

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

NUMBER

369

Interview with
Kyle O. Thompson
March 9, 1977

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: Kyle O Thompson Jr
(Signature)

Date: 9 March 1977

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Oral History Collection

Kyle Thompson

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Kyle Thompson for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 9, 1977, in Denton, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Thompson in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese during World War II. Mr. Thompson was a member of the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, which was a National Guard outfit from Texas. This unit was captured virtually intact on the Island of Java in March of 1942.

Now Mr. Thompson, to begin this interview, would you 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. Thompson: Right, okay. I was born on July the 25, 1922, in Nevada County, Arkansas. My family moved to Texas

when I was two years old, and I've been a resident of Texas ever since. I attended public schools in Montague County and in Wichita Falls, Texas.

I enlisted in the National Guard in about early 1939, and we were mobilized in November, 1940. I spent one year at Camp Bowie training, and almost exactly one year later, in 1941, we were detached from the 36th Division --our battalion was--and sent overseas and wound up in Java and were captured there.

Marcello: Okay, let's just back up a minute here, because I have several questions that I need to ask at this point. You mention that you joined the National Guard in 1939. That meant you would have been only seventeen years of age.

Thompson: I was sixteen, actually. I "fudged" my age by about eighteen or nineteen months.

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

Thompson: Well, I had several friends that I knew that were in the Guard, and they were telling me about the four or five dollars a month--big money--that we could get. This was just at the end of the Great Depression; I come from a large family; I never had too much of the world. . . anyway, a little money was very helpful, and it, you know, was something to do, so . . . you know.

Marcello: Well, the National Guard at that time, I think, was in many ways almost like a social club, was it not?

Thompson: Yes, really. We drilled. . . I don't know whether it was weekly or twice a month or something like that, but, you know, your group got together and you had fun. Once every month or so you went out for a weekend outing, and it was something to do. Social club, I think, would be a . . . I never had thought of it as that, but that's . . .

Marcello: In other words, I don't think the whole thing was really taken that seriously until maybe around the time that you were mobilized, and maybe it wasn't even taken seriously at that point yet.

Thompson: No, because, as I recall, most of us were convinced that we were mobilized for one year. There was a popular song at the time shortly after we went into service, "I'll Be Back in a Year, Little Darling," and I guess that I always equate that with a year's service. Our one year actually stretched into nearly six years.

Marcello: And when was it that the unit was mobilized?

Thompson: I believe it was November 11, 1940.

Marcello: Now how closely were you, as a seventeen, eighteen, nineteen year old, keeping abreast with current events and world affairs at that particular time?

Thompson: I was just about removed from it as . . . well, I recall vividly hearing, during the mid and late '30's, Adolph Hitler's speeches on overseas radio. This is one of the great impressions I have of that period. But, you know, our country, I think, was still isolationist to a great extent. I never was really all that well-versed in what was going on. As far as my own particular circles were concerned, we really didn't keep up with world events. You know, I think our average American at that period never thought anything would ever happen to us, and we didn't want to get involved and that type of thing.

Marcello: You would probably have to estimate this, but what was the average age of the typical individual in this unit?

Thompson: Early twenties would be. . . I have one friend that's still a very close friend of mine in Wichita Falls, and he was still sixteen when we were captured. So I think he must have started when he was fourteen or so, but, you know, some fellows mature a little quicker than the others. They were quite young, and I think this proved in the long run to be fortunate for many of us who were able to survive. Because, you know, when you're younger and healthier, you can just put up with more.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that the unit was mobilized on November 11, 1940, and, of course, you were sent to Camp Bowie.

Now what sort of training did you undergo after you got to Camp Bowie in Brownwood?

Thompson: Okay, my particular unit at this time was Regimental Headquarters Battery, and we served as the . . . well, as the headquarters battery for the regiment, which was 131st Field Artillery's regiment. I was a radio operator. We did extensive training in Morse code and handling the radio equipment of the time, which we usually had mounted in command cars. We ran the radio network for the regiment, you know, between the batteries--the field artillery batteries--and so forth. We did quite a lot of the usual type of training--exercises, marches, and bivouacs; we'd go out in the field for a week. We did very little. . . well, I don't recall any instructions that I had in side-arms. We did a little bit of . . . we had .45-caliber pistols that we wore.

Incidentally, after we got over into the combat zone, we were issued infantryman rifles, and I had never fired one in my life. I still haven't fired one, so I don't know (chuckle).

We. . . as far as arms were concerned, now, of course, my particular unit was not a firing unit, but we supported the artillery batteries, and they trained, of course, with the 75-millimeter World War I-type equipment, which we still had.

Marcello: Now it was during your stay at Camp Bowie that the unit was detached from the 36th Division, isn't that correct?

Thompson: Right. Yes.

