Leyte Gulf. He comments on several close calls such as when the officer he was next to was wounded by a sniper and when a Japanese “knee mortar” wounded men he was standing near. Walters explains he had a feeling he would come through and that God was watching over him. He comments on the GIs in the Pacific not wanting to take prisoners and he relates how a fellow soldier who was wounded by friendly fire was glad to be going home. Walters describes the fighting on Hill 502 at Luzon where his friend Gene Atkins received the Medal of Honor. He compares the Japan’s fighting strength on different islands, and he describes food drops and a sergeant who disliked him and assigned him extra detail. Walters recalls asking several Eau Claire soldiers to tell his wife he was okay, writing back and forth with her, and depending on his family for encouragement. He reflects on a discussion with a store clerk in Kobe (Japan). He touches upon service in the supply tent at Baguio, his operation in a field hospital for a ruptured appendix, brief occupation duty in Japan, the ship ride back to the United States, and the train trip from Washington State to Fort McCoy. Walters talks about getting his job as school principal back, joining the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and using the GI bill for professional development and a home loan.

**Biographical Sketch:**

John Walters (1912-2003) served in the Pacific Theater of World War II where his unit was under constant heavy combat. He received his bachelor's from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and his master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After the war, he taught, was president of the Eau Claire Teachers' Credit Union, and was an elementary school principal for thirty years.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

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**Interview Transcript:**

- VAN ELLS: Okay. Today's date is October the 27th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. John H. Walters of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a veteran of the 32nd Red Arrow Division in World War II. Good morning and thanks for coming down.
- WALTERS: Good morning. It's nice to be here.
- VAN ELLS: It's quite a drive. I have done that before so I appreciate it. Why don't we start by having you just 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?
- WALTERS: I was born and raised in Eau Claire, went to school in the public schools of Eau Claire. Went to the college at the University of Eau Claire. Graduated from there. Went on to the University of Wisconsin, got my Master's degree, went into teaching. Taught at Schofield for three years. Then went back to Eau Claire and taught in Eau Claire until I retired in 1975. I was an elementary principal in Eau Claire for thirty years.
- VAN ELLS: At the time of Pearl Harbor, where were you in this process? I mean had you gotten a graduate degree by that time yet?
- WALTERS: I had two years in on my Master's degree at that time. I'm sorry, two summers in, and I was teaching in Eau Claire, and I was an elementary principal in Eau Claire at that time.
- VAN ELLS: The attack on Pearl Harbor is one of those events that sticks in people's minds. Just for anecdotal purposes, if nothing else, I always ask my interview subjects what they recall about that particular day, so if you wouldn't mind.
- WALTERS: I was a principal at the school at the time, of course, and it was a shock to all of us. And at that time, we did not have a child, but shortly after we had a daughter who was born in '42. And I thought with the birth of the daughter I probably wouldn't be called in for quite a bit, but in July of 1943, I was inducted into the service with thirty-two other young men from Eau Claire.
- VAN ELLS: Now at this time you weren't a spring chicken anymore --

WALTERS: I was thirty and a half years old. That was another thought that I had that probably I wouldn't be called in for a while, but they needed persons.(laughs)

VAN ELLS: What was your reaction to getting a draft notice?

WALTERS: I was in a way shocked, Mark, shocked, because I thought there was so many others around Eau Claire that I thought should be called up before me really. But I took it. And I probably shouldn't say this now, but God was with me all the way through my service, and I want people to know that sincerely, because after you have heard my story, you will realize that it is true.

VAN ELLS: So you are thirty, thirty-one years old. The other guys who went in with you that were drafted at the same time, I take it they were considerably younger than you were?

WALTERS: Some were a few younger, but some of them were just a little bit older, too, Mark. And that kind of gave me a good feeling, too, that there are others going in who were my age or a little older.

VAN ELLS: That you weren't being singled out.

WALTERS: I wasn't being singled out, right.

VAN ELLS: So if you could just sort of walk me through your induction process. Now you have to go get a physical, and report, and then off to training somewhere. If you could just sort of –

WALTERS: Yes.

VAN ELLS: Describe that process for me as you experienced it?

WALTERS: Our group went to Milwaukee and we had our physicals and returned back to Eau Claire. Then we were shipped to a camp outside of Chicago, and we were there about a week. And then we were assigned many of us to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to a field artillery camp, and that's where I had my basic training at Fort Bragg. I was there until about February of 1944, and we came to the time when we were going to leave the camp and go overseas one way or another. And we had physicals and they found out that I had a problem, had hemorrhoids, so they asked me if I wanted the operation. I said yes, I'll have the operation. So I had the operation. Of course, I was separated then from my original group. So they went over to the European theater of war and I was sent home for recovery and then sent over to California and eventually to the Southwest Pacific. I left California in March of '44, spent twenty-one days on a ship. My

compartment is interesting, because I was ten feet below the water line on the ship for twenty-one days. And I didn't like it a bit. But we arrived at a little island called Goodenough Island off the coast of New Guinea. And there we were stationed for about two weeks when suddenly they realized that the island had been infected by scrub typhus, which is a small insect carried by rodents and small wallabies and such. And just in the short time that they'd had replacement people there, they had a cemetery that just had grown immensely.

VAN ELLS: With GI's, you mean?

