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THOMAS SPENCER
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Place of Interview: Denton, Texas
Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Thomas Spencer

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Thomas Spencer for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on February 5, 1979, in Denton, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Spencer in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was a member of the 131st Field Artillery, 2nd Battalion, during World War II. This particular unit was captured in Java in March of 1942, and it subsequently spent the rest of the year in various Japanese prisoner-of-war camps throughout Asia.

Mr. Spencer, to begin this interview, just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Spencer: I was born in Joplin, Texas, in Jack County, in 1917. I went to school there at Joplin--a small school--and I finished the ninth grade.

Marcello: When did you join the National Guard?

Spencer: On November 20, 1940, I believe . . . that's when we mobilized. I joined a few days before that.

Marcello: You joined a few days before mobilization in November of 1940?

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the National Guard?

Spencer: I knew a bunch of guys that was in there, because it was a battery in Jacksboro, you know, and that's a small town. I knew, oh, at least half of them. I knew that I was going to have to get in the service somewhere or another, you know, and I'd rather be with a bunch I knew.

Marcello: Now, the draft had already been started by that time, had it not?

Spencer: Yes, that's right. I'd got one of the first questionnaires in the county.

Marcello: Is that what prompted you to join this National Guard unit?

Spencer: Right. I decided I'd just as well join something, you know.

Marcello: Which particular battery was that at Jacksboro?

Spencer: That was F Battery.

Marcello: It was a firing battery, was it not?

Spencer: Yes, we had French 75's.

Marcello: You mentioned that you joined just a few days before the unit mobilized, and I believe it mobilized on November 25, 1940.

Spencer: Somewhere along in there.

Marcello: At the time that you joined, how closely had you been keeping abreast of current events and world affairs and things of that nature?

Spencer: I hadn't been keeping very close tabs with them. I had heard of the war, but I didn't think we'd ever get into it.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that when you thought of the country getting into war at that time, your eyes were turned more toward Europe than they were to the Far East?

Spencer: Yes, I thought when we got over there, we'd just be a walking guard, probably, or something like that. I thought the war was in Europe.

Marcello: You joined the unit around November 20, 1940, and the National Guard mobilized on November 25, 1940. What happened at that point? In other words, up until that time, I assume that you had no training whatsoever. How did the mobilization affect you as a member of the National Guard? In other words, when you were mobilized, did the unit undergo any additional training right there at Jacksboro?

Spencer: Yes, that was some of the hardest training I went through-- there at Jacksboro.

Marcello: What sort of training was it?

Spencer: We'd just march all day. That's all we were doing, really.

We got very little training on the guns. We was just out there on that prairie marching. We didn't have no uniforms then. Some of them was marching with cowboy boots on, and some of them kind of had them high-heeled slippers then. Our feet was pretty sore. They told us how rough it was going to be when we got to Brownwood, and it was quite a bit easier when we got to Brownwood (chuckle).

Marcello: How long did you stay there in Jacksboro before you actually went on to Brownwood?

Spencer: We stayed there until up in January, I believe. We stayed there about a month before we went to Brownwood.

Marcello: Now, while you were undergoing training there with the unit at Jacksboro, were you living in the armory, or were you close enough that you could go home every evening?

Spencer: I stayed there most of the time. Now, on the coldest nights, why, I'd stay with a cousin of mine there.

Marcello: This cousin lived in Jacksboro?

Spencer: Yes. We just had one blanket and a mattress tick stuffed with hay, and we were sleeping on a concrete floor. I don't think you could get these soldiers in this day and time to stay in a place like that (chuckle).

Marcello: How seriously was the mobilization and the training being taken at that time--in November and December of 1940--while you were still there at Jacksboro?

Spencer: I don't really think it was took too seriously, because we figured on getting in for a year and getting out.

Marcello: When you say you were just thinking about being in for a year, I am assuming that you had the draft in mind. At that time, the draft was only for one year, was it not?

Spencer: For one year. I believe that's what we mobilized for, was one year.

Marcello: Did you actually ever fire any of those French 75's while you were there at Jacksboro?

Spencer: Not while we was at Jacksboro.

Marcello: But you did train on those 75's?

Spencer: Trained on them, you know, simulated fire.

Marcello: In other words, the training would consist of setting up those guns to fire and all that sort of thing.

Spencer: Yes, throwing a dummy shell in them, you know.

Marcello: What was your particular function in the unit at that time?

Spencer: I was number two cannoneer. I loaded it.

Marcello: You were a loader?

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: You may have to estimate this, but what would you say was the average age of the person in Battery F at that time?

Spencer: I'd say about twenty.

Marcello: About twenty years of age?

Spencer: I was twenty-three, but we had a good number in there that

was in their teens.

Marcello: You're saying, then, that you were one of the older people in the unit.

Spencer: Yes, I was. Now, we had a few sergeants in there that had been in the National Guard a good while, that was possibly twenty-five, but there was just a few of those.

Marcello: Incidentally, in our pre-interview conversation, you mentioned that you had been in the Civilian Conservation Corps prior to entering the National Guard. Was that experience in the CCC of any value to you when you went into the National Guard after the unit mobilized?

Spencer: Yes, it was--quite a bit.

Marcello: How did it help you?

Spencer: Well, it was about the same kind of life, you know. It was different from civilian life. In the CCC, you just worked . . . but all your camp rules and regulations was about the same.

Marcello: Those CCC camps were run by the Army, were they not?

Spencer: What time you were in camp was run by the Army; when you was out on the job, it's kind of foremans and kind of a different setup out there.

But I come in from CCC camp and went over there to the armory--they met over there one night a week--to catch a ride home. I lived fifteen miles out in the country. This

Captain Files over there . . . I had on that CCC uniform, you know, and he asked me that night to join. I guess that put me studying about joining, too, you know.

Marcello: Were there very many other people in the unit that had been members of the CCC?

Spencer: A few. We knew how to make up a bed when we got to Brownwood, and that kind of stuff. It was about the same kind of life.

Marcello: When you joined the CCC, I guess that was in the midst of the Depression, and I assume that's the reason you joined.

Spencer: Yes, I joined for the money. It was \$30 a month.

Marcello: Okay, so you remained there at Jacksboro for approximately a month after the unit was mobilized, and then sometime in early January of 1941, Battery F joined some of the other units of the 36th Division in Brownwood.

Spencer: Yes, right.

Marcello: What happened when you got to Brownwood? In other words, what did you do when you arrived at Camp Bowie, which was in Brownwood?

Spencer: Well, the main thing . . . when we arrived down there, them tents was just throwed up in weather about like this [raining outside]. It had been muddy, rainy, and they had had trucks in there just setting them tents down. The first thing was to get out there and smooth them streets out, and clean the bathrooms--they was throwed up, just lumber picked

up out of the mud.

Marcello: I gather that camp wasn't in very good shape when you guys arrived.

Spencer: No, it wasn't. It didn't take us long to put it to looking pretty good, but it was a rough-looking place when we first went in there.

Marcello: What were your living quarters like there in Brownwood? You mentioned that you were living in these tents. How many men would be in a tent?

Spencer: I believe there was five men to a tent.

Marcello: Were they these big pyramid tents?

Spencer: Yes, they was boxed up about four foot with planks and screened wire. They wasn't bad to live in.

Marcello: What sort of training did you undergo when you got to Brownwood?

Spencer: We done quite a bit of marching and then training on them guns.

Marcello: Did you get to fire the guns there at Brownwood?

Spencer: We fired some 37's, I remember that. They were mounted on top of this French 75--them 37-millimeters. But I don't remember ever firing that French 75 there. We could have, but I don't remember. I remember firing the 37's.

Marcello: I wonder why it was that you fired the 37-millimeters but you didn't fire the French 75's?

Spencer: I don't know.

Marcello: Now, up until this time, you had really not undergone any typical Army basic training as such, had you?

Spencer: No, we hadn't.

Marcello: Had you ever fired a rifle or anything of that nature?

Spencer: Oh, yes, I had fired just rifles out in the country, and carried guns, you know.

Marcello: What I'm saying is, did you go through any of that sort of training after you joined the National Guard?

Spencer: I hadn't had a bit of rifle training until we got overseas. I don't believe we'd ever had a rifle issued to us until we got overseas.

Marcello: Now, did you still remain at your same function in the firing battery after you got to Camp Bowie?

Spencer: Yes, yes. That's what I trained for all the way through, was number two cannoneer.

Marcello: In the summer of 1941, the unit participated in the 3rd Army maneuvers over in Louisiana. What do you recall from those maneuvers?

Spencer: Well, it was just hot down in there, and about the time we'd get one bivouac with the underbrush cleared out and camp set up, we'd move again. I didn't mind them maneuvers all that much. It was just hot, but they weren't bad.

Marcello: Now, in Louisiana, did you get to fire the 75's or any weapons there?

Spencer: No, I don't believe we did. I don't believe we ever did. We simulated firing, but I don't believe we ever did fire on any targets, you know, or anything.

Marcello: Isn't it true, however, that the unit made a pretty good name for itself there in Louisiana?

Spencer: Yes, it was supposed to have been the number one . . . supposed to have been at the right place at the right time, you know. According to the maneuver, you know, why, we showed up better than the rest of them, so they claimed.

Marcello: So, in other words, you got that reputation not because of your efficiency in firing the guns, but rather because of your efficiency in maneuvering and things of that nature.

Spencer: Yes, that's right.

Marcello: Now, after you return from Louisiana, the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery was detached from the 36th Division. Do you recall why it was detached, that is, why it was pulled out of the 36th Division?

Spencer: Well, they first told us down there at Brownwood that we was going up there to Lawton, Oklahoma--the best I remember it--to fire some new ammunition.

Marcello: Now, Fort Sill is located at Lawton, Oklahoma. Is that correct?

Spencer: Yes. We was kind of planning on going up there, the best I remember it. They was giving some of us furloughs; I

believe I got a six-day furlough. I was in Jacksboro there in the cafe when Lieutenant Allen come over that night--it would have been somewhere about midnight--and he said, "Orders have been changed. We're going to San Francisco--PLUM--which means we're going overseas." I don't know; I just had a funny feeling right then that I was getting off on the wrong foot (chuckle).

Marcello: Let's get back again to that reorganization. Now, I've heard it said that the Army was changing from the square to the triangular divisions, and that's one of the reasons that the 2nd Battalion was detached. In other words, the Army had evidently been watching the German army in action in Europe, and it was rather impressed with the speed and mobility of the smaller German divisions; hence, the United States Army tried to copy that German system.

Spencer: Well, I heard something to that effect that they was going to reorganize the division, but as far as knowing any of the particulars, I didn't. I wasn't paying much attention to it then; I didn't care, you know.

Marcello: It was also around the time that the reorganization took place that the older men and the married men were given the option of getting out of the unit. Do you recall anything of that particular event?

Spencer: Yes, I remember going through the line, and they'd ask you

what kind of excuse . . . you know, if you was helping support your family or something like that, they'd consider letting you out, or if you was twenty-eight or was married. I remember when he asked me, I said, "I ain't got no excuse." A good many of them didn't make no excuse to try to get out.

Marcello: If they had a cutoff at age twenty-eight, probably only the officers would have come under this category for the most part, and I don't think officers were allowed to get out, were they?

Spencer: Well, I don't know of any that did get out. I can't remember . . . well, I don't know. I think, maybe, that that colonel just kind of put what officers he wanted to with us and kept the ones he wanted to with him.

Marcello: Now, I assume that virtually none of the enlisted men were married, either, were they?

Spencer: Very few. I'm trying to think if we had a man from Jacksboro that was married. Yes, "Humpy" Campbell was married. As far as I know, that's the only one I remember that was married that went with us.

Marcello: So evidently, then, at least in Battery F, very few of the men either had the opportunity or took advantage of the opportunity to get out if they qualified.

Spencer: Yes, very few of them even had the opportunity to get out.

Marcello: You mentioned that your destination was PLUM. I'm sure there

must have been all sorts of rumors and scuttlebutt as to what PLUM implied. What did you hear?

Spencer: Really, I don't remember. When we got out there to San Francisco on Angel Island, they were bringing back a bunch from the Philippines. That's where we figured we was going. That's where they told us . . . they said, "You are going to replace us." There was one night there that they told three or four of us, "If you knew what we knew, you'd head for them mountains over yonder."

Marcello: In other words, were these people implying that . . .

Spencer: That it was going to get rough over there, they thought.

Marcello: In other words, that war was pretty much a likelihood.

Spencer: Yes. They had probably heard more than we had heard. They probably had the feel of the people over there, you know.

Marcello: Well, I guess it was on November 11, 1941--Armistice Day--that you took off from Brownwood by train for San Francisco.

Spencer: Yes, that's right.

Marcello: I assume this was about as far away from home as any of you had ever been.

Spencer: I imagine it was the farthest any of us had ever been when we got to San Francisco.

Marcello: According to my records, you spent about a week at Angel Island there in San Francisco Bay waiting for transit. What did you do during that one-week period? Anything?

- Spencer: I don't remember doing anything there. I know our battery at one time there had caught KP and run the whole bunch through there. They wheeled and dealed that day. But I had worked KP out on the train, and so I was one of the few of us that didn't have to work it. I don't remember doing anything while we was there--just waiting.
- Marcello: I don't think most of you had too much money to go into San Francisco. You hadn't been paid, had you?
- Spencer: No, I probably didn't have a dollar in my pocket. I know it wasn't much money, because we hadn't been paid.
- Marcello: Okay, on November 21, 1941, the unit boarded the USS Republic. Describe what kind of a ship the Republic was.
- Spencer: Well, to me it was about the biggest . . . I had never imagined that a ship could be that big. It was a real big transport for its day. I believe nine knots was top speed on it. See, it was a slow ship; I believe they claimed they got it from the French in World War I.
- Marcello: Now, the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery was not the only unit that went aboard the Republic.
- Spencer: No, there was an Air Corps unit, I believe, from Salt Lake City, Utah, that was on there with us--something like maybe 2,000 of them.
- Marcello: So that ship had quite a few military personnel on it when it left San Francisco.

Spencer: Yes, it did.

Marcello: How did you make out when the Republic left the bay and hit the ground swells?

Spencer: Well, I remember a buddy of mine . . . we was eating fish that day as we went under the Golden Gate Bridge, you know. We looked up and seen that bridge and said something about eating that fish going under that bridge. He asked me, "Reckon we'll get sick? I heard them old World War I veterans got sick." I said, "Hell, they ain't never had rode in nothing but a wagon! We won't get sick." I tell you, before night, I'd say 95 percent of them were sick on there.

Marcello: Were you?

Spencer: I got sick and stayed sick for three or four days, but that buddy I was talking about--Cooper--I don't believe he ever got out of his bunk until we got to Hawaii. He stayed sick.

Marcello: I had heard it said that on that day that everybody got sick, not only did they serve fish, but they were also serving boiled cabbage. Is that true? Do you remember that?

Spencer: I don't remember the cabbage (chuckle). I just remember the fish.

Marcello: How long did it take you to get over your seasickness?

Spencer: I stayed sick, I believe, about three days.

Marcello: I guess that experience should have more or less been a

harbinger of what you were to expect on your subsequent Army career. It didn't start out very well.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Like you mentioned, this ship didn't have a very high rate of speed, and it was on November 28th that it docked at Honolulu. So it took about a week almost to get from San Francisco to Honolulu.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: What happened when you had to stop over in Honolulu? In other words, did you get any liberty there?

Spencer: Yes, about half of us was going to get to go to town that evening, and the other half that night. I went that evening.

Marcello: What did you do when you went into Honolulu?

Spencer: Well, mostly we'll just sightsee, you know; we just walked the streets mostly.

Marcello: Again, I don't think you had very much money.

Spencer: No, we didn't have enough money to spend very much there, so we just mostly . . . we were just looking. I asked this walking guard there in town, "What's your orders here in town? Why are you walking guard here in town for?" He said, "We're watching these Japs. We're just waiting for them to make a move." So they knew something, you know, there in Hawaii then.

Marcello: So you could notice a tenseness in the air while you were

there in Honolulu..

Spencer: Yes, they had a lot of guards walking right in the middle of town,

Marcello: What did you have there? About a four-hour shore leave?

Spencer: I imagine about four or five hours of shore leave.

Marcello: I believe this was on a Friday because the next day, Saturday, you left Honolulu. You were part of a convoy at this time, weren't you?

Spencer: Yes, we picked up another kind of a transport ship over there and a cruiser.

Marcello: Well, I believe the Bloemfontein, in fact, was in this convoy, was it not?

Spencer: It could have been. There was three or four, the best I remember--three or four ships.

Marcello: And, I think, as you mentioned, there was a cruiser--the Pensacola.

Spencer: Yes, right.

Marcello: You leave Honolulu, and I assume by this time you're pretty sure that you're on your way to the Philippines, even though you haven't perhaps been given any official orders to that effect.

Spencer: Yes, that's right. That's where we figured we was going.

Marcello: On December 7th, a short distance from the Gilbert Islands, you received the word of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

Describe how you heard the news, and what your reaction and the reaction of your buddies was to that news. How did you receive the news?

Spencer: Well, they had some kind of alarm that we'd already been told, you know, to assemble by. We assembled at a certain place, and our captain over F Battery told us that they'd bombed Pearl Harbor, and we was in a state of war with Japan.

I was just dumb enough, you know, that I was kind of glad it happened. We was all talking there, you know, and saying we'd whip Japan in three months and be back home. We didn't realize how long it took the Army to get to moving, and we didn't realize how strong the Japs was. We had heard they couldn't see (chuckle) and this and that.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what your impressions were of the Japanese. I assume that up until that time, you'd really never had any contact with any Japanese.

Spencer: No, I didn't know a Chinaman from a Jap then, you know, and had just read a little bit about them fighting in China.

Marcello: So you and your buddies were looking forward to a pretty short war.

Spencer: Yes, yes. They put us on one of the guns there on this ship, and it was just all hand-controlled, you know. When they'd shoot that little ol' plane off the Pensacola--that little ol' reconnaissance plane--we could follow it across there.

We was kind of hoping they'd come in and try to bomb us; we thought we could knock them planes out of the air like they was blackbirds. They wouldn't have had a chance.

Marcello: In other words, there was a lot of cheap talk circulating on that ship.

Spencer: Yes, there sure was. We didn't think the Japs would amount to much, you know.

Marcello: I guess that's why they send twenty- and twenty-one-year-olds to war.

Spencer: (Chuckle) I guess it is. We was ready; it didn't shake us any.

Marcello: Who was the captain of your battery at that time?

Spencer: Wright.

Marcello: Captain Wright?

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: This may be something you don't want to talk about, but I understand that his conduct wasn't exactly too exemplary when he was giving you the word about the Pearl Harbor attack. Do you recall?

Spencer: Yes, I remember it. You know, in Brownwood he'd seemed like a big, rough, tough officer, but when war was declared there, he let us down quite a little bit, you know.

Marcello: In what way?

Spencer: He was crying and he said he had a wife and two kids back home that he wanted to go back to see, and he said we didn't

have a chance when we left the States. (Chuckle) We wouldn't have had a chance, you know. He just couldn't fill the shoes of an officer in wartime; he was a good peacetime officer.

Marcello: What action did the ship take as a result of learning about the Pearl Harbor disaster? Now, you mentioned that some in the unit were put on the guns, and I assume these were the actual guns that were on the ship. They did not mount your 75's on deck or anything of that nature.

Spencer: No, I'm sure we didn't get them 75's out. It seems like we did on that Bloemfontein when we left. They had some old guns, probably about a 4-inch or maybe a 5-inch gun, on there. They was a little better guns than our field guns, but they was still all manual-controlled, you know.

Marcello: Did the ship undergo a zigzag course or anything of that nature?

Spencer: Yes. You know, out there I couldn't tell directions--only by the sun--and at sundown you might be going into the sun, and the next morning at sunup, you'd be going into the sun. So they zigzagged. We heard that that captain got orders to turn back, and he was afraid the Japs would pick it up, and he didn't even answer them. He just, on his own, headed to Australia--zigzagging, you know.

Marcell-: Now, before you got to Australia, I think you stopped very

briefly in the Fiji Islands, did you not?

Spencer: Yes, right. We got some food--vegetables--and stuff. We took on some food.

Marcello: You didn't stay there very long, did you?

Spencer: No, it don't seem to me like we was there over two or three hours.

Marcello: And I assume nobody got off the ship.

Spencer: No. If there was, it was an officer or somebody like that.

Marcello: Okay, so like you mentioned, your course was diverted, and you were on your way to Brisbane.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: I think you reached Brisbane on December 22, 1941. What happens when you get to Brisbane?