Marcello: How did this come about, and why did it come about?

Thompson: In the fall of 1940, the Pentagon reorganized the . . .

Marcello: Fall of 1940?

Thompson: No, '41. This is a year after we . . . we had been in the service about a year. The Army divisions were reorganized; they were streamlined. I think they based a lot of the reorganization on the triangular-type, as I recall, unit. We were the old square division, which had been in force since before World War I. Because of the experience and the observations that our experts had made of the Nazi military structure, I think they decided it was time to streamline, so because of this there were excess troops in certain areas. Our entire battalion became excess. Actually, our regimental headquarters moved into the 1st Battalion of the 131st. Then this 1st Battalion, consisting of somewhere between 500 and 600 men, was detached, and we were taken out of the division. Where we were actually headed was . . . we were supposed to wind up in the Philippines.

Marcello: Now is there any particular reason why your unit was detached as opposed to some other unit?

Thompson: I'm not really aware of the particular reason, except whoever was. . . I suppose the General Staff in reorganizing had to determine, you know, which group. So the 1st Battalion of the 131st was just the one that was chosen to be detached and pulled out.

Marcello: Was it also around this time that married men or older men were given the option of getting out of the unit, transferring?

Thompson: Yes, some were. A few of the fellows went to the Air Corps, which preceded the Air Force. I recall a couple went to Officers Candidate School. There were a few discharged for family reasons and this type of stuff. None of that stuff ever fitted me; I didn't think I'd have sense enough for officer material, and it never even occurred to me that I'd ever want to be an officer anyway. And, you know, I had no family; I was young and not married. I guess I was just right to be sent where I was sent.

Marcello: I would assume that the overwhelming majority of the people in the unit were unmarried.

Thompson: Yes. I'd say probably 60 to 70 per cent--just a rough estimate. There were several married; they had families.

Marcello: Now did they blend the replacements in from among the draftees and so on?

Thompson: We had a few draftees, but basically we were, I would say, at least 90 per cent local fellows from the Texas communities.

Marcello: Okay, now your ultimate destination was PLUM.

Thompson: Right.

Marcello: What sort of speculation was going around at this time, since you obviously didn't know precisely or exactly where you were going to end up?

Thompson: I don't really recall specifically a great deal of speculation. We wondered, of course. Of course, we all knew we were going across the Pacific, and where we were going to wind up. . . to me, I don't recall it being much of, you know, an issue as far as I personally was concerned.

Marcello: I gather at this time you still really didn't understand fully the seriousness of the situation in terms of the way world events were going and so on.

Thompson: Not personally, I did not.

Marcello: Okay, so you ultimately leave for PLUM from San Francisco. Do you remember the name of the ship that you boarded in San Francisco?

Thompson: USS Republic.

Marcello: Describe what sort of ship it was.

Thompson: It was a 28,000-ton troop transport, which was seized from the Germans after World War I. The top speed was twelve

knots, as I recall, even though our convoy went slower than that because there was another ship, I think, that eight knots was its top speed. It was an old ship, not too bad of shape; it'd been kept up fairly well. I think maybe it might have been in moth-balls and taken out and brushed up. But we had something like 5,000-7,000 troops on it, as I recall. It was not too crowded, but it wasn't exactly luxurious quarters.

Marcello: Did you get seasick?

Thompson: Yes, I did. When we got on . . . I think we left San Francisco a week before Pearl Harbor Day. It must have been around the 1st of November, 1941. No, 1st of December; December 7th is Pearl Harbor Day. Off the west coast of the United States, there were large ground swells, and I made it pretty well. We left one afternoon, and I was more or less excited; I'd never been on water before like this. I couldn't find the galley, but I think I probably got a candy bar or something and didn't eat the evening meal. The next morning, which, I think, was a Friday, I got up and still couldn't find the galley and had no breakfast. So as the morning progressed, these ground swells, you know, were going in the rhythmic-type thing that really contributes to seasickness, and I

became quite ill. I went up on the top of the top deck which was a mistake, because you catch all the sway up there the higher you go. Anyway, what really kind of set me off was. . . I finally found the galley, but it was a Friday and they were having fish. The Navy was serving some fish to a mass troop feeding, and it was not all that conducive to a good stomach, I suppose. I barely made it up to the rail and upchucked quite profusely and got over that. I did not eat lunch, but I laid down and apparently got over it that afternoon, because by the time of the evening meal I was able to eat. After that I never had any problem with it. . . just that one time.

Marcello: Now you made a very short stop in Honolulu. Were you one of the lucky ones to get ashore for a little liberty?

Thompson: Yes, I think we had a three-hour pass.

Marcello: What did you do when you went ashore?

Thompson: I just went down and looked at some of the downtown stores with two or three buddies. Quite frankly, I don't even recall who I went with; it was just some friends.