WALTERS: With GI's, our own GI's. We were then sent to New Guinea, a place called Finschhafen, which was a replacement depot. And I have a little story I would like to tell you. I was walking back from the kitchen one night and all of a sudden out of the jungle, a voice said, "Johnny Walters." "Yes." "Come here." So I walked over and here it was an old time friend who used to live next door to me in Eau Claire, and he had been in the service. He was with the 32nd Division, but he had been in New Guinea, had fought and had malaria and had gone back to Australia and now he was back again. So we had a couple days together, which was enjoyable. And then I was sent from Finschhafen up to a place called Aitape, A-I-T-A-P-E. And when we landed, we were given packs and I was given a rifle, and into the jungle we went. And I will always remember the first night. A Jap sniper knew we were there and kept firing at us. Although he did not hit any of us, he kept us awake all night. And while I was at Aitape, our fighting was mostly going through the jungles and pushing the jungles and pushing the Japs through the jungles and breaking up their ambushes. One day, we were pushing through the trail and all of a sudden a Japanese machine gun opened up on us. And I dove behind a big tree, and you have to see those trees in New Guinea, because they are big like four feet across the diameter. And I dove behind that looking up to see the Japanese had me spotted because chips were coming off the top of the old tree. I was scared, but I laid there until the firing had stopped, and then we pushed on through. I thought that was a pretty close call. We spent several trips going from our base camp there at Aitape up to a place called Drinamore where we also had a little camp. And in order to do so, we had to cross a river called the Drinamore which was infected with crocodiles that we did not know at the time. (laughs)

VAN ELLS: No small matter.

WALTERS: No small matter (laughs) until later, then you start to think about it. I have to say at this time if we wanted to take a bath, it was our custom to walk out into the water in the Drinamore or a stream close to us and just sit down and that was it more or less. So we weren't too sanitary. After seventy-five plus days fighting out of Aitape we were relieved and were

sent up the beach to a place called Hollandia where we spent about two weeks rehearsing things and having some exercises and so on. And then we were put aboard ships to go to Leyte, a huge armada of ships. I will never forget as we approached the Tacloban Bay to have Japanese ships diving at our armada.

VAN ELLS: Right. Now, this is the debut of the kamikaze if I am not mistaken?

WALTERS: That's right.

VAN ELLS: It's the Laying Gulf.

WALTERS: That's right.

VAN ELLS: So you hadn't been expecting this?

WALTERS: Not a bit. Hadn't expected this at all, Mark. And I remember our gunners on our ship did knock one of the planes out of the air, but we landed safely and marched inward and went into combat on Leyte. Here on Leyte, I think about the third day into combat, we were pushing along a ridge, and four of us soldiers were standing in a group that probably is six foot, eight foot diameter just rehearsing what we were going to do as we pushed forward when the Japs dropped a "knee mortar" right in amongst us. Two of the four of us were killed. Two of us got out without a scratch. I got out without a scratch. And I thought, again, God was watching over me. We did push the Japs down the ridge across Leyte to Ormoc Bay where some of the Japanese soldiers did escape on their own ships. From Tacloban where we rested for two, three weeks, we again boarded ship, went to Luzon and landed at Lingayen Gulf. And here we went into combat along a river that flowed into Lingayen Gulf because the Japs had a small camp set up there. And after about a week, we had destroyed it, so we had orders to start up the Villa-Verde Trail. Our first week or so, it was mostly just walking up a trail until our own equipment, our big trucks and our tanks and artillery came behind us. And as we would walk up this trail that wound around here and there, we were subject to Japanese artillery fire and, of course, we pushed on and pushed on. We did get support finally from our own artillery, our own machine guns, and finally got to the top of Hill 502 where the Japanese tried to take over, but we destroyed them and they retreated some more. It was here where one of my friends, a close friend, killed forty-two Japs on the perimeter and received an award. I guess I the "right award."

VAN ELLS: Excuse me?

WALTERS: I should say the right kind of award that he received.

- VAN ELLS: It was the Congressional Medal of Honor, right?
- WALTERS: He received the Congressional Medal of Honor, yes, Gene Atkins. We were relieved and went down on the beach and it was here that I met some teachers, some Philippine teachers who were very nice to us. After about two weeks at Asingan, we were sent to the summer capital of the Philippines up in the hills, Baguio and here we went into combat again.
- VAN ELLS: Now this had to be about July or so of 1945?
- WALTERS: Right, right. This was about July of 1945.
- VAN ELLS: It's pretty late, so it must be after Okinawa?
- WALTERS: That's right. Well, I'll jump to somethin' and then you'll know right away. While we were at Baguio, I was --I had been the Company clerk for probably a couple of months, and then I was assigned to the supply tent as the "artificer". (laughs) I never heard the word before, but my job was to repair equipment that came back from the front and also to send out Equipment that they needed at the front. While I was there, I became sick one day with a high fever, upset stomach, and one of the kitchen help asked me if I would go to the sick call if he could get a Jeep to take me. I said I certainly would. I had planned to wait out the night and go in the morning. So he took me to sick call. And the doctor took my blood pressure and blood sample and so on. They rushed me into the operating room, and they operated on me for ruptured appendix. I was at this field hospital for about five days and then I was shipped down to a station hospital which was down below the hill. And I was at the station hospital when the war ended in August, first part of August. After I had partly recuperated, I was assigned to another Company and eventually shipped to Japan, landed at Fukuoka, went on to Nagoya where I waited for some time before I could go home. I left Japan December 21st, 1945, and arrived in Seattle with 5,000 other troops. I was in Seattle a couple days and then shipped across country by train to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, and I was discharged on December 31st, 1945.
- VAN ELLS: That's a free and clear discharge, there was no reserve time or anything?
- WALTERS: Nothing.
- VAN ELLS: Well, if you don't mind, I would like to go back and ask some questions about some specific topics.
- WALTERS: Oh, yeah.



