

Interviewee: Lester Osvold

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 9 August 2002

Location: dining room table of the Osvold home, Cloquet, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, September 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, December 2002

Lester Osvold was born 24 August 1921 on a farm near Randall, Morrison County, Minnesota. One of twelve children, he lived with his family during the 1930s on several rented farms in the Brainerd area. After a year with his family in Arkansas (1937-38), Lester hitchhiked back to Minnesota and ultimately ended up at a CCC camp in northern Minnesota, where he remained until the end of 1941. He was working at Diamond Match in Cloquet in October 1942 when he was drafted into the US Army.

Lester did Basic Training at Camp Roberts, California, and then was assigned to the 104th Engineer Combat Battalion, Ft. Ord, California. With this unit, Lester participated in the reoccupation of Kiska, in the Aleutian Islands (July 1943); landings at Eniwetok and Majuro Atolls, Marshall Islands (February 1944); the invasion of Leyte, Philippines (October 1944); and the invasion of Okinawa (April 1945). Lester's duties included loading and unloading ships, driving trucks, and repairing roads, at times under dangerous conditions. Lester's unit was stationed on Okinawa, preparing for the forthcoming invasion of Japan, when the Pacific war ended in August 1945. Lester then returned to the US, where he was discharged in November 1945 with the rank of tech sergeant.

Back in Minnesota, Lester settled in the Cloquet area, got married (wife Vivian), and raised four sons. He took a job with Northwest Paper (later Potlatch, then Sappi); he retired in 1984 with 35 years of service.

Lester remained active with VFW Post 3979, Cloquet, and enjoyed several hobbies as well as his eleven grandchildren. He passed away on 15 March 2006, aged 83.

Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

L = Lester Osvold

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: This is the 9th of August, 2002 and this is the interview with Lester Osvold. First, Lester, I want to thank you on tape very much for taking time to sit and talk with me.

L: You're welcome.

T: Thanks very much. Let me start by just asking you when and where you were born.

L: I was born on August 24, 1921 at Randall, Minnesota. It's a small place just west and a little bit north of Little Falls, Minnesota.

T: Were you folks farming out there in those days?

L: They lived on my grandfather's homestead at the time. They were farmers.

T: And your grandfather, I think you told me, he was from Norway?

L: Yes. And my mother's dad, his name was Ole Dunnum.

T: Now a lot of the details of the 1930s we talked about before we started to tape so we won't go through those again. Let's go forward to the 7th of December, 1941. Do you remember where you were when you first heard that news?

L: Yes. It was on Sunday morning and I got out of bed and the radio was going and I heard the news that the Japs had struck Pearl Harbor. I was in the CC [Civilian Conservation Corps] Camp down at the Minnesota State Headquarters, CC Headquarters, in St. Paul. It was the Radiator building at the time, is where they were located.

T: Were you in a room with some other folks when the news came on the radio?

L: I was on my way to breakfast so, yes, I suppose you can say that. It was the CC Camp Headquarters. There were quite a few other boys there as well. It was a training school for the cooks. Of course, the cooks were there making the breakfast. Other guys that worked at the camp.

T: What was the general mood when the news was announced?

L: On my own part I felt shocked and a dread of it. I was angry. A lot of mixed emotions. I was ready to just go right into the Army is what I wanted to do. Go out and enlist right away.

T: And yet, I know it was almost a year before you did actually enter service.

L: Yes. I was discharged from the CCC shortly. When I came home I told my mother I wanted to join the Army and go right in to fight the Japs. She encouraged me to stay around and help out at home for a while. She said, "They'll draft you soon enough." So I took her advice.

T: Did you? Did it take some convincing or were you ready to listen?

L: I pretty much always listened to my mother. I was kind of helping out a lot at home anyway. I thought I'd better just stick around and help mom a little longer before I went.

T: During the first part of 1942 then, jobs were, I believe you said, a bit easier to find.

R: Right after the war, yes, when so many young men had been drafted. There were a lot of openings in the factories and stuff so I went down to the Diamond Match Company [here in Cloquet] and was hired right away.

(1, A, 62)

T: Was the money pretty good at that point?

L: I don't remember exactly what we were making at that time, but as it goes in that particular area I think it was the going rate. It was pretty good.

T: Did you stay there then until you were drafted in October 42?

L: I didn't just stay at the Match Company, I stayed home until I was drafted. Then when the opportunity came to work for a contractor so I could make more money, I went to work for them, down at the steel plant in Duluth was where it was. They were adding on to the steel plant.

T: Did you move to Duluth or were you just going back and forth every day?

L: No. I just went back and forth from Cloquet to Duluth with my brother-in-law. He worked at the same place. He had a car and we rode together.

T: The steel mill there, were they adding more people?

L: I believe it was they were adding some extra, I forget what they call them, some big tanks. They were lined with bricks and stuff. Just common labor was what I was doing. Loading the bricks in a sling and sending up there for the bricklayers.

T: So unskilled labor.

L: It was unskilled at that time.

T: Were people joining the service out of that steel mill, too?

L: I have no experience about that, I don't know. But I would imagine they were. They were taking people from everywhere. If they weren't actually needed for defense purposes, I mean, they would take them.

T: You were in Cloquet then for about ten months after the war started.

L: I guess so. I never really thought about it.

T: Did Cloquet begin to change at all now that the war was here?

L: I can't really think how much it really changed. I know people all over were busy. Everybody was working hard to keep the war effort going. I don't think there was too much carousing and celebrating of that kind. Everybody was just busy working.

T: Were you attending a church at that time?

L: Not at that time I wasn't.

T: You were drafted in October of 1942. Do you remember getting the letter in the mail?

L: I can't say I really remember it. I know I got it because I had to go to Fort Snelling, down in Minneapolis.

T: What was the response of your mom or the other members of your family when it was official that you were going into the service?

L: They were concerned. They hated to see me go, I'm sure of that. I know that. Of course, my family was always quite religious, so they said their prayers and everything were going with me. God would keep me safe. I hadn't even been baptized at the time. But I believed in God and I always prayed to God and I read the Bible and stuff like that. I just wasn't going to any particular church at the time.

T: So was anyone else from Cloquet drafted the same time that you went down to St. Paul with?

L: There was a whole busload of us that went at the same time. I couldn't tell you who they all were.

T: Not names, but there were some other people on the bus.

L: We had a busload going down.

T: Do you remember anything that ride down to St. Paul? What was going through your mind?

L: No, not really. It was just something I had to do and I was anxious to get going.

T: Anxious to get started?

L: Yes.

T: You went for Basic Training to Camp Roberts, California.

(1, A, 131)

L: That's correct.

T: Was that a new part of the country for you?

L: Oh, absolutely. I had never been to California before. I had no idea what it was like. West of Monterey was where it was located. No, not Monterey, but it was in that area. Close enough. It was quite wild and a little bit like a desert out in that area. There weren't too many trees. The trees that did grow out there had a lot of moss in them. I remember that. During Basic Training when we were camping out and stuff I used to pick that moss and put it in the bottom of my pup tent for a mattress. If you pick enough of it you get a nice cushion there. Sort of like laying on feathers.

T: Do you remember when you first arrived at Camp Roberts? Was it by train or by bus?

L: We went out on a train from Minnesota. There was a big troop train that went out. I remember crossing the Salt Lake and the Salt Flats or whatever it was. It was just miles and miles and miles of nothing but salt. That was strange to me to see all that. Then when we got to the mountains another engine had to couple up onto the coaches to get it over the mountains.

T: Is that the first time you had really seen tall mountains?

L: That's the first time I had, yes. The first time I'd been out of Minnesota actually.

T: Other than Arkansas, right?

L: Other than Arkansas.

T: What can you say about the mood on the train among all these guys?

L: It was just joking and joshing going on. Some talked about their families. Just more or less communicating with each other and getting as much enjoyment out of it as we could.

T: Some guys more serious than others? Or some guys more...

L: There were some of them withdrawn and quiet. I suppose they were probably scared and lonely already. Leaving home for the first time. Most of them.

T: Were some of these guys younger than you? You were twenty-one by now.

L: I think some of them must have been. I never really gave it much thought. They were all just as big as I was. I never thought about age. If we were old enough to go that was it.

T: Do remember actually arriving at Camp Roberts? When you got off the train or got off the bus? What was the initial reception there?

L: Of course you met your sergeant for the first time. I forgot what language he used but he got us all off the train and got us out to camp.