Spencer: Well, you never . . . there won't be nobody--any solders--ever welcomed in a place any more than we were. We couldn't hardly march up the streets for them mobbing us, because they was glad to see some soldiers moving in there. I guess they're the friendliest people I ever met in my life.

I couldn't understand them too well when I first got around them. I know the first one I heard talk was cutting us some wood in the kitchen, and he said, "Yank, hand me that bloody axe." I looked around for an axe with blood on it (chuckle). That was just his byword, you know. But they were real friendly people.

Marcello: Were you one of the lucky ones to be invited for Christmas dinner in the private homes of the Australians?

Spencer: No, I didn't go into any of their homes--just meeting them downtown in the streets. Some of the boys did, but I didn't. I might have been invited. I just always was a little bashful about anything like that around strangers. I probably wouldn't have went in their house if they'd invited me.

Marcello: Was this your first experience with mutton, that is, when you got to Brisbane?

Spencer: Yes, yes. They fed us that mutton, you know, and we didn't go for it at all. Them Australians couldn't figure it out. They told us later, they said, "Well, we'll have to go to eating beef now. They'll feed the Yanks mutton." It was right the other way around. One of them said he met two Yanks downtown there, and they said, "Is there any cafe where you can buy a steak?" He said, "There's a little old cheap cafe down the street there that serves beef." They said, "We don't give a damn how high it is, as long as we can get a steak." (chuckle)

Marcello: Was this boiled mutton that they were serving you?

Spencer: Yes, the best I remember, it was boiled mutton.

Marcello: Where did you bivouac when you got to Brisbane?

Spencer: Well, it was kind of a little old racetrack.

Marcello: Ascot?

Spencer: Yes. I can't remember what kind of barracks we was in there; it seemed to me like it was more like sheds or something.

Marcello: Did you undergo any training here in Brisbane?

Spencer: No, I don't think we did. I don't remember any training at all, even unloading the ship or anything, while we was there.

Marcello: Had you received any pay by this time?

Spencer: We got two months pay. No, let me see. That might have been after we got on up in Java. I kind of believe we got paid there in Australia--had some money, you know, in town.

Marcello: I understand you really didn't need too much money, though, because every place you went, the Australians more or less treated the Americans.

Spencer: Yes, they wouldn't let you buy anything, you know. They wanted to buy everything. There never was a bunch accepted any better than we were there. We kind of hated to leave, too.

Marcello: A lot of the men have told me that one of the things that they noticed was the fact that there were very few young men in Brisbane.

Spencer: That's right. There wasn't very many. They were old. Most of the men in their army there were old--kind of a national guard-type deal. They didn't have no army there.

- Marcello: In other words, all the young men were already off fighting somewhere.
- Spencer: Yes, right. The ones that we got with later on up in Java, there was some of them that was getting on up in years. To me, they were old. They was probably around thirty-five years old. But, ordinarily, their men was older; the ones we met on up in Java were older than we were.
- Marcello: Okay, so you remain in Brisbane for almost a week, and then on December 28, 1941, you boarded the Dutch motor transport, Bloemfontein, and you were heading toward Java. Now, the Bloemfontein was a much faster ship than the Republic, was it not?
- Spencer: Yes, it was a pretty fast little ol' ship.
- Marcello: Now, by this time, it's only the 2nd Battalion that's aboard this ship.
- Spencer: Yes, I believe we're the only ones that's on that ship. It was a smaller ship.
- Marcello: Were you ever told why you were going to Java?
- Spencer: No. Now, the officers and sergeants might have been told, but as far as telling me, I don't remember.
- Marcello: The word never got down to most of the enlisted personnel.
- Spencer: No, not to the enlisted people because we didn't know where we was going or what we was going to do.
- Marcello: Describe your trip from Brisbane over to Surabaya, which

is the port in Java where you would be landing. What sort of a trip was it? Did anything eventful happen on this portion of your experience?

Spencer: Well, not to me.

Marcello: Do you remember the submarine scare?

Spencer: Oh, I remember kind of a little scare there, you know. I didn't think too much about it. I figured they had seen something else. But there was a little scare, I remember that. There was quite a bit of shuffling.

Marcello: So you get over to Surabaya, and that's where you debarked, so to speak. What happened at that point?

Spencer: Well, that's something to see. That's a different world and a different people.

Marcello: Had you ever seen so many people in your life?

Spencer: No, I hadn't never seen as many people in my life. I don't know . . . there's just . . . well, you just don't never see nothing . . . you got to see it before you can believe how the people is living and the way they worked.

Marcello: Evidently, a lot of the men were struck by the filth and so on they saw there around Surabaya, too.

Spencer: The what?

Marcello: The filth.

Spencer: Yes, that there was something else, too. I couldn't see how people lived in that kind of filth.

Marcello: One of the men supposedly remarked that he now knew what PLUM meant: "Plumb to hell,"

Spencer: (Chuckle) Yes. I didn't go for that country at all.

Marcello: So what happens when you land at Surabaya. You didn't stay there very long, did you?

Spencer: No, we moved on up to this little old airfield there that was inland a few miles.

Marcello: The airfield was at Singosari.

Spencer: Yes, right.

Marcello: And Singosari was close to the town of Malang.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: How did you get from Surabaya to Singosari? Did you go there by truck? By train?

Spencer: I believe we went there by truck. I kind of forgot that part of it, but I believe that's the way we went.

Marcello: Describe what Singosari looked like from a physical standpoint. In other words, what were your barracks like? What were your quarters like?

Spencer: Well, the barracks was all right. They was kind of made out of brick and stucco-like. They would put about two to four men in what we called cubicles; it was kind of like horse stalls. They were all right.

Marcello: Did you have bunks or beds of some sort in those cubicles?

Spencer: I don't remember whether we slept on the floor or whether

we had some kind of bunk. I just don't remember that part of it. But we was right at the end of the runway there at that little airfield.

Marcello: Were these grass runways that they had there?

Spencer: Yes, they was just dirt runways, you know, just grass. I was attached to that 19th Bomb Group over there.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned the 19th Bomb Group, so let's pursue that subject a little bit further. Was the 19th Bomb Group there when the 2nd Battalion arrived?

Spencer: Yes, they were already there. They were glad to see some help, because they didn't have nothing but their combat crews. They didn't have no ground crews there. They were having to go out on them missions, you know, and then come back and service them planes. Me and Buster Ross one night, and another old boy--he wasn't too good a help--loaded enough gasoline in fifty-five-gallon drums in the back of trucks to get out eighteen planes. That was the most we ever got out--the next morning--and that takes a bunch of gasoline.

Marcello: How many planes did that 19th Bomb Group have?

Spencer: Well, about eighteen.

Marcello: Were these all the four-engine B-17's?

Spencer: Yes. They might have had some of them there . . . what'd they call them? B-24's?

Marcello: P-40's?

Spencer: No, they had one or two old, big, boxcar-looking planes.

Marcello: B-24's, I think.

Spencer: B-24's. One or two of them would be around there once in a while. But they had about eighteen B-17's.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned that you personally served as ground personnel for this 19th Bomb Group. Was this voluntary duty, or were you simply assigned to the 19th Bomb Group?

Spencer: I guess we was assigned over there. I don't know whether we volunteered for the detail or whether they just picked us out to go over there. But I really liked it. I was glad I was picked out to go over there.

About five or six of us worked on a plane that had holes shot in the oil tanks, and we took them oil tanks out. A little old electric motor lifted the wheel . . . they'd landed it on a flat tire, and it burnt that motor out.

They said we'd done such a good job that they'd take us for a little reconnaissance flight. We were all artillery personnel but the crew chief and two pilots. They put us on the machine guns, you know, just like we was a crew. We got up there, and that motor burnt out again about the time that wheel got halfway up. The ol' crew chief, he got me and we went out to the nose of it to a handcrank, and

we twisted that shaft in two. We could see that it fell down.

They told him to take that plane to Australia, because the field wasn't big enough to land it on. We'd been flying toward Australia about at least a couple of hours when they called him and told him to bring it back and land it there. They needed the parts off of it. When we got back and flew around over to let the gasoline out, we could see them ambulances and fire wagons lining up down there.

They had four seats up in the cockpit. I had went up in there with the crew chief and this pilot and co-pilot. I guess I'd have been a little scared, but they wasn't the least bit scared, it didn't seem like. When he set her down on the ground, he just set her up on one wheel and run about halfway across the runway. Then that wing fell down, went spinning, and tore about half the wing off, and one motor. But they did need the parts; we got the parts off of it.

Marcello: I assume that was your one and only experience in flying at that particular point.

Spencer: Yes, that just about broke me from wanting to fly (chuckle).

Marcello: When you got to Singosari, what did you do with your French 75's?

Spencer: We set them up around camp at the end of that runway and

fired at them planes with them. We had some of that old ammunition that you could still cut, you know. It had a fuse on it to make it explode at a certain distance. Really, I think the Japs thought we had a new antiaircraft gun. We couldn't have hit a freight train with one of them, hardly.

Marcello: Now, were these French guns .75-caliber or 75-millimeter?

Spencer: 75-millimeter. Now, we had got rid of the French guns and had gotten American guns when we got over there. The only difference was that American had that split trail on it, and a little more turning radius.

Marcello: But they were still 75-millimeters.

Spencer: Still 75-millimeters.

Marcello: And approximately how many of these would the unit have had?

Spencer: Well, let's see. We had four to the battery, and we had three firing batteries. I guess we had twelve.

Marcello: As you mentioned, they were set up around the camp.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you get from the Dutch when you got to Singosari. After all, it was a Dutch airfield, and, I assume, there were Dutch personnel there.

Spencer: Yes, there were Dutch personnel there. They were friendly, but not over-enthusiastic, it didn't seem like. They were just friendly, but not like the Australians. I couldn't

communicate with them, I guess.

Marcello: After you arrived there at Singosari, did you have any occasion to go on leave into Malang or anything like that?

Spencer: Yes, we'd get to go to town, oh, every night or two if you wanted to, you know--probably two or three nights a week if you wanted to go. It was all blackout down there, but I went three or four times.

Marcello: What were your impressions of the native Javanese that you met there in Malang? Were they friendly and so on?

Spencer: Well, they were friendly, all right; but you could just tell they didn't know nothing. You know, if you bought a stalk of bananas from one of them today and you give him 25¢ for it, tomorrow he'd ask for 50¢. That's just the way they was. The Dutch was telling us we was over-paying them all the time, you know, and we was ruining them.

We had two places that was good places to eat, and we'd kind of hang out there in town. Well, there was about three of us had one of them rickshaw boys take us over at one place, and he waited until we ate. We come back over to this other one, and I told them other two boys, I said, "I believe I'll get in an argument with him. I'm going to offer him a dime." We'd been giving him about a guilder, you know. So I handed him a dime. He had it in his hands, and, oh, he was wanting more money. I was kind of arguing

with him, you know.

A Dutch kid there--wasn't over twelve, thirteen years old--came over there, and he could speak English. "What's the trouble?" Oh, I told him about how long we had him over there. I said, "I gave him a dime. I thought that was enough." I was just having a little fun, you know, and he jerked that dime out of that native's hand and said, "Give him five! Give him five!" He reached in my hand and got a nickel and handed it to him, and he run and kicked him three or four times just as hard as he could. He put that native to really running. He said, "You was paying him too much!" I just thought about them kids at that age bossing them natives. They knew how to handle them. But that was something to see, you know.

The Dutch was a little rough on them there. There'd be one man out there working maybe a hundred of them, and he'd have a bullwhip just like he was working cattle. That's something different to see--something like that. I guess they had to be rough to control them. I don't know.

Marcello: Reality hit on February 5, 1942, because that's when the Japanese staged their first air raid there at Singosari.

Spencer: That changed the whole situation.

Marcello: Describe that experience.

Spencer: Well, they had blowed two or three false alarms, and they told

us the next one was going to the "real McCoy." Me and my buddy that worked together over there at the airport, and stayed together in them cubicles, we just got in from the airport after working that night. We were pretty tired, you know.

They blowed this siren, and he said, "Are we going to lay down and go to sleep, or are we going to go out of the camp?" I said, "Well, they said the next one would be the 'real McCoy.' I guess we better go out of the camp."

So we went out the back and crawled over a high fence. There was this sloping ditch there--the bank sloped on both sides--and not probably over four foot deep. I sat down on top of the bank, and I said, "Well, I'm going to see them knock the first hangar down."

Well, the first ones that come in was pursuit planes--just strafing the ground with machine gun fire--and when he made his first pass, I dove down to the bottom of that ditch. It was muddy, and the ground was soft. I jerked that old iron hat off, and I just dug back in that bank right quick where I could stick my head under it. Another one of my buddies--it was kind of a brushy ol' ditch--was laying down just below me, and after they made four or five passes, he asked me, "How are you doing?" I said, "All right. I've got my head in good shape, but my butt

feels big as a bale of hay!"

They was strafing us with that machine gun fire, and then they went to dropping a few little ol' personnel bombs there in camp. They stayed about thirty minutes.

But about the first impression you get, I think, is, "They're shooting at me!" and that makes a difference. That's the first thing I thought of: "They're shooting at me!"

Marcello: How much damage was done in that initial raid?

Spencer: Oh, not a whole lot, I wouldn't think. They knocked holes in our barracks and stuff like that. They might have got two or three planes in that raid, but it didn't amount to all that much as we seen later. We thought it was pretty bad then, but it got worse.

Marcello: Now, did you mention that there were or were not any high-level bombers in that first raid?

Spencer: Oh, I believe there was some high-level bombers that come in right behind . . . some of their two-motor jobs come in right behind them and dropped a few bombs.

Marcello: What did you find to be worse--the pursuit planes or the high-level bombers?

Spencer: I kind of believe them pursuits would scare me a little worse, you know.

Marcello: How effective were your antiaircraft guns against either

the pursuit planes or the high-level bombers?

Spencer: Well, we didn't have anything but them 75's. I guess for them, we hit pretty close to some of them. But now later, there's some English that come in there on the guns. Three or four of them set up one antiaircraft gun there in camp. All we had besides them 75's were just .50-caliber machine guns.

Marcello: Were these machine guns that had been taken out of the damaged and destroyed planes?

Spencer: They possibly had. I don't remember us having any of them at Brownwood, but we had one or two. We might have had two or three jeeps with us that had .50-calibers that they could mount on them.

Marcello: Now, within the next month, approximately how many of these raids did you have? You might have to estimate this, of course.

Spencer: Oh, I'd say probably six or eight, something like that, the best I remember.

Marcello: Could you expect these raids to occur at a particular time whenever they did come, or did they vary the timing a little bit?

Spencer: It seems to me like they varied a little, you know. Them natives would get the word just about as quick, and sometimes quicker, than us, and they would blow them sirens. You

could hear them beating them old . . . kind of a drum deal they had, you know, because they'd send messages with them drums. I think they claimed from one end of the island to the other, it took them eight minutes to send a message. So they'd come in down there, and them natives would send that message all the way through. They was just about as accurate as their sirens.

Marcello: Do you ever get used to those air raids?

Spencer: No. To a certain extent, I did later, you know.

Marcello: Now, all this time, were you still working with the B-17's?

Spencer: Yes, we worked with them plumb up until they flew out of there.

Marcello: As all these air raids were occurring, and as the B-17's were going on missions, I would assume that there were less and less and less planes to service. Is that correct?

Spencer: Yes, I believe we got about two or three from the States over there, but they were less able to fly. I don't remember how many they flew out when they left, but it wasn't very many.

Marcello: I've heard it said that they had four B-17's that were serviceable when they left. Does that seem fairly accurate to you?

Spencer: Well, that could be. I know they didn't have very many left.

Marcello: Now, during that time when all those raids took place,

what damage was done to the camp itself?

Spencer: Well, they hadn't hurt the camp too bad. They hit a supply house down there where there was a bunch of canned milk and stuff. I caught that detail digging them cans out that had been hit by shrapnel and was beginning to sour. We separated the good from the bad there and hauled it off. That was about the most damage I think they done, was when they hit our supplies.

They dropped one bomb right by one of our guns, and the shrapnel off of it fouled that gun up--the wheel on it and something else on it.

Marcello: Was it kind of demoralizing to come under these air raids and know full well that your guns really weren't going to be too effective against the planes?

Spencer: Well, we knew them guns . . . we wasn't going to do too much good with them. But we had a lot of hopes of getting reinforcements, you know, and we knew we'd be sending out a few planes the next day.

Marcello: You mentioned that you had hopes of receiving reinforcements. Am I to assume, therefore, that you still did not actually understand or realize the seriousness of the situation?

Spencer: No, we didn't. I really didn't think they'd push us back any. I thought we'd get enough reinforcements in there to hold them, you know. We'd always hear of reinforcements

landing on the other end of the island--good rumors. We had good rumors going all the time.

Marcello: On February 27, 1942, the Japanese evidently landed on the north side of the island about twenty-five miles west of Surabaya. At that point, the B-17's and their crews immediately left for Australia. What effect did this have upon the morale of the 2nd Battalion? After all, the bombers were now getting out, and you were still remaining on the island.

Spencer: Well, I don't think we thought a whole lot about it. Like I said, we thought we'd run into reinforcements on the other end of the island. That's where we thought we was going; we'd join up with some more on the other end of the island. Now, there's one battery that stayed there--E Battery--but the other two . . . the rest of the battalion went on down to the other end of the island, and it took us, it seemed to me, like three or four days. We'd go through them little ol' towns and then kind of double back and go through them again. It seemed to me like they was getting lost every time we'd hit a little ol' town, you know.

Marcello: In other words, almost immediately after the B-17's left, the 2nd Battalion pulled out of Singosari, also.

Spencer: Yes, we pulled out about the same time they did.

Marcello: Now, up until this time you still had no idea, basically,

why you were on Java. Nobody had ever told you why you were there.

Spencer: Well, not in details or anything, but I'm sure it was to be a ground crew for those bombers. They said that that old Colonel Eubanks who commanded that 19th Bomb Group wanted to fly us out, but some way or another we had orders to stay.

I talked to an old Dutch colonel, or possibly a higher rank than that--he was on the staff, anyway--as we went from Java to Singapore on the ship. He said we stayed to draw the Japs in there. He said they had a lot of spies on that island, and we doubled back through them towns to make them think there was a lot of Americans there. It sounded logical to me; I believe that was right. I'm sure it helped a lot for them to get more reinforcements in Australia.

Marcello: So, as you mentioned then, you left camp very shortly after the B-17's got out, and you were continually on the move.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Now, at this time, E Battery had separated from the rest of the unit.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: And, as I recall, E Battery headed toward Surabaya, where I think it was going to be reinforcing the Dutch.

Spencer: I believe that's right, yes. They went down in there somewhere.

Marcello: Now, in this constant moving around, did you have very much contact with the Japanese?

Spencer: No, we didn't. We didn't really know where they had landed or anything like that--the enlisted men didn't. They never did bomb much convoy of ours as we were going down through there.

Marcello: You mean, when you say a convoy, you were in trucks?

Spencer: Yes. And they didn't have no planes in the air. I don't know why, but we never was bombed on the road.

Marcello: Now, during this maneuvering around, had you personally ever come in contact with a Japanese soldier?

Spencer: No.

Marcello: Were they all around you, however?

Spencer: Well, I don't know whether they were or not. You know, I wasn't sure I could tell a Japanese from a Javanese there if we did run onto one of them.

Marcello: Were you actually up on the front lines, or were you actually behind the front lines since you were in a firing battery? Do you recall?

Spencer: Well, the evening we fired, why, I guess you'd say we was just right on the front lines. We was supporting some Australians there. The gun I was on, that got that wheel

damaged there in that bombing raid . . . now, I guess that's the reason the number four gun wasn't up on the line.

But I was walking guard back around the supplies, and the first sergeant come down there and said he needed ten men. There was some Japs in a native village out there sniping at the guns, and they picked ten of us privates and one corporal--Duckworth--to go up there and run these Japs out of the village.

We loaded up in the truck, and ol' "Snuffy" Jordan asked the first sergeant, "What do we do for supper?" And he said, "If you're there at supper, we'll bring it to you." "Snuffy" said, "He didn't talk very encouraging, did he?"

We had to cross a rice paddy to get into that village, and they started firing these 75's right over to our right. When they started firing them 75's, them natives had all got off down in the creek--them Javanese. They started hollering and squalling until I thought there was a bunch of Japs in there cutting their throats. We run up to this creek bank, and we seen they was just scared.