- VAN ELLS: In fact, I would like to go all the way back to basic training. What sort of training were you doing specifically? I had you fill out this biographical data sheet. You mentioned you were trained in artillery yet you ended up in the infantry?
- WALTERS: Right.
- VAN ELLS: The Army has a reputation –
- WALTERS: That's right.
- VAN ELLS: There is the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way. Why don't you describe that situation when you were slated to go into artillery at some point?
- WALTERS: Yes.
- VAN ELLS: That changed when you were sick apparently?
- WALTERS: That's right. When I had the operation for hemorrhoids that changed the picture. But I was supposed to be in the field artillery, trained in the field artillery, dug huge emplacements for field artillery pieces. And, well, spent the winter in North Carolina, and it is fairly cool there outdoors most of the time, intense, and really a kind of a tough basic training. But I kind of liked the field artillery, and I was kind of looking forward to going to Europe, really, because that was a rumor and how rumors go. But then when I had the operation, I had no idea what was going to happen except when I got to California, they issued us OD's. We were going to go to Alaska. Two days later, they took the OD's away from us and issued us fatigues, and we left from Camp Stoneman underneath the Frisco Bridge and for twenty-one days until we reached Goodenough Island
- VAN ELLS: So you were never trained in artillery--I mean infantry necessarily?
- WALTERS: Never had one day's training in infantry.
- VAM ELLS: Now, to – yeah.
- WALTERS: When I was inducted into the 127 Infantry, they handed me a rifle and I think it is a 1918 rifle, and I had a grenade launcher on the end of it. And I carried two or three grenades in my belt for it plus regular rifle shells. So I was a rifle grenade launcher of this rifle platoon.
- VAN ELLS: In terms of basic training, now, you had been educated, I don't know if you had traveled or not before you were inducted into the service, but what I am getting at is that the military seems to bring people together

from all different parts of the country. And the country wasn't nearly as well integrated as it is now. There were still various regional distinctions and that sort of thing. So if you could just sort of comment on if it was, in fact, your experience that you had people coming together from all different parts of the country and if you would comment on sort of relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds and of different regional backgrounds?

WALTERS: When I was at Fort Bragg, most or a lot of the young people being trained there were from the Midwest. I had several friends from around Cleveland, Ohio, and in Pennsylvania. And when I left them and went out west and into the infantry, I found that a lot of those people were from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and the South, and, of course, the 32nd Division from up in Wisconsin. But two of my better friends, the ones that I read letters for and wrote letters for, one was from Alabama and one was from North Carolina. I ran into actually only one Negro and that was when I was in the hospital just before Christmas on Leyte. I had dysentery problem and I was in the hospital for just a few days at Christmastime, but I joined my Company just in about two weeks. I saw just the one black fellow. He was a nice young man. I think if I could say anything about the young people from the South, it seemed to me that they did not have the fear that we did. They seemed to be not so much afraid.

VAN ELLS: Do you mean in combat or just--

WALTERS: In combat, in combat, yeah. This Gene Atkins, the boy that got the award, Congressional Medal of Honor, he had a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] and I have told you of the incident when I was behind the log. And he was standing up by me about six, seven feet from me with that BAR just sweeping and firing. And here (laughs) I am ducking.

VAN ELLS: Why do you suppose that was?

WALTERS: I don't know. I wished I knew.

VAN ELLS: It's an interesting observation.

WALTERS: Yes, it was. He -- Good kid.

VAN ELLS: Now, life in the military is much different than civilian life. You are under a lot of different restrictions and that sort of thing and some people don't always adapt well --

WALTERS: Yeah.

VAN ELLS: To the military. Gee, when I was in in like in the 1980's, it wasn't terribly tough, but people would –

WALTERS: That's right.

VAN ELLS: Leave for inadaptability or whatever the case may be. In your experience, did you personally have any difficulties adjusting to military life and then more generally were there some around you that didn't seem to --

WALTERS: Mark, I don't think I had too much trouble adjusting. Basically I had come from a poor family in Eau Claire. And I have told this to my wife and other people, when I went into service, I had a feeling I was going to come out okay. Now, that's a funny thing to say, but I had it. And I don't--I don't think at that time I was over religious. Religion meant a lot to me, but, you know, I just felt I am going to come out of this. Basic training wasn't too tough for me. I had been in athletics when I was in high school and college. I think that kind of helped for marches and runs and that sort of thing. So I came through that fine. In fact, I was not surprised when they found that I had to have that operation when I was through with my artillery training, because I'd had it in college. I knew I had hemorrhoids, but I just hadn't had the operation. My gosh, twenty minutes to 12. You know that? (laughs) Oh, is that an hour early?

VAN ELLS: I haven't set the clock. It was daylight savings time.

WALTERS: Oh, okay. What is it? 25 to 11. Okay. I thought, my gosh, we haven't talked, I haven't talked that much.

VAN ELLS: You haven't. Reminds me I have to change the – Was there something you were going to add or?

WALTERS: I think I probably said to you before, there are four times when I was in the service in the South Pacific I should have been killed. Once when the Japanese had me spotted behind the tree, once when the “knee mortars” dropped between us. I was in a foxhole on Leyte with my first sergeant. He was a big fella. Within a yard of him, and a Jap sniper picked him up instead of me and shot him right through here. It didn't kill him, but he was wounded and got out. He was out of it. And another time when we were up on the Villa Verde Trail, similar. I was in a foxhole and a friend of mine was in his foxhole just next door to me. And he was silhouetted and they picked him up and shot him right through here and killed him, went through his heart. So I figure it could have been me just as well. And one other time, I was standing with a captain who was our commanding leader of our platoon. He was from North Carolina, a

nice young fellow. And he was looking over our perimeter to see that we were situated fine in the jungle on Villa Verde Trail. And a Jap sniper evidently saw his captain bars, picked him up, right through the heart just like that and he was gone. Here I am standing like over here, he is here. It makes you think, really. But like I said, I had that feeling I was going to come through.