T: You were still dressed in civilian clothes when you went out to camp, right?

L: No, we got some uniforms when we went to Fort Snelling.

T: So you were already in your Army uniform when you got out there.

L: We were already in uniform. Some of them didn't fit too well.

T: How about your own? Was it the right size?

L: Pretty much. I wasn't too bad off.

T: This sergeant, do you remember his name?

L: No.

T: He got you off the train and got you off to Camp Roberts. What was Basic Training all about?

L: The way I see it now it was about getting us and keeping us in physical shape for one thing. We had done a lot of calisthenics on the parade ground early in the morning. We'd fall out and do some calisthenics and stuff and then we'd go in and get ready for breakfast. Discipline was the thing. They wanted to make sure they drilled it into us that we were going comply. When we were told to do something we better comply. There were consequences. That was one of the things we learned real quick. And to keep our bed area, the area that we were assigned, the cot we were assigned to, keep it neatly made and keep our clothes neatly in place. Everything had to be shined and polished. Then of course we had our main Basic Training. Firing the rifles. It happened to be an anti-tank battalion so we got into anti-tank, 37mm cannons toward the tail end. There wasn't that much ammunition so to start with for firing those cannons to get the idea of how to track and move the thing they had a 22 rifle barrel mounted inside the barrel of the 37mm. So you were actually firing a 22 rifle instead of a cannon.

(1, A, 199)

T: Before you moved up to the actual rounds that it would fire.

L: When we actually graduated we only fired like three rounds of actual 37mm ammunition. Then we were fighting a moving silhouette of a tank.

T: Did you consider yourself to be adequately trained? If you were going into an anti-tank battalion, did you feel comfortable that you were trained and ready to go?

L: They had a start. I guess our main training was the training on the rifles. We did take training with the rifles and the BAR and even the 30 caliber machine gun. We had some basic on those weapons as well.

T: The ones that you could expect to come into contact with.

L: Yes. Not only the canons we would fire but we had to fire against troops as well if we needed to.

T: Was this the first time away from home for an extended period of time for you?

L: Outside of being in the CC camp. Yes. I worked out that summer in Iowa and I worked another summer over by Staples away from home. I wasn't that far away from home. I managed rather well actually for having been used to having a big family of brothers and sisters. But I just kind of took these guys as my big brothers and my comrades. So I had some good friends in the service. We started going to church together and stuff like that. They always had service on Sunday. No matter what denomination they had chaplains that served for the whole purpose.

T: Would you say that you didn't have a real difficult adjustment to being away from home then?

L: No. I didn't have any problems. Until I got overseas and having been gone from home for so long. There were days when you were pretty darned lonely. You were wondering if you were ever going to get back.

T: At Basic Training were there other guys who seemed to have a more difficult time being away for the first time?

L: Yes, I suppose there were some but I never really ran into anybody that really was having a bad time.

T: Guys seemed to adjust pretty well.

L: Yes.

T: Is there a story, an anecdote, you can relate about Basic Training? Something that sticks in your mind? Humorous or otherwise?

L: The funniest thing that happened was when we were first inducted in the Army. We took most of our clothes off and we were going through the line and were getting our shots and stuff and some of these guys would see that needle and they would pass out before they even got the needle in their arm. *(laughs)* That was kind of funny.

T: Was this at Fort Snelling?

L: At Fort Snelling. They'd just pass right out on the floor. Just klonk, down they went.

T: What did they do when guys when that happened?

L: They just picked them up and talked to them a little bit and gave them the shot and booted them out of there. *(laughs)*

T: Fainting wasn't going to keep them out.

L: No.

T: From Camp Roberts you went, with a little bit of delay, your next major stop was Fort Ord. Is that right?

L: Yes. That was just kind of an in between training and getting assigned to your outfit. It was just someplace for you to be and keep you in the military and keep your discipline up. We had a few little jobs to do. We did some work around the post.

T: Basically you were just waiting to be assigned to...

L: Waiting to be assigned mostly. We had free time. We'd go to town. We went downtown Seattle and I used to go roller skating and stuff like that. The USO had a club right there on the camp. They used to bring busloads of girls out on Saturday night and have music and we'd have a dance right there on the post.

T: Where is Fort Ord located?

(1, A, 254)

L: Just outside of town, near Seattle.

T: When you were at basic were there any minorities, blacks for example, at training?

L: Basic training? If there were any I never really noticed it. We were all in there together. We did have a couple of Mexicans and we had an Indian.

T: American Indian?

L: American Indian. His name was Ghostbear. He was about as Indian as you can get.

T: How long was it in the service before you encountered blacks at all?

L: No problems at all as far as race goes. I didn't see any problems.

T: Were they a member of the combat engineer battalion that you served with?

L: Yes. We had about three Mexicans and at least one or two of these Indians in our outfit. I was friends with most of them.

T: Did blacks do things drive trucks or cook meals or things like that?

L: I didn't really see any different. We did run into a black outfit after we hit the Philippines. The invasion of the Philippines. There was a black outfit that landed quite close to us. The only thing I thought was a little bit strange was that they abandoned some of their equipment that we took over and used because it wasn't being used. We needed all the equipment we could get. That was strictly not kosher to the military rules.

T: Allocating that equipment?

L: Yes. Like a couple of trucks they left behind. We used. We made good use of them.

T: Is it your impression that race relations in the military was or was not a concern?

L: I didn't see any of it myself. I don't think there was any big concern. There were always some of these southern boys you know that talked the black boys down a little bit but other than that I didn't see any real serious problem.

T: Did people tend to stick to their own racial or ethnic groups as far as in free time or things like that?

L: Not necessarily. We mixed it up real well. Some of these guys were funny as heck. Always full of the dickens and telling jokes and stuff and making you laugh. Those were the kind of guys you liked to hang around with.

T: Can you remember a specific person that sort of fits that bill?

L: One of my good friends. He died a few years ago. From California. A Mexican. Oh, man when you get to be over eighty you have problems with names.

T: He was a Mexican guy?

L: Yes, he was a Mexican. One of his friends was Londeros. I remember him. He was a real nice guy. I drove truck mostly in the Army. When I wasn't driving he was driving my truck when we were working shifts. When you're out there in combat you're kind of working around the clock. You don't have the night off. You work. Somebody's working all the time. So when I wasn't driving the truck he was driving the truck keeping those roads open and stuff.

(1, A, 302)

T: So you worked side by side with a Mexican-American.

L: Yes. You could say that, sure. No problems.

T: Would you differentiate between whites from the south and whites from the north as far as how they perceived or treated minorities, especially blacks?

L: I did see some of that. It seemed like the people that lived in the south they were more likely to run the coloreds down a little more than the northern boys. Hardly ever heard anything derogatory about blacks or anybody else from the people from the north. Once in a while from the south. They were brought up below the Mason-Dixon Line and it was just kind of born right into them I suppose. It's kind of hard to overcome for them. They never looked at a black as equal I don't think.

T: Did that kind of attitude bother you?

L: Yes. It bothered me.

T: Did you find yourself avoiding southern whites or finding them people you didn't want to hang around?

L: Not really. I didn't really avoid them. Whenever they started talking that way I just turned away and let it go in one ear and out the other. I didn't carry it with me.

T: Your first station away from the US was in the Aleutian Islands. Can you briefly summarize what your unit was doing in the Aleutians?

L: We were doing what we were trained to do before we left. We were unloading ships and brought the supplies in and established the dumps and then after that our outfit was helping to repair the airstrip there. We were starting to build a dock.

T: This is on Kiska, right?

L: This is on Kiska. There was a Seabee outfit there helping to build that dock. That's Navy. We were working side by side with those guys. Doing the same kind of work. The same thing they were doing.

T: How long were you up there all together in Kiska? Or in the Aleutians?

L: Maybe three months at the most. I really never kept track of the time. We weren't there too long actually.

T: You mentioned not keeping track of time. Did time become abstract when you were at duty stations?

L: I would say so. You didn't pay much attention to time at all. You just did it from day from day. Whatever you had to do.

T: What can you say about Kiska or the Aleutian Islands as a place?

L: It's kind of a miserable, desolate place. There's no trees on the island. Nothing but brown grass. I never saw any green. And if several guys walked behind each other across it the first thing you know you're going through what we call the tundra and you start slipping and sliding. It was always cold, always foggy, rainy. This was in the fall, or late summer. You were always wet. Like when we had to go over to mess hall, we had a mess tent. All these guys coming for mess you know pretty soon we're walking in mud clear up to our knees. This soupy mud because there's too much traffic. That's kind of the area it was. Pretty miserable place. Now the airstrip was being laid over with those metal... I forget what they call them. Those sheets. They were hooked together. So that's what they were doing. They were filling in holes and putting that metal sheeting on there so the airplanes could land.