Marcello: Did you recall an atmosphere of tenseness in Honolulu? In other words, did you see evidence that they might have been gearing up or preparing for war in some way?

Thompson: Not really. I don't recall. . . you know, even at the docks there was no great effort, as I recall, for security.

There was just normal-type stuff, I would say, but really, you know, this was, I think, exactly a week before Pearl Harbor was bombed.

Marcello: Okay, so you leave Honolulu, and you're still on your way toward PLUM, wherever that might be.

Thompson: I think after we left Honolulu, we began to . . . the most general rumor and speculation was the Philippines. So I think we began to realize that we were headed for the Philippines.

Marcello: Now is this where you picked up your escort? Didn't you pick up the Pensacola somewhere around in here?

Thompson: Yes. Yes. I think that was probably the first day out of Honolulu. It was the Pensacola, and I believe there was a small. . . we called it a sub chaser. It was a converted yacht that was armed.

Marcello: Okay, you're somewhere out of Honolulu when you finally get the word of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Do you remember what you were doing and what your reactions were when you received word about the attack at Pearl Harbor?

Thompson: Yes. We were in the process of crossing the International Date Line and were being initiated by the Navy. Most of us, of course, had never been on the high seas before, and there's quite an elaborate ceremony that normally goes

on. Of course, when you have to initiate 5,000 to 7,000 people all at one time, you miss some of the things. I recall our colonel had a mustache--our commanding officer, Colonel Tharp. One of the things. . . I'd never seen him without his mustache, and I don't think he'd had it shaved off for thirty years or something like that. They put him in the barber's chair and cut off half of his mustache --you know, this type of stuff. Some of the fellows, they'd run the clippers down the middle of their hair and dump you over into a vat of salt water, and they had a small electric prong. . . I don't think it was quite as bad as a cattle prong, but there were a few things like this. We'd crawl through wind tunnels, and they'd shoot the streams of water in there on you.

We were going through all of this process when it was announced over the public address system that we were in a state of war with Japan. The decision was made to proceed with the ceremony, to hurry it up. I think I was one of the fortunate ones; I had not gotten to the worst hazing section of the ceremony. They were rushing us through to get through, but we did proceed and finish with our ceremony.

The atmosphere did change quite extensively. Even as immature, I guess you might say, as I was or . . . you

know, I had never really been concerned with world affairs. You know, living in your own little circle during the Depression was hard enough, I suppose. But anyway, we begun to realize that, you know, we were in a serious situation. We went on watches on the ship, watching for airplanes and submarines. I served many an hour in one of the towers from that point on.

I also think that right after the war started that the decision was made to change course. The Japanese had invaded the Philippines while simultaneously attacking Pearl Harbor, so it was decided we could not land there, and we went from a southwestern course to a southern course and went down towards Australia.

Marcello: Now you did land in the Fiji Islands just very briefly.

Thompson: We stopped to pick up provisions in the Fiji Islands, because they had not planned to go quite that far. I think we were nearly a month on the ship, as I recall.

Marcello: Okay, so you land in Brisbane, Australia, on December 21, 1941. What did you do when you went ashore?

Thompson: We went immediately to an Australian Army camp and was assigned barracks space. If I'm not mistaken, I think we were the first American troops to land in Australia after the war started. We had little or no . . . well, we had

nothing there. We couldn't even draw pay, because there was no finance section. . . the Army had nothing set up there. We were just sort of out there on a . . . and we were more or less guests of the Australian government. I recall eating that god-awful mutton that they served in their rations. It was the most horrible food I ever put in my mouth (chuckle).

Marcello: I gather that most of these Texas boys had a hard time adjusting to mutton.

Thompson: Yes, yes. Mutton was the last thing in the world that any of us. . . I had a hard time adjusting, you know. Texas has always been in politics Democratic, and I can recall, you know, if you weren't a Democrat, you weren't anything. We looked at mutton sort of like it was a Republican, you know.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you receive from the Australian civilians here at Brisbane?

Thompson: Great! Absolutely great! Many of us . . . I recall us talking later that Australia reminded us of Texas about fifteen or twenty years before--just the atmosphere, the way the people were. I think probably their standard of living was not quite up to ours generally, although I don't know what type of standard of living we had in the Depression. But we had a lot in common with the Australians,

and all through our experience we had great rapport with the Australians. We turned out. . . frequently, us Yanks and the Australians would take on the British, you know. They seemed to have more in common--the Australians did--with us than they did the British troops that we later on were with in camps.

Marcello: Were you one of the lucky ones who got to eat Christmas dinner in the homes of Australian civilians?