VAN ELLS: Yeah. Do you think it is true that there are no atheists in foxholes? How much of it is God's grace and how much of it is luck and kind of like (unintelligible) --

WALTERS: I think, yeah, I think there is luck there, too, I really do, and God's grace, I really do. One night two of us were in a foxhole and we heard some noise down below us and we thought the Japs were coming up after us. And we threw grenades after grenades and went back to the CP and got some more grenades and threw grenades and grenades. And finally the noise lessened. So we didn't do anything. So the next morning we find out it is one of our own patrols down below that was going through there. Well, we didn't know. Had no idea. Thought they were Japs coming up the hill. It was a horrible, horrible experience for me. Now, some people have good experiences in the warm, and I can understand that, but my experience to me was a horrible, horrible experience. One of the thoughts that I had in my mind all the time I was there was that my wife and my beautiful young daughter who was ten months old when I left to go in the service, and I will always remember, Mark, on the night we came back from Camp McCoy when I had been discharged, she had a hold of my hand. And other soldiers were in the train, the 400, remember. And she would say, "That's my daddy, That's my daddy," all the way back. She was proud, too, really, cute little thing, oh!

VAN ELLS: I've got a couple more questions about the combat. Then I want to ask some more sort of social history of the GI type of questions. On New Guinea and then on the Philippines, about how many days were you in combat compared to not being in combat? For example, like at Aitape, how many days were you in combat? Were you constantly pushing up or was it like a couple days on and a couple days off?

WALTERS: It was not constant, because we were in camp like for a couple days. Then we would go on patrol that would last probably two, three days up and back. Of the seventy-fifth or seventy-sixth days we were in combat in New Guinea, I would say like probably half of it was actually we were on the move doing something. Otherwise we were probably setting up the perimeter and waiting for the Japs or that sort of thing. On Leyte [**End of Tape 1, Side A. ca. 30 mins**] – but of the days we were there, I think we pushed a little bit more on Leyte than we did in Luzon, because on Leyte, the Japanese had tanks and other things that they used. One of the things I

want to mention to you, Mark, now one night on Leyte, I was in a foxhole fairly close to the Japanese perimeter and the Japanese came in there with grenades and they attached a piece of TNT to them and then they'd pull the cap on the grenade and throw it. Of course, a huge explosion. Of course, that shrapnel has gone all over. Well, when they started throwing them fairly close to our place where we're dug in, we were told to move back. I moved back and I got a little scratch on my face, but I think it was probably from a brush. I don't think it was from shrapnel. But at least I didn't report to sick call or anything or get a purple ribbon for it or anything. But that was close, but we in turn for the first time used a flame - thrower on them. And I remember one of my friend who was supply sergeant when I was art officer, he was the first one to use that flamethrower, and he crept up as close as he could and then he "pfft, pfft," you know, and that drove them back. Finally, we got them going towards Ormoc Bay which was away, we had pushed in the other direction actually south kind of and then we pushed them towards the west, which is Ormoc Bay. And a lot of them got off the island. But, ah dynamite, flamethrower.

VAN ELLS: I've just got two more things I could think of offhand about combat. First of all, as prisoners, one of the handouts you gave me was a surrender leaflet. Now the war in the Pacific was very different than that in Europe?

WALTERS: *Oh, yes.*

VAN ELLS: There wasn't--

WALTERS: Firepower. They had more firepower against them in Europe.

VAN ELLS: Well, I am thinking in terms of surrender. There was really no expectation of surrender?

WALTERS: In the Japs, no.

VAN ELLS: Why don't you just describe the GI's point of view, the GI's perspective on the combat and taking prisoners?

WALTERS: Yeah, I think the GI's view, at least in New Guinea, I think was to kill them, kill them all. And though we did get the one prisoner who gave himself up to them, but he was so thin he was just emaciated. And I remember, because I carried him on my back for like a hundred yards and I was all played out. I couldn't carry him anymore because I had all my equipment and big rifle, and somebody else carried him. And finally they made the decision, our commanding officer and first sergeant made the decision that they would kill him. So they took him off in the woods and shot him and left him there. Well, when we got into the Drinamore Camp,

the lieutenant in charge and the first sergeant caught the devil because they wanted prisoners at that time.

VAN ELLS: For interrogation purposes.

WALTERS: For interrogation, exactly. And they caught the devil. They really did. But then on Leyte, it was a different picture, Mark, because there we had a couple Japanese give up to us. They came in. We had them surrounded, so they just arms up and they came in. I was lucky on Leyte. I was assigned to go forward to cross a road onto a little knob and build a perimeter with other soldiers. And for some reason, the lieutenant asked me to stay back and take notes or something. And while I was back, our own artillery opened up supposedly on the Japs who were beyond. But some of the shells lit on our own troops. And I can remember a young man from who lived in Washington D.C. coming back by me with his arm all up like this and his blown part of his shoulder off. And he says, "Johnny, I am lucky, I am getting out of here." You know. He was glad to go even with the shoulder gone or most of it gone. Well, he was one of the several.[Intercom Message Interruption]

VAN ELLS: I'm doing these interviews. That what I do.

WALTERS: Yeah, yeah. I think when we got to Luzon; it was a little bit different attitude. I think we killed, but I think it was more to take prisoners than it was to kill really. And I shouldn't say there weren't as many along the Villa Verde Trail. They were embedded in the banks. They had caves, you know, and they'd move, roll out these little artillery pieces and bang, bang, bang at us and pull them back or else they set up machine gun, bang bang, you know, and give it to us and pull 'em back. Unless we hit the exact placement where they were, we had to dig them out.

VAN ELLS: Yeah.

WALTERS: So it was really tough fighting, but, like I said, we did not have the firepower against us that they had in the European theater war, but we had the tricky Japanese who were quick to set up ambushes and traps for us.

VAN ELLS: Now, we sort of discussed the GI's attitude towards taking prisoners. What about surrendering if you had to? Now the Japanese had a reputation for not taking prisoners themselves. I mean, what was the sort of, what did GI's think about in that regard?