We crossed the creek-end of that village, and if there was any Japs there, they had left; there wasn't none in the village. We went in them old cellars . . . Ray Ogle would

go down in there and flush them Javanese out and run them out of the camp into their old air raid shelters. But if there was any Japs in there that had been sniping, they left before we got in there. I was more worried on that detail than any one I went on, because I hadn't had no rifle training at all.

Marcello: What sort of weapon did they give you?

Spencer: It was a Springfield .30-06.

Marcello: I also gather that, since the Japanese did outnumber you by so much, they were continually outflanking you, and that was another reason why you had to keep moving. You were continuing to fall back all the time.

Spencer: Most likely, because that old Dutch officer told me that 100,000 front line troops hit that island.

Marcello: Well, you evidently kept retreating toward Bandung.

Spencer: Yes. We was supposed to have been picked up by the Houston or something over there, you know.

Marcello: And, of course, it was at Bandung where the end more or less came. On March 11, 1942, the Allied forces surrendered to the Japanese. What was your reaction when you heard that the Allied forces, including the Americans, had surrendered? What was the reaction of you and your buddies?

Spencer: Well, I guess that was the biggest letdown that a fellow could get, because I never had thought that they'd ever give you

that kind of order--to surrender. But they told us it was an order just like ordering us to the front line--to surrender. It was quite a letdown, because I didn't know they'd ever--in the American Army--give an order like that.

Marcello: I've heard it said by some of the men that they were actually kind of ashamed when this happened.

Spencer: Yes. If a man knocked your gun out of your hand and captured you, I can see that. But just to lay it down, why, that was just unheard of.

Marcello: And you really hadn't seen any Japanese yet, to speak of.

Spencer: No, we had never really seen one of them. We had fired on them that evening, or the day before that, I believe, and knew they was close, but we had never seen one of them.

Marcello: Now, up until the time of the surrender, you really hadn't lost anybody yet, had you? I think a couple of the men had been lost when they went up in some of the airplanes.

Spencer: Yes, yes. I believe there was two. I knew one of them, but I don't believe I knew the other one personally, you know. One of them was out of our battery. I believe there was two we lost in that plane, and that's all we had lost.

Marcello: By this time, had you heard the rumors that the Japanese didn't take prisoners?

Spencer: Oh, we probably had, yes. We probably had heard how mean they was and everything.

- Marcello: Some men reacted by wanting to head for the hills and more or less wage guerrilla warfare. Did this thought ever cross your mind?
- Spencer: Well, you know, I was just going to try to be with the bunch-- whatever the bunch done. There was a few who went to the coast, but I didn't go to the coast or anything because I just kind of stayed with the bunch. The ones that went to the coast come back and said there wasn't nothing down there but Jap ships.
- Marcello: What did you do in terms of your weapons and your trucks and things like that?
- Spencer: They told us to circle them out on a little ol' racetrack there, and we moved out on it. The best I remember, when the Japs come in there, we just marched out with just our gear. What I mean is our blankets and mess kits and stuff like that . . . clothes.
- Marcello: Were any attempts ever made to destroy any of the guns or any of the vehicles and so on, so the Japanese couldn't use them?
- Spencer: Now, there was on these cars. They had some command cars there. I kind of believe that was before they said we was captured--that the island had fell, capitulated--that we drained the oil out of them, and water, and just started the motors and pulled them wide open . . . thrashed the motors

in them. But I don't believe there was anything destroyed after they said the island had surrendered, you know, at twelve o'clock that day, and that was about one o'clock when they told us.

Marcello: So did you mention awhile ago that, after the surrender word had come down, the unit then proceeded to this racetrack?

Spencer: Yes, we assembled out on kind of a little ol' racetrack there.

Marcello: Was this at Garoet?

Spencer: Well, it could have been, but I don't remember them names of them little ol' towns.

Marcello: And it was at this racetrack that you had your first contact with the Japanese?

Spencer: Yes, that's when we first seen some of them, when they come down there and we marched out. The best I remember, why, we went to a tea plantation.

Marcello: Okay, let's back up and talk a little bit more about the experience here at the racetrack first. Did you actually, personally, have any contact with the Japanese here?

Spencer: No, I never did talk to one of them there or anything, I'm sure.

Marcello: Were these mostly officers that came in?

Spencer: It must have been Jap officers that come down there, it seems to me like, and maybe talked to our officers or something like that.

Marcello: And, like you mentioned, from the racetrack, then, you proceeded

to this tea plantation.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: How did you get to the tea plantation? Did you go by truck, or did you walk? How did you get there?

Spencer: I don't remember how we got there. I sure don't. I don't remember whether we went on a train . . . I don't believe we went on a truck. I believe we went by train, or walked. I forgot how we got up there.

Marcello: Now, had E Battery been reunited with the rest of the unit, or was it still separated?

Spencer: It was still separated.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens when you get to the tea plantation?

Spencer: Well, we hung around there, which wasn't too bad.

Marcello: What did you do there?

Spencer: Well, I don't even remember going out on any kind of a working detail there. We stayed there about a week.

Marcello: And the Japanese never came around?

Spencer: No, they didn't bother us there. The best I remember, they didn't bother us there.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did in your spare time here at this tea plantation? You must have had a lot of spare time.

Spencer: We must have, but I can't remember much about that there. I can't remember doing anything. I don't believe we was there over a week.

Marcello: Where did you go from the tea plantation?

Spencer: They put us on a train then, and we went down on the coast there close to Batavia to a camp called Tanjong Priok.

Marcello: Tanjong Priok.

Spencer: Yes. That's where we got a full dose of the Japs.

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned you go from the tea plantation to at least a little town close to where there was a railroad station or where you could get on this train.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Now, did you have any contact with the Japanese there at that railroad station or that train depot or whatever it was?

Spencer: Well, I didn't, personally. I don't remember having much of a run-in with them there. I believe it was there that I seen them slap the first soldier. This Jap officer and three or four of them was coming down the column that's lined up, and one of them was smoking a cigarette when they come by. He bashed him around for smoking that cigarette. I believe that's where that was at, and that was about the first of that I'd seen.

Marcello: What did these Japanese soldiers look like?

Spencer: Well, they didn't look as educated and smart as what you see over here. They was dressed in a sorry uniform, and they just looked a little like a . . . well, we called them a

lot of times "gooks," you know. They wasn't educated like the ones over here, and they wasn't as neat in appearance and everything. What we had dealings with was more or less the "coolie" class of them.

Marcello: Okay, so you go on this train, and you go to Tanjong Priok, which is going to be your first POW camp, so to speak. Now, you mention that it's here that you really get a taste of the Japanese. In what way?

Spencer: That's where we went behind the barbed wire; they had barbed wire around us and them walking guard. They fed us two big spoonfuls of rice there twice a day. I got so hungry there, I could eat the tongues of my shoes before we got anything that had any taste to it.

Marcello: Describe what Tanjong Priok looked like from a physical standpoint. What were your quarters and so on like here?

Spencer: It was kind of down in an old swamp, just some old abandoned barracks. They was just dirty and rundown and in a swampy place.

Marcello: What were your living quarters like?

Spencer: They were barracks, but they were dirty. That wasn't too bad, you know. They had a concrete floor; we slept on that concrete floor. They wasn't muddy like them was in Burma--the floors in them and stuff like that.

Marcello: Was this a very big camp?

Spencer: Yes, it was pretty big.

Marcello: Were there other nationalities in it?

Spencer: The English was already there--a lot of them. They told us there when we got there that we had to turn in all the food we had, or the Japs would sentence you to ninety days of hard labor and this and that. So we all turned in our food, or most everybody did. We had canned stuff. But none of that ever come back to us. I don't know whether the English got it or who got it, but we didn't get it.

Marcello: Is this the beginnings of the bad impressions that you had of the English?

Spencer: I guess it was. We figured they threwed us a curve there, you know.

Marcello: You were talking about the food awhile ago, and you said that you had received two big spoonsful of rice . . .

Spencer: Twice a day.

Marcello: . . . twice a day. Did you get anything else besides rice?

Spencer: That's all we got there for about . . . I know it was at least a week before they ever sent out a working party. Then they sent out a working party to unload some sugar and rice down on the docks. There was three of us staying together--Anderson, Cooper, and myself--and Anderson got to go on the detail. He come back with his pockets full of sugar--brown sugar--and I put that on that rice that night,

and I thought that was the best I had ever eaten, that brown sugar.

Marcello: What was the quality of the rice like here at Tanjong Priok?

Spencer: Well, it hadn't been polished; it still had that brown shuck on it. I reckoned they stored all of theirs in some kind of an old, dirty warehouse. It would have sand and grit, but they wouldn't let them wash it because they said it washed out some of the vitamins. It was a little different rice from what we get here.

Marcello: Was it wormy?

Spencer: Oh, yes, it was all full of worms. It had white worms about an inch long, and them little, ol' black weevils, but you couldn't taste one of them if you eat after dark; you couldn't taste a worm.

Marcello: So what are you saying? You waited until after dark to eat the rice?

Spencer: No, but if you happened to be on a working party and come in after night, you couldn't see what you was eating. You knew you was eating them worms, but you couldn't taste them. They didn't have no taste to them.

Marcello: At first, did you try and pick out all those worms and weevils and so on?

Spencer: Yes, we'd pitch out what was on top--them worms.

Marcello: Who was making, or who was preparing, the rice at this stage? Were your own cooks doing it?

Spencer: I believe they set up there in that camp . . . their own cooks was cooking rice in just kind of like wash kettles.

Marcello: Did your cooks have a very hard time learning how to prepare that rice properly?

Spencer: Well, yes. At that time, they didn't know how to cook that rice like them Dutchmen did. Them Dutchmen . . . you give them a little something to go with it, and they can make that rice pretty tasty.

Marcello: So not only was it a poor quality rice, but in the beginning it wasn't being cooked very well, either.

Spencer: No, it wasn't.

Marcello: Did you have very many work details here at Tanjong Priok?

Spencer: Well, about every other day. After they got started sending out working details, you could catch a working detail about every other day.

Marcello: What sort of work was being done on these details?

Spencer: Mostly unloading them warehouses. The Japs were getting all that rice and sugar and taking it to Japan, I guess.

Marcello: I assume this was pretty hard work.

Spencer: Them sacks of rice . . . they said they weighed 224 pounds--so many kilos. We had some of them trucks in them warehouses that we could move it; but them natives moved it on their

shoulders. Well, we had weakened some then, but we tried to carry it on our shoulders, and we didn't do a very good job of it. I couldn't hardly stand up under a sack of it. As we got in Burma and were carrying everything on our shoulders, we got to where we could handle it. But at that particular time, we hadn't had nothing to eat there in a good month or so, and we was weakening.

Marcello: Now, while you're here at Tanjong Priok, what was the relationship between the prisoners and the Japanese? In other words, were the Japanese harassing you very much here?

Spencer: Well, quite a little bit, but not real bad in there, the best I remember, because it seemed like that they wasn't in as big a hurry to move that rice and stuff out as they was after we got in Burma and on the railroad. There wasn't as much bashing going on there, I don't believe, the way I remember it. Of course, some of it was going on. They was in a hurry all the time.

Marcello: By this time, had the Japanese laid down the rules and regulations that you had to follow as a prisoner-of-war, or was most of that to occur in Bicycle Camp when they had you all together? I'm referring now to the bowing and saluting and all that sort of thing.

Spencer: I'm sure they had done laid down part of that there, but I

believe it was in the Bicycle Camp where we was to sign a paper that we wouldn't escape under no consideration.

Marcello: What were your shower and toilet facilities like here at Tanjong Priok?

Spencer: We just had them ol' slit trenches dug for toilets there at that camp, and I can't even remember whether they had any showers there or not.

Marcello: Well, did you ever have any opportunity to bathe there at Tanjong Priok?

Spencer: I don't remember it, if we did. That was in the first part of it. We did later up in Bicycle Camp. That was the best camp we was in while we was prisoners.

Marcello: Now, all this time, are you thinking that maybe your time as a prisoner-of-war is going to be a short one?

Spencer: Oh, all the time. We figured, well, three months and we'd be out of there. The Americans would hit them in three months, or they'd come in there and get us out in three months. That was about as long as we'd ever stay, is three months at a time.

Marcello: So you remain in Tanjong Priok, as I guess, for about a month.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: And then you're moved in May of 1944 to Bicycle Camp, which is more or less a permanent camp.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Evidently, Tanjong Priok was kind of a temporary camp until they got Bicycle Camp established.

Spencer: I imagine it was.

Marcello: Now, how far was Bicycle Camp from Tanjong Priok?

Spencer: Well, it seems to me like it was eight or ten miles.

Marcello: How did you get there?

Spencer: We got there on foot. When that 19th Bomb Group flew out, they left all their tools, and I sorted me out a good set of tools. I had mechanicked a little back here before I got in the service. They must have weighed a hundred pounds, at least. I put them in the bottom of a barracks bag, and I still had them.

When we left there, why, me and Harold Argabright put a pole--a bamboo pole--between both our barracks bags and put it on our shoulders. I had about that hundred pounds of tools in the bottom of that one. We walked about four or five miles, and we come to a bridge, and I told him, "Let's move over to the side, and let me go into that bag and throw them tools over this bridge into that creek."

We moved over to the side, and when we did, some of the others had done got to kind of weakening and falling behind, and them Japs started whipping them back there to make them stay up. We just shouldered that pole up, and we carried them tools and all right on into that camp. I got

rid of them tools, I took them and put them up in the attic first thing. I didn't want to carry them anymore.

Marcello: As you were marching from Tanjong Priok into Bicycle Camp, did the Japanese try to humiliate you at all in front of the local population or anything of that nature?

Spencer: Well, yes, I suppose they did because they just tried to have you walking real fast, and they were coming along with them poles hitting first one and then another. I imagine it was mostly just to show the people they could, you know.

Marcello: By this time, I assume that the loyalties of the natives had changed, too.

Spencer: Oh, yes. Just overnight, they were for the Japs.

Marcello: Okay, so describe what Bicycle Camp looked like from a physical standpoint.

Spencer: Well, it was a pretty nice-looking camp to me for them times. I wasn't expecting too much as a prisoner-of-war. But we had some volleyball courts in there and pretty good barracks to stay in. It was all right there for a prisoner-of war; if we could have stayed right there, it would have been all right.

Marcello: Describe what your barracks were like here at Bicycle Camp.

Spencer: Well, they were mostly brick. They had kind of cubicles in it that three or four could stay in--kind of like horse stalls. They had showers there. The camp part of that wasn't bad at all.

Marcello: Now, were you sleeping in bunks or were you on the floor, or did you have ticking or what?

Spencer: I kind of believe some of us had bunks. I don't think some of them did, but I believe some of us did have bunks there.

Marcello: Did you have a bunk?

Spencer: I can't remember making it up or anything. I just don't know. I kind of believe, though, I had a bunk there.

Marcello: You mentioned that you did have showers here at Bicycle Camp. Am I to assume, then, that you did have an opportunity to take a bath rather frequently and so on?

Spencer: Yes, you could there. We was buying things from the natives. Food wasn't all that bad there. It wasn't as bad as it had been down at Priok. It was getting a little better.

Marcello: Had the food ever improved there at Priok?

Spencer: It might have improved a little from what it was when we first went in there.

Marcello: In other words, you mentioned that for the first week, you received nothing but the rice there at Tanjong Priok. Now, did you ever get any vegetables or anything like that later on?

Spencer: We probably did later on. I know the first thing they issued us that had any taste to it was some cheese. It was old; the wood boxes had rotted around it. I'll guarantee you, you

could smell them cheese for a half a mile, I'd say. I never smelled any cheese that stunk as bad, but they had a taste to them. You could hang them up overnight, and they'd eat pretty good the next day.

Marcello: So what did you do? Kind of scrape off all the mold and everything like that?

Spencer: Yes, and kind of hung it up where it'd air awhile. You just can't imagine cheese getting to smelling as bad as they did.

Marcello: And this occurred at Tanjong Priok.

Spencer: Yes. It was the first thing they issued us besides rice.

Marcello: What were the toilet facilities like at Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: We had toilets there.

Marcello: The Dutch type?

Spencer: The Dutch type--just water running through them.

Marcello: No such thing as toilet paper.

Spencer: No, we had to hustle that ourselves.

Marcello: Did you ever get used to using the Dutch water bottles? That's what they used, didn't they?

Spencer: No, I never did. I'd hustle around and find some paper, but I never did use it like the Dutch.

Marcello: Now, when you got to Bicycle Camp, the survivors off the USS Houston were already here.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: They were a pretty pitiful outfit at that time, were they not?

Spencer: Yes, they didn't have no clothes at all, and we still had our clothes. I gave one of them a uniform that was about my size, and a pair of shoes, and fixed him up in pretty good shape. They just had what clothes they found. They was in pretty rough shape there.

Marcello: Was there a ready willingness on the part of the 2nd Battalion to share what they had with the Houston survivors?

Spencer: Oh, yes, I think they did. Just like I shared mine, them other boys did with some of them there, and I'm sure all the rest of them did. We was just all prisoners-of-war there--some of them from the country and some of them from town, some of them boys from Arkansas off the farms, you know. We'd usually stick together, the ones off the farms, more so than falling in with somebody from some city somewhere.

Marcello: Now, the Houston people were in a separate barracks from the 131st Field Artillery.

Spencer: Yes, probably forty or fifty yards from us.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the Japanese here at this camp. What sort of rules and regulations did the Japanese lay down so far as your relations with them were concerned? What could you do and what could you not do?

Spencer: That's where they laid it down there, you know, this calling

attention and all that stuff. If you seen one coming, you had to bow to them or salute them. Coming through camp, if they could find anything to give you a bashing over, they would in that particular camp. That's where a lot of that started, especially if you went out at night. I believe that that's probably in the camp where they put them Korean guards in there.

Marcello: You've already got the Korean guards in Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: I believe that's where they come to us at. When they put the real Korean guards over us, I believe it was in Bicycle Camp there. They loaded them up that we'd kill them and this and that, and they were scared when they come on guard. If one had to go to the bathroom of a night, you'd better be careful, you know, and not run onto one of them. He'd give you a pretty good flogging over nothing.

Marcello: Let's get back to the bowing and saluting once again. How did that work?

Spencer: Well, I want to say that if you didn't have a hat on, you bowed, but I don't believe that's right. It might have been. You could bow to one of them if you had something in your hands and get by with it, but you had to salute every one of them from a private plumb on up.

Marcello: Was this rather humiliating in the beginning?

Spencer: Oh, it was in the beginning (chuckle). I remember that now.

The first night we was captured, they come back and told us we was going to have to salute them . . . we was going to have to do this and that . . . telling us what we was going to have to do. One old boy spoke up and said, "I'll do anything but salute them! I won't salute them!" They said, "Well, that's what they expressed most, that you'd have to salute them." He said, "All right, I'll salute them then." But that was pretty hard to do, you know.

Marcello: Did you find it worthwhile to learn the essential parts of the Japanese language as soon as possible?

Spencer: No, I seen right off that when you got to learning a little of that, you couldn't explain yourself well enough. Then you just got in trouble with them. It seemed like one that was picking it up and trying to talk Japanese to them, they'd get in trouble with them. I just got to where I wouldn't try to learn it at all.

Marcello: Were there certain Japanese words that were essential for you to get along, that is, words that you had to know the meaning?

Spencer: Now, we had to learn to count off in Japanese. But that was about all you had to learn. I learned how to count off, and that's about all. Of course, I picked up some of it along the way. Just naturally, some of it would rub off on you, but I didn't study it any.

- Marcello: Do you learn very shortly that if you're going to get along with the least amount of discomfort and so on, you had better cooperate?
- Spencer: Yes, that was about all. You just nearly had to cooperate, or you were really going to get beat up.
- Marcello: What form would the punishment usually take when the Japanese did resort to physical punishment?
- Spencer: Well, usually, if it was just some little old minor something, they'd just slap you around with their open hands. But as it got worse, why, they might put a bamboo between your legs. You know, you'd sit down on it, and it was in the bend of your legs there, and by night you wasn't about to walk. They used that some.
- Marcello: What would you have had to do to be punished in that way?
- Spencer: Well, if you got caught stealing something that amounted to something--that you could resell to the natives--you were liable to wind up like that.
- Marcello: But, for the most part, it usually took the form of slapping and pushing and shouting and hitting with gun butts and things of that nature?
- Spencer: Yes, that was mostly . . . but if you had done some offense that they'd call you to the guardhouse for, they'd liable to set you down on one of them poles and beat you with a pole pretty good.

Marcello: Did you personally get any beatings here at Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: I don't believe I was ever slapped around by one of them until after I got on up in Burma, because I knew how to do all their kind of work. Then I was able to do it, and I just tried to avoid them as much as I could.

