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Interview with

EUGENE NIELSEN

December 11, 1989

Place of Interview: Reno, Nevada

Interviewer: George Burlage

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Approved: Eugene Nielsen
(Signature)

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Eugene Nielsen(1916 - 2011)



OGDEN - Our beloved father, grandfather and great-grandfather, Eugene P. Nielsen, 95, passed away Thursday, Feb. 3, 2011, due to natural causes.

He was born Jan. 23, 1916, in Logan, Utah, to Jens Peter and Martha Ann Sorenson Nielsen. His father died when he was 12 in 1929, leaving the family to struggle through the Great Depression. Dad joined the Civilian Conservation Corps and worked in Sanpete and Cache counties and on the This is the Place Monument.

In April 1940, he enlisted in the United States Army and was assigned to Ft. Mills, Corregidor, Philippine Islands. He was placed in the 59th Coast Artillery and trained as a range setter on huge coastal defense guns and infantry. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, the Philippines were also attacked. Dad then endured five straight months of intense combat and artillery and aerial bombardment. On May 6, 1942, the Corregidor garrison surrendered due to lack of food and ammunition and Dad became a prisoner of war of the Japanese. Almost three years of starvation, beatings, hard labor and cruelty followed. On Dec. 14, 1944, Dad was among 150 POWs at Puerta Princesa, Palawan Prison Camp. The POWs were forced by their Japanese captors into covered air raid trenches. A massacre followed where only 11 survived, including Dad. Despite being shot and suffering from starvation and malaria, he swam through the night to escape down the island and made contact with brave Filipino guerillas who contacted US forces in Australia. Dad was picked up in a behind-the-lines air rescue and flown to Morotai, New Guinea, then taken to San Francisco. The Army finally caught up to him and sent him to Washington, D.C., where he reported to General George C. Marshall, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. One of his proudest moments was when General Marshall pinned the Bronze Star on him. For his wartime duties he received the Silver Star, Bronze Star, two Purple Hearts, and the POW Medal. He assisted the military in the war crimes trials that followed. Dad met Mom the day he returned to Cache Valley. She became the love of his life and they were married on March 7, 1946, in the Logan LDS Temple. Mom was the perfect wife and mother and worked hard for 54 years to heal Dad from the unseen wounds of war. Together they had four children, Shariene (Jim) Peters, Bruce (Janice) Nielsen, Janet (Bill) Covering, and Lorna (Ross) Murray.

He graduated from Utah State University in 1950 in business management and economics. He started work with the U.S. Postal Service then spent most of his career at Hill Air Force Base in materials management, retiring in 1978.

The hardest thing Dad ever faced was when Mom passed away in 2000, yet Dad managed to live on his own, working in his garden and with his fruit trees. We would like to say a special thank you to Glen Larson and his recently departed Lucille for looking after Dad and being his friends.

For us children, our lives were filled with adventure, opportunity and fun. Dad took us camping, hunting, fishing, boating and traveling every chance he got. There was no national park, major city, or high mountain range in North America that was too far to take us. We never missed the deer hunt or the opening day of fishing. Dad's favorite things included Aggie football and basketball, river running, catching big fish, snowmobiling, growing fruits and vegetables, and a big campfire on a moonlit night far up in the mountains. He taught us the value of education and how to hunt, fish, shoot, fix a car, think, and live. He remains a tower of strength to us and we will remember Dad and Mom every day of our lives.

Dad is survived by his children, seven grandchildren, Michelle, Levi, Jennifer, Justin, Derek, Tera, Rachel; six great-grandchildren; brother, and sister-in-law Dale and Pat Nielsen, Midvale; sister-in-law, Merle Dunkley, Layton; brother-in-law, and sister-in-law, Robert and Norine Allen, Logan; and numerous nieces and nephews.

Preceding him in death are his most beloved wife, Gwynne Allen; his brother, Weldon; three sisters, Delora Sill, Cleo Nielsen, Lila Nielsen; a grandson, Jordan Murray; and a great-grandson, Klinton Capener.

Funeral services will be held Wednesday, Feb. 9 at 2 p.m. at Lindquist's Ogden Mortuary, 3408 Washington Blvd.

The family will meet with friends on Tuesday from 6 to 8 p.m. and Wednesday from 12:45 to 1:45 p.m. at the mortuary.

Interment, Lindquist's Memorial Gardens of the Wasatch, 1718 Combe Road.

Email condolences to the family at www.lindquistmortuary.com.

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Oral History Collection

Eugene Nielsen

Interviewer: George Burlage

Date: December 11, 1989

Place of Interview: Reno, Nevada

Mr. Burlage: This is George Burlage interviewing Eugene Nielsen relating to his experiences at Palawan and other places during World War II. This recording is being made at the Palawan Survivors' Reunion held in Reno, Nevada, from December 11- 15, 1989.

Go ahead and give us your name and a little bit of your background before going into the service.

Mr. Nielsen: I'm Eugene Nielsen. I lived in Logan, Utah, prior to the time I went into the Army. I went into the Army shortly before the war. I chose the Philippines because I thought it would be an interesting trip. At that time, you could go overseas and get out with what they called a

"short discharge." So I could get my military service over sooner.

Well, I joined up in Logan, Utah. I went to Angel Island and waited for the boat. I went to the Philippines on the *Republic* in early 1941.

Burlage: Where were you assigned when you got to the Philippines--when you first got there?

Nielsen: I was assigned to the 59th Coast Artillery on Fort Mills, Corregidor. I did my recruit training at Corregidor and then was assigned to Battery B, Crockett. It was a 12-inch disappearing gun battery--two guns.

Burlage: Describe the other armaments there on Corregidor--the other guns and batteries.