WALTERS: I really can't say much about that except that I think we were willing to die before we were taken prisoner. I think some especially, like I say, the kids from the South, I think they had that feeling like this Gene Atkins and Romano, I think they had that attitude they would rather die than give up.

VAN ELLS: That was more a pride and esprit de corps than fear of the Japanese?

WALTERS: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah.

VAN ELLS: I see. One last combat question. And that involves the capabilities of the Japanese as a fighting force. Now, you were engaged against the Japanese for a period of almost two years. Did you notice any qualitative decline in their fighting capabilities, or did they stay relatively tough throughout the whole experience?

WALTERS: I think they're the trickiest in New Guinea. We probably faced more firepower in Leyte. And I think they were on Luzon at least where we were in combat, I think there were fewer of them, but probably better Japanese fighters. They didn't give up. They just did not give up. But I do know that when we were on New Guinea, we did take some prisoners who came in with hands up. We had them surrounded and they knew it, so they came in, six, eight of them, you know. But supposedly when we went into New Guinea to fight the Japanese, there was 60,000 in there. And they had their own airstrip that we could not control. We bombed it and bombed it and bombed it, but we couldn't control it and our job was to take care of the 60,000. Well, I know we took care of thousands of them, but I have no idea how many. But lots of bodies, lots of bodies in places. And one of the features I didn't say, Mark, was this. When we were fighting in New Guinea, our food was dropped to us from the air for all of those seventy-five days or whatever it was. Our forces had knocked down trees, cut them off so that they were probably two feet above the ground and so on, but you could walk through them and so on. And our planes would fly low, drop the food in large containers which would break when they hit a stump as you can imagine, so our food was spread all over, but that's the way we were fed. And I remember when we were getting towards the end of our war in New Guinea, some holiday end, I can't think of it offhand, but they were going to drop cake to us. And that was, oh, heaven really (laughed). And they dropped it. And some was smashed, but a lot of it we got. So it was really a blessing.

VAN ELLS: We can move on from the combat to the sort of noncombat experiences. As you mentioned, a lot of times you weren't involved in combat, you were back in camp. I'm sort of interested in GI's life outside of combat, as well. When you weren't actually in the fighting and patrolling and these sorts of things, what did you do to occupy your time? Was there a lot of repair or, you know, the sort of simple soldier vices that are infamous?

WALTERS: Okay. Good. Yeah, when I first landed on Goodenough Island, we were put on patrols. I remember definitely one of my patrols was to go aboard a ship, our own ship and help unload food or supplies, anyway and I can

remember being on deck and seeing this young man standing over there. He looked familiar. So I walked over to him and I said, "Aren't you Jim Young from Eau Claire?" "Yes, Johnny." He recognized me. But he was a first lieutenant or something. So we talked for a few minutes. He was going home in just a short time. I said, "Well, Jim, you know my wife Jewel. Would you mind calling her and tell her that you have seen me and that I am okay?" "Sure, I will." He came home, he didn't call at all. I felt so badly, you know, really, a friend you kind of-- And then when we got back out of fighting at Aitape, I ran into two other kids from Eau Claire. And one of them was my wife's cousin, Cliff, Cliff Rude. And so I said the same thing to him, when you get back to Eau Claire. And he had been in early fighting in New Guinea and he had gone back to Australia and back again. So he said, "I will call Jewel." Well, he did. So she knew that I was getting along fine at that time. Then when I told you about this kid yelling out of the jungle, yelling at me at Finschhafen, Roy Campbell, he did the same thing. When he went home, he called her, too, let her know that I was there. And when I was in the hospital on Luzon, this Cliff Rude's brother, Mannford, who was in the service, he was looking at this hospital list. He saw my name, John Walters. He came up and visited me. He was interested. So when he went home, he told Jewel he'd seen me. (laughs) So it was a kind of repeat, but at least it helped her to know that they had seen me and I was getting along okay.

VAN ELLS: Remarkably small world sometimes.

WALTERS: Yes, it is. And I have to tell you another story, Mark. On the ship that we went from Aitape up to--wait a minute, I am sorry--from Finschhafen to Aitape, which is just a day and a half. I was up on deck when we got on, and I saw this fellow standing on the rail. He had a big Aussie cap on. And I just assume he was an Australian. I went over to him and I said, "What part of Australia are you from?" He says, "I am not, I am from the States." I said, "Oh, oh where about in the States?" He said, "Wisconsin." I said, "Where about in Wisconsin?" He said, "I used to live in Eau Claire, but my dad lives there. I live out east now." He said, "That's where I joined the Marines." He was in Merchant Marines. He said, "My dad used to be the one that carried that stop sign by Huebsch Laundry where there is a railroad that went across the track— went across a road there. He'd stop the traffic so the train could go across." Sure, I knew his dad. So he said, "Have you got any GI socks?" I said, "Yeah, I have got some in my duffle bag." So I gave him a couple pair of those wool GI socks. He said, "You come over here and I'll take care of your food." We were on K rations then. We graduated from C, we were on K now (laughed). So I went up and I remember the first--the first noon, he brought out a great big tray. Oh, what a beautiful food, you know, everything that you would want, and at supertime, the same thing. I would wait until they were through and I would wait out and he would



bring it out. Breakfast they had scrambled eggs and toast and juice and everything, you know. So he took care of me for a day and a half and then shook hands and we were gone. I never did see him again after that. But it just kind of goes to show, you know, that you do meet people all over the world, really. Unbelievable that I should meet that number from Eau Claire.

VAN ELLS: Yeah. Well, it is interesting actually.

WALTERS: Yes, it is.

VAN ELLS: Now, in terms of corresponding with your family, I mean you were obviously able to get many messages back, but you were also writing. This pile of letters here attests to.

WALTERS: Yeah.

VAN ELLS: Were there many delays in the mail? I mean, we're going halfway around the world --

WALTERS: Yeah. Yes.