(1, A, 345)

T: Were you doing construction work or just sort of moving supplies and driving trucks?

L: In the Aleutians we didn't have any trucks up there because of the tundra and the way it was. We had all cats. There were web-footed cats and web-footed trailers. We had put additions on the tracks of the cats so that the tracks were about two feet wide. So they wouldn't sink. And the trailers they pulled was like a tandem-trailer. They had a track over the two axles. That's how you moved material around there. That's the only way you're going to get anywhere.

T: Did it mean that work took longer to get done because of these conditions?

L: Oh, I'm sure. It wouldn't be near so easy to do the job in those conditions, so it would take longer.

T: Did the gray environment and the wetness affect peoples' mood up there?

L: Oh, yes. I think it did. Everybody was not too happy. They were always kind of grumpy. A little bit quick to bite back in case somebody said something wrong. It was a little bit tougher. Pretty tough.

T: For yourself too?

L: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

T: By the time you hit Alaska it's clear you were part of the larger war effort against the Japanese. When you perceived the enemy, in this case the Japanese, what did that concept mean to you?

L: Naturally you were scared. You're going up against people that are shooting at you, you're going to be scared. You just wonder how far you're going to get before you get it. When we got, in the Aleutians not Alaska, down to Kiska and our troops made a picture screen. We went in from the opposite of the main harbor there and across the island and our two troops came together in that fog and wind and rain all the time. There was some firing going on our own troops before we discovered we were friendly troops. There were a few casualties that way. Otherwise the Japs had been dug in. They had many trenches and many gun emplacements. Kiska was the base for their two-man submarines so there was a shop right there on the shore where they had rails coming up where they used to pull the submarines right out of the water.

T: Those two-man subs were based there.

L: Two-man subs were there. There was more like (***). There were quite a few ships that were sunk in the harbor there. Evidently our planes had managed to sink them before we got there.

T: So you arrived just after the Japanese left.

L: The Japs had left the day before we hit the island. That's the way I understand it. But we didn't know that.

T: So from what you knew they were still there.

L: We thought they were still there. When we found out they weren't there we were pretty happy about that.

T: How would you describe your own mood when some kind of action appeared imminent?

L: *(5 second pause)* I never really gave it too much thought. I just thought I would do whatever I had to do. And that was that.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 381.

T: Was it easier to think that way than to try to worry or think about what might happen?

L: I think so. I don't think it would pay to try to worry about what's going to happen. You gotta think about what you're going to do right now. Don't think about what might happen. It'll freeze you up so you won't be able to do anything.

T: Were other people as successful as you at thinking that way?

L: I never asked them but I think judging from their actions most of them must have been like that. Just went ahead and do what they had to do. You had to do it. It's either you or them, and you better make it them.

T: You and others arrived just after the Japanese departed. Had they left stuff behind?

L: Like I said there was one two-man sub that was still there. I don't remember what else might have still been there. There was some evidence of the gun emplacements still there.

T: They took their weaponry?

L: Most of that stuff must have been out of there with them.

T: After a brief stop in the States, Les, you went to the South Pacific.

L: No. We didn't stop in the States at all. We went directly from Kiska on the *President Monroe*, that was the only passenger liner we ever got loaded on, and went directly down to Hawaii. That turned out to be a nice cruise. I loved that. When we got out of the Aleutian area the sun came out and ocean was calm and it was nice. We had moonlight nights. We had movies to watch on deck and stuff like that. It was nice. Very nice. Big difference from Alaska.

(1, B, 422)

T: Could you detect a more relaxed mood among...?

L: Oh, absolutely. The rumor goes around that we were going back to the States, but we didn't go back to the States. You don't know where you're going. They don't tell you until you're well on your way. They never tell you where you're going.

T: It doesn't mean there's still rumors floating around though.

L: Yes, the rumor floating around was that we were going back to the States. That didn't happen. Everybody was happy about that.

T: Hawaii was okay, right?

L: Yes. Hawaii was fine. We hated to see all those ships sunk in the harbor.

T: Rumors. What part did rumors play in the military among the enlisted guys?

L: Well sometimes there's good rumors and it will lift your spirits and the bad rumor will put you down a little. It just depends on what kind of a rumor it is.

T: Does one learn to screen the rumors?

L: I did anyway. I think most of us did. You heard the rumor and you said well, it would be nice if it happens but I'm going to wait and see. You kind of learned that rumors are rumors.

T: Where did you go from Hawaii?

L: They gave us some work on Hawaii. We wound up blacktopping in front of the ammunition tunnels and stuff, the parking area, the loading area. We laid blacktop there. Then we loaded on board ship again and headed out. We didn't know where we were going then, either. We went to the Marshall Islands.

T: So you didn't know where you were going when you got back on the ship?

L: No. We never knew. You don't hear that until you're almost there.

T: Rumors must have been rampant again as to where you were headed?

L: There would be just guessing. Anybody was guessing. Nobody knew. We knew that didn't tell us. The orders would come down soon enough. We'd find out before we got there.

T: You're pretty stoic, it sounds like. It sounds like it would be very tempting to worry about this. But you just waited to see what would happen.

L: That's right. There's no use worrying about it.

T: I bet there are plenty of guys who did though.

L: I suppose there were. I never saw any evidence of it. I never saw anybody sick about it or anything.

T: I think about how different people react in different situations. Boy there are just worry-warts by nature sometimes. I can see in a situation like this where you don't know where you're headed, that it would really get on some peoples' nerves.

L: If you did know you just had that much more time to worry about it. It was smart that they didn't tell you. The enemy had no chance of hearing it from somebody either. Like the old saying during the war went: "Loose lips sink ships." We were doing a lot of shipping all over the Pacific. Lot of big convoys going. There was a lot of commerce going out of there. We were in a pretty good convoy.

T: When you went to the Marshall Islands you were in a convoy?

L: Yes. The troop ships and destroyers and not a battlewagon but cruisers. A couple of cruisers. There might have been one aircraft carrier. Sometimes we even had a sea-going tug following behind another ship, because they were so small they'd have to follow in the wake. They would flounder in the big waves. The tugs aren't very big. Even a destroyer was not very big. They're under the water more than they're over the water a lot of times when it gets rough. More water washing over the decks.

T: Are you one of these people that got seasick?

L: No, I was fortunate that way. I never got seasick on the bigger ships.

T: Other guys must have.

L: When we went to the Aleutians on those LSTs we had one sergeant that never got out of his bunk. Those LSTs are small, flat-bottom ships. They are really rough.

They ride on top of the water. When they come over those huge waves there would be half of the ship sticking out in the air and when they came down (*sound: smack!*) like that.

T: Do you remember that trip up there, that LST?

L: You better believe it.

(1, B, 504)

T: What do you remember about that?

L: It was pretty darned rough. We had an LCT on the deck, which is a landing craft tank. The next size smaller than an LST. It open on both ends except for the bridge. You can open it on both ends. You can use it in between an LST and the shore if you want to direct traffic across. It's big enough to haul about four or five tanks. The big Sherman tank. They used it also for unloading off the ships, unloading cargo to shore. Ship to shore. Part of our job while we were going was to watch, this thing was on skids and was chocked down, so that when we got there they just lifted the LST and chopped the chord and she went sliding off sideways in to the harbor and launched right off the deck that way. That's the only time I felt a little seasick. I had a little trouble getting my chow. I'd come off the deck to go through the chow line through the galley. That was inside. I'd get my food and get right out on deck. As long as I was on deck I was fine. Below deck I had trouble.

T: Were your sleeping quarters below deck?

L: Yes. Those were all below deck.

T: Was this a large compartment then where they sort of packed a lot of guys in there?

L: Yes. You had hammocks. Most of them were hammocks. Crawled into the hammock. There were as many as five high from the floor up. We could get quite a few hammocks.

T: Those large compartments with lots of guys must have smelled pretty bad sometimes.

L: I never really noticed it. Never noticed it. We had enough fresh air coming in and out of there. They had it pretty well ventilated. I can't say that it didn't smell, though. The latrine sometimes, they called them the heads in the Navy, they sometimes were a little smelly. You ever take a salt-water bath? Well, that's what you got aboard ship mostly—salt water. It's bad for bathing. They had their own facility where they distilled the seawater to make salt-free water. They cooked with it and stuff like that. Kind of limited for bathing.