Nielsen: There were numerous batteries on Corregidor. Most of them were quite old. There was 12-inch mortars, 14-inch disappearing rifles, 12-inch--that had longer range. The names of the two batteries were Smith and Hearn. There was no protection at all. It was just flat concrete with a gun on it, and they were very vulnerable to enemy shelling or bombing. They had 12-inch mortars there that were very effective.

Due to the number of casualties, our battery had to also help fire Battery Geary, which was 12-

inch mortars, because so many of their men had got killed off. A large bomb shelter was hit directly with a large bomb, and they'd pounded their way through one of their outer magazines to blow up part of the battery. They pounded through it with 240-millimeter siege guns from Bataan.

Burlage: When did your battery go into action and against what type of targets?

Nielsen: Our battery went on wartime status about two months or three months before the war. There was already another battery on wartime status, and there was a third one that went on shortly after us. Now that's the only time they'd had three batteries on wartime status since World War I.

Burlage: Did you do much firing? Also, were the guns able to fire in the direction of the targets you wished to fire at?

Nielsen: The 12-inch disappearing guns were primarily to fire at ships at sea. They were not originally set up to fire at Bataan. We could hit parts of Bataan, but we couldn't hit some of the places we wanted to. The 12-inch mortars of Geary had a high-angle firing. They could fire in most any direction, and they could fire high enough that they could come down behind a

hill, where with the other type with a low-angle firing would go right over the top of the hill that the enemy guns were down behind.

Burlage: Were the mortars used extensively in the defense of Bataan?

Nielsen: Yes, the mortars were used quite heavily. In fact, we shelled Bataan several times. There were pockets that got cornered over there that we would shell. Also, there at the last we were firing there at a few targets where we didn't figure the Americans were being held.

Burlage: Was you battery damaged or put out of action by enemy fire?

Nielsen: Our batteries--both guns--were put out of action by enemy shelling and bombing. At Battery Geary, which had eight 12-inch mortars, we had one gun left the last night. We fired that until it got so hot we couldn't close the breech. Then we went back to our battery at Crockett and got our supplies and equipment and everything ready and headed down toward the beach defense out at Monkey Point, where the Japs have landed.

Burlage: In other words, the artillery people became infantry people.

Nielsen: We were always trained as infantry. We had our machine guns--.30-caliber machine guns--3-inch trench mortars, Browning automatic rifles, Springfield rifles, and hand grenades.

Burlage: How did your surrender come about? Were you still there when the white flag, so to say, went up on the fateful day?

Nielsen: Our battery--the remains of it--was out toward Monkey Point, where there were some water towers out there and an aircraft battery, which was since deserted. No one was there, I mean. We were out there.

At the time about all we had was hand grenades and rifles. This was very early in the morning, and there was two Japanese tanks that had been landed and were running back and forth out in front of us along with their troops. There wasn't a great deal we could do. We didn't have guns to stop a tank, and there were very few Americans in that area at the time. We were going to try and take one position, and they told us, "Take a rest and then we'll try and take this position."

About the next thing we heard was that we were supposed to fall back. The story was that we would

try to make another line back, because the Japs seemed to have things pretty well controlled in front of us. So we headed back, and we got back fairly close to Malinta Hill or right there alongside Malinta Hill, and I think some- one said we was supposed to go back to the tunnel.

As we got back to the tunnel, someone said that they were going to surrender the island, that General Wainwright was going to surrender the island and would not contest it too much. If they wouldn't surrender, then we would probably continue to fight, but the idea was that we were falling back, and he was going to surrender.

Burlage: How did the surrender come about? Was it mass confusion, or was it pretty orderly?

Nielsen: It was very confusing. There was quite a lot of confusion all the way, from the time that we went out to the front lines until we got back. Even after that it was very confusing.

Burlage: How long was your stay there, then, and where did you go from Corregidor after the surrender?

Nielsen: From Corregidor they had us all march out to the 92nd Garage area. That was out toward the smaller Monkey Point area of it. There we were confined along

with most of the rest of the troops on Corregidor. It was a very small area. At night there was just enough room for everybody to lay down. There was no water, no sanitary facilities, no food, or anything there. There were no provisions made to get us any food. We couldn't get any water, which was our primary concern at the time, because we had lost most all of our equipment. We didn't have canteens. When we left the battery to go down there to the front line where the Japs landed, what we carried was mostly arms, ammunition, gas masks. We did have canteens then, but after we got back in there, the Japs took everything. If we didn't throw it away, they took it from us.

Burlage: When you left the island, how did you get over to...I believe everybody went to Bilibid first. How did you leave? Just give me a brief description of the trek to the Bilibid Prison.

Nielsen: We left the 92nd Garage area and went down and got on an old freighter that was tied to the South Dock. There they just left us sit without sanitary facilities or food. We could get a drink then. Prior to this, while we were still at the 92nd Garage area, there was a very large bomb crater, and it filled in

with freshwater. It was very difficult to get down at first. Eventually, we made a trail to where we could get down to the crater, you know, so you wouldn't just slide in the mud into the water. You could walk down there and get a drink. We didn't have drinking containers, most of us, so the only way we could get by was to get in groups, and then we had to get in line to go down that trail. There might have been ten or twelve thousand--this is just a guess--people there going down that same little trail to get a drink in a bomb crater, so we had a man stand in that line twenty-four hours a day, every day. Then he would come up, and we would all get a drink of the water. Then we would put another guy right back in line. We would take turns in there.

When we left the 92nd Garage area, we went to that freighter. Then, after a couple of days in that freighter hull, why, they took us over to a place between Cavite and Manila. Instead of taking us into the Manila docks, they took us over there about, maybe, fifteen miles from Manila. They quite enjoyed what they were doing. We'd walk out on a plank. We didn't go into shore. We'd walk out on a plank, and then a Jap on each side with his gun would knock you

off the end of it with their rifle butts. Then you had to swim in. When we got in on the land, why, we went up to the highway. From there we were marched into Manila to Bilibid Prison.