Marcello: You mentioned something that I heard a lot of the other prisoners mention. The best thing to do was to stay as far away from them as you possibly could.

Spencer: Yes, and not associate with them any more than you had to.

Marcello: There was no such thing as being friendly with them.

Spencer: Yes, that's right. You couldn't be friendly with them and get along with them.

Marcello: Now, did you notice that physical punishment was also a way of life in the Japanese Army?

Spencer: Yes, they punished each other that way. You take one of them . . . if he didn't have but a month's seniority on another one, and he caught him doing something he oughtn't to, he'd just slap him around like he was a stepson or something. That went along right in their own army.

Marcello: And I've heard it said that if an officer caught hell in the morning, he simply passed the punishment--or that the punishment was passed--right on down the line until it finally got to the prisoners. In other words, if a prisoner saw that an officer was being admonished or something, they knew that

sometime within the course of the day, they were going to get it, too.

Spencer: Yes, I've seen that happen.

Marcello: It was a way of saving face, I guess.

Spencer: Yes. After we got down to Saigon, one of the boys crawled up on a crate to eat this rice for dinner, and in that crate they had a Japanese airplane wing that had the "Rising Sun" painted on it. There was a Jap officer that come in there and seen that, and, boy, he knocked him off of that crate, and he thrashed him out there--beat him good, you know. Then he went around all evening . . . we had small details digging foxholes on the Saigon airport, and trenches, and there would be one Jap over each little ol' bunch of men. He went around all evening whipping the Japs for letting that old boy get above the "Rising Sun" (chuckle).

Marcello: By this time, that is, after you get to Bicycle Camp, do you begin to have nicknames for all the Japanese or Korean guards?

Spencer: Yes, we went to nicknaming them.

Marcello: Do you recall what some of the nicknames were?

Spencer: In the Bicycle Camp, it seems like we had one there, maybe, that we called the "Brown Bomber."

Marcello: "Liver Lips?" Was he here at this place, or was he farther on in the jungle?

Spencer: I believe he got with us in Burma. That's about the only one

I remember there. We had began to nickname them, but that was at the early part of it. It wasn't too rough then. About the roughest thing I seen there . . . out on the working details, these Dutch women would throw us some cigarettes or give us that (gesture) . . .

Marcello: The "V" for victory sign?

Spencer: . . . victory sign. Well, they'd just stop the truck right there and slap her all over the sidewalk--just over some little old something like that. That was pretty hard to take, you know.

Marcello: Now, at one time during this period, the Japanese tried to get you to sign a document to the effect that you would never escape.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Describe that incident.

Spencer: Well, they said we was going to have to sign this, that we wouldn't escape under no consideration. The officers, I believe, told us not to sign it. They marched the officers out of the camp where they had their graves dug, you know, and them officers decided to sign. They come back in and told us to sign, that they'd take the full responsibility for it.

Marcello: So did everybody sign the document?

Spencer: I think everybody signed it then, and that went plumb through

all the prison camps. An Australian told me this
he was already in Burma then. They wouldn't sign it, and
they threw them in a wooden building they had up there
and kept them two or three days without anything to eat.
They had to sign it; they forced them to sign it. Yes,
they intended for them to sign this, or they'd have killed
them if they hadn't.

Marcello: Did the Japanese ever warn you as to what would happen if
you tried to escape?

Spencer: Oh, there was talk all the time, you know, that you'd be
killed. And there in Burma, they brought one back to camp
there to kill him, you know, that tried to escape.

Marcello: How about in Bicycle Camp? Did they warn you what would happen
there if you tried to escape?

Spencer: I don't remember it, personally. I guess it was mostly just
talk. We knew we'd be killed if we was caught anymore. I
guess they told us that there, probably.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the work details here in Bicycle
Camp. Describe what they were like.

Spencer: Well, the work details there--we was working about every other
day--wasn't all that rough. We could have done the work real
easy.

Marcello: What sort of work were you doing on these details?

Spencer: Well, it was different. Some of the work there was just

cleaning up in the parks, you know, and some of it was in the warehouses, you know, still loading out stuff.

I don't remember of anything else there that amounted to too much there. I left out of there with the first bunch to Burma.

Marcello: Some people, I think, actually volunteered for the work details, because it gave them a chance to perhaps trade with the natives or do a little bit of stealing or whatever.

Spencer: Yes, they would. You would try to get on the working details. Even after we got in Burma, you'd try to stay with the working men because you had a better chance of getting something to eat.

Marcello: Now, when you went on these work details, were you allowed to trade with the natives or did this have to be done secretly? Again, I'm referring to that period there in Bicycle Camp. All my questions at this point will be dealing with Bicycle Camp.

Spencer: Well, I think it was just according to what Jap you was out with. Some of them would let you trade with them; some of them wouldn't.

Marcello: I assume that by this time all the guards are getting a reputation. You know which ones are . . .

Spencer: Yes, you begin to learn them.

Marcello: What did you do for spare time here in Bicycle Camp?

- Spencer: Oh, we had some volleyball courts there, and a basketball, but we didn't play a lot of basketball; it was too hot there to play basketball. But we had some of the best volleyball teams there that I ever seen play. It's like I said, if we could have stayed there, why, we'd have been lucky. We'd have just kind of dodged the war if we'd have stayed there, I felt like.
- Marcello: Do you have quite a bit of spare time here in Bicycle Camp?
- Spencer: We had quite a bit of spare time there. You didn't work over every other day, I don't think.
- Marcello: What did you talk about in your bull sessions and so on? I'm sure by this time . . .
- Spencer: Oh, we'd be talking about getting out in three months.
- Marcello: Did you talk about home very much?
- Spencer: We'd talk about home because we were all from the area of Jacksboro, Decatur, Wichita Falls--scattered through the country there--and you could always talk about the things that had happened and the places you'd been at the same time somebody else had been there. It made it a lot better.
- Marcello: And I understand you got to know everybody's family history.
- Spencer: Oh, yes, we knew everybody, and I'd hear some of them talk about their friends until I felt like I'd know them if I seen them. But it didn't get rough until we got to Burma.
- Marcello: What was the food like here at Bicycle Camp? We haven't talked

about it yet, so let's talk about the food.

Spencer: Well, at that time, I didn't think it was too good--rice and a lot of pinto beans, which I always loved--pinto beans.

Marcello: How much rice would you get at a meal?

Spencer: There in that camp, you could get a mess kit about full. You could pretty well get what you wanted.

Marcello: Did you get this rice three times a day?

Spencer: Yes, I believe they fed us three times a day there. I'm sure they did, or I'd have remembered it.

Marcello: How about vegetables? Did you get any vegetables or anything of that nature?

Spencer: Some vegetables there--some kind of greens and that kind of stuff. It wasn't too bad.

Marcello: How about meat?

Spencer: There might have been some meat in the stew. I can't recall it, but there could have been.

Marcello: Is it not also true that, during this stage, company funds were being used to buy food?

Spencer: Yes, it was. They'd let a detail go out and buy food with the company money they had.

Marcello: In other words, if somebody was going out on a work detail, the officers would give him so much money to buy some food, and they would do this for other individuals, also. Is that the way it worked?

Spencer: I believe that's the way it operated there. That's the best I remember. I know they was buying a lot of the food there, you know, and after we got in Burma, we didn't have no money to buy it with.

Marcello: What kind of extra food were they buying on the outside?

Spencer: Mostly pinto beans, the way I remember it.

Marcello: How about sugar or milk and things like that?

Spencer: Well, they could have been buying some sugar, too . . . coffee. They might have bought some coffee.

Marcello: During this stay at Bicycle Camp, what kind of news were you receiving from the outside world, and, if you did receive any, how would you receive it?

Spencer: Well, I believe that some of them had some radios that was picking up the news. It was always good. If they got any bad, they didn't tell it.

Marcello: But you never really saw the radios.

Spencer: I never did see a radio.

Marcello: You probably didn't want to know where the news was coming from, or know where those radios were, really.

Spencer: No, that was it. If you didn't know, they couldn't get it out of you.

Marcello: We haven't mentioned it, but I assume that the Japanese forbade you to have radios.

Spencer: Yes, they did. We heard later--about the time we got up in

Thailand--that one of the English had one with some cookies over it in a jar. The Jap turned the can over, you know, and they said any other Jap would have never reached down to turn it back up. He turned it back up and seen the radio. They thought they killed them. Two Englishmen was in on that radio.

Marcello: Of course, I guess at this time, all the news that you would have been receiving would have been bad news, anyway, because these were still good times for the Japanese.

Spencer: Yes, we wasn't winning many battles then.

Marcello: What were the hospital facilities like here at Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: Well, we still . . . you know, our American doctor was living, and he was a fine fellow. I went to him there one time with . . . I believe I fell playing basketball or volleyball and skinned all the hide off my knee. He doctored it because them things would turn into them ulcers there in that country.

Marcello: Even at Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: At Bicycle Camp. You had to doctor that kind of stuff. I don't think he had much medicine there, but still you could go to him.

Marcello: Now, at Bicycle Camp, how was the health of the men holding up?

Spencer: Well, I think it was holding up pretty good there.

Marcello: Did you have enough food to eat? Now, you weren't getting very much of a variety and so on, but did you have enough,

or were you still hungry at the end of the day?

Spencer: Such as we had, I think we had enough. We had about all that we wanted for what we had.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that you came into Bicycle Camp with those tools. What happened to them?

Spencer: I don't know. When I left, I left them up in the attic. You could get up in the attic of them buildings there, and that's where I left them.

Marcello: I would assume that you might have been using them for trading or things of that nature.

Spencer: Yes, if I could have stayed there, I could have peddled them out maybe to them natives. I really got them--at the time I got them--to bring them back home with me. I was glad to leave them there in preference to carrying them any further.

Marcello: Generally speaking, were all of you still maintaining your normal weight here at Bicycle Camp, or had you begun to lose weight by this time?

Spencer: We had lost a little but not all that much at that time. We'd lost probably ten pounds a man or something like that.

Marcello: But you're not losing any men. Nobody's dying yet.

Spencer: No, no. I just remember one man being sick there.

Marcello: Did you have very much contact with the other nationalities here at Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: English and Australians?

Marcello: Yes.

Spencer: Yes, we'd go over in their barracks--huts--and visit with them and play volleyball against them.

Marcello: By this time, had you begun to form little cliques or little groups among yourselves? Now, when I use that term, I'm not using it in a derogatory sense. In other words, did a couple or three men buddy together and share food and so on and so forth by this time?

Spencer: Yes, right. They'd already begun to pool their stuff. When you was out on a working detail, you got whatever you could and brought it back in.

Marcello: Who did you buddy up with at this time? Do you remember?

Spencer: I was buddying up with Luther Anderson and Murray Cooper. He got killed in a car wreck in 1950.

Marcello: Were both these men from F Battery?

Spencer: Yes, they were from that little ol' community I lived in.

Marcello: Now, was this important to your survival, that is, buddying up with a couple of other people?

Spencer: Very important, you know, for somebody to take care of you. Especially later, if you get the fever or something, somebody'd take care of you. If we'd have been throwed in with strangers, there wouldn't have been half of us got back, I don't think.

Marcello: And this buddy system kept up throughout the entire period that you're a prisoner-of-war.

Spencer: Yes, plumb on through to the end, why, this group stayed together.

Marcello: And, like you say, we can't emphasize enough the importance of that buddy system.

Spencer: It just meant all of it in the way of survival.

Marcello: Let's keep this point in mind, because I think we'll want to talk about this some more when we get you up in the jungle where it's going to become even more important than it was in Bicycle Camp. At the time you're in Bicycle Camp, are you still obeying your officers? In other words, is discipline still being maintained among the Americans?

Spencer: Well, we listened to them pretty well.

Marcello: I guess the formalities such as saluting and so on had been dropped.

Spencer: Yes, that had been dropped. They would still pick the details and tell you what to do.

Marcello: And I guess this discipline was also going to be important in terms of survival. You simply couldn't operate as a rabble, so to speak.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Somebody had to give orders.

Spencer: Somebody had to be kind of in charge.

Marcello: And, generally speaking, do most of the men still have the respect for their officers and so on?

- Spencer: For some of the officers, you know, they did. If some of them who just didn't carry their load, why, they kind of lost their respect.
- Marcello: Are the officers kind of acting as go-betweens?
- Spencer: They acted as go-betweens, and they didn't have to work like the enlisted men did. They'd tell them to go out on a detail, and they just kind of went between us and the Japs on what we was to do.
- Marcello: Was there very much resentment over the fact that officers didn't have to work?
- Spencer: I don't believe there was any at all, because I'll tell you what they was liable to get into. If you done something wrong out there, and he was liable to get whipped for it. So I didn't want one of their jobs, you know, nor nobody else did. Sometimes they'd just have a sergeant in charge. Well, I didn't want his job, either, because he was liable to get whipped for something I done.
- Marcello: You've mentioned this several times, but I gather from what you've said that, all things considered, Bicycle Camp wasn't too bad. In other words, if you had been able to stay there for the duration of the war under those conditions, survival would not have been too difficult.
- Spencer: I don't think we'd have lost three men if we could have stayed

there. Of course, we was slapped around there by the Japs and all that, but the living conditions and everything was much better.

Marcello: In October of 1942, you leave Bicycle Camp. Now, you mentioned that you were in the first group that left.

Spencer: Fitzsimmons' bunch.

Marcello: Okay. Am I right in assuming that the Fitzsimmons bunch might have left as early as October 2, 1942? I'm perhaps being unfair in asking you for a specific date.

Spencer: I don't remember the exact date, but I know we left in October, possibly two or three months before some of the other Americans come on later.

Marcello: Did you leave in a group with other nationalities as well?

Spencer: Yes, there was some Australians with us, and some English . . . no, I don't remember whether the English left Java with us or not or whether we picked them up in Singapore, but I'm nearly sure there was Australians that left Java with us.

Marcello: Did they ever prepare you for this move? In other words, a week in advance, did the Japanese say that you were going to be leaving and to prepare accordingly, or did you just pick up one day and leave?

Spencer: I believe we just picked up one day and left. They just wanted so many men to go, and they just picked us to go, I'd say,

within four or five hours.

Marcello: How did you get to be picked? How did the process take place?

Spencer: Well, some officers, I'm sure, just went to calling names. I guess that's the way they picked us. They got most, or a big percent, of F Battery privates in that first bunch.

Marcello: Incidentally, had E Battery ever caught up with you yet in Bicycle Camp?

Spencer: No, we never did see E Battery anymore. We heard as we was going through Singapore that they were on their way to Japan. They took them to Japan.

Marcello: Was this a rather unsettling experience to have to pick up and leave Bicycle Camp? In other words, I assume that you had fallen into a routine here, and you were beginning to feel somewhat comfortable here at Bicycle Camp.

Spencer: Yes, I'd loved to have stayed there, but most of F Battery was going--the privates--so it didn't bother me to go. I'd have rather stayed at that time.

Marcello: Incidentally, had the Japanese processed you at all up until this time? In other words, were they maintaining POW records, or did they give you any sort of a number or a dog tag or identification or anything of that sort?

Spencer: Oh, I can't remember. Now, they gave us a number, but I don't remember whether it was at that time or not. I hadn't

thought of them numbers in years, but they gave us a number.

Marcello: Was it something that you had to memorize, or was it on paper or anything of that nature?

Spencer: No, I believe you just memorized your number, but I'm pretty sure we went by numbers. I'd forgot about that number. I can't recall it much. It just kind of comes back to me a little--them numbers.

Marcello: Okay, describe your trip to Singapore, because that's where you were going.

Spencer: Well, it wasn't too bad.

Marcello: Describe what conditions were like on the ship.

Spencer: Them Jap ships was old, slow, kind of freighters converted into a transport. It was crowded and hot. About all you got to eat on there was just straight rice--kind of steam-cooked it. It just didn't have much taste. It didn't have a good taste. They were filthy. I can remember on that trip of having the privilege of getting up on the top deck--the open deck.

Marcello: The whole time you were on this trip?

Spencer: I don't remember whether I ever had to go back down in one of these holds on that trip to sleep or not. I believe we slept on this open deck.

Marcello: What were conditions like down in that hold?

Spencer: It was hot down in one of them holds.

Marcello: How much room did you have?

Spencer: You didn't have no room at all on any of them Jap ships.
You was crowded.

Marcello: To what extent were you crowded? In other words, could you stand up or lie down?

Spencer: I don't remember riding but one of their ships where you had enough room to stretch out and lay down.

Marcello: How was it on this one between Java and Singapore?

Spencer: We was crowded on it, hardly room to lay down on it. It was hot there on it. Their toilets is just ol' houses just built that just kind of hung over the ship, you know. They was pretty filthy.

Marcello: Dysentery hasn't set in yet, has it?

Spencer: No, we hadn't had much dysentery then at all. It wasn't too bad a trip--that first one.

Marcello: What were you being fed?

Spencer: Just rice. If we had anything else, I couldn't remember it.

Marcello: Again, were you receiving it three times a day?

Spencer: I believe we was getting rice three times a day.

Marcello: Were you allowed to take all your gear with you?

Spencer: Yes. I had given away a lot of my gear, but I believe I had took all I had.

Marcello: How long did this trip take?

Spencer: It must have took something like ten days until we got to Singapore. It might not have been that long, but that's the

best I can recall it now, is something like a week or ten days.

Marcello: Let's talk about your stay in Singapore. Since you were with this first group, you probably didn't stay in Singapore too long, did you?

Spencer: No, we didn't stay there over about a week.

Marcello: What did you do during that week that you were at Singapore?

Spencer: We didn't have any working details much there. We went on a few, but I can't remember much what kind of work we was doing.

Marcello: Now, at Singapore you were actually at Changi Village. Isn't that correct?

Spencer: Yes, yes. A lot of English were there.

Marcello: Huge camp!

Spencer: Yes, it was as big an army camp as I was ever in, I guess.

Marcello: I know that some of the later arrivals at this camp had some really bad experiences with the English. Did you have any problems here during that one week that you were here?

Spencer: No, but we knew they were eating much better than we were, because we didn't have nothing much to eat there at all but rice. They had been there long enough that they had little gardens growing.

The English officers down there wanted to play us a basketball game. There was about six of us that went down

there and played them--played by the English rules--and we beat them 48-38. They took us in and gave us a treat, some little coffee or tea--it might have been tea--and some little old fried pies about that big around (gesture). They were good! We wondered where they come up with that act, you know. But that was quite a treat for us.

They were living much better than what we lived while we were there. In fact, we didn't have hardly anything to eat there--just rice was all we had. I don't think we even had any stew. I was glad to get away from there. I knew it was an island, you know, and everything had to be brought in that you ate if you didn't raise it there. That was as filthy a town as I ever seen, too. I never wanted to go back to Singapore.

Marcello: I understand that the British as a group were not too clean.

Spencer: No, they weren't. They weren't near as clean with their food or anything, or particular about what they eat, as we were. I don't think they bathed as much as we did. They had that ringworm--"scabies," we called it--on their skin more than we did.

Marcello: What were your barracks or living quarters like here at Singapore?

Spencer: Well, they had regular barracks there--army barracks--made out of brick, I believe. They had a lot of old lumber out

at the back. A bunch of us jumped out there, and I don't know where we come up with nails or hammer, but we built us some bunks and stretched our shelter halves across them to sleep on them, and we made us some pretty good cots to sleep on while we were there.

Marcello: What was the food like here at Singapore? You mentioned that the British seemed to be eating better than you were. What were you receiving?

Spencer: All I remember there--I know we got awful hungry there--was rice. I don't know whether we was getting it twice a day there or three times, but rice is all I remember there. I know we got awful hungry there. I don't believe we even had any stew to go with it of any kind.

Marcello: Now, I assume that at this point, you still don't know what your ultimate destination is or that you're going to be working on the railroad.

Spencer: I believe the Japs had told us by then that we were going to Burma to build a railroad and that we'd kill our own beef. We was pretty well "hoped" up; we were ready to go. They painted a pretty rosy picture of what it was.

Marcello: So you must have pulled out of Singapore sometime in mid- or late October of 1942. Is that correct?

Spencer: Well, I guess that would be about right.

Marcello: Describe the next portion of your trip.

Spencer: When they loaded us on this ship . . . , they put the Americans on the bottom of an old cargo ship of some kind.

Marcello: Was this right there at Singapore?

Spencer: That was right there at Singapore. They put us in the bottom hold. Then they put the English and Australians up above us. It was just a ladder that you climbed up to the next deck. They were all Australians and English up above us.