T: Is salt water bathing a problem?

L: Yes it is, because you can't find a soap that will lather.

T: Soap won't lather in salt water?

L: No. It won't lather in salt water. You always feel sticky.

T: So a freshwater bath was a...

L: That was a luxury.

T: What people take for granted. You got to the Marshalls in '44?

L: I guess that's when it was.

T: This says, this information sheet (*provided by Les Osvold*) I'm looking at, says February 1944.

L: Right. Before that we were on the move out of Kwajalein... Part of the troops that went in there took Kwajalein. We were on standby. So I did get seasick again. They put us in those Higgins boats and we were out there circling, circling, circling. Up and down, up and down. And then the diesel fumes from those engines. That got me. There were quite a few of us that were putting it all over the side. As the good Lord would have it, we didn't have to go in. We finally went back to the ship and then we went to Eniwetok. Then we were in about the third wave. I was always on a special assignment, so when we in to Eniwetok I was carrying a flamethrower.

T: You were carrying a flamethrower. Had you been trained in this?

(1, B, 570)

L: Yes, I had been trained. I had been trained with mortars as well, because when we went in to Kiska I was carrying the base plate of a 90mm mortar. We had a pretty heavy load. The base plates are heavy, seventy-five pounds I think. Just the base plate. I had it on a backboard and then I had my duffel, my Arctic gear in a big bag on top of that.

T: You were dragging some serious weight then, weren't you?

L: You bet I was. We went down net ropes to get in those Higgins boats to go ashore. With all that stuff on your back.

T: Were you worried about losing your footing?

L: If you did you'd fall into the Higgins boat, hopefully. But it was quite a little drop. I never saw anybody that really fell although they came close. Some of them.

T: When you had the flamethrower at Eniwetok. What can you say about that particular landing?

L: It was a pretty hairy landing to us because that was the first live amm... where we had the first live enemy to face. We got in the Higgins boat and headed for shore and of course the Navy was shelling. They were shelling the shore all the while we were going in until the last ten minutes or so. Then they ceased fire then we hit the beach. Some of my buddies in the boat right next to me landed right in front of a machine gun nest. Some of them got killed right there. The sergeant was able to back the boat off and take it back to the ship so these boys got medical aid right away. Well, actually it was the second or third wave I was in, so there was infantry ahead of me. Outside of the ones that were dug in right on the beach there they had pushed the rest of them back already, or off the beach. Actually I didn't get to use that flamethrower, which I'm happy I didn't have to use it. It went pretty quick. There was only one tank on Eniwetok. There was some smaller artillery.

T: With a flamethrower on your back, did that cause a certain level of tension or worry for you?

L: Yes, sure. Although it isn't much different than having to carry your rifle or a machine gun, really, because the flamethrower we were trained to use, you spray the area you want with the liquid and then you pull the trigger and ignite it. It goes up right away. You just kind of burn them out. I didn't have to use it. I was kind of happy I didn't have to use it.

There was one time I thought I probably should have used it but somebody else got in there ahead of me. There was another Jap that was buried underneath a bunch of debris. The tops of the palms trees and stuff had come down. It was a palm tree island and most of the tops of the palm trees were on the ground. There was one of these guys underneath some of these branches and stuff. Looked more like a brush pile than anything. One guy had gotten shot there so one of my medics ran to help him and he got shot by this brush pile. The lieutenant and another person came in there with a satchel charge and placed it on there and blew it up. If I'd have been in there with the flamethrower I would have had to burn these guys on the ground. I didn't know if they were dead or what. I didn't. Nobody told me I should go so I didn't go on my own. That's why I didn't go. I might have been able to save the lieutenant from getting shot in the leg but who knows. I might have gotten shot myself just doing that. If I had gone in there with the flamethrower and burned it. Nobody knows that but the good Lord. The one time that I did feel a little bit ashamed that I didn't go right ahead and do that. It would have saved the lieutenant from getting shot through the leg.

(1, B, 629)

T: That's something that I guess you had a chance to replay after...

L: Afterwards. Yes. It was one of those things that goes around in your mind after the fact. It kind of bothers you.

T: Are you a second guesser by nature?

L: I don't think so. Maybe. *(laughs)* I don't know.

T: How long did that action on Eniwetok last?

L: The actual battle only lasted one day. It didn't last the full day. That island was three miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide. That's all the bigger that island was. It was part of a chain of islands. As soon as it got secured then we just started cleaning up the mess. Some of the guys were detailed to bury the dead. You know the Japanese were pretty tough because they would rather die than give up. I think there were one or two prisoners of war that were taken off that island. The only one I really know for sure about was the one where the radio patrol man was out there when we started to build the airstrip. He uncovered one of these guys that were sitting in one these holes. Uncovered him [the Japanese soldier] with the blade. Started the blade. He got pretty excited. He grabbed his rifle. We always had a rifle handy in the trucks. He grabbed it out of the sand and pointed it at him and made him take his clothes off. Took all of his clothes off and put him on the blade. Made him stand on the blade and drove the whole rig over to the command post, with the [naked] Japanese on it, and turned him in.

T: This soldier gave up as opposed to attempting to kill himself?

L: Evidently. As far as I know he didn't try to kill this guy.

T: Did you see this Japanese soldier yourself?

L: No. This was the story and I believe it was true because these guys told me.

T: Was that for you personally the most serious combat situation that you encountered?

L: I don't know if it was any more serious than it was when we went in to the Philippines. We went in to Okinawa. Okinawa was really the toughest invasion of all.

T: How would you differentiate between the three? They were three very different places. What made the invasion s different from your perspective?

(1, B, 658)

L: The size of the operation for one thing. Eniwetok was small and it only lasted one day. When we went in the Philippines on to Leyte there that, I don't know how long that lasted. It was a lot bigger island so the infantry went in ahead of us. They pushed them back although we did hold the line. We were the last to fill in a secondary line. We filled it in there for about a week with our troops. Foxholes and machine guns and we wired our bandoleers out with tin cans on them with rattlers in them so that we would hear anything that got in there at night. The security. We'd hear the bells ringing. So we held the line there for about a week. It must have been about a week before we went back to the beach. Part of our group stayed on the beach but part of us went up there on the line. I was one of them. I happened to be on a 30-caliber water-cooled machine gun at that time. I did manage to get a couple of tracers into a Jap zero that came over carrying a big old torpedo but it didn't do any good. He just kept going. But I could see the tracer going through the fuselage.

T: It sounds like in this engineer combat battalion that you did a number of different things.

L: Yes. We were combat engineers so we were trained like infantry as well. If we were needed we worked like infantry as well as doing engineer work. Supply dumps and keeping the roads open and building airstrips. We built an airstrip on Eniwetok. We had fighters coming in there very shortly. We just got in there with our bulldozers and graders and trucks and stuff and we started clearing out the stumps and leveling and then we had a couple of cranes with drag lines. We started blasting on the beach and pulling this coral, live coral. It crumbles up. We hauled it and dump it and spread it and grade it and water it and it knits back together again because it's alive. It knits back together by itself as long as you keep it watered and wet. That's how we built the airstrip. But I have to say, we didn't do that all by ourselves.

T: This is on Eniwetok you mean.

L: Yes. The Seabees came in. This was a deal for the papers evidently because about two weeks after we'd been there, we were still living in our foxholes and working on the airport and unloading supplies and stuff. Here come the Seabees, full field packs and their rifles and everything. It looks like they're invading something. They come in with their squad tents, wooden floors, screens, cots. They put up a big Quonset hut, refrigerators, electric generators and stuff. They've got coolers and they've got fresh meat and they have everything. They got that all set up before they ever did a lick of work. We unloaded all their equipment and everything else and we were using their equipment building that airstrip a long time before they ever got to use it. But they got the credit for building that airstrip. Not only that, we built the fuel tanks and we set up a water purification system and the whole works on that island. They were out for credit. They were one of the key workers there but I think the Seabees got most of the credit.

T: Was there a sense of rivalry between the Army and the Navy?

L: Not really. I wouldn't say so. Although there was more or less like the kidding stuff that goes on. Some of that might have gone on. Not really anything serious.

T: More kind of bantering back and forth?

L: Yes.

T: When you went in to the Philippines, as opposed to Eniwetok, that was a larger operation you said.