This was a Japanese victory march. The Filipinos along the way tried to help us by giving us a drink of water, but anytime the Japs could stop it, they would knock the Filipinos around for it and knock the water on the ground.

Burlage: How long did you stay in Bilibid before you left on this Palawan assignment?

Nielsen: It was only about one or two days. Then we got taken down to the railroad station and put in these little steel boxcars. They opened on each side. They were steel. They weren't the full-sized boxcars. They jammed about as many people as they could force into each one of those. There wasn't enough room for you to sit down on the floor or even lay down. Then we were taken from there up to Cabanatuan in those boxcars. In the daytime those cars got so hot they were almost like an oven. Most everybody was pretty sick.

Down there in the 92nd Garage area with no sanitary facilities, you had to take and do your

little "job" right in amongst everyone else. They had a little wire or rope that ran around the area on some little poles, and you weren't supposed to cross that. One day I went out just right under the wire to defecate. I just got out to the wire, and one of the machine guns, clear up on the ridge above--it was circled with Japanese machine guns--started firing because I was too close to the edge. He only missed me by a few yards, but at that distance (chuckle) it was a little close.

Burlage: Okay, you went on up in the boxcars to Cabanatuan. You stayed up there a little while, and then you say you were shipped out to Palawan.

Nielsen: This was at Cabanatuan town. Maybe I had better say something about our condition.

Burlage: Yes, just go ahead.

Nielsen: First of all, we were cut down in rations while we were still fighting under the Americans. We were cut down to two meals a day, and much of the time the food we got was a little sack of rice and a few cans of salmon (sometimes it was a dozen). This would be for about 110 men. As it went on, it wasn't increased any. It seemed to be cut down a little more. We had rice and salmon fixed every way the cook could think

of it. We had some fresh meat when the bombs hit the mule pen. That's about the only fresh meat we got. We skinned them up.

But we were starting to get weaker then. Then out there on the front line, why, it's quite a strain. We were getting quite tired and rundown. As we were taken prisoners, there was quite a loss of morale among the people. We were taken out to the 92nd Garage area, and the flies were terrible out there. There was quite a few dead bodies around. They were gathering them up and burning them, but it took a while to find them and get them burned. The flies were just everywhere.

Well, I think that's when most of the dysentery got started. I'm not medical personnel; I don't know. But that's what I thought. Of course, we had a lot of diarrhea, dysentery, a certain amount of malaria, which had been around for quite a while. Quite a few of the people who made it over to Corregidor from Bataan had malaria. I think it was getting started, too, more than usual.

When we got up to Cabanatuan--the town--I don't think they called the town Cabanatuan at the time--we were given a couple of rice balls, one for that

night and one for the next day. They cooled it down enough right after they cooked it to where it was just like a snowball, and they handed you two of them.

We had to walk about twenty-two kilometers up to the Cabanatuan Prison Camp from the town. Cabanatuan is what it was called at the time. In the condition the guys were in, it was very difficult. A lot of them were sick to the point where they could hardly walk. At the time some of them referred to it as one of the "death marches." Since that time, why, the death march has more so referred to as the ones from Bataan up to O'Donnell. But at the time, they called that a death march, too. There was a lot of guys that couldn't keep going because they wouldn't let us stop for water. At one place there was a large flowing well. It must have been a ten-inch pipe, and it was flowing out of there at a pretty fast rate. It was right alongside the road, and they would never allow you to go over there to get a drink. A lot of those guys didn't have canteens or anything and, there again, the water situation was very thirsty. It had rained, and right on the road, from all those prisoners just marching, it stirred up mud in little

puddles on the road. I've seen guys bend over and drink that mud.

They divided us into hundreds--even hundred groups. Then they had the Jap guards change off every little while while they marched us up there. In the group I was with, there was one or two that fell out, and we never knew what happened to them. I heard they were picked up by a truck later.

But out of that group, when we walked in to the prison gate up at the Cabanatuan Prison Camp--the farther one up--there was one guy there who was in very bad shape. He seemed to just make up his mind that he was going to make it. He went in there and sat down under a tree. He went through the gate, sat down under the tree, and he just took a big breath: "Oh, I've finally made it!" Well, he didn't act any different than just going to sleep, but he died.

Burlage: What did you find in the camp in the way of accommodations and such?

Nielsen: In the camp, there was water to drink. The food was a small dish of rice and soup. The soup was just about the same as water. You could see right to the bottom, and there was very little in it. The first part of Cabanatuan, it was really a starving diet we

got. We were hungry all the time with no way to get anything else to eat, that we knew of. We were so hungry that we got them to cook the rice with a lot of water in so it would fill our stomachs up a little bit. But that also created other problems. It might have been kidney problems. There was a steady line of people going out to the latrine all night long to urinate. It didn't last long. It was kind of hard on your stomach, too, because it was gummy. But to cook it dry, it would have been such a small amount you wouldn't feel any satisfaction.

Burlage: Okay, as people lived there and tried to adjust to that kind of life, people were hearing rumors of work details. People thought they would be better off on different work details. How did you get involved in going to Palawan? Did you just volunteer and go?

Nielsen: Well, my friends were getting sick. There was an awful lot of sickness there. Where they were burying them, they'd walk right by the barracks--the grass and bamboo shack we lived in--and it was getting so that there was quite a steady line of them going out there all the time. They'd carry them out and bury them.

I wasn't doing too good. I seemed to be very hungry. I didn't have any extra food of any kind. Some of the guys had a little bit. I don't know how they got it, but some of them had a little bit. I didn't. I'd read about all the stuff that's in the grass. If you eat a little grass, there's more vitamins in that than most anything you can eat. Cows can do so much on stuff like that (chuckle), so I decided, well, "I'll get some nice, green grass around one of these little places where there is water where it grows." But it's impossible to eat grass. It would just be like eating straw. You just can't do it. I tried.