VAN ELLS: This is before we had airplane --

WALTERS: When you have looked at a couple of these, you will find that I have often said that I haven't received any mail for a day or two. And then I get a whole batch of it, you know, get several letters at once. And, of course, these came to my wife. I don't know. This is interesting. I read something right away at the top. I don't know what it says, but "Sunday evening, October 21st, 1945, October, Sasebo, Kyushu, Japan." Okay. I was on my way home. I was stopped at Sasebo. I am undertaking a big job to fill this sheet on both sides (laughed). I did a lot of writing, but someplace here, I did not get a nice letter, so I am disappointed. (laughs) Yeah, but then I would get a whole bunch of them and I would read them and keep them and read them and reread them, you know how that goes.

VAN ELLS: Well, it sounds like communications were pretty good considering the circumstances?

WALTERS: Yes, they absolutely were. I had no complaints at all. They really got the mail to us.

VAN ELLS: Now, in terms of occupying a typical day when you are not in combat, I suppose there were various fatigue duties to do?

WALTERS: Yes.

- VAN ELLS: Did you have--did you have USO shows or did you get to go on leave somewhere or?
- WALTERS: Let's see. Yes, we saw--we had Brown, Joey Brown was it, Joey Brown? Yeah, Joey Brown we saw on Luzon, on Luzon. I think that's the only show that I remember seeing. No, we had little details around the camp, too, that, oh, I would say roughly every other day you were on some kind of a detail, mostly probably to go get food and bring it back to hand out to the fellows in their ditches where they had their perimeter set up. I don't recall of ever digging latrines, for instance. That doesn't ring a bell. (laughs) But—
- VAN ELLS: Are there –
- WALTERS: Go ahead.
- VAN ELLS: I was just reading some World War II veteran memoirs recently, and this term “chicken” comes up frequently. Do you recall the term? Was there much of that sort of thing when you weren't in combat? And if so, perhaps describe your experience with it.
- WALTERS: No, I can't say I did, Mark, but I had my own inner feeling. When I was in New Guinea, I ran into a Spanish kid from Texas who was a sergeant and I was still a private. And he had distaste for me, and I haven't any idea why except I would not gamble with him. I didn't care to play poker and so on and I just didn't. And Rodriguez just seemed to put me on detail after detail. And finally, one of his superiors who was a staff sergeant and was from Menominee, Michigan, he went to him and he said, whatever his first name was, he said, “Seems to me that you've had Walters on detail more than any other person by a long shot.” And he said, “Is that true?” “Well,” Rodriguez said, “Well, probably has been.” Then it lessened up, so then I got my details, but along with the others, too. You know, the others got it, too. But he was kind of picking on me, I would say.
- VAN ELLS: You mentioned gambling, which sort of brings me to the topic I think I alluded to it earlier and that's the sort of gambling and drinking and these kind of things that some people often associate with soldiers and military life.
- WALTERS: Yeah, yeah.
- VAN ELLS: Sometimes you are in remote areas.
- WALTERS: Yeah, yeah.

- VAN ELLS: You don't have much opportunity for that. Or do other opportunities present themselves, for example, boredom and gambling? Would you just describe the vice situation, I guess, is how you might phrase that?
- WALTERS: Yeah. When we were back at camp when we weren't in combat, let's say we're out of — they have taken us out of camp like I said we went from Aitape up to Hollandia. Okay, here, then the fellows would sit down. They'd play cards for money at night. Usually when we had a rest period like that, they would issue us, oh, a couple six packs of beer or something like that. And I don't recall anyone getting drunk or anything like that, you know. Some get kind of loud, but I would say gambling, yes, they did play poker and that quite a bit.
- VAN ELLS: You didn't have problems with people being drunk on duty?
- WALTERS: No, no, not a bit, never, never.
- VAN ELLS: I think, of course, TV show Mash when they had the still.
- WALTERS: Yeah, yes. No, never saw anything like that, not a bit. I suppose, Mark, like at Hollandia where we were for a couple weeks, now, that was kind of a base camp for quite a while. I can see that going on there, you know, for those who stayed there, because they--that was big enough so they could get their booze and so on. What an experience, Mark, what an experience.
- VAN ELLS: Now, again, as I was reading some of these veteran memoirs, another subject that comes up fairly often and sort of relates to boredom of camp life, I guess, and you mentioned it earlier, too, and that's rumor. Sometimes tall tales get told and that sort of thing. Do you recall any of that sort of thing? If so, do you recall any good ones? (both laugh)
- WALTERS: Well, I remember the good ones when we heard the rumor that the fighting people in Europe when that was over, they were going to come over and help. And that was big to us, because as you know, Mark, we were scheduled to go into Japan and at least lose probably two million men if we went into combat into Japan itself. And the 32nd Division was one of them that I am sure was designated to go in. So we had that to kind of look forward to, you know, if the war didn't end. If we had to go in and fight them in their own country, it was going to be tough on us, and like the rumor that we were going to get help from the European soldiers, that was great. We were glad to hear that. We did notice a little bit more of a pickup in the air cover that we got and, you know, that sort of thing. Now, I could say this. On the Villa Verde Trail, for instance, planes didn't come over and drop any bombs there. You can understand, you know, those close-knit--troops were too close together and so on. I did, when I was

occupying Japan, I did go through the two cities and, boy, they were laid low.