They put us in there so thick that we could just sit up; we couldn't lay down. The only air we got was just what filtered through that second deck and come on down to the bottom deck. That old screw that went through under the bottom of that ship would get the bottom of that old ship hot, and that was the hottest place I ever seen in my life! I just looked around for somebody to die until we got off of that thing. It seemed to me like we was on there all of one day and that night and part of the next day.

Marcello: Before the ship even left?

Spencer: No, we was on there just about all that day. I believe the ship pulled out that night. There was such a steam going out that hold we come down in--it was just a fog--that you could just barely see light. There was so much fog going out of there.

I climbed up that ladder . . . neither one of my buddies smoked, and we got an issue back there of cigarettes at some

time or another, and I still had a package of cigarettes, which there wasn't many cigarettes. I climbed that ladder and told them Englishmen I'd swap somebody a package of cigarettes for a canteen of water. Well, they must have had an excess of water, because one of them traded with me right quick. But that canteen of water didn't last very long. We three drank that canteen of water.

I know we had Captain Fitzsimmons and Lieutenant Stensland and Lieutenant Fillmore with us. Stensland was as big and stout a man . . . he looked like these wrestlers. He was as well-built as any of these wrestlers you ever see, or better.

Marcello: Now, was Stensland the guy who was the mysterious man on this trip?

Spencer: Yes, he fell in with us there at Java. We picked him up there in Java. He was a big, rough . . . oh, he was just . . . looked like a giant, you know. He went around fanning--with his shirt--men all night, and he cussed the Japs every breath he took (chuckle). He was cussing the Japs, and he was bad to cuss, anyway.

Marcello: How long were you on this ship altogether?

Spencer: The best I remember, it was all that day--just about a day--that night, and the biggest part of the next day.

Marcello: Were you allowed to go up on deck at all?

Spencer: No, they wouldn't let us out at all. There were Japs there to keep you knocked back down in there.

Marcello: How did they feed you?

Spencer: I suppose they just sent us, the best I remember, some kind of containers of rice. But the hunger wasn't bothering me as bad as there. You was just being so hot and smothering in there, you know, that I thought sure that they'd start dying in there.

Marcello: Did you see anybody go berserk under those conditions?

Spencer: No, sir. Everybody took it just pretty calm. I think everybody was just watching somebody else, because I figured that when three or four of them went to dying, I was going to go up that ladder. If somebody had died, I think everybody'd have tried to break out of there. It was just that bad.

Marcello: I guess you were getting some sort of an idea as to what the slave ships must have been like back in the 1600's and 1700's.

Spencer: I believe it was worse than any slave was ever on. I believe that was worse.

Marcello: You mentioned that you're on this ship for the better part of two days. Where did you land?

Spencer: At Rangoon, Burma.

Marcello: Rangoon or Moulmein?

Spencer: Well, we landed at Rangoon on that ship. They transferred us off of that ship onto another one, and we was on the open

deck that had a wooden shed built out over it, and it was cool. It was like riding a luxury liner compared to what we'd been on.

Marcello: How long were you on that ship?

Spencer: Oh, the best I remember, about another day and night, and we pulled into Moulmein, Burma. It was dark--about ten or eleven o'clock that night--when they marched us in this jail. As soon as they dismissed us, why, I just turned around and laid down on the ground--a big bunch of us did, because we was tired--and slept there on the ground. But some of them went in some of the huts, and some of them went up in a hut there that had . . . the next morning, it had "leprosy" written on it, and they had slept in it that night.

Then there they had some Burmese in jail there that they took them out on working parties that wore the ball and chain.

We didn't have nothing to eat there but rice about twice a day, and I know I got real hungry there in that place.

Marcello: How long did you remain there in that Burmese prison?

Spencer: It seems to me like about three days.

Marcello: Now, were you living in the actual cells and so on there?

Spencer: Yes. They didn't have our doors locked or anything like that, but we was in that compound there.

Marcello: I'm sure that those people that slept in the leper's ward were rather shook up by the experience, were they not?

- Spencer: Yes, they kind of wondered about that, you know, because it was known to be in that part of the country.
- Marcello: Again, I assume that you didn't do any work at all during this three-day stay here at Moulmein.
- Spencer: I don't believe we went on any kind of a working party there.
- Marcello: Where did you go from there?
- Spencer: We went to this first camp in the edge of the jungle where we was going to build the railroad. It was called a hospital camp.
- Marcello: This was at Thanbyuzayat?
- Spencer: Something like that. Some Englishman there, just as I walked in, had wrote a sign and stuck it up on this old hut. It said, "Work cheerful on empty stomach." I didn't think then he was getting very much to eat.
- Marcello: How did you get from Moulmein to Thanbyuzayat?
- Spencer: We rode the train, I'm pretty sure, up to that camp. That first night we was there, they said some Japs had fouled up on the railroad. We got in there before night, and they had them Japs carrying crossties in a good trotting military manner. They'd carry them about three or four hundred yards, and they'd throw them down on the pile, and they'd run back and get another one just as fast as they could carry them. That went on all evening. About dark, why, I thought they would dismiss them, but I reckoned they'd took them in to

eat, and they brought them back in about thirty minutes.

When I went to sleep that night, they was still carrying them just as fast as they could. I knew if they was going to be that rough on the Japs, they was fixing to get rough on us.

Marcello: Were you given any sort of an orientation here by Colonel Nagatomo?

Spencer: Yes. He got up on a box there, or a stump or something, where he could kind of look over us, and he said the English had surveyed that railroad and said it would take ten years to build it. But he said, "We will build it in one year, or we will build it over your dead bodies." I remember that speech real well.

Marcello: Did the speech really have any impact at the time that he gave it?

Spencer: Well, I knew they was going . . . when they wanted to set you out something to do, you know, I knew they was going to very near do it.

Marcello: So how long did you remain in Thanbyuzayat?

Spencer: We just stayed overnight there.

Marcello: And then what happens the next day?

Spencer: They started walking us . . . it was either the 40 or 45 Kilo Camp that we walked to. I believe it was the 45 Kilo Camp. Of course, we still had then some clothes--pretty good little

bag to carry. We had just come off them ships, and we were pretty tired then.

Marcello: So you, in effect, were walking forty-five kilometers, that is, forty-five kilometers from Thanbyuzayat to this camp.

Spencer: Yes, up in the jungle, up in that camp there.

Marcello: This was during the dry season that you were marching at this stage.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what the road was like during the dry season when you were marching from Thanbyuzayat to 45 Kilo.

Spencer: Well, it was just kind of an old bullock road--the most of it that we was traveling over. I took the hiccups on that march, and my buddy, "Luke" Anderson, he bumped me off in a little old ditch. I said, "What in the hell you mean? I'm doing well to stay up!" He laughs and says, "Where's your hiccups?" Well, I'd lost my hiccups.

We just started out with one canteen of water, and it was hot. We come up to a river, you know, of running water, and the English was ahead of us. They just run in there and went to drinking like cattle, and that big ol' Lieutenant Stensland, he run down to the edge of the water and said, "I'll beat hell out of the first American that comes down here!" (chuckle) And there didn't none of us go, because you couldn't drink that water without boiling it.

Marcello: Was the road dusty?

Spencer: It was dusty and dirty. We were sweaty, and that dirt got on us real bad.

Marcello: Okay, you get to 45 Kilo Camp. Describe what it looks like from a physical standpoint.

Spencer: It was just cleared out of the jungle there. Our barracks was made out of bamboo; the roof was just leaves. It was kind of a shed, and they had a platform up about two foot off the ground made out of bamboo poles . . . you know, they still got knots on them where they cut the small limbs off of them. You couldn't hardly sleep on them until you pulled them out of there and beat them with something or other and busted them up to give them a little spring. That first night we slept on them that way. We boiled the drinking water in our canteen cups. They didn't have nothing set up, you know, for any water.

Marcello: How many men were usually in one of these barracks?

Spencer: They'd hold thirty, forty, fifty men. They was just big, long huts.

Marcello: And how much space would each man have on this platform that you were talking about?

Spencer: Oh, his personal space would be four foot, I imagine, that he'd lay down on and kept his mess gear.

Marcello: When you say four feet, do you mean it was four feet wide?

Spencer: Yes, four feet wide, and you'd have all the room long. You was laying in there pretty close.

Marcello: Approximately how big were these camps? In other words, how many of these barracks might there be in one of these camps?

Spencer: I'd say there was probably 400 of us in this camp--you know, English, Australians, Americans. I'd say 300 or 400 of us.

The next day we went out on the railroad there. We was sore from walking the day before, you know, and they marked us off a meter-and-a-quarter per man to dig up. We was going to make a fill through there.

Marcello: Now, when you're at the 45 Kilo Camp, are you in the jungle?

Spencer: Yes, we're in the jungle.

Marcello: What is the terrain like here?

Spencer: Well, right in that particular area it was kind of swampy, lots of underbrush and lowland. Of course, we got in some hills later, but in that particular camp, it was just kind of a swampy . . . well, more like Louisiana country.

Marcello: What time did your workday start that first day you went out on the road?

Spencer: It started early. I'd say it was about sunup.

Marcello: Did they feed you before you went out on the detail?

Spencer: Yes, we'd have rice every morning. They never did have no stew or nothing every morning. It was just rice.

Marcello: Okay, now, when you get there, are the kitchens and so on

already set up?

Spencer: They weren't set up, but we had some men that was setting up the next day. I know we was out there that first day, and I asked that ol' Lieutenant Stensland, "How long do you think it'll take us to build this railroad to the top of that hill?" We could see the top of the hill. He said, "Don't worry about the top of that hill. The war will be over before we get this damn railroad built to the top of that hill." Well, we topped that hill and many more.

Marcello: You mentioned that you get up at sunrise. You're fed your rice ration, I assume. Do you get any hot tea or anything like that?

Spencer: Once in awhile we'd get some hot tea. I never remember the Japs giving us any coffee. Now, once in a while, we could buy coffee from the natives. You know, they paid us ten cents a day.

Marcello: Where do you pick up your tools for this detail? Are they out on the job, or do you pick them up in camp before you leave?

Spencer: The best I remember, they was probably on the job, all piled up out by the railroad.

Marcello: What sorts of tools were you using?

Spencer: We was just using picks and shovels and baskets. Later, we got some of these burlap sacks that rice would come in--big,

thick burlap sacks and tied a wire to each corner and put that on a pole, and two men would carry one of them. We had a meter-and-a-quarter per man of dirt to move.

Marcello: This was when you first started.

Spencer: That's when we first started. It later got to two meters. But you could take them, and that man behind, when you went up on that dump, would dump that sack, and you'd just go right down and get another load. Starting out, there was two Australians and six Americans that worked together. We six Americans carried it, one of them Australians shoveled it, and the other one picked it up with a pick. That Australian picked more dirt than any man I ever seen. We had to start slowing up about four or five o'clock of the evening to keep from getting ours in too early, but some of them would have a little trouble getting theirs in by night.

Marcello: Even in the beginning? I was under the assumption that, in the beginning, most of the time you could make your quota fairly early, and when you made your quota, you could go in.

Spencer: Yes, you could. But some of us wouldn't make it too early because we suspected they'd give us more. They went to giving us more until they got it up to two meters per man. We six Americans and them two Australians could put ours in as easy as anybody, but I have seen some of them on them cuts--bringing that much out of the cuts--and they'd be ten or eleven o'clock

getting to camp every night. They just couldn't get it out of there.

Marcello: Did each individual team have a meter-and-a-half to move?

Spencer: Per man. It went from a meter-and-a-quarter to two meters. When it was a meter-and-a-quarter, we eight would have ten meters to move, is what we'd have.

Marcello: When you had finished ten meters, could you come in, or did you have to wait for everybody to come in?

Spencer: No, you could come on into camp if you wanted to finish it, you know. We'd always finish ours in a reasonable time. Some of them worked hard to try to get on into camp, and that's how come they pushed that on up there to two meters. That two meters was hard to put in.

Marcello: Having been a farm boy, I guess in a sense you were perhaps somewhat used to working this hard.

Spencer: We was used to hard work. If we'd have had plenty to eat, I imagine we could have done that work.

Marcello: I guess in the beginning, that is, here at the 45 Kilo Camp, you could do that work because you were still in relatively good physical condition as compared to what you would be later on,

Spencer: Yes. I tell you, you can just get toughened up for that kind of work on very little to eat, if it's really put down to it.

Marcello: How about your noon meal? Would it be served out on the job?

Spencer: It would be served out on the job.

Marcello: And what would it consist of?

Spencer: Rice and some kind of stew most of the time. Now, I have seen them just bring out rice and hot peppers, you know, something to put on that rice--like red peppers.

Marcello: I guess you were always looking for something to flavor that rice.

Spencer: Yes, and they did bring in some cattle there. The poorest . . . I ain't never seen a cow that poor in this country. They'd kill one about once a week for that 300 or 400. It would kind of flavor the stew, though. We looked forward to that.

Marcello: How much time would you have for the noon meal?

Spencer: I suspect between thirty minutes to forty minutes, something like that. I got to where I could eat that rice and take a short nap.

Marcello: How much rice would you be getting? Now, again, I'm referring to here at the 45 Kilo Camp.

Spencer: You'd pretty well get your mess kit full of rice.

Marcello: While you were working on this detail, what were the Japanese doing?

Spencer: They was just watching you.

Marcello: Now, of course, I guess out here on the work details, you really had the Korean guards, did you not?

Spencer: You'd have maybe a Jap or two in charge. He might not be carrying a rifle, but he'd be in charge.

Marcello: Would the Korean guards be harassing you at all on these work details?

Spencer: They wouldn't be bothering you too much if you got your work done. We hadn't been there very long until this . . . well, no, this was later when we moved back down to about the 26 Kilo Camp. They took us back down there just to clear out some of the timber, and they didn't have no quota set up for how much to do. This Korean guard, along toward sundown, told us to fall in and go to camp. There was a Jap guard who was in charge, but he was off a ways. He come up--we'd fell in to go to camp--and he just went into a fit. He slapped every one of us in the detail around, you know, for falling in to go to camp. He put us back to work, and worked us until after dark.

The next day we went out on the detail, why, Stensland was with us--this ol', big lieutenant. This Jap that had bashed us all around, he was a surveyor; he had a surveying instrument. He hollered and motioned for me and this Stensland to go with him and run this surveyor. Old Stensland looked at me and said, "Is that that bashing son-of-a-bitch?" I said, "That's him." That Jap hollered again and motioned for us. He said, "All right, by god! I'm coming, but if you slap

me, Goddamn if I don't kill you!" I knew he meant what he said. He was wanting to kill a Jap, anyway. Gosh, I was about half scared to death because I knew if he killed that Jap--he had jumped on to every one of us--and if he killed that Jap, we'd have to cut our way through the jungle. So we went and worked with him that day, and he treated us nice. I sure was glad of that because old Stensland . . . that was before he . . . later, why, his health went down on him, and he couldn't hardly walk. But then, he was still much of a man.

Marcello: How were you getting your supplies at this camp? Again, I'm referring to 45 Kilo Camp because I think you spent quite a bit of time here.

Spencer: They had just been bringing that rice up in bullock carts.

Marcello: And it was coming up from Thanbyuzayat, I guess--from the base camp.

Spencer: Yes, yes.

Marcello: What sort of bathing and toilet facilities did you have at 45 Kilo?

Spencer: There was a little ol' creek, must have been a half a mile from camp, and they'd let you go down there and take a bath. If you was late getting down there, like, after dark . . . them was the darkest nights over there I ever seen. Walking back to camp, you'd be about as dirty when you got back--falling

down in them roads--as you was when you went down there. It was just a little ol' muddy creek; it had a lot of leeches in that water.

Marcello: I assume you had no soap or anything.

Spencer: No, we never did have no soap that I remember. I don't think it was about a little over knee-deep. You'd just take your canteen cup and kind of give yourself a shower with it, you know.

Marcello: What did you do in terms of toilet facilities? What did you have when you were in these various kilo camps?

Spencer: We just had them slit trenches. By that time, they was taking that dysentery, you know, and some of them would just take their blanket and move out to them slit trenches, and they'd sleep down there. They'd have to go--some of them--thirty to a hundred times a night. I had that dysentery there in that camp, but it wasn't all that bad.

Marcello: In 45 Kilo?

Spencer: In the 45 Kilo Camp.

Marcello: When you say it wasn't all that bad, what do you mean?

Spencer: I wasn't as bad as some of them that just had to move down right close to the slit trenches.

Marcello: How do you get rid of that dysentery? Were there any cures for it?

Spencer: I don't remember getting very much medicine for it. You just

kind of have to let it run its course. Now, that's when that Dutch doctor come to us, and he had some medicine for it--I don't remember--possibly some kind of pills at that time. But he didn't have much, just maybe for some of the worst ones. When they'd kill one of them beefs, they'd save his blood, and if you were sick enough, they'd give you an an issue of that.

I was sick there one day with the dysentery, but I wasn't as bad as one of the guys. He was bad enough that they'd give him an issue. He boiled that blood in his canteen cup until it got to where you could slice it with a knife. He sliced it out on a piece of tin there and was cooking it, and I asked him what it tasted like. He gave me a piece of it. It looked like liver, and it tasted like liver. But you had to be pretty sick to get it.

Marcello: Generally speaking, here at the 45 Kilo Camp, how long a day would you be putting in in terms of hours?

Spencer: I'd say, on an average, it'd be about ten hours. Now, some of them might put theirs in in nine hours, but it would take some of them twelve hours to put it in.

Marcello: And I assume you were working seven days a week.

Spencer: Yes. We was supposed to have gotten off every tenth day, but most of the time, they just let about half of them off. Most

of the time, you'd go about twenty days before you got a day off.

Marcello: When you came in in the evening off one of these work details, what did you do? I assume you'd get fed when you came in.

Spencer: Yes, we'd just eat that rice and stew. You'd hit the bed pretty quick because you was tired, you know--lay down. Most of the time, I'd sleep pretty good.

Marcello: How long were you at 45 Kilo? Again, you would probably have to estimate this in terms of time.

Spencer: Well, I don't think we was there but about a month until we moved back down to 26 Kilo.

Marcello: Now, is everyone still in fairly good health by this time?

Spencer: They were just getting sick already by the time we left that camp. Already they had taken the dysentery. Now, we hadn't had much fever.

Marcello: In other words, it was mostly all dysentery.

Spencer: Mostly all dysentery. We'd got back down to 26 Kilo, and I don't think we'd been in the jungles over about a month-and-a-half, when "Grundy" Solomon took that fever. He was the first one of us that I remember taking it.

Marcello: This is malaria?

Spencer: This is malaria fever. He was the first one who took it there; we'd been there about a month-and-a-half.

Marcello: What did you do when they sent you back down to the 26 Kilo Camp?

- Spencer: Well, we was clearing some of the timber off of it and building bridges. We was driving them piles and building bridges.
- Marcello: What kind of terrain were you going through when you moved down to the 26 Kilo Camp?
- Spencer: That's kind of hilly right in there. We had some bridges to build right through there, and it was a little bit hilly.
- Marcello: How many men did they pull down to work on the bridges?
- Spencer: I believe they pulled that whole camp down there--300 or 400. They pulled them logs in there with elephants. We had a little derrick set up there, you know, and we'd pull them logs up in there. They had an ol' weight on it that they said weighed 640 pounds; it had a hole through it, and a shaft went down through there that was sharp and stuck in the top of that log. It had a rope run over here (gesture)--about ten men on that side--and a rope run over there (gesture) on the bank to about ten men. It had a "spider" on it, and each man would get on that rope, and they'd lift that up three times, and then they'd drop it to drive that pile.
- Marcello: In other words, all of the equipment on this road was very, very primitive.
- Spencer: I could have carried all the equipment they had, besides that old shaft and this weight. Always four men would carry that weight over, and the track was built up to there, and they'd move it up to the next bridge on a train. You'd run a crowbar

through one of them eyes in that weight. Me and Jimmie Ledbetter had run that bar through there and were waiting on two men to help us move that weight over to the railroad. There was a Jap that run up and went to squalling and jabbing at us with a bayonet, and we just shouldered that "dude" up and carried it over there. He slipped that old bar off his shoulder, and a knot jumped up as big as your fist. It had to be about 320 pounds per man we was carrying, and that's the heaviest load I ever carried.

Marcello: What did you find worse--the making of the cuts and fills or the building of bridges? Was one easier than the other as far as the jobs were concerned?

Spencer: Well, I think it was all about the same as today's work; it wasn't much different. Laying that rail, that was pretty fast, you know, and if you got on a curve laying that rail, you'd gain a rail. Well, you'd have to pick that up on your shoulder and carry it on up the line to where you could get room to lay it down.