L: That was a very large one.

(1, B, 706)

T: Larger because of more units and more men involved?

L: Yes.

T: From your perspective, off shore at first, how did you, and this is your second invasion now...?

L: Third actually.

T: After Kwajalein.

L: We had collisions. That was an invasion. Then the Marshalls. Then Leyte in the Philippines.

T: How did you size the Philippines up as being similar or different to what you had already experienced?

L: I knew we were going to run into more people. More natives. I was kind of wondering how they were going to fare with all that shelling going on.

T: You hadn't on Kiska and in the Marshalls...

L: On Kiska we didn't worry about the civilians because there wasn't supposed to be any. Just enemy. In the Marshalls the natives there were supposed to have been evacuated off of that island. They were supposed to be on a different island. So we didn't worry too much about natives on that island. In fact, I never did see any on that island. But there had been some there before. We heard stories about them. There weren't any there when we invaded. Just Japs.

T: The Philippines was different though, right?

L: The Philippines was different. What amazed me was how soon after we got ashore that some of these people started coming out. I don't know where the heck they were to keep them from getting killed. Of course we probably didn't see the ones that got killed. The ones that were alive they came right out to the friendly troops. They came right out onto the beaches right away. Quite a few of them. We started seeing them almost the first day.

T: What was the condition of these people?

L: I would say that they were survivors more or less. They lived by the land and they lived in huts that they built themselves with palm branches and stuff. They made that in such a way that it would shed the rain and the walls were made out of that. It was just a few, I don't know what kind of small trees they were, something like a laurel rush that they could use for sides. And they built their little houses. They would always be off the ground. Then the clothes they were wearing were what amazed me. Most of them looked like they were dressed in burlap. I found out later that it was made out of the fibers out of the banana stalks.

T: Woven?

L: They wove the banana fibers and made cloth out of it and made clothes. That's what most of them were wearing.

T: Were they friendly toward the American troops?

L: Oh, absolutely.

T: Was it possible to communicate with the people?

L: Most of them.

T: So they were happy to have you there?

L: Yes. They were happy to see us.

T: Were you ashore the first day of the Leyte invasion?

L: Yes. I was on the third or fourth wave there also. I was on one of those special forces deals again. I had that machine gun. We were set up as perimeter guard around our outfit while they were working on the beaches. Several of us machine guns. In case anything came through we were to protect our troops.

T: Was that the case or was it quiet?

L: We did get mortared. We were unloading ships there. We got one unloaded and I don't know whatever made this captain, he should have known better. He lined them up in a column of threes in enemy territory. Can you imagine that? He should never have done that. And he started to march them down the beach toward the lead ship, the next ship to unload. That's what he was doing. They mortared him and they killed three or four of them.

T: So clearly the Japanese were able to see what was going on?

L: Evidently. They had forward observers that called in the mortar shells. So it wasn't any big stuff but some of our boys did get killed. It made me very upset to see him line them up like that on the beach. He never, never, never should have done that. You don't bunch up like that and march down the beach like we are home for crying out loud in enemy territory. That's where they went.

T: How was it for you to see casualties like that? People that you may have known or people in your own unit?

L: It makes you feel bad, really bad because you hate to see your friends get killed. There's no question about that. It makes you feel really bad. But I suppose in a way we were lucky because that's about the worst we had until we got to Okinawa.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: How did this Philippines campaign then progress for your unit and for you personally?

L: About the same time the pyros went to the front lines there just to hold the line the Japanese had come over and had a direct hit on the ammunition dump. We had armed our cats with armored cabs over the driver so he was pretty much protected. We sent these guys in there with the cats to spread out the stuff that was on fire to save as much of it as possible and keep it from all blowing up. They worked three or four days on that before they got that all done.

T: Three or four days?

L: Yes. Before it was safe enough to do anything with it. I didn't get in on that part of it because I was out there on the line with the 30-caliber machine gun in the foxhole. I heard about it and I know some of our boys were there. Some of our equipment was there.

T: Did you spend your nights in that foxhole too?

L: Absolutely.

T: Did you have other people in the foxhole with you?

L: There were two of us. Just a little ways down there would be more guys. There was a line of us. You were in talking distance of other people.

T: What about the experience at night in a foxhole? It must be dark?

L: It is dark and that's why they had those rolled out wire that we'd stretch out and have tin cans on it in case anything was coming through from the enemy area we'd hear it. The only thing funny that did happen there was about thirty yards down the line one night the one machine gun opened up. They quit pretty quick. Everybody was jumpy and on edge. Just waiting. In the morning we found out here it was one of the water buffalo that had gotten tangled up in that darn thing and they shot a water buffalo. So there was a dead water buffalo there.

T: I guess that's not a bad surprise.

L: No, that wasn't too bad. They wound up giving that back to the natives. They made meat out of it and ate it. A lot of buffalo over there were work animals. They worked in their rice paddies.

T: So somebody's work animal strayed.

L: Yes.

T: Was it nerve wracking or stressful to be in a foxhole at night?

L: Absolutely. Because it's dark and you can't see that far and you don't know where the enemy is and he could be thirty feet from you and you couldn't hardly see him unless there was some movement or some noise. You're alert.

T: How did you deal with the stress of having to get through a night in a situation like that?

L: Pray a lot. You just stay alert. If your buddy could sleep you let him sleep and then he would do the same for you. If you could sleep when you tried to sleep.

T: Could you?

L: Not very much. I remember being on that special detail and being on that machine gun all night long for days and days and days. Because after the incident with the ammunition dump there were three like C-47 cargo planes that came over that were supposed to have Japs in them. They crash landed close to the airport which wasn't very far from where we were. We were all pretty jumpy about these guys coming in. There were many days there with no sleep. It's a good thing they finally announced that it was all clear. It was safe. I was able to go and sleep in my cot in a tent that we had set up in our company area. We had tents there so in the

day time I spent some of the time in that tent. Some of the other boys would be out there on the machine gun. It almost got me.

T: How does lack of sleep affect guys?

L: Eventually you kind of go numb. You can't hardly think. You're just tired and it's so hard to move. So hard to do anything. Just plain tired out. Your brain goes numb. It's hard to even think. It's a bad time. A very bad time.

T: How long did the campaign in the Philippines last for you?

L: I didn't keep track of time. It was after Christmas before we got out of there. I remember having Christmas...

T: So October, November, December. Several months then you were in the Philippines.

L: Yes.

T: Once away from that beach area, what were you doing for these couple months?

(2, A, 105)

L: Seems like everywhere we went the rain hit and it wiped out all the roads and everything went to pot. The same thing happened on the Philippines. We got that rainy season and the roads washed out so bad we were cutting palm trees and stuff and corduroying roads and pulling sand off the beach to cover the corduroy and just getting the roads open again for transportation to get supplies to the front lines. That was our job.

T: Were you doing more driving at this point or more construction?

L: On the Philippines I didn't do hardly any driving. It turned out, I don't know where this thing ever came from, there was an airborne caterpillar that had been dropped there somehow. It was there anyway. Loading that sand on the beach we didn't have a shovel for that so they had me on the new airborne cat and a D-4 cat would push the sand up into her in a pile like. The dump trucks would back up to this pile without the tailgate and I'd push the sand right into the dump trucks with this little cat. That's what I was doing.

T: So you did that for a while then?

L: I did that quite a while.

T: Which was okay duty as far as you were concerned?

L: Yes. That was fine. I didn't mind it. Then when I wasn't doing that I was driving truck hauling.

T: Let me ask a larger question here. At Kiska and in the Marshalls and in the Philippines when you had free time, when your unit, other guys had free time, what did guys do to pass the time?

L: We used to read a book or play cards. That's about all. Outside of eating. You never ate too much except at meal times. If you happened to have any cookies from home or anything which I did get a couple times. Which was nice. Very nice.

T: They weren't stale?

L: Mostly all crumbs. But the crumbs were good. I had one cousin that used to send me fruitcake. Now they'd come in one piece. I really loved those.

T: Was there a lot or any amount of drinking?

L: No. For one thing it wasn't available.

T: Officially it wasn't available or really wasn't available?

L: Really wasn't available. There wasn't any around that I know of. Outside of the fact that some of our cooks had made some Raisin Jack [homemade liquor].

T: People knew about that.

L: A few of us knew about it and a few of us drank some of it. I never did. I guess I had a taste of it. Nobody ever got drunk. Not up till that time anyway. We did get a beer ration. We got three cans of beer. Everybody got three cans of beer.