VAN ELLS: You mean Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

WALTERS: Nagasaki, yeah. And by the way, on our way up to Nagoya, which was a replacement depot then, we stopped--our train was stopped because there was a train up ahead that had some problems. They told us we could get off the train and visit in Kobe, which used to be the capital of Japan. But if the train whistle blowed, we were to come back to the train right away. So I got off and I was walking down this little street, and I saw this little, it looked like a store that had a lot of glass things in it and so on. So I went in and a young fellow sitting there. I said, "Would you by chance be able to get me a tea set?" He said, "I think I could. Do you speak English?" "Yeah." I said, "How come?" He said, "I went to a missionary school." So my day was made right then. So he said, "Just a minute." So he went out in the back. He said, "I will get you one." So pretty soon, they brought tea out. I had tea. And I said, "Now one more thing. I have a daughter at home." And I said, "If you could get me a little kimono about that big, I would appreciate it." "Just a minute." He goes out and comes in, just a beautiful little kimono. (laughs) And I've forgotten what he charged me, but very little, if any. I've forgotten. And we visited back and forth there for probably an hour and pretty soon the train blew and I had to go. Now, see, there is something you wouldn't run into ordinarily, would you? You know, somebody that could speak English, you know. And I asked him, I said, "What do you think when our planes came over dropping these bombs?" He said, "It was a beautiful sight, but horrifying, too." I said, "What did you do?" He said, "Well, right up here about a hundred yards, we got a cave, so we just run for that and go in the cave." Good enough. Just a nice, young fellow, you know. So obliging and accommodating. I just couldn't believe it. They could hate us, you know, really, you would think. When I first landed at a place called Fukuoka, which was a -- it was kind of replacement depot for the Japanese in the southern island. We would walk down the streets there and the Japanese women would look at us kind of shy, you know, like that and just like, you know nothing to do, stay away, different feeling completely from what this young man up in Kobe.

VAN ELLS: When you first went to Japan, did you have any fears of sabotage or resistance --

WALTERS: No.

VAN ELLS: To the occupation?

WALTERS: No. I must have been too dumb. I didn't have any fear at all (laughing). First of all, when I went in there, I was not attached to my own Company like the 127-A Company 127. I was attached to K from somebody else. But once I got there, I saw a staff sergeant who was in charge of kind of administration. He, said "No problem." So he just took care of the headquarters. So they got me back into my own Company where I was supposed to be. And so we had very little to do there really. I can't remember even going out on any watching duty or guard duty. I can tell you their beds are the places where they slept are real small. I don't know if you have ever heard that or not, but they are just like about, oh, I suppose they are two by four, little cubby holes. You wonder how they get in them, but they did. That's where they slept. They had several in this camp where this replacement depot was, Fukuoka.

VAN ELLS: I just got one last question about Pacific and then perhaps we can get on to some post war experiences. And that involves the character of the 32nd Division. Now, as I am sure you are well aware, it started out as a Wisconsin and Michigan National Guard Unit and as the war went on sort of became more homogenized, I guess. I'm just interested in your perspective in terms of how the Division seemed or didn't seem to have changed from its National Guard character to its more homogenized character.

WALTERS: Here's a roster of the fellows. Now just by looking at those addresses will give you an idea of where, you know.

VAN ELLS: This list dates from late in the war, at the end of the war.

WALTERS: I carried that with--I must have gotten it right over there when I was overseas. I would say, Mark that I got that when we were probably at Hollandia.

VAN ELLS: So it changed quite a bit? (unintelligible) --

WALTERS: Oh, yes, oh, yes, oh, yes, quite a few of those were killed and so on, you know. I haven't crossed them off.

VAN ELLS: So when you joined the unit, were there very many Wisconsin guys left, in your opinion? Do you think this might have been why you were able to communicate with them?

WALTERS: You're right, there were not very many left. Actually, the one fellow that I knew who was left was a staff sergeant. He was from Menomonee, and he and I have kept in contact for all these years at Christmastime. Lloyd Gannigan his name is. Nice fellow. He is the one that approached that

Rodriguez about giving too much detail to me, you know. So I am indebted to Lloyd. We had a young fellow who was an Indian from Oklahoma, called him Chief. And he was one of the scouts, good scout and he was the kid that got shot through the shoulder, but got out of the war, but wasn't killed that I was sitting next to. Nice fellow, **[End of Tape 1, Side B. ca. 30 Min.]** nice fellow. Nice kid really. Well, see, Mark, I was older than a lot of them, you know. See, I was five, six years older than most of the kids here. Had a kid from - this kid that was killed up in the on the Villa Verde Trail when the sniper picked him up, green to combat. He'd had quite a stay in the states and then was just all of a sudden shipped over, felt sorry for him. Gee, bang, just like that.

VAN ELLS: Some of the post war experiences. Your experience is going to be a little unusual in that you were already established in a profession. I mean you were going on doing your graduate work and it is a little different than a nineteen year old draftee. When you first came back from the war, what were your priorities? What did you want to do, and how did you go about doing them?

WALTERS: I got back the last day of 1945. And I was back working the middle of January in a teaching job, but instead of being principal of the job where I had been before I went in the service, I was now physical education supervisor for the whole Eau Claire system. So I went around from school to school until the end of the year. Then they replaced me back as elementary principal in that school.

VAN ELLS: Yeah. Now, there were--there was the Selective Service Act which guaranteed Veterans their jobs back under certain circumstances. Did that - is that how you got your job back?

WALTERS: Yes.

VAN ELLS: Or did not that not Factor in at all?

WALTERS: Yeah. I think that was true in Eau Claire, yeah, I think they gave the job back to those who had jobs before they went in.

VAN ELLS: Yeah. So you ended up in the same job, eventually you ended up in the same job afterwards?

WALTERS: Yes. Yes.

VAN ELLS: You were working within a month of coming home?

WALTERS: Right, right. Right back to work.