Marcello: Now, when did you begin laying rails? For example, at 45 Kilo you were making cuts and fills; at 26 Kilo, you mentioned that you're basically building bridges and so on. Where were you laying rails?

Spencer: Let's see. I guess we started laying the rails when we moved in there to about the 36 Kilo. I don't know who had laid

them up to that camp, but we took them from there and laid them a way on up the railroad.

Marcello: Describe what the laying of the rails was like. I don't believe I've ever talked to anybody that actually was in on the laying of rails. How would that process work?

Spencer: They brought them up on a little diesel car, and they had rollers that you just rolled that by hand down there and just dropped one off. You'd spike it down and go up to another one and roll it off. On them curves, I know we had to carry a lot of them by hand--just put it up on your shoulder and carry it.

Marcello: Did it take a certain amount of time to acquire the skill of driving the spikes and so on?

Spencer: Not much because we'd all chopped wood and stuff like that. We could always get the work done better than the English. Like, unloading a boxcar of crossties, they'd jam them in there until they was just as tight as they could be; and if we could get a sack or an old English jumper or something and wrap a sleeve around one of them to where it wasn't slick, we could start jerking them out of there. Them English would have a time getting one started to unload, and a lot of times they'd holler for the Americans to unload that stuff.

We was unloading crossties there at, I guess, the 36 Kilo Camp, and it was raining during that rainy season. It

was raining so hard that you couldn't see a man ten foot in front of you. A whole bunch of National Guards, they had talked about how much it rained in Louisiana in '40, and "Grundy" Solomon came up to the car where I was unloading. I said, " 'Grundy,' did it rain in Louisiana in '40?" He said, "Hell, no, it just come a small dew!" (chuckle) It really rained there.

Marcello: I guess when we talk about these various kilo camps, they all look about the same in terms of their physical appearance.

Spencer: Yes, they all looked about the same.

Marcello: All of them had been built for you when you arrived, I gather.

Spencer: Yes. While we was at that 36 Kilo Camp during that rainy season, water was about half knee-deep in our camp. Down at this main first camp we come into . . . it was called a hospital camp. You'd get sick upon the railroad--bad sick--and they'd move you down there. Well, they had better food to eat--that was kind of out of the jungles--and they'd try to stay--some of them would--when they got down there. Some of them thought they was blind, some of them was paralyzed, and some of them hadn't fed theirselves in two or three weeks. There was about three B-29's that come in there and bombed that camp and then dropped down and strafed it with machine gun fire. It killed a few of them, and all the rest of them got up and walked out of there. I think the first camp was

8 Kilo, but we were in the 36 Kilo Camp, I'm pretty sure. The ones that was in the best shape walked on into our camp.

I'd been working nights, and I raised up on that old platform as these Australians was coming chugging along in that water. One of them was a little bit old; I guess he was thirty-five or forty years old. He was talking to himself as much as anybody else. He said, "A man's got about as much chance of getting out of this as a chicken has a hard-boiled egg!" That kind of tickled me. When they got settled in, I walked down there and sat down by one of them, and I said, "Was it a little rough down there yesterday, Aussie, when they bombed that camp?" He said, "I'll tell you right now, Yank, they performed miracles. They made the blind see and the crippled walk." (chuckle)

Marcello: This camp that you're referring to, again, was Thanbyuzayat, that is, where the bombing took place.

Spencer: Yes. He said there'd been some down there that hadn't fed theirself in three months. Some of them were blind, and the Japs would hit at them, and they just wouldn't bat an eye. But they could see after that bombing raid.

Marcello: Just a moment ago, you were talking about the rainy season, and I think we need to go into this particular part of your experiences in more detail. In May of 1943, the Japanese started the so-called "Speedo" campaign. Evidently, they

were behind schedule, and they decided to step up the work. Like I say, this began in May of 1943. Did you mention that you were at the 36 Kilo Camp when this took place?

Spencer: Yes, I was right along in there at about the 36 Kilo Camp.

Marcello: And it just so happened that the "Speedo" campaign coincided with the coming of the monsoon season.

Spencer: Yes, right.

Marcello: By this time, that is, by the time that the "Speedo" campaign had begun, had you had any contact with the other members of the 2nd Battalion? You mentioned that the Fitzsimmons bunch had left Bicycle Camp first, but, of course, by May of '43, the whole unit was on the railroad with the exception of E Battery.

Spencer: Yes, yes. But I had never got even a chance to talk to any of them.

Marcello: Did you know, or had you heard, that they were somewhere around?

Spencer: Yes, we heard they was back down . . . some of the men had been back at that hospital camp and had been by their camp, and we knew they were there.

Marcello: How did things change for you in the 36 Kilo Camp when the "Speedo" campaign started?

Spencer: I guess we was kind of lucky there, in a way. About the time that that rainy season started, and this "Speedo" started, too . . . we didn't think we'd have to build that railroad

when the rainy season started, but they went right on with their work. Just like you said, they was really rushing you. We had caught a detail of not too many men that stayed there at the 36 Kilo Camp to load the supplies--rice and beans, what few beans they got. We done loaded them off of the train in a warehouse, and then we would load them back up on trains and send them on up in the jungles there. Crossties, rails--we kind of had a storage yard there. We were working in there more so than working on the railroad part of it--at that camp.

Marcello: This was at 36 Kilo Camp.

Spencer: Yes, I believe that was the 36 Kilo Camp.

Marcello: In other words, they would bring the supplies up from Thanbyuzayat and drop them off at 36 Kilo, and you would store them in warehouses there and take them out again when they were needed farther on up the line.

Spencer: Yes, yes, right. We was working all the time there pretty steady at that kind of a chore.

Marcello: Is it true that you would do anything possible to stay off that railroad?

Spencer: Yes. We was glad to get some kind of a detail like that.

Marcello: In other words, any job that you received was probably better than working on that railroad.

Spencer: Yes, than working on the railroad because you was going to

put in some hard work there.

Marcello: And, again, this was not to imply that you were not working hard at 36 Kilo Camp, but it sure as hell beat being out there on that railroad.

Spencer: Yes, it beat that.

Marcello: I gather it was this way throughout all that work on the railroad. For example, I know at one stage the officers evidently had the privilege of having an orderly or a "batman," as the British called them, and, again, this was simply another way of getting a man off that railroad. Nobody really resented the fact that the orderly had a pretty easy job, but you'd do anything to get somebody off that railroad.

Spencer: Yes, that's right.

Marcello: In other words, a woodchopping detail was better than being on the railroad; working in the kitchen was better than being on the railroad.

Spencer: Anything was better than that railroad. I know, one night . . . we laid them rails all day and all night until daylight the next morning, and then we loaded on one of them little ol' diesel trains that just had them little bitty cars, standing as thick as we could stand, and I bet you he never drove us back into camp, which must have been five miles, faster than 5 miles an hour--just barely poking along. And

we had worked all day and all night. I sure did want to go up to the engine and kill a Jap and start driving (chuckle) it myself.

Marcello: I would assume that if you were at 36 Kilo during the "Speedo" campaign and when the monsoons got under way, your chances of getting food and supplies were better than those who were working up the road, let's say, at 80 Kilo or 100 Kilo, which were some of the worst camps.

Spencer: That's right. I knew we was there . . . at one time, the three of us stayed together, and we had a raincoat between us, and whoever had a chance of stealing anything wore the raincoat. We'd been stacking them beans, peas, and rice up in there--I think they was soybeans--and one of the sacks had a hole in it. I had one of them old Dutch straw hats, and I filled it up full of beans, and hid it up on top of where we were stacking that rice.

When it got ready to go into camp, I ran up there and got that. I come backing down that rice and stuff, you know, and a Jap had sat down right at the edge of this old warehouse to wash his hands, and I stepped right in the middle of his back. I was barefooted, but my feet was muddy. He squalled out, and I thought I'd be nice and knock off a little mud I got on him, and I reached down to knock that mud off. I had this old hat under this raincoat just like that (gesture),

and when I bent over to knock that mud off of him, I poured them beans right down his collar. Gosh, he squalled like a panther, and I just knew he'd beat me to death. Any other time, he would have, but I reckon it had gotten me so bad, you know, and he looked at me and just kind of laughed and went on off. He didn't even hit me, and I'd been hit for a lot less things than that. He didn't even give me a beating that day.

Marcello: Were you still buddying up with your original . . .

Spencer: Cooper and Anderson, mostly.

Marcello: Did you have all sorts of opportunities to steal things here at 36 Kilo?

Spencer: Not too often, but once in awhile you'd cut you a hole in a sack, and you could fill your pockets.

Marcello: Did they watch you pretty closely?

Spencer: They'd try to watch you, you know, and if you got caught, why, you'd really get a beating.

Marcello: Was stealing worth the chance of getting caught?

Spencer: Yes, because I never was much of a thief. I couldn't ever steal as well as some of the other boys, but you just couldn't keep from it. If you got a half a chance, you'd take a chance on it.

Marcello: I've heard it said that a lot of times stealing was simply a way of getting back at the Japanese, as well as being a means

of survival. In other words, if you could steal something and get away with it, that meant that you had put something over on them. It was kind of like a morale booster.

Spencer: Yes, if you could put something over on them.

Marcello: What's it like in the rainy season there at 36 Kilo? Describe what conditions were like?

Spencer: It would rain, it seems to me, for thirty minutes or an hour, and then it would slack off, and then it would rain again. But it would do that every day. I think they claimed that it rained about forty to fifty inches there in about two or three months.

Marcello: Would those atap huts keep out the rain and so on?

Spencer: It'd be watery and muddy underneath, but you could get up on that platform, and them old roofs kept pretty dry, you know. Just what water would run under them was the worst part. Them old roofs would turn the water pretty well.

Marcello: By the time you're at 36 Kilo, how is your clothing holding out?

Spencer: Well, we had begun to run out of clothes. There was a good many of them by then that was just wearing G-strings. That rain is kind of cold, and it fell hard; it would just kind of sting you if it hit your hide.

Marcello: How about yourself? Are you down to a G-string?

Spencer: I still had . . . I believe that was the camp that I'd wore out my shorts. I laid my shelter-half down one morning,

ripped them shorts out, and just took a pocketknife and cut me out a pair of shorts out of that shelter-half. It fit all right, and that was the wearingest thing I'd ever seen. I had them when the war was over.

Marcello: How about your blanket? What sort of shape was it in?

Spencer: Well, them blankets stood it good. That particular night . . . I come in there one night, and R.N. Gregg was working on the same detail. We went in . . . a lot of times, somebody would lay on your bunk in the daytime, I reached down to shake my blanket out, and I said, "This ain't my blanket." Gregg was over three or four men from me, and he said, "This ain't my blanket." One of us said, "Pitch me that blanket you've got." We changed blankets there and felt them in the dark, and we knew which one was our blanket in the dark. They was both Army blankets, but we just knew the feel of it.

Marcello: Do you have very much of an opportunity to trade or deal with the natives here at 36 Kilo?

Spencer: Not too much there in Burma. We didn't have much opportunity there because they was nearly in as bad a shape as we was in. There wasn't much trading that went on. Once in awhile, there'd be one come down through there that you might buy a little brown sugar from, or maybe some cigars.

Marcello: Did you mention that the Japanese were paying you ten cents a day?

Spencer: They was paying us ten cents a day.

Marcello: How often would you get paid?

Spencer: I believe every thirty days.

Marcello: Was this in occupation money?

Spencer: Yes, that was the money the Japs had put out there. Inflation was getting worse all the time.

Marcello: Where could you spend that money?

Spencer: Just, like, a native with some cigars that he'd sell you, or some sugar or something. In Burma, they never did have no regular stands set up or anything.

Marcello: I assume you spent a great deal of your time at 36 Kilo.

Spencer: We stayed there quite a bit.

Marcello: Was it a matter of several months that you stayed there at 36 Kilo?

Spencer: I'd say we stayed at that camp two or three months--three months probably.

Marcello: Did you lose very many men here at 36 Kilo?

Spencer: No, we didn't lose too many. There was some English and Australians died there, but I can't remember losing any Americans there. It seems like we lost one or two up at the 45 Kilo, but I can't remember who it was.

Marcello: How was your personal health here at 36 Kilo?

Spencer: It was pretty fair there. I had held up pretty good there, but it was right along about there--about the time we moved--that

I took malaria fever.

We stayed at the 26 Kilo Camp quite a bit there. We was there in Christmas of '42.

Marcello: '43. Or was it '42?

Spencer: I believe it was '42. Yes, '42. Yes, that's where we was at at Christmas of '42--26 Kilo.

Marcello: Is that where you moved from the 36 Kilo?

Spencer: I believe we went from the 45 Kilo back to the 26 Kilo, and then maybe from the 26 Kilo to the 36 Kilo. We done some skipping around in there on different details.

Marcello: I would assume that, given the conditions at some of these other camps, you were kind of sorry to leave the 36 Kilo eventually.

Spencer: That particular detail, as long as we had that detail of handling them supplies, was the best we had in Burma.

Marcello: Up until now, while you're at the 36 Kilo, did you ever have an opportunity to send out any mail or anything of that nature?

Spencer: I don't remember whether that was the camp we was in or not. Possibly, it was because at three or four different times, they had cards already made out. They had wrote on there that we had hospitals and this and that--good living, according to them. All you done was sign your name to it. They'd hand out them cards and . . . you know, some of the . . . from that little community I was from, I might get four or five

cards and sign different one's name to it. That's the only card that my folks got, was one somebody else had signed. Some of my buddies at different camps was doing the same thing, and my folks knew I didn't sign that card. So I guess it didn't help them, really, any, you know, because they knew I hadn't signed it. But I didn't think them cards . . . I always said I got a better chance of getting out of this than them cards. I figured them Japs just threw them in the can, and kind of done it just for . . . well, I figured they was just doing it to have something to do. I didn't figure they'd send them out, but they did.

Marcello: You mentioned that at the 36 Kilo Camp you got malaria?

Spencer: Yes, I believe right along in there was where I had malaria.

Marcello: Was it bad enough that you remained off the job?

Spencer: If you was out on the job, and you took fever out there, and the Jap would see you was really sick, he'd let you lay in the shade until you went in that night. We was allowed to keep about 10 percent in camp sick, and if you was sick enough, you got to stay in camp. You could be sick and still weller than some of them, but they still had their 10 percent or more in camp, and you'd have to go out.

Marcello: Who determined which prisoners were sick enough to stay off the work details?

Spencer: The doctor.

Marcello: Suppose the doctor decided that more than 10 percent of the prisoners were too sick to go on the work detail. Then who determined who went out? In other words, did the Japanese guards have the final say?

Spencer: Yes, they'd come in sometimes and throw what we'd call the "blitz." They'd tell everyone to assemble out, and they'd pick out the ones they thought was in the best shape and send them out on the railroad.

Marcello: And these, of course, were men who had absolutely no knowledge of medicine and so on.

Spencer: Didn't have a bit of knowledge.

Marcello: Coolies, to use your terminology.

Spencer: That's right. But they wouldn't let but about 10 percent of the men be off. The rest of them had to be out there.

Marcello: Did the doctors have anything for your malaria?

Spencer: Yes, he had quinine.

Marcello: Was that rather plentiful?

Spencer: We had tolerable plenty of quinine.

Marcello: That was probably about the only medicine that you did have in any degree of abundance.

Spencer: Yes, that's right. That's all we had, and I think they claimed Java furnished about 90 percent of the world's quinine, and they had captured a lot of it. That's how come it was there. Later on, up at 114 Kilo, why, I had that fever, and it run

into that "dingy" [dengue] fever, and that quinine wasn't touching it.

Marcello: Where did you go from 36 Kilo?

Spencer: We moved on up to about that 62 Kilo, at a river that run by the camp.

Marcello: Were you kind of sorry to leave 36 Kilo?

Spencer: Not really, because I thought something would be better than that on up the line.

Marcello: I assume the guards didn't harass you too much here at 36 Kilo.

Spencer: Not a great lot. If they caught you doing something, or you didn't salute one of them, why, he'd slap you around. If you accidentally didn't see one of them, you'd get slapped around. Sometimes you could make out like you didn't see one and not salute him and get by with it, but sometimes you wouldn't.

But we got to 62 Kilo there, and the first day out on the job, there was a dead Burmese laying right there by the railroad where we was going to work. We was going to unload supplies there--railroad switches and that kind of stuff--and we didn't have no shovels. There was one Englishman and one of our guys, Jim Hicks, and they stopped the natives coming down the railroad with shovels, and they was going to cover this Burmese up. He had swelled up like a dead cow and was beginning to stink. That old Englishman had about one loose

screw, anyway. The first shovelful he picked up and threwed on him, he said, "Let him lie in peace, not pieces," and I thought that was the shortest sermon I ever heard (chuckle) when they went to bury somebody.

Marcello: What sort of work did you do up at the 62 Kilo?

Spencer: We was unloading railroad iron there--switches and crossties and the rails--and then we'd load them back on and send them on up the line.

Marcello: So you were basically doing the same sort of work, then, at 62 Kilo as you had been doing at the 36 Kilo Camp.

Spencer: About the same, right along in there. One night . . . see, they'd lay two rails on a boxcar, you know, with the ends on the ground and the rest of them run off the top of this boxcar. It didn't have no top on it, but it was probably eight foot high. I was up in the car helping stack these rails. We'd reach over and get them when there'd be some men shoving them up to us, and we'd drag them in with our hands. I was barefooted by then--I'd wore out my shoes--and I had both my big toes just hanging over that railroad car.

We reached out and got that one, and it turned in our hands--that rail turned over--and mashed both of my big toenails off, just mashed the dickens out of my toes. It was still during that rainy season. They carried me into camp--them boys did--on their backs. That was the night we went in about

two o'clock, and I didn't sleep any the rest of the night. It made me sick, and that old Dutch doctor cleaned them toes up.

I went down and slept the rest of that day, and they said there was going to be a Jap doctor come in the next morning, and if he thought you was able to work on the railroad and wasn't out there, he was going to give you ninety days of hard labor. Well, I didn't mind the ninety days of hard labor, but I didn't want to get split off from the rest of the men. So I just went out in the mud that next day--them toes just wrapped up.

And we was carrying them sacks of rice--four men was carrying them big sacks of rice--down a bullcart road and across this river on the other side where they could pick it up. You'd step in holes better than knee-deep in that bullcart road because there was water and you couldn't tell where they was at. I just knew them big toes would turn into ulcers because we was already having them, and, you know, they healed up and never did turn into an ulcer.

Marcello: Who was the Dutch doctor that you have referred to on several occasions? Was this Hekking?

Spencer: That was Hekking. We was lucky we had him.

Marcello: I gather that these Dutch doctors have some knowledge of tropical medicine and so on.

Spencer: He did. He knew all them weeds he could boil up and give you a little of. He was real good; he knew it all. He knew how to spoon out them . . . he had a little spoon that was just sharp as a razor around the edges. He said anything--coconut oil or anything--would kill one of them germs if you could get to it. He'd dig them out . . .

Marcello: Are you referring to the tropical ulcers?

Spencer: Yes, and he'd spoon them out and put some coconut oil or something on them, and we didn't lose a man with an ulcer.

Marcello: At 62 Kilo, you were still not actually working on the railroad as such.

Spencer: No, we wasn't. I'd had that fever there one day, and I had a chill about four o'clock. This Jap let me lay down over pretty close to him. Well, that night some of the Australians had stole some beans or something, and the Japs had found them. Well, they lined us all up and made us put poles over our heads like this (gesture) and hold them up until somebody admitted they was the one that stole them. Well, I knew I wouldn't last very long; I knew I'd pass out in about possibly thirty minutes.

This Jap . . . that's the only good deed one of them ever done . . . this Jap guard, he knew I wasn't in on it, so he come and pulled me out from over there and had me go over and sit down. They stood there for an hour or two, and finally

them Australians stepped out and admitted getting them. They turned the rest of us loose and beat the dickens out of them.

While we was there at that place . . . this bridge . . . that was a creek that ran all the time, and during that rainy season, it was a bank full of water. They told us then that they'd pay us twenty-five cents a day for dangerous work. We went out there one night, and that river was bank-full; that water was slapping the ties, the rails. And we were trying to put poles down in that water to brace that bridge, and it got just into a horseshoe. By two o'clock, we couldn't get enough poles in there to hold it, and I told them, "If we don't get a quarter for this night's work, we never will." We were on that bridge out there, and that old river was bank-full of water. About two o'clock they give up on it and send us to camp, and the next morning there was just the rails and the ties, was all there was across there.