T: A week?

L: No. Just this once. I guess we had more than once. I used to drink beer at home once in a while. It was fine but I never drank warm beer. I had one can warm beer and I got sick and I never drank another beer. I still don't like beer.

T: It made an impression on you obviously.

L: Yes, I got sick on it.

T: You wouldn't say that alcohol was a problem at all?

L: Only the ones that had the problem before they got in. They found a way to get something. We had one old guy, have you heard of Sterno? It's a can of jelly alcohol. Our cooks used to bake bread and he would get a hold of a big chunk of bread and

he'd squeeze this Sterno through the bread to get the jelly out and drink the alcohol. He wound up being sent home pretty early. It affected him really bad so he got pretty squirrely.

T: How did it affect him? Do you know?

L: It kind of made him crazy. He was lucky he didn't go blind or something besides. That's the only one I know. He was one of the oldest fellas in our outfit. He must have been in his forties.

T: In your unit?

L: Yes.

(2, A, 175)

T: How did you stay in touch with your family and other loved ones back home?

L: V-mail.

T: Did you write a lot?

L: As much as I could, yes. I used to write home regularly. I used to write to my wife. She was my girlfriend yet at that time. My fiancée.

T: When were you married?

L: June 28, 1946. After we got home.

T: You and Vivian were already writing when you were in the service?

L: Yes.

T: Who was the better letter writer, you or Vivian?

L: I think she was a better letter writer than me. I never was too good at writing.

T: When you wrote letters home, V-mail, what kind of things did you write about?

L: You were kind of restricted. There were things you couldn't talk about. Your mail was censored. If you wrote anything that shouldn't be in there they cut it out anyway.

T: They literally cut the stuff out?

L: They blacked it out some way. Somehow so it couldn't get through.

T: How important was mail to soldiers when they were away from home?

L: It was important. It is still important. Anybody, any soldier boy that's away from home anybody that's in training today, mail call is important. It's nice to get a letter. It's really nice to get a letter.

T: Did you get mail regularly?

L: No. We were lucky to get mail at all I suppose. The way we traveled around it took a long time for the mail to catch up to us. When we did get mail one person I was writing to, she especially like being nagged and I can't stand to be nagged. She wrote the same thing. I think I got six or eight letters almost like a carbon copy. Why don't you write? Why don't you write? It upset me so much I wrote kind of a nasty letter back to her. That was the last time I heard from her. My dad died while I was over in the Philippines and I never knew about it until I got to Okinawa.

T: Where was your dad living at that time?

L: He was living out in Washington.

T: When he left Cloquet he really left, didn't he?

L: He went to Washington State. He was working as a carpenter out there.

T: He died in 1944? When you were in the Philippines.

L: Yes, it must have been.

T: Was there one time you can recall that getting a letter from someone really made an impact on you, really was important?

L: They were all important. You were always happy to get mail. Like I understood that there were times it was just impossible to get mail because they just didn't catch up to you. I could understand that. There were many, many weeks, sometimes months before you'd get the mail.

T: Sometimes would you get a whole bunch at one time?

L: Yes. Sometimes you'd get a whole bunch at one time.

(2, A, 220)

T: When you got a whole bunch at one time, were you the kind of person that sort of stretched it out and read maybe one or two a day or did you read them all at once?

L: I think there were times there when I didn't really have time to read them all at once. I would probably read a few after I had chow and then go right back to work.

T: You guys worked long hours, didn't you?

L: I think so. I think we did.

T: Did you get news, newspaper, radio, that kind of stuff?

L: Once in a great while we got *Stars and Stripes*.

T: You got *Stars and Stripes* but not regularly?

L: No.

T: Was there news? Did anybody type up a news sheet in your unit or pass news around in any way?

L: I don't remember that at all, no.

T: If you had something to read out there was it most likely books that kind of made the rounds?

L: It was Pocket Books that we used to get through the Red Cross or somebody. They'd pass those around. We used to get those little packages that we received from the Red Cross. There was a couple of books in there, playing cards and a pack of cigarettes and a few other things.

T: Did you like getting those things to read?

L: I never really had that much time to read.

T: Did you make lasting contacts during your time in the service?

L: You kind of bond with your comrades, with your buddies out there. I mean you're all in this thing for life or death together. You're all working together, doing the same thing for the same purpose and that kind of bonds you.

T: Did you have a lot of coming and going in your unit, guys moving in and out, or was it pretty steady core of people?

L: Pretty steady. Pretty steady except for the ones that had to be replaced when they got killed.

(2, A, 243)

T: Did you stay in contact with some people after you were discharged?

L: Oh, yes. Like I said, we had several buddies that I stay in contact with. I'm still in contact with Stanley here. He's the one that gets all the stuff out for the anniversaries and stuff. He used to be our clerk when I first got in the outfit. He wound up as a first sergeant. And then there was Pete and then there was Ostrum. Ostrum is dead and Pete is living. The guy from Georgia I never wrote to him or anything but I used to see him on the road especially when we were out with our anniversary get together.

T: Are these people that you stayed in contact with pretty much continually once you got discharged? Or did it take a long time before you reconnected?

L: There were a few years that we really didn't get together that much. But then we started these reunions and then we got together at least once a year.

T: When did these start? Do you remember?

L: No, I don't remember. Quite a few years.

T: Would you say it more the '50s or the '70s?

L: I think it started in the '50s.

T: It's been going quite a long time. These unit reunions, you've been attending for quite a number of years. Why do you attend?

L: Mostly to see old buddies. To see your old friends from overseas during the war. Get together and talk about a few things. Have a good time and enjoy each other. Friendship.

T: Are spouses always invited too?

L: Spouses are always invited. For years we used to go to Branson, Missouri every year. We had what we called a midi-reunion. We would go to the shows, go out to eat together, have a banquet at the end.

T: So you really enjoyed...

L: Oh, yes.

T: Do you think most of the guys attended for the same reason?

L: The reunion? Oh, yes.

T: We talked earlier in this interview a bit about Kiska and the Marshalls and the Philippines. I wanted to also ask about the invasion of Okinawa, which was the final invasion that you were involved in. What can you say about the preparations for that invasion?

L: We were busy in the Philippines right up until we got aboard ship, and went, because somebody else made all the preparations. Except for loading our own equipment. We loaded our own equipment and all the rest of it was done by somebody else. It was all put together and we went out of there in a big convoy all the way to Okinawa. From the Philippines to Okinawa.

(2, A, 281)

T: What was your unit tasked to do with the invasion of Okinawa?

L: Pretty much the same thing. We land and unload the supplies, maintain the dumps, distribute some of it, keep the roads open.

T: It's something that by now you're pretty practiced at.

L: Yes. We knew what we were doing.

T: Were you to land on April 1 [1945]?

L: Yes, we landed on April 1.

T: What can you say about the actual invasion itself on April 1.

L: It was the biggest I'd seen and there were a lot more Japanese planes around. They had the *kamikaze* planes coming in. I was one of the first ones off of our ship. It was on a regular troop cargo ship. Troops and cargo both. We went over the side, down the nets, into the Higgins boats and there was a large coral reef where we ran so that when we got within three-quarters of a mile of the beach we had to transfer from the Higgins boat into an amphibious tank to go over the reef. That's how we got ashore.

T: Was there Japanese fire out from the island?

L: Absolutely. There were some mortar shells falling in around the boats as we were coming in. We were fortunate—we never got hit. Our boys that got left behind, that were waiting for the next wave, one of the *kamikazes* went into that ship. We lost a bunch of our boys. We lost the whole third platoon on that ship when that plane hit. We lost quite a few of our boys right there. I got off the ship in time. I was fortunate to be one of the first ones off in that particular instance.

T: The Higgins boats hold what, a couple dozen guys?

L: Oh, yes. It must be all of that. I never counted. I bet there were close to forty guys maybe.

(2, A, 308)

T: Some of these guys landing in an invasion for the first time?

L: I don't remember if we had any fresh replacements. We must have had a few. I never even gave it a thought. It must have been the first time for some of those guys because we lost a few in the Philippines. We were brought up to force before we left I'm sure. I never got to know them.

T: That was my next question: Whether you felt yourself as a mentor toward younger guys?

L: No. I never got to know them. I never went out of my way to try to get to know them either. Maybe I was lax in that respect, I don't know.

T: Basically did you hang around with the same people pretty much all the time?