Well, next thing I did, I started trying leaves. I found a tree there, and at first I'd try just a bit of a leaf. It had a little bit of a citrus flavor to it. It wasn't good, but it wasn't too bad. Then I'd eat a little more each time and see if I'd get by all right. Pretty soon I was eating a fourth of a leaf, a half of a leaf, then a leaf. Pretty soon I'd go out there and...we was just laying around there. We had a lot of time. I'd go out there and pick the leaves, one at a time off the tree, and put them in my hand, just like a deck of cards --one on

top of the other--and I'd get about two inches of those leaves stacked up, and I'd eat it. Well, I think that helped me a lot because I was getting by better than a lot of them were.

I still didn't figure that my chances to survive in that camp were too good. There was just so many of them getting that dysentery, and that dysentery is sure nasty stuff. They'd take them across the street to what they called a hospital. All it was was just a place to take them over. They didn't have enough well people to take care of them very much. They didn't have no medicine up there. There was no way we could get any penicillin or sulfa or stuff like that. Sulfathiazole or something like that is supposed to take care of that kind of stuff to some extent. But I figured that if I wanted to live, I had to get out of there.

Burlage: So you made the decision then.

Nielsen: I volunteered to go out on a work detail.

Burlage: When was that and what did you find when you got to Puerto Princesa, where you landed for Palawan duty?

Nielsen: We went down there in a small boat; it was a rice boat. We went in there, and there had already been a group dispatched down there from Cabanatuan. We

was just put together with them. We were building an airfield for the Japanese. It was to be a concrete runway. I forget now just how long it was, but it was a long way from one end of that to the other. That's where we stayed until December 14, 1944.

Burlage: Describe the events leading into the December 14 massacre. What kind of warning, if any, or foreboding or anything else did you have on that, or was it just kind of a surprise?

Nielsen: Well, do you want to talk about the couple of years in between there--the building?

Burlage: Yes, we can go briefly through that--the building and so forth. Let's go on back, then, and talk a little bit about the type of work that you did. Of course, it was construction work on the airfield, but how was it done? What kind of equipment did you have, and what kind of treatment did you receive?

Nielsen: Well, the work consisted of going out and working probably around eight and nine hours a day--eight hours probably--to begin with. The tools we had to work with were very crude tools. These were clumsy-feeling things. We had to clear the land out there first. It was kind of in the jungle, some of it. Some of it had a few coconut trees on it. Most of it

was jungle. There were some very large trees. It ranged from very large on down to brush.

We worked under threatening conditions all the time. One group would come in and guard us. The guards would put us to work, you know, for maybe six months. Then they would change the guards and bring in another bunch. Every bunch was a little bit different. Some were better; some were worse. There was always beatings going on, but under some of the groups, especially two of them, why, you could figure on getting hit over the head at least once by a club. It was just their way of trying to get the most out of you.

Burlage: Their "management theory" was to bang you once in a while.

Nielsen: Oh, yes. And if you did something you shouldn't, then you got a beating, and those beatings were very brutal.

People would try to get something to eat. That was still our biggest problem--getting something to eat. We were hungry. Sometimes, when you would get off the runway area there and go out a little way to defecate, why, you'd try to pick up a coconut or get some bananas or anything that was edible. Well, it

was quite continuous that somebody would go out and get caught. When you were caught, you got beat for it.

I got caught trying to get some bananas once. I shoved them under my shirt, but there was no way they could help but see me, I guess, because there were quite a few of them under there. I came back in, and they grabbed me and took me over. They decided I had to have...I think it was fifty licks with a pick handle. I had to hold my hands up and stand straight up--hold my hands above my head. Well, there was one Jap on one side and one on the other, each with a pick handle. One would hit me, and then the other one would hit me on the buttocks. They'd give you the fifty licks. If they decided on a certain amount of punishment, I think, even if you died, you'd still get that amount. Of course, this wasn't my case (chuckle) or anything like that. They'd swing those pick handles about as hard as they could. They were small people; a hundred pounds in weight wasn't unusual. After you take so many of those, for some reason or another, the strength just goes right out of your legs, and you fall. Your knees just give away. Well, you get up and they start in

again and finish the punishment. When they got through, I looked back at my back, and from halfway down my thighs to about my belt line, it looked like when you pinch your finger and it fills in with blood. It looked like a great, big...it was solid, dark purple. My whole back looked like that--the back of my hips.

The next day, why, I went to sick call. They only allowed a few guys to stay in each day--the sickest ones. Dr. Mangel, the American doctor, let me stay in. He said, "Just don't let anyone see it," because he didn't want to be giving us any sympathy in the eyes of the Japs by letting us stay in. So I got out of work the next day.

Burlage: How about the food situation? You covered the treatment mostly. How about the food and the facilities and so forth? Were they any better than Cabanatuan?

Nielsen: Well, we had all the water we wanted. We could get a drink anytime we wanted. We were given more rice. The soup, so much of the time, was grains--we called them "whistle weeds." It was more like a spinach, only it was kind of a hollow little weed or what you'd call a stalk. If it was young, it was very

edible. At certain times of the year, it was pretty good. At other times, it got a little bit big, and it was tough, forming a hollow in the middle. That's where we got the word "whistle weeds." (Chuckle).

Burlage: What was accomplished there? Did you get the runway completed--the airport completed--that they had planned for you?

Nielsen: Yes, the airfield was completed with a large cement runway. A big part of the cement was mixed by hand on a flat board. We dumped the sand, gravel, cement, and water and mixed it on something like, maybe, an 8 x 8 piece of plywood. That was the mixing. Then there would be a guy on each side with a shovel, turning it over to get it mixed up. They would turn it until it got mixed, and then you'd scoop it off onto the runway we were building. At first, we put down about eight inches of rock, and then they put on--I forget how many inches--the cement, concrete.