They brought a bunch of Japs in there and they built that bridge back, and it was bank-full of water. They had a big celebration that night; we could hear them down there. They all got drunk and was hollering and whooping. The next morning, it was washed out again. I thought, "Well, they won't never fix that one back." But they started in the next morning, and they put it back in there, and that time it stayed.

It was a big river, and it was bank-full of water. I don't know how they done it.

Marcello: You mentioned the tropical ulcers awhile ago. Did you have any of them?

Spencer: I had some small ones that that Dutch doctor got to early and stopped them.

Marcello: How did he treat your ulcers?

Spencer: He just spooned them out with that little spoon until he got right down to all that dead flesh and got it out of there, and then he put something on them. I guess it killed that germ, and they healed up.

Marcello: I assume that the pain must have been terrible when he was using that spoon on those ulcers.

Spencer: Oh, it was. Now, the other group of Americans . . . you know, several of them lost their leg, and some of them died from it. I understand they just called in some of them to set on them while they sawed their legs off. Then they put maggots in there to keep that dead flesh eat off, I guess.

Marcello: Did anybody have to hold you down while he was using the spoon on you?

Spencer: No, no. Mine wasn't that bad, you know.

Marcello: Under these conditions that you were experiencing there at 62 Kilo, and also at 36 Kilo, are you still looking forward to your eventual liberation?

- Spencer: Yes, all the time. We'd think, "Well, they'll sure hit here in the next three months." We never would figure on being there over three more months.
- Marcello: What do you do in terms of certain activities that we take for granted? For example, how did you substitute for a toothbrush and toothpaste?
- Spencer: We just didn't use them. Now, I had a good set of teeth then, and I didn't know that there was any of them bad until I come back. They temporarily filled sixteen when I got out of the service. But I didn't know it; they never had bothered me. There was some of them that did. We had a dentist along that had some of them deals that pulled your teeth, and he pulled some of them's teeth. He said the only anesthetic he used is just shoot a little saltwater in there and make them think he was deadening it. They said it hurt, you know, but he said if he hadn't done something like that . . .
- Marcello: I've heard it said that some people would take a twig and chew the end of it to make it bristly.
- Spencer: Well, some of them might have done that.
- Marcello: How about shaving? How did you take care of such things as shaving?
- Spencer: We had some barbers in camp that had some straight-edged razors and about every thirty days, I'd get a shave and a haircut for that money they paid me. I don't remember what they charged

for cutting and shaving. That's the way we got by with it.

Marcello: I would assume that you would not want to have any more hair than possible because it would seem to me that that would be an open invitation to lice and bedbugs and all other kinds of critters.

Spencer: Yes, we'd just have it all clipped off, just as close as they could clip it. Some of them grewed a beard, but I never did. I'd get a shave at least every thirty days.

Marcello: How much of a problem were bedbugs and lice?

Spencer: The worst that you can't imagine how bad they was. Some of the huts . . . most of them had slick bamboo poles in them, but some of them would have just like oak poles--bark--and you could just see the bedbugs up and down them poles in that bark. Oh, them lice and bedbugs was something awful!

Marcello: Was there anything you could do to get rid of them?

Spencer: Not a thing that I know of. It seemed like when you moved into a new camp, they'd hit you worst the first few nights. I still had a mosquito bar there, oh, I know, until I got down to Saigon, down to French Indochina. In the morning, they'd go up in the corners of that mosquito bar, and I'd kill them up in the corner of this; you know, it'd just be a handful of them.

Them lice would get right around your belt, and they'd stay in your clothes. They wouldn't get on you; they'd reach

out and bite you from the clothes, right around where your belt was at.

They had a sandfly there of a night that would bite you right around the ankles, just like a mosquito. They tore the dickens out of you.

Marcello: Where did you go from the 62 Kilo?

Spencer: I believe we went to the hundred . . . now, I was sick there, and I didn't make one move there with the working bunch. I tried to stay with the working bunch. They must have moved on up to about the 80 Kilo, and I stayed there at the 62 Kilo until I got able to move on up. Then I moved on up to 114 Kilo and got with the rest of them.

Marcello: When you say you got with the rest of them, what do you mean?

Spencer: The bunch that I'd went through Burma with.

Marcello: In other words, you caught up with the Fitzsimmons bunch again at 114 Kilo.

Spencer: Yes, I caught up with them again there. I believe I caught up with them at the 80 Kilo, but I didn't stay there but a few days before we moved on.

Marcello: What sort of work were you doing here at the 114 Kilo?

Spencer: We was repairing that railroad--going back and beating that ballast under the ties and leveling the tracks.

Marcello: By the time you get up to the 114 Kilo, then, a good deal of the railroad must have been already built.

Spencer: It was pretty well finished there, and, boy, we had got down in real bad health, and we wasn't getting nothing to eat there but rice and a radish stew mostly. Those radishes, they'd be about that long (gesture).

Marcello: About a foot long.

Spencer: Yes, and about as pithy as a cornstalk. They wouldn't hardly color the water. That's where I had the fever at real bad. They cured me and put me on the train, and we left there. When we first moved into that camp--it'd been an old Burmese camp--they got out and buried three or four Burmese laying around there dead.

I was sick one day and dug the graves for two of our boys, Mattfeld and "Swede" Ecklund. We was digging their graves over on one side of the railroad track, and the Burmese had just dug one square hole on the other side. They was bringing them Burmese out of there to bury them, and they just had them on a bamboo stretcher and their legs and arms just dangling off of it. They never would bend their backs when they'd jump one of them in that hole. I told them boys helping me dig "Swede's" and Mattfeld's grave, "If you don't think life's cheap here, just look at them burying them over there across the railroad." They was just carrying them out like a sack of flour. They must have buried ten or fifteen in that hole.

Marcello: The Japanese were using a lot of native labor on this railroad.

Spencer: Yes, they was using Burmese.

Marcello: Did you ever work side-by-side with those Burmese, or did they have them at some other place?

Spencer: No, they had their separate camps and worked together. But they died just as bad as we did.

Marcello: Is this where you ran into most of the deaths that you saw, that is, here at the 114 Kilo?

Spencer: That was about the worst camp, I think, I was in. We was already beat down, and we didn't have . . . they had finished the railroad, and our food had got a little worse there, it seemed to me.

Marcello: I would assume that you did not experience or see too many people die at the 62 Kilo or at the 36 Kilo. Is that correct?

Spencer: No, we lost very few men. I guess we lost the fewest of our group over there--the Fitzsimmons group. Doctor Hekking was with us.

Marcello: How did the burial ceremony take place? Describe what one of these burial details was like.

Spencer: All I remember them doing is just blowing taps, is all I think was the ceremony they had.

Marcello: Would these graves be marked?

Spencer: Yes, they had an ol' boy in there that burnt their name on them, and that was pretty hard wood. It should have been there

when the war was over.

Marcello: Was there careful records being kept as to where these men were buried?

Spencer: Yes, they kept a record. I'm sure that when they brought them back that they got the right men.

Marcello: They ultimately did disinter those bodies and bring them back to the States?

Spencer: Yes, in later years, I guess, and I'm sure they got the right ones.

Marcello: Did you ever see any cases of where men simply gave up and died? Just lost all will to live? Well, maybe not in your group, but I'll ask the question, anyway.

Spencer: Yes, they was some of them that was from other states that just gave up and missed about three meals, and that's all they had to do.

Marcello: How could you tell when a man had lost the will to live?

Spencer: He just didn't talk or anything, just wouldn't go when they hollered "Chow!" He just wouldn't get up and go get it. You could say, "Well, we'll be burying him in a few days."

Marcello: Was there anything you could do to bring them around, so to speak?

Spencer: I don't believe there were after they got that low. They just decided to die.

Marcello: Under these circumstances, do you see men becoming more religious?

- Spencer: Some, but not as much there, I don't believe, as possibly when we got on down to Saigon and got in the heavy bombing raids.
- Marcello: By the time you get to the 114 Kilo, have you been separated from your two buddies, or have you been reunited with them now?
- Spencer: Oh, we were together there. Now, at different times, Cooper would have to stay in one of the camps while we'd finished the railroad because he was sick and couldn't be moved. He was sick more than me and Anderson was. He was split off from us three or four times, and then Anderson was split off from me at one time. He went back on another detail.
- Marcello: Is this rather disheartening, that is, when you are separated from either one or both of your buddies?
- Spencer: Yes, that meant more, you know . . . we didn't worry about our folks back home, but when we was separated, you'd get to wondering what he was doing and how he was getting along. When we got a chance, we'd ask about them.
- Marcello: Even today, yet, in 1979, are the people that you buddied up with your closest friends, let's say, in this whole group of "Lost Battalion" survivors?
- Spencer: Yes, they're still my closest friends. You know, if I needed any help, I'd go to them today.
- Marcello: Where do you go from 114 Kilo?

Spencer: We went into Thailand.

Marcello: You went to Kanchanaburi?

Spencer: Wasn't that the river camp's name? Wasn't it on a river--
Kanchanaburi?

Marcello: Tamarkan?

Spencer: I believe Tamarkan was . . .

Marcello: Are you speaking of the camp where the bridges were?

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, that's Tamarkan.

Spencer: Well, I was in the other one when we first went in there.

Marcello: In other words, you went out of the jungle to Kanchanaburi
first.

Spencer: Yes, that's right.

Marcello: I guess it was a pretty happy day when you were able to get
out of that jungle and leave 114 Kilo.

Spencer: They had to carry me out of there. I had had the fever. That
old "doc" said it was "dingy" [dengue] fever. I was so sick,
I couldn't take a drink of water without throwing it up. They
carried me and put me on the train.

When we got into Thailand, the Dutch was already there,
and they met the train to carry the sick. They couldn't speak
much English, but they was just saying, "Good chow! Good chow,
men!" So I walked and held Anderson or Cooper, one, into that
camp. The next morning, Cooper got some of them limes--you

could buy stuff from the natives there--and I ate about a half a dozen of them, and it just settled my stomach. I took quinine and got over that fever. It hit me a few times after that, but not that bad. We had more to eat there; that was a prime place, too, there.

Marcello: What was the "dingy" [dengue] fever like?

Spencer: It was just like malaria, it seemed to me like, only it threw you out of your head more. You didn't know what was going on.

Marcello: What did the "dingy" [dengue] fever come from?

Spencer: I think just malaria that run into it, I believe, is what it was. I thought that Dutch doctor just didn't know the English name for it, but I went to this veteran's hospital in Dallas, and one of them doctors asked me if I ever had "dingy" [dengue] fever. I told him I had, but I didn't know that was really what it was called. It was a little different; it kind of run you off your "rocker."

Marcello: So you're in Kanchanaburi. That's another huge camp.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: But, like you said, the food was better. How did the food improve?

Spencer: It was vegetables in that soup. Of course, we still had rice, but it just seemed so much better. It had a taste to it, you know. I'm sure there was some meat in it because they could just make a good stew there, you know. It don't take

long to feed a man up. In ten or fifteen days, we was getting back in better shape.

Marcello: Were they working you at all here at Kanchanaburi?

Spencer: Small details, but nothing to amount to anything much. We just mostly was kind of waiting, I guess. They picked out the ones they thought was in the best health to take to Japan.

Marcello: Were you being fed three square meals a day here?

Spencer: Yes, we was fed, I'm sure, three meals a day, and, like I said, that's a better country. More vegetables grewed there, and I imagine them Thais was giving a lot of that food.

Marcello: You were closer to civilization here, too, were you not?

Spencer: Yes, that was the most civilized people--natives--we run onto over there, was them in Thailand.

Marcello: How long did you remain here at Kanchanaburi?

Spencer: I'd say about two months.

Marcello: This was mainly a period of rest and recuperation, I gather.

Spencer: I think so, yes. Then they moved us all over there at that camp by the river and picked out everybody that they was going to take to Japan.

Marcello: Now, while you were here at Kanchanaburi, did the other members of the 2nd Battalion catch up with you here?

Spencer: They was mostly over in that camp at the river.

Marcello: Tamarkan?

Spencer: Yes, they was in that camp. They moved us over there later,

and I got with some over there that I hadn't seen in two or three years.

Marcello: They had a canteen here at Kanchanaburi, too, didn't they?

Spencer: Yes, they did, where you could buy anything if you had money-- even peanut brittle or something like that. You could also buy peanuts.

Marcello: Did you have money, or were you able to buy anything?

Spencer: Yes, we had a little bit between us. Not very much, but we had some we couldn't spend down at Burma there.

Marcello: I would assume that, by this time, food was the thing that was most constantly on your mind, and it was also the major topic of conversation.

Spencer: It was. When it got real bad, you could walk up to any group, and they'd be talking about food--how they was going to cook it when they got back home. When it was real bad and everybody was real hungry, that's all that the conversation . . . you could walk up to any group talking, and they'd be talking about food.

Marcello: What food did you crave more than any other? Did you have a special one that you were looking forward to?

Spencer: Of a morning for breakfast, we just got rice. It was kind of ground rice; they called it "pap." I never did eat no rice at home or any hot cereal. I was raised out there on the farm where we always had eggs and pork of some kind, you know, and

biscuits of a morning. Breakfast, I guess, was what I missed the most.

Marcello: I have heard that people just sat around dreaming up all sorts of menus and recipes and things of that nature.

Spencer: Oh, yes. Cooper, one time, had been left in one of them camps. If you got left there sick, they'd put you on what they called "half-rations," and that was just rice. He said that when they run out of anything to eat, the Jap took them over there, and they gathered them some sweet potato vines and cooked them. He said they was the best greens he ever ate in his life. He said if he ever got back home, he was going to cook some of them. But I never did ask him if he cooked any, and I never have tried any. I know it's a difference in whether it's good or not.

There at 114 Kilo, whoever was sick would gather leaves off trees and boil them that day on a fire, and when they come in off a job that night, we'd have them green leaves along with that rice. You could boil it all day, and they'd still be about as tough as these post oak leaves. They didn't get soft. But we had good teeth then; we could eat them. We watched them natives to see what they'd gathered.

Marcello: I guess, by this time, you're kind of used to moving around. It doesn't bother you too much anymore.

Spencer: No, the only thing about their moves was the food was always

short on a move because they never would take much along to eat. That was the worst thing about their moves, and then they'd keep you on the go and not let you have any rest much on a move.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned that you did move from Kanchanaburi over to Tamarkan.

Spencer: Yes.

Marcello: How long did you remain there?

Spencer: About a week.

Marcello: Oh, was that all?

Spencer: Yes, just about a week. They was just getting a bunch together to send to Japan, and they sent us down as far as Saigon.

Marcello: So am I to gather that really nothing eventful happened there at Tamarkan?

Spencer: No, not nothing that amounted to anything. Now, we had some planes come over there one night, and the Japs shot some kind of gun at them. Cooper was sleeping right by me. He jumped over the back of this old hut we was in and down in a ditch dug around it. Well, I didn't think of nowhere to go. I thought I may as well lay in bed. The next morning, he was telling me I was going to get killed in bed rather if I didn't get in that hole, and I said, "How did you get over that, anyway?" He said, "It's just a short step. I'll show you." He couldn't even get over it the next morning. He got to

telling me this shrapnel hit a pole right there by his head, but he never could find no holes in it.

Marcello: Oh, so while you were there at Tamarkan during that one week, then, you did come under one of these air raids.

Spencer: Yes, and also over at this other camp before we moved over there. We got some raids over there. This old hut we was staying in--barrack-like--was built out of that bamboo, you know, and it had been there . . . I don't know how long. But it was long; but I suspect it was as big as one of them old huts--we called them--that I was ever in. I suspect there was 500 men in it. That thing started falling at the other end, and them bamboo poles was popping. They'd sound like machine gun fire. But it just fell like setting up a bunch of dominoes and just hitting the one on the end. That's just the way it fell. Old Lieutenant Stensland, he jumped up and hollered, "Don't panic!" And about that time, that thing hit him and knocked him down, you know, and he went to hollering, "Come get this damn thing off of me!"

Marcello: What did those air raids do for your morale?

Spencer: It would help your morale considerably to know that we was getting in there and bombing them more.

Marcello: That was perhaps your first indication, in a way, that the course of the war was changing.

Spencer: Yes, yes. It was right there, you know.

Marcello: I assume the Japanese did not mark the prisoner-of-war compounds in any way.

Spencer: Not in any way.

Marcello: When these raids occurred, did you have someplace to go, that is, did they dig any slit trenches or anything of that nature?

Spencer: At that place there in Thailand, they didn't have no places at all.

Marcello: This was at Kanchanaburi that they didn't?

Spencer: Yes, they didn't have no place at all. There was a little ol' ditch kind of dug around the hut--I guess to let the water out--but as far as air raid shelters, they didn't have none there.

Marcello: How frequently did these raids occur?

Spencer: We had two or three of them while we was there.

Marcello: What was the reaction of the Japanese when these raids occurred?

Spencer: Well, they couldn't hardly stay theirself. They'd just go wild in a raid.

Marcello: Did their attitude toward the prisoners change any after these raids?

Spencer: No, not too much until we got down in Saigon. We left there and went down into Saigon. We stopped off before we got to Bangkok and stayed all night in an English camp--big camp--and I asked them if they didn't have no air raid shelters around

there, and they said, "They won't never hit this camp. They've got too many targets up here at Bangkok." I said, "They've hit some smaller camps than this." They hit it about a month after we was there and killed about forty of them.

Marcello: I assume that you went from Tamarkan to Saigon by train.

Spencer: Yes, until just before we got to Saigon. Then we got off on some kind of a little ol' ship and went down the river.

Marcello: Describe this train trip from Tamarkan to Saigon.

Spencer: We was packed in there just about like sardines, and when we got to Bangkok, it was hot.

Marcello: Were these open cars or closed boxcars?

Spencer: They was enclosed boxcars. When we got there, and got out and was sitting down on the track waiting for another train, there was one of them natives that died there, and the first thing they done was run through his pockets and took whatever he had.

Marcello: When you say "they," you're referring to the prisoners?

Spencer: No, the natives--them Thais. But I'd always heard that there was more flies in Bangkok than anywhere in the world. Those flies was just as thick as they could be there!

We got on a train there and left to go on down toward Thailand. We had to keep them boxcar doors closed. Them Thais was rocking them trains. They'd just shower them with rocks. They had it in for the Japs. We'd been sitting . . .

just room to sit, you know, and old "Fat Boy" Wilson said one night, "My back hurts so bad, I'd just cry if it'd do any good." He was nearly crying, and I knew how he felt. My back was hurting so bad because we'd been sitting in that position, for, oh, I don't know, maybe eighteen hours-- a long time.

Marcello: When you get to Saigon, where do you go?

Spencer: We went into a camp there that there was already some Englishmen in, about a block off of the docks there where this channel come up in there. I asked them again about air raid shelters, and they didn't even have none of no kind. They said they hadn't even seen an American plane. I don't believe we'd been there over a week until they come in. We accused them of being Chinese. They just dropped bombs, just scattered them all over town. They dropped them close enough to our camp that they shook them old buildings, and that put them to digging air raid shelters.

Marcello: When you went to Saigon, were you fully expecting to go to Japan?

Spencer: They hadn't told us exactly at that time where we was going, I don't believe. We had been there about a week when we was supposed to load on this ship. The Australians had loaded one evening, and we was to load the next morning. We got to the gate in this camp, and we was lined up with our little

ol' bags--we didn't have nothing much--and there was a Jap officer who crawled up on a box there and told us we was going to Japan. He told us what a fine country it was. He said they had summer and winter. He said, "Of course, you will work. It is a sin to eat and not work." He got down off of that box, and they hollered, "Attention!" you know, and we just fell into formation there at attention. There was a Jap run up to hand him a telegram, I guess, and he read that telegram and got back upon that box and said, "Go back to your huts. The move is off." They never did say nothing else about taking us.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going to Japan?

Spencer: I thought it would be better than what we'd been in. I figured they was having it pretty rough over there, not getting anything to eat, but I figured it'd be better than where we had been in Burma.

Marcello: What were your quarters like here in Saigon?

Spencer: They, I think, had been warehouses. They was made out of bricks, and there was a platform made out of wood to sleep on. It was double-decked--a deck up above and one about this high down below (gesture).

Marcello: What sort of work were you doing here in Saigon?

Spencer: Just all kinds of work--unloading ships; digging trenches and foxholes and stuff like that around the airport; loading

gasoline barrels on barges, and having to take them off ships and taking them out to rubber plantations and rolling them. Some of them was working in machine shops, and some of them was working around the hospital.

Marcello: Generally speaking, were you working hard there?