L: Pretty much the same friends, yes. The guys that you knew best and the guys you liked most. Although you know you talk to everybody. You were friends with everybody, but you weren't that real close with everybody.

T: There's a difference isn't there between close friends and others?

L: Yes.

T: The movement to shore on Okinawa, having done this a number of times now, was this more or less stressful in some ways than others?

L: No, it wasn't. I put it in the hands of the Lord. If I go, I go and if I don't, I don't. If I get there, I get there, but if I don't, I don't. It's all up to you. So I just didn't worry about it. Don't worry about it. Just slows you down, that's all it does, the worrying.

T: Were other guys on the same boat more upset or more worried than you were?

L: I don't think so. I don't think so. The only funny thing that did happen on that day. A French cook was along...

T: French, he was?

L: Yes he was a French cook. Little fat guy. Kind of fat, not too fat. He was a good cook. He'd had a little too much of that Raisin Jack [homemade liquor] so when we transferred from the Higgins boat into the tank he didn't quite make it. He went

down between the boats there. We couldn't get him. When his head popped up we grabbed him and pulled him in.

T: Or he would have been squeezed between.

L: Yes. So we got him ashore okay. He sobered up pretty quick.

T: That will do it to you. When you got on shore then was there a lot of activity already on the shore?

L: Oh, yes, absolutely. The first two waves had already gone inland. The Marines had landed just above us. You're assigned certain areas on the shore. So the Marines were up above us and then us and then some more down the shore. So the Marines were already gone north and most of the infantry force was already ahead of us. We weren't worried about too many real Japs on the beach by the time we got there. It was only the second or third wave. About the third wave. They move right out when you hit shore, boy, you don't stick around unless you get pinned down somehow.

T: Did your unit get off the beach pretty quickly too?

L: Yes. We went right inland a ways. We just went right to work. There was cargo coming and stuff and we were already establishing a place, a dump to put it. We put it all together. I remember that night then or the next night. My buddy and I were assigned to unloading, unloading supplies that went to the civilian area inland a little ways. We had to truck a couple loads of supplies in there. Those roads in Okinawa were so narrow. At the time we landed it was dry enough so we didn't have a problem that way but it was really narrow and the corners were sharp and the 6x6 GMC two-ton trucks are not too quick turning. We both got out there with our load just fine. It was in the dark. We were running with hardly any lights at all. I came to one corner to turn and I got out onto the shoulder a little too far and there was a rice paddy about two feet down. The shoulder gives in and there we are. Stuck.

T: Even with a 6x6?

L: Even with a 6x6 I'm stuck because I'm leaning so bad the wheels are off the ground. Both wheels on that side. There were six wheels on that side. So my buddy gets ahead of me, turns around and got out the winches. Put the winch on, starts to pull, and I'll be darned if it doesn't shear the pin. So then I had to get the snatch bar out and pull out the cable on my own, winch to his truck, and used it as an anchor to winch myself out that way.

T: So the roads were more narrow.

L: Really narrow and not used to that heavy equipment.

(2, A, 362)

L: Then about a week or so later the rains hit and then the roads really washed out so we had nothing but soup. It was really bad.

T: How long were you on Okinawa? The whole time?

L: All the rest of the time until the war ended. Every day there.

T: So you were on Okinawa on V-J Day?

L: Yes.

T: The Okinawa campaign lasted a number of months. For you specifically, how did you spend your time on Okinawa? That was April, May and into June 1945.

L: We were busy working keeping the roads open. We were in between the artillery and the front lines is where our camp was located. We'd get shelled once in a while too. That kept us awake, on our toes. We were busy trying to keep those roads open and keep the supplies moving. Some of our guys had to go put in a Bailey bridge over a crick. A kind of a portable bridge. They carry in parts and put it together.

T: Luckily it sounds like, you had the front lines ahead of you and the artillery behind you so you weren't forced to secure perimeters at night or anything like that?

L: We still had some perimeter guys out but I didn't happen to be on it this time. I was driving truck mostly.

T: I do know from reading accounts of Okinawa that the weather was pretty awful for a while.

L: Like I started to say, the monsoons came in and the roads all got mud and soup and so we were trying to keep them open by hauling stuff out of, I think it was sort of like a butte. I think it was like dead coral buttes. We were using that for fill.

T: Grinding it up and stuff?

L: Well when you get in there with the shovels and went to work with it, it pretty well just kind of fell apart. So there wasn't any grinding up that had to be done. Just loaded right on the trucks and by the time you put it in the mud holes and stuff. Just keep dumping until you get a good surface.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.

T: Some Army groups were involved in some pretty heavy fighting on Okinawa and most of the Marines as well. Did you come into any contact with those units or those soldiers?

L: No. But I felt sorry for them because I know in the Naha region there and Sirey it was all underground tunnels and stuff. Like a bunch of gophers. You have to dig them out before you can do anything with them. They'd hide in these things and then come out at night. That's when they'd do most of their damage, at night. Of course we always had a lot of flares going up around there. I wasn't on the front lines and I'm glad I wasn't. It was really rough. I remember the Marines went north. There weren't any troops up in the north. They were all congregated in the south. So when the Marines came down we were working on the roads as they went by, all those young fellas marching into the battle in the south. The next day they were coming out of there trucked in 6x6s all dead. High as a rack. That really made me sick. *(pauses three seconds)* That really made me sick.

T: You didn't have to transport those bodies?

L: No. I don't know if I would have been able to do it even. I was just feeling so bad. We lost a lot of Marines. We lost a lot of boys there before that line was in.

T: One of the most costly island invasions. Les, you were on Okinawa when President Roosevelt died, on April 12, 1945.

L: I think we heard about it.

T: How did you and those around you react to that news?

L: I didn't see any real reactions. I felt bad about it. I liked the old geezer, but I knew he had been sick. I knew he was sick for a long time. He was pretty sick. I had seen him while I was on Hawaii. He came to Hawaii at the officers club there. We were standing honor guard on the curbs right in front of the crowd when he came in so I could almost touch him when he went by in his staff car. I saw him but he looked sick even then.

T: So you weren't surprised to hear that he passed on?

L: No, I don't think anybody was surprised really.

(2, B, 437)

T: Were you or others around you now concerned because the president had died or not?

L: Not really. We had a good vice president.

T: It was a few weeks later that the war in Europe ended, on May 8, 1945. V-E Day. In the Pacific, what do you remember about V-E Day?

L: We kind of said, "Hurray!" But we were in this other war. We're still at it. It didn't mean that much to us.

T: It didn't change your daily routine at all?

L: No. It didn't change anything. We were glad to hear it was done over there. We knew that there would be plenty of guys available to make that big push into Japan. Which we were getting ready for pretty soon.

T: So you either had heard directly or could figure out that the next big step was going to be the invasion of Japan?

L: It was going to be Japan.

T: Was that in the back or the front of peoples' minds already?

L: No, I don't think most of us really dwelt on thinking about that. We'd just dwell on doing what we were doing and getting it done.

T: So the Okinawa thing was hard enough anyway?

L: It was hard enough.

T: Okinawa was declared secure in June sometime. You remained on Okinawa then after the island was secure. Doing what specifically?

L: We were improving the airport, working on the airport, working on the roads, building up the roads, making them more like the highways here in the United States.

T: Blacktop and everything?

L: No. Not the blacktop. We still had dirt but I didn't see any blacktop. I don't know what they did on the runways on the airport. I didn't get on that part of the job. I know they built a nice big airport, the troops that were there. I wouldn't say we had that much to do with the airport there.

T: You were still doing supply?

L: Doing trucking. I'll give you a little story about Friday the 13th on Okinawa. I was the last guy out from under the shovel in the pit. I was hauling the dirt onto the roads. On the way to deliver that load I had two flat tires. And of course they had to be on the inside too. I had one spare. So I had to stop one truck and get another tire.

So I had to change two flat tires, deliver that load. When I got into camp it was already almost past chow time and I needed a shower real bad. We had the showers set up down in a gully. It was kind of a creek. They had a pump in the creek and a showerhead set up and a can was around it so you're right out in the open. But it was cold showers. I went down there with my towel and my soap and I was ready to get a good shower and the creek had run dry. So I didn't get a shower. When I got to the mess hall I ate cold food too. That was my Friday the 13th on Okinawa and I'll never forget it. That was right after the war ended. It must have been August or September.

T: Once the island was declared secure did things change a lot from your perspective or not?