Burlage: It was a fairly decent runway, then, for the type of plane they were going to use.

Nielsen: Yes, it was pretty fair.

Burlage: I've been told that some of those runways weren't thick enough, and they would break up in a hurry. Not there, but in other places. As the date we

mentioned before, December 14, approached, what was the activity on the field? Did they have fighter squadrons or anything there?

Nielsen: They had fighter planes and bomber planes and trainers that came through. Some of them were pretty poor, and some of them looked pretty good. One flight of new light bombers came through, and they was some of the nicest looking planes I've seen. They had Zero fighters there and the little trainers, which, I understood at the time, they used for fighter planes, which were very poor. They were hard to control. They only had about one .31-caliber machine gun on them.

Burlage: Did you get anywhere close to them? What was your job then? The field was completed, so what was your job and your duties? Were you still working on the runway?

Nielsen: After it was completed, we were building trails out into the jungle for them to taxi into away from the runway. They'd try to put the planes under these extra-large trees for cover. We built revetments around some of them. We built another...just cleared a grass runway on the other side of the road from where the field was. We did have to work sometimes

pushing airplanes in the mud. Some of them even had to help take the bombs down to the planes that they were going to use.

Burlage: Okay, as December 14 approached--the day of the massacre --had their attitude changed or anything, or was it still business as usual?

Nielsen: We went out in the morning, and I had a feeling something was coming off. Two or three of them...there was one who we called "Silver" because he had gray hair; it looked kind of silvery a little bit on the sides.

Burlage: Let me interrupt and change the tape here before we continue on this, because the tape is getting short. So I will continue on the back of this tape and run this on through. [Tape turned over] This is a narrative from Eugene Nielsen. You may go ahead and continue now.

Nielsen: We went out to the airfield to help repair some of the bomb damage. The Americans had been bombing the field pretty heavily. We went out to repair it on the morning of December 14, 1944.

I particularly noticed one of the Japanese guards by the name of "Silver." He sat on one place there, and he never turned his head, never said a

word to anybody. He just sat there--there was kind of a little mound there--looking straight forward. He never acted like that before. It was puzzling to me. Several of the others was acting odd, too. We felt like something was up, but we didn't know what it could be.

Then they told us they were going to take us in at noon. So they took us in. We rode from the airfield into the prison compound by trucks. We went in and they told us that there was an air raid and to get in these little tunnels that we had dug to protect ourselves from American planes strafing us--they had strafed there several times. These were little, more or less, tunnels with a hole on each end and about maybe sixty feet long. It was originally supposed to hold fifty men in each tunnel. We had three of them. It was just a ditch we dug, covered over with planks and then dirt with just a hole on each end.

They told us there was an air raid and to go get into the bomb shelters. I don't remember right now--this has been forty-some years ago--for sure, but there was what looked like a P-38 up there in the sky. I don't know whether it was right at that

time or whether it showed up later. Anyway, we got in the holes, and the officers had some little individual bomb shelters close to the building that would just hold one or two people. We got in there, and we noticed that there was an unusual amount of Japanese around there, including the officers. The higher-up officers were right down there in the camp where you had never seen them before. They told us to get down and stay out of sight.

C. C. Smith was sitting right on the end, not down out of sight. He was sitting right at the end of that little opening at the end of the tunnel, which was about two-and-a-half feet in diameter. Well, he was sitting there, and the Jap officer--I think he was the island commander, whatever his handle was--took out his big sword and was acting like in those exercises where they swing it around and around above their head and stuff. He came over there, and Smith was watching him. He come right down on Smith's head with that...well, he just split his head open and killed him. He was killed instantly.

It was kind of hard to realize what was going on, but then they was starting to shoot. Some of

them were shooting down in the holes. They set up a machine gun on the opposite side of the fence that dropped down to the beach. There might have been two of them. I've heard there were two machine guns there, but they did set up one, and they started killing everybody off.

Then they took cans of gasoline and poured it in the holes closest to the building. They didn't go down to the other end of the hole to pour it in, just in the holes closest to the compound. Then they lit something--some kind of material--and threw it in there to set it afire.

Well, at that particular time, I was down about two-thirds of the way on down from where they poured it in, and a big flame shot through there. I didn't get burned. The ones in the other end got burned quite a bit--quite badly, some of them.

Then they threw hand grenades in there. People would poke their head out. I got down to the end there and poked my head just up and down right quick, and I could see they was shooting and that it was real. It wasn't just some exercise or anything like that.

It's hard to realize that kind of stuff, but it finally hit me that that was it, so, well, I figured I had to get out of there. I was probably one of the first ones out. I dove through that there opening and landed flat on my stomach. As soon as I could get my hands and feet under me, I dove again, and I went right through the fence. You go through the fence, and it drops down into some trees, brush. There were a lot of coral cliffs and places there you could hide different stuff. But it was quite a drop.

As I went through there--diving--I grabbed hold of a tree. It was just about the right size, so it would just bend with me and I didn't get hurt. Some of the others like Bancroft, a medic, got really beat up going through there later.

I got down there, and I started going back and forth trying to find a way out. I found out there was Jap squads on both sides of us. Up around the top there, they were shooting away quite steady at the guys who would poke their heads out. I don't know how it happened, but there must have been thirty guys that got out of that compound down there, maybe thirty-five. About half of them got down to where

the sand beach was--there was no cover--and they started just running out into the water. They shot all those guys. In fact, that beach there--the water and the little area right through there--was red with the blood from those guys. I've never seen nothing like it. It was red to about twenty feet out and maybe sixty feet long and parallel with it from the number of guys that was shot.