Spencer: Not as hard there, unless you caught unloading a ship--you might have some pretty fast work.

Marcello: In working around the docks, I would assume you were presented with all sorts of opportunities to steal things.

Spencer: You could steal more stuff there if you could get hold of a little bit of cloth--material--and then get on the detail out at the airport. Around lunchtime, you could meet them natives and sell it to them for money and buy from them along the road. You did have more opportunities there.

Marcello: They evidently craved all sorts of cloth.

Spencer: Yes, they didn't have much material over there at all. Some of them was wearing them burlap sacks. You could sell anything like that pretty good.

Marcello: What sort of material did you sell them?

Spencer: Just any kind of cloth that you could get hold of.

Marcello: I've heard that the cloth along the bottom of mosquito nets was especially prime material.

Spencer: Yes, you could sell that. You could sell any kind of cloth you could get hold of.

Marcello: How did you manage to sneak it back into camp and then to get it out to the natives?

Spencer: There was enough guys that had long britches that you could give it to him--and split with him--if you didn't have some on yourself. He would just fold that down each leg--you know, that cloth--and just stuff it in his britches and stuff it down each leg, and they wouldn't notice it much.

There was one of them out there one night who was going to show us how we was stealing from them. He got a can of milk and put it under a hat--set this hat on it--and he went back around like he was looking for a Jap and was going to come back and get it. He come back and raised that hat . . . they had us lined up--and some Australians--and one of them Australians had reached under there and got that can of milk. He come back and raised that can of milk up and was going to get it and show us how we was stealing. He felt under there, and it wasn't there.

Oh, he throwed a fit! He went to searching . . . and I don't know how them Australians done it--passing it from one to the other, I guess. He couldn't find it. So when we got to camp, he told the camp guards about it, and they searched us, and they couldn't find it. When they dismissed us, that Australian pitched him that can of milk, and he wouldn't have it; he gave it back to him.

Marcello: Did you mention previously that it was here at Saigon that a great many air raids actually occurred?

Spencer: Oh, yes. They really bombed that while we was there.

Marcello: You evidently were rather frightened of these air raids here,

Spencer: Yes, because you might be right on one of them ol' ships when they come in, and you hadn't got to . . . they'd slip in, flying low, and they hadn't sounded no sirens. You just had a running chance when you left that ship.

We had got out at the back of our camp and just built up where the tide had come in some dirt dams to run behind in an air raid. We wasn't down in a hole; we was just in between two of these dirt piles that we'd built up out of soil.

It was one morning just about sunup. They had already picked their details and had done sent some of the English to the airport. They sounded that air raid alarm . . . and the tide come in there, and it was muddy in between these old dams we'd built up. When they sounded that siren, we'd run out there to what we called an air raid shelter. Instead of getting down in the mud, I just run up on top of it and sat down. The first planes hit the airport over there, and we heard them. Some of them said, "Oh, it's just a Jap maneuver."

And about that time, I seen one of them Jap planes get up just above the building, and one of them American pursuit planes with that star on it hit him, and it looked like it

flew all to pieces. I dove down in that mud, and I said,
"Jap maneuver, hell! This is the 'real McCoy!'" "

They had forty-eight ships tied up there in that harbor, and about that time they hit them ships. It looked like that if you'd have throwed your hat up that morning, it would come down full of straffer holes. They was shooting at them with everything from a pistol to a coast gun, and they just shot down two planes. They stayed there thirteen hours that day, and they just shot down two planes. One of the guys bailed out back behind us, and the other one got hit right out in front of us--just tore his plane all to pieces. He never did get out of it; he was low when they hit him. They sunk all forty-eight ships--there wasn't any of them got out of there--and they had 110 planes on the airfield, and five or six of them got out. They either burnt or cut them in two with them .50-caliber machine guns and just dropped them down on the ground--110 planes. They had a refinery out about eight miles from town, and they hit that refinery and the docks and the airport. That was their three targets that day.

There was one of them that tried to drop his bomb, and it hung on the plane. He come on by us, and they had an old coast gun set up over there. About the time he got right up over the coast gun, he flopped that plane up just like that (gesture),

and when he did, he shook that bomb loose; he just flew back out from under it. That bomb hit close enough to that old gun that it blowed . . . they had sandbags all around that thing, and it blowed about half of them sandbags in.

There was one that had made a run on them ships . . . would circle and come back by us. And he turned that plane up just like that (gesture) and was looking right down at us. "Luke" Anderson was there with me, and I told him, "Look there, 'Luke,' you can see his goggles, see his eyes!" And about that time, there was a shell that hit right in the . . . looked like right behind him, and he just wobbled that plane out toward the sea, and we watched him to see if he was going to go down, and he never did go down. It come out in the Reader's Digest and Post, or one of them magazines--a picture of it. When we got back, we seen it. A shell had hit him right in the back of the head, and one of his buddies flew along and told him what his instruments was. He couldn't see and was about half-unconscious half the time. But he told him enough that he landed back on the aircraft carrier. It gave his address and everything, and I never did . . . I ought to have wrote him and told him I seen that. But I've often wondered what he was thinking about . . . if he was thinking about strafing us when he turned that plane up there about the time he got hit.

Marcello: Am I to assume that this air raid caused a certain amount of jubilation, as well as fear?

Spencer: That was the prettiest fight you ever seen in your life, other than them two that got shot down.

Marcello: What was the Japanese's reaction?

Spencer: They hit a few old warehouses there just to see if there was anything in them, and they had rice in them and maybe a little sugar, but mostly rice. Well, the next morning they had us out there carrying that on our shoulders and putting it in barges. They was going to get it out of there. You couldn't look while carrying a sack of that rice . . .when you dumped it in that barge, you better not look out there at them old smoking ships. You'd just keep your head down and go back and get another bag because if you looked out there, there'd be a Jap who'd lay one on you.

Marcello: Now, at this time, do you still have your Korean guards, or are they gone?

Spencer: Yes, we still had the Korean guards and Japs, too.

Marcello: Some of the same Korean guards that you had up in the jungle?

Spencer: I'm sure some of them was with us--some of the same guards--ol' "Nigger Lips," we called him, and ol' "Beard," he was still with us. He was a mean one, and that old "Nigger Lips" was, too.

Some of them went to the airport the next day, and he asked

them when they unloaded on the truck . . . they'd got lined up and was spreading gravel. They was bringing that gravel out there in bullcarts. So he asked them what denomination they was--they'd always ask you that--and they told him American. They said he run over and got one of them rawhide bullwhips off one of them bullcarts, and he just started down the line hitting them with it. They didn't have on no shirts. "Luke" Anderson said "Dusty" Slate said, "If that son-of-a-bitch hits me, I'm going to kill him with this shovel!" He said he hit old "Dusty," and he went plumb down to the ground; and he started up again, and he hit him again; and he went plumb to the ground again right on top of that shovel. It left marks on their backs for several months.

Marcello: Were you at Saigon when the war was over?

Spencer: No, I was up at that little old school building, working on that bridge up there--up north at . . .

Marcello: Da Lat?

Spencer: No, we'd been to Da Lat; we'd left Da Lat after working in them tunnels and went on up there to work on a railroad bridge. What's the name of that little old place? It was on up north, up the coast to a railroad bridge. They had bombed it out, and we had went up there to build a section of it back in. It was some little old village up there. I've forgot the name of it. But that's where I was at when the war was over.

Marcello: How long were you at Saigon altogether?

Spencer: We must have been there about a year altogether . . . maybe a little longer than a year.

Marcello: By the time you're at Saigon, are you in fairly good health now?

Spencer: After being in Thailand there, we got fed up some, but when we first hit in there, we was in bad health. There was a lieutenant that had been there all the time that come from the Philippines on some kind of a little old craft, and he said it was the worst-looking bunch of men he ever seen come through a gate. He said we looked worse than a bunch of old contract horses that had been on a railroad job or something.

Marcello: Are you referring to when you entered Saigon?

Spencer: Yes, but still we was in a little bit better shape than we had been when we come out of Burma.

Marcello: Did you pick up some weight and so on?

Spencer: We picked up a little weight after we got in Thailand.

Marcello: How about in Saigon?

Spencer: There in Saigon, the food was better; living conditions was much better. When the war was over, one of them French women told two or three of us . . . we was talking to her, you know, and she said, "Your folks will not believe this when you get home. I'd have had to see it with my own eyes before I ever believed it." We told her it was 100 percent better than it was in Burma, and she just walked off. I said, "She don't believe

we've seen it any worse."

Marcello: Where did you go from Saigon?

Spencer: I went up to Da Lat.

Marcello: A train trip again?

Spencer: Yes, a train trip again. We'd stay in tunnels in the daytime because American planes was flying that track looking for a train. We'd stay in them tunnels in the daytime and travel at night.

Marcello: What did you do up there at Da Lat?

Spencer: We dug tunnels in mountains. I didn't know there was a place for 10,000 miles like that. That was kind of a French resort up in the mountains where the pines was growing. It'd get cold up there. Of a morning, it would just be plumb chilly!

It was a good working detail. We'd got out of the bombing raids. It was safe. I'd have loved to have seen 10,000 planes come over there while we were working in them tunnels.

Marcello: What was the purpose of these tunnels?

Spencer: I believe that the Japs was aiming to set up some kind of a communication headquarters there or something underground, in case of an invasion or something.

Marcello: Was this fairly hard work here at Da Lat?

Spencer: Well, it was just an average day's work there. You carried that dirt . . . there'd be somebody digging that dirt up, you know, and you'd be carrying it out and dumping it. We

run out of rice there, and we just had regular old corn-on-the-cob to shell off and cook. The first meal of that was good, but you get tireder of that than you do rice--just straight corn--because to just cook it from every morning until dinner, it don't get too done.

Marcello: So the rations did get a little short here.

Spencer: Yes, the rations was plenty short there.

Marcello: As the tide of the war has turned--and obviously it has turned by this time--can you detect any change in the attitude of the Japanese?

Spencer: Yes, they treated us . . . after being rough for three or four days there, right after that big raid we had . . .

Marcello: In Saigon?

Spencer: In Saigon. After three or four days, they treated us much better. I think that was the first time they ever thought they might lose the war. They treated us much better after that.

We got up there working on that little ol' bridge . . . and that bridge was long! It must have been nearly a half a mile long. The Japs was trying to bring an army down from out of China and circle around through there into Burma with it; they had a lot of cavalry. They didn't have much to eat, but if we could steal anything to eat from them, we'd steal it and we'd divide it with them guards we had; and they'd

go along with us on stealing it because they didn't have much to eat. But I've seen them . . . when they was bringing that army down through there, it was during the pumpkin season, and they'd just chop up raw pumpkins and feed their men just like you'd feed a bunch of hogs. It wasn't cooked or nothing; they just chopped up pumpkin. I guess that was all they had to eat for supper that night.

We just had pontoons to take that stuff across to the other side where a train would pick them up over there, and we had some good cowboys with us. We had to put them old horses in a pontoon, and it wasn't over a fourteen-foot pontoon. But we found out that if we'd get around them old horses with a pole and punch them up in them pontoons, and then start them moving right quick in that water, we could just take them old horses right on across. We still had a few English and Australians with us, and they'd try it once in a while . . . or the Japs would be trying to load them, and they couldn't load them. Them Jap guards would tell them Americans to load them; they'd holler for the Americans, and they'd just step back, and we'd load them old horses. We had a lot of fun out of them.

Marcello: Describe the events leading up to your liberation. Where were you when you got the news the war was over?

Spencer: We was working on that bridge. Some of them was working down

on the water, and some of us was working up on top of it. Me and Wayne Rhine was working on top of this bridge, and most of them was working down toward the bottom of it in the water. There was a Jap officer--they all carried sabers--and him and five or six privates come across that bridge, and they was just in a high trot. We had scaffolds built there, and they had to cross them, you know, and when crossing them, this officer dropped his saber in the water. Well, one of them boys there seen it and figured they'd have to dive down and get it, so they just volunteered and dove off in there and got it and come up with it and said, "Here's your saber."

He didn't never stop; he said something . . . we had an old Jap lieutenant in charge of us. We hardly ever had an officer in charge of a camp, but we had an old Jap lieutenant with us--old. He said something to him, and he jumped up, and they just went trotting off this bridge.

We called him "Old Coot," and old Lumsden hollered up there to Rhine and said, "What did 'Old Coot' say before he left? What's going on up there?" "Old Coot" had told him in Japanese that the war was over. Lumsden said, "He said what?" Rhine said, "Oh, hell, he said the war's over! Go back to work!" which he didn't, you know, or anything.

The next morning, then, gosh, they went to bringing in

everything to eat. They had an old pump out there where we washed out our shorts--our G-strings. It was just clear water, and we washed them out about every morning or so. Them Japs went to bringing soap out there to wash our clothes out with, and he'd sit down there and wash his without any soap. They went to bringing food into that camp. They took us out on two or three more details, and they wouldn't holler, "Hurry up!" Usually, about every other breath, they'd holler for us to hurry up. They wouldn't say nothing to us.

An old kid from up there who lived by me said, "One of them Japs tonight was crying behind one of them poles. He asked me what 'complete capitulation' meant. I told him it meant just to take every damn thing he had--guns, ships, and everything. He sure did go away from there squalling!" We was all talking about how we believed the war was over, you know. I told him, "If I don't hear where they're fighting in New Guinea" We'd always hear a report they was fighting in New Guinea. I said, "If that plane don't come down the track tomorrow, and I don't hear they're fighting in New Guinea, I'm going to say the war is over." It didn't come down the track. In about three or four days there, we could tell it was over, or something had happened.

Why, this ol' Jap sergeant in charge of that camp, he could holler and scream until he'd just make the leaves on

a tree quiver; he had such a voice. He called us together, and he couldn't hardly talk above a whisper. He told us the war was over.

All them English jumped out there and sung their national anthem--and the Australians--and we was just kind of sitting there on the porch looking at each other. They all run over there and said, "Yanks, you won the war. Let's hear that national anthem." And, you know, there wasn't a damn one of us could sing it! We didn't even know it; we didn't know the words to it,

Marcello: So what happened at that point, then, when you learned that the war was over?

Spencer: Well, you know, we just . . . I don't know. I guess you can't realize just how you felt and everything.

But them natives over there was marching, and we thought they was celebrating that we'd won the war. We thought they was just having a jubilee, too. They come right down to our camp, and the Japs was standing them off with their rifles and squalling at them. We had them old blankets and some old clothes, and we didn't figure we'd need them anymore, so we just throwed them over the fence and told them, "Hell, pay no attention to the Japs! Come on up and get this stuff!" We was throwing it all over to them, and they gathered that stuff up and kind of held a powwow and left.

We got on a train going back, and that's when we realized that . . . they was rocking that train and marching and everything, and we'd got the wind that they'd declared war on the French. Gosh, by the time we got down to Saigon, it was dangerous to go up and down the streets! They was shooting all the Frenchmen, you know.

Marcello: So you're up in the northern part of Indochina when the war is over. Did you do any celebrating up there at all?

Spencer: No, we didn't do much celebrating. The Japs was still under control, you know; they was when we left. They still had their arms; they never had laid down their arms.

Marcello: In other words, you had to stay in camp the whole time.

Spencer: Yes, we just stayed in camp.

Marcello: How long were you there before you were evacuated from there?

Spencer: Now, we must have stayed there three or four days, and then it took us about two days to get back to Saigon.

Marcello: Were you getting a little anxious while you were waiting there three or four days?

Spencer: Yes, we was. We was really getting anxious. We got back to Saigon, and they flew us out on the 6th of September, so there was a period in there of twenty days, I'd say, before we got out.

Marcello: When you got back to the States, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life once again?

Spencer: Well, I didn't think I did at the time, but I guess I did. I went to work in a garage and worked there about a year. I bought a little ol' farm and moved out on it--plumb off the highway--and my wife was working in Jacksboro. That was the loneliest place I ever seen in my life! I left there that fall; I just stayed there about seven months, I guess, and I never intended to ever move back there anymore. That was so lonesome! I'd been around people, you know. In later years, I started working for myself operating a gasoline plant--natural gas plant.

Marcello: When you finally got out of Saigon, I assume you ultimately went to Calcutta. That seemed to be where they sent most people.

Spencer: Yes, we went to Calcutta.

Marcello: By the time you got there, had they ever given you any sort of psychological tests or anything of this nature?

Spencer: Not when we got there. We just got off the plane, got in some trucks, and they took us to a hospital camp and marched us right in the mess hall. Boy, they had more food there than anyplace I ever seen in my life! Then, after that, why, there was some psychologists that talked to us, you know, a day or two later.

Marcello: But they really didn't make too many preparations for putting you back in the real world again, so to speak.

- Spencer: No, they didn't. I come through Washington up there--at Walter Reed Hospital. We was all wanting to get home as quick as we could, but my urine was just red as blood, so I wouldn't show it to them. I was afraid they would keep me. I come home to San Antonio for about a week and then come home on a furlough. I believe I had ninety days, and ten days of that was spent in Hot Springs recuperating. We had a good time down there, and I just went back to Camp Fannin and got my discharge.
- Marcello: Now, by the time you left Calcutta, had you regained a great deal of your weight and so on?
- Spencer: Oh, yes. You can fatten a man up pretty quick. I weighed about 180 pounds when I was captured over there, and I weighed about 145 pounds when I got back. I gained about five, six, seven pounds, and then I just stayed just about where I was. I never did gain my weight back like some of them did. I never have.
- Marcello: You know, you said something awhile ago that is kind of a little bit different from some of the men that I've talked to. You mentioned that after you came back to this country and returned to your home, you bought a farm. You mentioned that you were rather lonely on that farm.
- Spencer: The loneliest place I ever seen in my life! I was just in misery there! For some reason, I couldn't adjust to it;

it was too quiet. When I left there, I never did intend to move back on it.

Marcello: I've heard it said that many of the prisoners had trouble staying in groups for any length of time. They couldn't take all the attention and so on that they were given, and they had to get up and move around. Did you have the problem of staying in one place very long?

Spencer: Well, you know, I worked a year there in the garage and then moved out there on that place. Then I sold everything I had and went back to work in a garage and worked about a year. Then I went to work on a drilling rig. I worked in the oil field around people until I got down to that gas plant and went to operating it by myself or a night. That got next to me worse than anything. That was kind of like being on the firing line to me; you're just kind of sitting there waiting on something to happen, you know, and being by yourself. But after I got kind of used to being by myself, I'd have loved to have went back on that farm like I was there in . . . I believe it was '47 when we lived there.

Marcello: As you look back upon your experiences as a prisoner-of-war, what do you see as being the key to your survival?

Spencer: There's two things, I think. That was the good shape I was in when I went in there and being with buddies--people I knew before I went in there, you know, that helped each other.

I just don't think there's any boys now . . . you won't find one out of a hundred that was in as good a shape as we were because we hadn't ate no junk food at all, and we'd done . . . ever since I'd been big enough, I'd done a hard day's work. I'd been in them CCC camps where you just went out there and worked about six hours and got lots of exercise. I was physically, I believe, in as good a health that you could put a man in when I got in there. I could do a hard day's work then without even getting tired and then go somewhere that night and not be a bit tired. I think that was one of the reasons that there wasn't as many of us that died as there were English. I think we was in better health when we went in. Another thing was being with men you knew before you got in.

Marcello: Mr. Spencer, I can't think of anything else to ask you. Is there something that we haven't talk about that you think we need to get as part of the record?

Spencer: Oh, I don't know of anything that I can think of.

Marcello: Do you think that we've touched most of the high points, so to speak?

Spencer: We've touched most of them, I guess, I never was much for . . . you know, I always like to forget the horrors of it and kind of remember the funny things that happened. I didn't figure I'd write a very good book; you just can't

write that stuff that you went through day-to-day like it was.

Marcello: I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things.

Spencer: Well, I'm real glad that you're taking your time to find out something about it. I know if you talk to all of us that you could put together a pretty good story. It's just something you can't hardly write about. You can't hardly imagine it. I don't believe there ever was any prisoners treated as bad as we were. I know that if they treated them half as bad as we were in the penitentiary, there wouldn't be no second-timers down there because you could sell pencils out here and get enough to eat hamburgers. If the penitentiary was as bad as what we was in, before you'd take a chance on going back a second time, you'd beg out here with your hat before you'd take a chance on going back.

Marcello: I'm sure that scholars are going to find your comments very valuable, and I want to thank you again for having participated.

Spencer: You bet. I thank you for taking a little interest in it. I wasn't much help; I knew I wouldn't be because I'd tried to forget it.

Marcello: Well, you were more help than what you think.