L: Yes. Things got a little easier. We still had plenty of work to do. We had some Marines and they built an officers' club. I don't remember getting any beer rations yet or anything like that. We used to have some outdoor movies.

(2, B, 500)

T: When it turned dark they would start them up?

L: Yes. There was an area there they had set up where you had benches to sit on. Like a drive-in theater almost. You went out and sat on benches and watched this outdoor movie. That's what we were doing when the war ended and all the fireworks started.

T: What do you remember about V-J Day on Okinawa?

L: That's what I was just telling you. We got the news. It was in the evening. We were watching a movie and when we got the news that Japan had surrendered all heck broke loose. Artillery, everything, machine guns, all those tracers going up in the air. We headed for the camp. I got my helmet and I got into my foxhole because everything that goes up has gotta come down.

T: Those guys firing the stuff off weren't thinking about that, were they?

L: No, they sure weren't. But it didn't take me long because when you hear those things hitting the ground around you. You know something's coming down.

T: So on V-J Day you had your helmet on and you were in your foxhole. On August 6th and August 9th, the United States Government did drop atomic bombs on Japan. Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the time, did you feel the government was correct to use atomic bombs on Japan?

L: We didn't hear anything about it until the war ended.

T: You didn't even know about it?

L: No, not to my knowledge. I don't remember hearing anything about the atomic bomb until the war ended and we heard the reason why. That they had dropped this bomb.

T: What explanation was given as far as what these weapons were?

L: Actually we knew that they were like life-savers because with all these troops that would have gone into Japan, can you imagine what would have happened? It's hard to even imagine what would happen. Because you could not even trust little eight and nine year old kids. You had to take everybody. And it would have been terrible. It would have been really terrible. I have a diagram of what they intended to do on Japan right there (*motions to map, laying on table*). Our outfit would have been involved.

T: Have your feelings changed about the use of atomic weapons since 1945?

L: Depends on who is going to use them. If it's used for a good purpose, fine, but if it's used just to kill people, no. In this case I think we saved more lives than what we killed when we dropped those bombs. It's too bad that all those civilians had to die but they would have died anyway and probably a lot more if we had to invade. More than likely a lot more.

(2, B, 558)

T: Earlier you mentioned civilians. Did you interact with civilians at all on Okinawa?

L: No. I never had anything to do with any civilians on Okinawa at all. They had been moved out. We didn't have any contact with any civilians. They must have moved them out. Like I said, they had separate camps for them.

T: Were you shipped out from Okinawa pretty quickly after the war ended?

L: No, I wasn't quite that high on the points. Some of our outfit got shipped out before we did. We were the second bunch to get shipped out. In the meantime our outfit was being re-outfitted. They went to Korea. I didn't go to Korea because I got all my points. But my outfit did. Some of the younger guys had to go.

T: Did you go directly back to the States from Okinawa, or did you make other stops?

L: It felt like we were on that ocean forever. We got on an old tub. It was a cargo ship. It had been converted to carry troops. We headed for Seattle. On about the third day out I looked over the side and I said, "Boy, we aren't hardly moving at all. I wonder what the matter is." Then I heard over the loudspeaker. One of the boilers was out. We're going to be just maintaining our course for a few days until we get

that repaired. About two days later we picked up again and I thought, "Oh, geez, we're going to get home." The next morning I looked over the side and we were just barely crawling again. Here the other boiler went out. So they had to repair that boiler. We finally got to Seattle. Wound up at Fort Lawton, Washington.

T: Were you discharged from there?

L: No. That's where we had a delayed Thanksgiving dinner. I had worked at that place. I knew the camp. Then we were put on trains and headed to Chicago. I was discharged, there's a camp just south of Chicago. I forget the name of it.

That was kind of a memorable train ride because of the fact that the train tracks went right through all these areas where we used to live when we were moving around from farm to farm. We came back through even past Randall, where I was born. The train went right back through there and into St. Paul. From St. Paul to Chicago. Boy those memories as I came through those areas, where I went to school and stuff.

T: Was that the first time you'd been back in the States for a number of years?

L: That would be the first time. That would be the only time I'd been back since we left. Hawaii was as close to home as I ever got until the war ended.

T: So by the time you got back here it had been over two years?

L: Yes. I was in the service over three years. I figure it was pretty close to three years.

T: What was your initial reaction to being out of the military? Being a civilian again?

L: I was happy to get out. Happy to see my intended wife. We had gotten engaged while I was in Hawaii the first time. Over the phone. I sent a ring from there along with letters, of course.

T: And now you're back after almost three years. Were you one of these people that considered staying in the military? Making it a career?

L: No. That's one of the things they asked me. They wanted me to stay in the Reserves. I said I've had all I want. I just want to go home. I don't want any more of it. So I took a clean discharge.

T: No Reserves for you. Did you ever think later, "I wonder if I made the right decision?"

L: Not really. There were some people that tried to talk me into joining the National Guard and stuff and I said, "No. I've had enough of that."

T: A number of those guys that joined the Reserves got called up for Korea, too.

L: That could have happened to me.

T: What was the first thing you did as a civilian? Do you remember?

L: Came home. Went to see my girl right away. It was a train from Chicago to Minneapolis and St. Paul. She met me at the station.

T: Do you remember meeting at the railroad station?

L: Yes. Pretty nice. Very nice.

T: Can you talk about it?

L: I don't remember just exactly what we did besides going to eat or something.

T: Les, what was the hardest thing for you readjusting to life as a civilian?

L: Nothing really hard about it. I was just kind of tired. I was run down a little. A little skinny. I just wasn't in too big a hurry to do anything except enjoy life a little bit. Just kind of relax. Take it easy. Later on the Army set up sort of like an unemployment deal. You had what they called 52-20. Twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks you could draw, if you needed to, which I didn't. But I did draw it for a few weeks, a couple of months. Shortly after I arrived home I applied for it. I was getting that up until we were married. Then I came to Cloquet and got a job. As soon as I got a job that ended it.

T: You would say on the whole that you had a fairly easy time adjusting to being a civilian.

L: Yes. I didn't have any problem with that.

T: Did you have memories or things that bothered you, dreams that bothered you for a while?

L: Once in a while there would be a bad dream, but I never let it bother me.

T: What kind of things crept up in your dreams?

L: Some of those close calls you might have and that you did have and stuff. The bad things that happened, that you don't like to talk about.

T: You mentioned a few things already. When you were in the service and you were in for a number of years, what did the war mean personally for you? Why were you doing it?

L: Somebody attacked our country and somebody had to pay them back and get back what we lost. Try to get back some of what we lost. They were trying to take away our freedoms, actually. If Japan and Germany had won that war, can you imagine where we'd be today? I can't hardly imagine it. It would be terrible.

T: How do you reflect on the war now, when you think back it fifty-seven years later?

L: It was part of life, I guess. Sometimes you wonder if it's necessary. But when you're being attacked you better fight back. You can't let them walk over you.

T: Was it the right thing to do?

L: I believe it was the right thing to do. Absolutely.

T: How would you say the war changed your life?

L: I might have been a little better off today if I hadn't had to fight that war.

T: How's that?

L: Financially mostly. The people at home there were working at good jobs. They were making good money, and they were able to build up their homes. Buy homes. Build up their stake for later on, where all of us guys, most of us guys fought that war for about forty-five dollars a month.

T: You lost a number of years of earning, didn't you?

L: Absolutely. And then all these guys that were working on these, I don't what kind of wages they were getting, but they must have been making good money for the war effort. They were way ahead of us when it comes to financial. We didn't have any stake. I think we had three hundred dollars between us when we got married. And so when I came home I just had to go to work. And that's what I did—I went to work. I worked hard and made as much money as possible, and I kept my wife at home and raised the kids. We built this house. Bought this property and built this house.

T: Are you resentful in a way of those who didn't go?

L: No, not really. I'm not resentful of most people, but I think our government could have done a little better job of taking care of the veterans after the war. I think they could have done a lot better job. We're still fighting for people that are disabled vets and don't have a decent home. That should have never happened. There's no reason why after putting their life on the line to save their country they should be on the streets and homeless. People shouldn't have to be begging to get their medical

problems fixed. You shouldn't have to go through all that red tape to try to get something done. That's the thing that kind of burns me. They say they're a grateful nation, but they don't act like it.

T: Anything else you want to add before we close?

L: My brother was in Europe [during World War II] and my son was in Vietnam [during that conflict].

T: Les, once again thanks for your time today.

END OF INTERVIEW