Then there was the other guys that was shuffling around back and forth there. One area I got into, there was thirteen, I think it was--either twelve or thirteen. I thought it was thirteen. Twelve of them got killed. That group was cornered from all three sides with nothing but the water out the other way. We had just a big chute that went through the barbed-wire fence where we threw all our garbage--limbs, garbage, anything we wanted to get rid of. We would throw it through there, and it would go down that chute, and the tide would carry a lot of it away. In the old garbage pile down there, I started worming my way underneath it. I got pretty well covered up, but the other twelve didn't. As they come in there, they knew they were caught short.

I remember I could hear what was going on when they talked there still in the compound where the air raid shelters were. They would catch a guy, and instead of killing him at that time, they would catch him and torture him. They bayoneted him down lower in the groin and stuff like that. They would knock him around and stick him around the hips with their bayonets. They weren't trying to kill him at that time. They were cheering. The Japanese were cheering just like Americans would at a real interesting football game or basketball game. They were hollering "banzai" and just whooping it up. They acted like they were really enjoying it. Well, for the twelve down there that was with me in that little crevice or wash, there was no way to hide if they came over that way. They couldn't see us until they got there.

Right at that time, the biggest concern was to be killed, not tortured. I remember there was a guy from New York. He picked up a rock about six inches in diameter, and he says, "Well, them son-of-a-bitches, they're either going to kill me or get their heads bashed in!" He ran at them with that and threw it. Well, it sounded--I couldn't see where he threw-

-like it hit a person--just the sound of it. They shot him.

Then they came over and had the rest of them--most of them who were still right there--and they was just torturing those people. They were sticking them with bayonets but not trying to kill them. Well, they were all either laying on the ground suffering, or there might have been a few of them dead by then, but most of them were groaning. They were groaning and making weird noises.

Then the Jap squad started digging a hole right there in the sand. They dug a pretty good-sized hole, threw them all in it--they were still groaning--and covered them up.

After they had covered them up with the sand, one of them came over there and started taking brush and other stuff--slimy stuff--that had been thrown in the garbage dump and uncovered my legs from about the middle of my thighs on down. He stopped and called the others and said something to the others. He said, "His friends have given him a burial!" He stood there looking at me. It was hot, and he didn't want to dig another hole. I'm sure of that. They

were just trying to make up their minds, I guess, of what they wanted to do.

Then someone up above, on the edge of the cliffs, in the compound hollered down and told them that it was time for them--that squad--to come and eat. They all just dropped their shovels, picked up their rifles, and went on around the hill, over to their supper.

Well, I got up and started shuffling back and forth again. There had been a barge--a landing barge--that went back and forth along there with several riflemen in it shooting all the prisoners that they could see. I remember I ran into one little shallow-like cave, and you had to hold yourself up against the top so they couldn't see you. Sierra was one of the other prisoners there, and he had been burnt over what looked like almost his whole body. He was muttering. It wasn't talking; it was just kind of a muttering sound, and he couldn't stop. Him and I was in that there little hole together, and his foot was down where they could see it. They shot him and hit him right in the ankle and just about took the whole front end of his ankle off, so his

foot just kind of dangled off. Then, when he fell, they finished him off--shot him.

Well, I went back and forth there. I couldn't find no way out. Pretty soon I got caught where I was cornered. They were coming in from both sides, and I laid down right in the water where there was a little ledge of coral. It wasn't enough to really get out of sight on very much, but I laid there. I couldn't see anything else but a very big coconut, so I grabbed that coconut, and I started swimming out. I thought, "Well, maybe they'll just see the coconut and not see me."

I got out a little ways, and one of them started hollering at the others, "Yashi! Yashi!" That's "coconut." They started shooting. I swam under water as far as I could and as deep as I could. I would come up and get a breath and go under water again. They were peppering that water around me. Even when you were down under the water quite a way, why, you could still hear the shots in your ears. You could feel that bullet hitting the water very easily (chuckle). One shot, I remember, hit me right in my armpit. There seems to be quite a bit of concussion when they hit right alongside your skin. It didn't

puncture my skin any, but it made it very sore--the muscle on the rib right in my armpit. The next time I came for air, boy, one hit right alongside my forehead or temple, and it kind of knocked me out temporarily, but it didn't penetrate.

Then the next one hit me just above my knee. It must have hit the water first because it made a big hole just above my knee and went up into my hip--the distance of about a foot through the flesh there. It didn't hit any bones. It stopped in my hip just alongside my hip bone or where the leg starts. It immediately went numb. I reached down there, and I could stick my whole thumb right in the hole. It couldn't have been just a straight shot, or it wouldn't have made that big of a hole going in.

Well, I didn't dare swim out across with that tide. It was still daylight, so I got out far enough so that with the waves and everything they couldn't get a shot at me out there in the water as I was laying low. With the little waves, you just can't shoot at somebody at a time like that. I just stayed about the same distance from the shore, and I started out swimming parallel with it. I just went along slow.

They knew I was out there, and they kept watching me and talking. They followed along on the shore, waiting for me to come in, because I guess they knew I was hit. They probably thought I was hit several times.

Finally, it started getting dark, and by the time I got down to that point--there's kind of a point down along the shore there where it cuts back to the northeast again--it had gotten dark enough that I decided to start swimming across. Well, I started swimming, and I had pointed myself out a certain star that I was going to go by. I swam toward that star to get across. It was a very dark night, and I figured that would be the guide.

Another thing is that during the night, there was some kind of an animal--a fish--swimming around me counterclockwise. It would come so close that I could have reached out and touched it. As I understood in talking to the natives and everything, it was what they call a sea cow. It's like in the porpoise family, only it's kind of an ugly animal. I forgot the name of it right now (chuckle). It was in the porpoise family. It had a big, round, bulbous nose on it that kind of pointed out around. It stayed

there by me just going around counterclockwise around me most of the night.