- VAN ELLS: There are a lot of guys I talked to 'em that wanted to take some time off. You didn't have that option. Did you want to do that anyway?
- WALTERS: No, no. My wife was living down home with our child, with our daughter Jane and I wanted to get out, you know, and get started. So before this first school year was out when I was physical education supervisor, we had found a home and had gotten a refrigerator, which were hard to get then at the end of the war. (laughs) I don't know if you –
- VAN ELLS: I bet.
- WALTERS: This was something that was, but we finally got one and found a little home for rent, and that was kind of the start of our progress. And after I had been in that same principalship then until 19--the fall of 1949, I applied for a new school in Eau Claire, Sam Davey School, and I got the principalship. And then I was there for twenty-six years and retired from there in 1975. In the meantime, as far as troops and so on, I joined the Veterans of Foreign War. I am a life member, and I would not say I am an active member. I seldom go to a meeting, so on, except locally.
- VAN ELLS: When did you join, is it right after the war or was it --
- WALTERS: I would say probably a year and a half or within a year, let's put it that way, something about that.
- VAN ELLS: What prompted you to join? Was it patriotism or hanging around with other vets?
- WALTERS: I think probably got a letter in the mail or something, you know, and friends and that sort of thing, you know, in Eau Claire probably had joined. Another thing, the Veterans of Foreign War in Eau Claire, they had a club and an eating place. And it was easy to go out there and eat, you know, if you wanted to. And I think my wife and I had been out there a couple times. We kind of enjoyed it, and we are not drinking people, although I would take a drink at that time. But I think a series of things kind of encouraged me, friends and knowing a little about the local Veterans of Foreign War encouraged me. So I sent in and became a life member of Veterans of Foreign War.
- VAN ELLS: Now, when you first came back, now, of course, you go into the military, you are sort of indoctrinated into this whole different lifestyle and then you are plunked back into civilian life.
- WALTERS: Yeah.
- VAN ELLS: Did you have any sort of, I don't know if difficulties is quite the word,

WALTERS: No, I –

VAN ELLS: But like just wearing civilian clothes or maybe your relationship with your child, for example, just the little everyday things, were there any sort of readjustments or issues that you had?

WALTERS: I don't recall anything like that, Mark, but I had some priorities when I came up. As you know, I had two summers in on my master's before I went in. So the summer of '46, I went back after my master's. In the summer of '47, I got my master's. So then I had some GI time. So it came 1951, '52, '53, I went to summer school out in Denver. And then later on in 1967 or so, I got a government not a scholarship, but a summer school out in Oregon. So I went to school out there. So I was going to school, you know, several summers there, too.

VAN ELLS: Yeah. This was financed in part by the GI bill?

WALTERS: Yes, but I had my master's before I used the GI.

VAN ELLS: Right. So you didn't have to have the whole bachelor's degree, graduate degree to pay for that, but in terms of professional development?

WALTERS: Yes, it did. It helped me very much, you bet. Through the Veterans, I wound up with enough credits to actually have a doctor's degree, but I don't have the residency. I hadn't stayed in one school that long, so, but I have enough credits.

VAN ELLS: Yeah. Would you have pursued so much professional development had it not been for the GI bill, do you think, or would you have done these things anyway or would it have been more difficult?

WALTERS: I don't think so. I, for instance, I wouldn't have gone to Denver for three summers, although I had a sister living there and that would have been an encouragement. But I don't think I would have gone to school, but several little things. It was a five-week session, so it meant that I had three weeks for kind of vacation a little before and a little after. Usually a summer school is eight weeks, see, and so here I had three five-week sessions for three years. So we went out there, stayed in the Quonset huts on the campus of the University of Denver. I got a lot of credits and so on. It counted towards more money for my salary in Eau Claire, because if you earn so many degrees past a certain degree, you get more salary. Ten degrees past a master's, you get so many hundreds and so on. So that was all kind of encouragement in a way.



VAN ELLS: On the subject of veterans' benefits, were there any others that you utilized? I don't want to pry into your finances, just sort of get a handle on the usage of the benefits. For example, a home loan, did you utilize a GI home loan?

WALTERS: Yes, yes, I did. When we were buying our first home, I applied to the Veterans and I got a loan. And I had it for, oh, I don't know, I've forgotten, I like probably had a ten-year loan, something like that. But anyway, I paid for it for a couple years. But then I became president of the Eau Claire Teachers' Credit Union. And I could get a better deal with the Eau Claire Teachers' Credit Union, so I dropped the Veterans and took it out with Eau Claire Teacher's Credit Union because I saved some money. So then I got the rest of the loan from them. But yes, I did use the Veterans loan.

VAN ELLS: Now in terms of medical readjustments. Again, you were in the Pacific, it was malaria ridden and some of the other diseases, that sort of thing. Did you have any medical problems service related when you came back, for example, recurrence of some of the diseases you had or anything like that? What I am getting at is the Veterans Administration medical facilities. Did you use them at all?

WALTERS: No, not a one, not a thing. I've had several operations, but not connected with the war, like gallbladder, you know.

VAN ELLS: Yeah.

WALTERS: Well, like hemorrhoids, of course, that was before and they took care of that, you know, but - and the appendicitis overseas they took care of. But I've had a colon operation, so on; cancer of the colon. They took out about that much of my colon, you know that's - but that was my own.

VAN ELLS: Gees, you were pretty lucky, I guess. I hadn't thought of this, no malaria, Dengue fever, Beriberi -

WALTERS: No, no I really was. That's why I said God looked down on me, Mark, really. He really did, and I thanked him a million times I hope enough.

VAN ELLS: Those are all my standard questions.

WALTERS: Good.

VAN ELLS: Was there anything you would like to add or anything?

WALTERS: No, except somewhere my wife has played an important part in this. If it hadn't been for she and Jane, I am sure somewhere along the line I would

have faltered and failed, but through her encouragement and Jane's, they have helped to keep me going, sustain me, and give me a little push when I needed it and so on. I have been real lucky. I was, just between the two of us off the record now.

VAN ELLS: Okay. I will shut this off. Well, thanks for coming in.

WALTERS: Yeah.

**[End of interview]**