I finally got over...well, first of all, that star during the night...it wasn't the North Star because it changed positions, and I found myself swimming right out to sea. Then I happened to see just a very faint outline of the mountains over there above Iwahig, where there is a prison colony of Philippine prisoners. I seen a faint line, and I realized I was going the wrong way, so I straightened out and went the right way.

Well, I got over there, and I finally felt the bottom as I was swimming along, and I was going to get up and walk up into it. I found out I was too weak, so I just crawled up on the shore and found out it was just a little island there--a little sand bar. It had brush on it. I was tired so I just crawled up in there, and I went to sleep. I was well-covered in that brush--it was thick.

Well, I woke up, and there was a barge. I think maybe that landing barge was searching the other shore over there for prisoners. I think it woke me up, and I looked out there. It wasn't out there very far, maybe fifty to 200 yards, and then it went off.

I made my way into the main part of the island and off that sand bar. There I found myself in a swamp--one of these mangrove swamps. It was kind of a stinking, dirty old swamp with a lot of crap in the water. I figured I had to get to some fresh water. I never had been there, but there was a river, I knew, that came down over by Iwahig, so I was going to try to make myself make it over to that river. I ended up there in that swamp that night with the mosquitoes so bad. I was too tired to even brush them. I just let them suck what they wanted (chuckle). During the night, there were a lot of animals'--I don't know what they were, because it was too dark to see them--eyes that would shine. Some of them were six inches apart; some of them were a quarter-of-an-inch. There were all sizes and shapes. The big one came over there and came up. It never made a sound--the one with the eyes six inches apart. I reached out and slapped the water as hard as I could, and he slapped the water and disappeared. I wondered if it was a crocodile or an alligator.

Well, I was pretty tired and hungry, and I figured I had to get to that water, so I kept pushing through there. I did see a Filipino out there

fishing, and I hid from him. I didn't want him to see me. I came by another Filipino house where they had some chickens that were making a noise. I didn't dare go to them. I didn't know whether or not the Filipinos would be on our side or their side. I didn't know whether the Japs were over there. They dropped some bombs over there once--just one or two small bombs. I had never been over in that area, so I was hiding from everybody.

I finally got through that swamp after that day and the night and the next day. Then I got into a field. Along the edge there were some coconut trees. I was trying to get up to get one of those to get a drink of the coconut milk. With that numb leg there was no way I could get up the tree. I found one of these old ones that was laying on the ground, and I found a little stick that was broken off, and I pounded the coconut on that to get the husk off. Then I broke the nut open, and it was one of these that had the pulp--the white pulp--that was growing from inside of the coconut. Well, that was just saturated completely with water and I ate that--that's also water, same as drinking.

Then I started out again. I had some trouble. I found myself starting to hallucinate. I would see things, and when I would get there, they weren't there. I would see Japs on a nice little place laying in the shade, and I would go out around them and get away from there. Pretty soon I kind of realized that I was seeing things that wasn't there, so I just kept going.

When I got out of there, I went through a big field with tall grass--that jungle grass, which is about five feet tall. I kept bending over because I didn't want anyone to see me. I was stripped naked. I never had a sign of any kind of clothes or shoes or hat or anything. That jungle grass would cut you a little bit because it has a saw edge on it. I was covered in little tiny scratches all over.

Going through there, I saw a Filipino come down. There was a trail that went down through that field. He went through, and I hid and watched him. When I got over there, I was fairly close to the trail, and here he came back. He had a big bolo knife hanging down there. I had made up my mind that as soon as he gets there, I would jump him, grab hold of his knife, and then talk to him to see what I

could find out, if he could talk any English. He came along and got right there within a foot of me - I was just under the grass and had laid over on the trail next to it. For some reason or another, I didn't jump on him.

He went up the trail a way, and I called to him. I says, "Hey, Joe, come here! I would like to talk to you." I didn't want to show myself; I was still hiding. He just stood there. I guess he was scared to come back, afraid of what I might do; and I was scared to show myself, afraid of what he might do (chuckle). Anyway, I kept trying to talk him into coming back, and he wouldn't.

Finally, I stood out there, and I said, "Don't worry. It's all right. We're friends. I'm not going to hurt you." I probably couldn't have anyway, but he didn't know it (chuckle). He finally started talking. He could talk English. He was a prisoner of the Philippine government at the Iwahig Colony. He seemed to be pretty nice. I asked him, "Can you get me a drink of water?" He said, "Yeah!" He motioned for me to come, and he took me up the trail a little way and gave me a drink. Then, the next thing I asked him was, "Can you get me something to eat?" He said,

"Yeah." He took off and came back with a couple of pithy things about three-quarters of an inch in diameter and about four inches long. They tasted quite bit like a potato.

I ate them, and he said, "You have friends." I didn't know what he meant. I asked him, "Can you get me a piece of paper and a pencil to write with?" I said, "I want to write a letter." He said, "Yeah." He went and got it and came back, and I wrote a letter. I addressed it to Douglas MacArthur, United States Army. I used MacArthur's name because all the Filipinos knew him. I told him, "When the Americans come back, you give them this letter, and they'll give you a lot of money for it." I told him that so he would be more apt to give it to them. I wrote in the letter what was going on over there, that they was killing all the prisoners off and I was the only one that was alive and I didn't think I had a chance to make it back because I was sick and wounded. I explained some of the things that they were doing over there--how they were killing them. I told him I wanted somebody to know, like, even my folks and everybody, what had happened--besides the

government. I wrote it down, and I gave it to him. I told him to be sure and give it to them.

We started down the trail again, and, again, he said, "You have friends." I didn't know what he was talking about. Pretty soon he said, "You have friends." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You have friends." So I got to thinking, and I thought, "Well, what does he mean by that?" I asked him again, and he said, "Off this trail, you have some friends."

It was off the main trail back in a little place. I went up that trail and then came into a little place there, and there was Petrey and Cobliss, laying on a mat--a grass mat. I looked at them, and I thought, "I'm out of my mind again. I'm seeing things that's not there." I walked up to them and realized what it was. They were hid up out there away from the main trail, waiting until dark, and then they were going to get them out of there. So I laid down, rested, and went to sleep.

When I woke up, I asked them if they had any kind of medicine or anything to use on the wound I got. They said they could try and get some. When they started moving us out of there, one of them went and got a fifth of rice whiskey. He was using

that to wash the wound out because it was getting kind of bad. We met up with Smith, too. I think it was Smith that was washing out my wound when we stopped at one place. I was in kind of bad shape, and I passed out for a minute--not from the wound, but just from exertion because I hadn't had much rest.

Then we started walking down the island, and we walked all night. My numb leg...I had to keep it straight, or it would just give way. Doing that, I landed on the heel. Keeping that one leg straight every step, why, you'd come down heavy on the heel on the other one to catch yourself. We walked all night barefooted. It was pretty rough gravel along one place there, and it was just wearing that heel off (chuckle). It got so bad that I would step on a smooth rock, and it would leave a red print. It was light-colored, but you could see it. It would leave a red print because that heel was so worn off.

We kept going, and I got to the point toward morning--it was daylight--where I was just going from one tree to the next, grabbing the trees as we were moving along there so I wouldn't fall. Finally, I told them, "This is as far as I can go. You go

ahead and go. I'm going to have to take a rest and try to recover a little bit." They were a ways ahead of me because I was dragging behind. They decided, "Well, we'll stop here." So we went off into the jungle, away from the trail, and we stayed there.

A guy went out and got some eggs. They were little eggs--probably little bantam chicken eggs. He gave us each a couple of them. We each had two eggs. We didn't know hardly how to eat them, so I asked him how he did. He showed me how you take a little stick and break in a hole on each side, and then you just kind of suck on it. Everything in the egg just comes right out and so on. So we had fresh eggs (chuckle).

The next day we started out, and I wasn't doing very good--my leg was getting sore. So we got the idea that we would try and ride carabaos. We got a Filipino who was going to go with us to guide us on down the line, and he went out and got some carabaos. The one I got on was a big ol' thing, and you had to just pound it steady, right hard, across its rump to keep it going. If you stopped, it stopped. It was hard sitting on it, anyway, because it was hard on that torn up leg where I had gotten shot. We had

traveled quite a while on that, and my leg was getting sore. Finally, we got down there, and that thing turned and went right out into the ocean. It stopped and drank for a while, and then it went on out farther with nothing but its nose up. I was out there, and I couldn't turn it around and get it to go back or anything, so I just got off and swam in, and we started walking again.

Then we got the idea, "Well, maybe we could go buy a boat." This guy said he could get us a boat from some little pygmy-type people there. I guess they lived in that little dugout boat. They had straw mats in there. They were going to row us down the island. We was trying to head down for the guerrilla camp, which was down the island quite a ways. It must have been close to a hundred miles from where we started. These little Filipinos rowed for a long time, and then the water got a little choppy, and they got sick. They were just little guys, maybe seventy pounds, and they started crying. Boy, they howled something frightful! We had this Filipino guide. I think it was Pablo Pilope, who was the Filipino guide that was taking us down to that place. I asked him, "What's the matter with them?" He said,

"They are just sick--probably just seasick--and they think they are going to die." Boy, they were just really bawling just as hard as they could (chuckle)!

Well, we decided to take them over and put them on shore. Then we started rowing ourselves. It was four Americans, and we started rowing ourselves. We went along pretty good, but there was quite a strong breeze blowing right down the island in the same direction that we were going. We got the idea that maybe we could get some kind of a sail. We got him to go out...it seemed like he could go out into those jungles somewhere and find almost anything we wanted. He went out there, and he got a blanket. He got a couple of poles, and he set up that blanket. It was a big ol' G. I. blanket, and he set that up so that wind would catch it. Boy, we went down that island really slick!

We got down to Brooke's Point, and there the guerrilla camp was, and they gave us a place to sleep and fed us good. We ate like horses, I guess, for a while. The commander of the camp, Nathaniel Mejor, said he didn't think he was ever going to get us guys filled up. They treated us real good down there. They had a celebration going on after we were there

for a while. We were there during that time, and we had a big feed. We stayed there for probably a couple of weeks.

During that time, we got in contact with the American military authorities through a radio that two Filipinos operated down there. They had landed there on the island at night from a submarine. It was Jimmy Roques...I think he's from one of those little towns south of Los Angeles. They call it some kind of a beach...Laguna Beach. There was another one, but I can't think of his name right now. They had the radio on and got in contact, and they kept setting it up for an American rescue plane to come in and pick us up. You'd build a big fire, and he was supposed to come in at night. Night after night they never came. I was really wondering what was going on.

Then, finally, right in the middle of the day, here it comes. It comes in and lands, and they got out on the wing--it was one of these PBYS, two-motor, that landed in the water. They got out on the wing and were yelling to us. We couldn't understand it, so we swam over toward it, and they wanted to know what kind of a bottom there was on that bay

there so they could come up close to the shore. We told them it was just sand, and so they pulled in closer. We got all of our stuff together. There was a B-24 that showed up right afterwards. It was to be a fighter escort for that landing boat. It was supposed to protect it while it was on the water. He said that B-24 had eighteen .50-caliber machine guns on it, plus a few bombs. It waited until we were ready to take off, and then it took off.

Burlage: That concludes the interview with Mr. Nielsen.

[End of interview]