Thompson: No. No, I had Christmas dinner on the. . . I think it must have been mutton. . . maybe something else. Christmas of 1941 does not have a great impression on me, except that the only thing I recall is it was the first Christmas, of course, I'd ever been away from home. We didn't have a lot. We still didn't . . . we got a small allowance of money to buy cigarettes or whatever we wanted with it, but it was still very close. And our rations are still not under our own control; they were under the Australian Army. So it was rather bleak, I suppose.

Marcello: Were you simply waiting there in Australia during that period? In other words, you really weren't undergoing any sort of training or anything of that sort.

Thompson: No, we were just there. Of course, nothing was set up; there was no structure of our government or military or anything. Now the other troops, I don't know, really, what

happened to them. I suppose they all stayed in Australia, because we had a number of units that were from other divisions similar to ours, and these fellows, I suppose, stayed behind.

Marcello: When did you board the. . .

Thompson: Bloemfontein.

Marcello: . . . the Bloemfontein for your trip to Java?

Thompson: It must have been about January 5th to the 10th--in that general area--because I think we landed in Java on January 11th.

Marcello: That's correct. What sort of a ship was the Bloemfontein?

Thompson: Oh, it was a real neat. . . much better condition than the old Republic. It was not a troopship; we were very crowded. Many of us slept on the decks in our bedrolls. It was not a . . . it was really a merchant ship, as I recall; it was not heavily armed. I remember we went from Brisbane to Port Darwin, I think it was. We stopped at Port Darwin and picked up some supplies and then went on from there to Java. From Darwin to Java, we were in rather hostile territory, and we were fired on by a submarine somewhere at this point.

Marcello: Did you actually witness this in terms of seeing the wake of the torpedo or everything of this sort?

Thompson: Yes. Yes, we could see the wake of the torpedo.

Marcello: I'm sure this gave you quite a thrill (chuckle).

Thompson: Yes, it scared the hell out of us! We took our field artillery pieces and strapped them to the deck and prepared to, you know, use them if we needed to. But it turned out that this apparently was just a long submarine that fired either one or two torpedoes. I'm not sure how many it fired.

Marcello: Now were you being escorted at this stage?

Thompson: Yes, there was something else, but I can't recall what it was. I'm not sure. We may have been alone, but it seems to me like there was another ship. I really don't recall.

Marcello: Did you know that you were going to the Dutch East Indies at this point?

Thompson: Apparently we did, because this was a Dutch ship we were on. You know, there again, my knowledge of world history and geography was quite limited, and I had no concept of what the Dutch East Indies was. You know, I just knew that it was on the map. I'd never been out of Texas or . . . well, I'd been in Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma, and that was the extent of my travel prior to getting on the troop train to go overseas.

Marcello: Okay, so you debark at Surabaya, Java, on January 11, 1942.

Thompson: Right. Yes.

Marcello: I gather you just passed through Surabaya; you didn't stay there very long.

Thompson: Yes. Yes, we just went from Surabaya directly to Malang, I believe it is--a little mountain town. . . beautiful area.

Marcello: And actually you were even outside Malang, were you not, in Singosari?

Thompson: Yes, we were at a military camp. This is where we joined up with the remnants of the B-17 bomber group from Clark Field in the Philippines. They had barely escaped with their planes and didn't even have a basic ground crew, so we started working immediately with helping them do minor repairs. They had some engine mechanics and this type of stuff, but our fellows who were adapted to this type of stuff, you know, worked on the B-17's--patching them up to make bombing runs.

Marcello: Now by this time, are you beginning to realize that perhaps the situation is becoming a little more serious?

Thompson: Yes, because right away we were bombed and strafed by the Japanese Air Force.

Marcello: Now let me ask you this. Now you probably hadn't even seen a Japanese up until this point.

Thompson: No.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Thompson: Well, I guess the worst caricature that you could possibly think of, you know. We looked on the Japanese as the bad guys, and, you know, they were. . . just, you know, that type of thing.

Marcello: Were you pretty confident that it was going to be a short war?

Thompson: Personally, I was. I thought that. . . I said, you know, "How dare these little yellow guys from the Far East attack a country like the United States!" To tell you the truth, from that point on, I lived the war three months at a time--even after we were interned. I had determined in my own mind . . . I think this was a psychological thing with me personally, and I think it was probably good for me because I would convince myself that "three months from now the war will be over, and I'll be going home."

Marcello: What did this base look like from a physical standpoint?

Thompson: Our particular barracks were. . . well, they were not too bad. I don't recall what we used to . . . whether we slept on platforms or . . . I don't suppose it's really important. It was nice. I suppose it was a Dutch Army camp.

There are a few odd things that I recall. The Dutch . . . when our people went in to get supplies--I remember

one thing specifically--they wanted toilet paper, and the Dutch were amazed that they would buy toilet paper for enlisted men. This is kind of an example of the different way. . . of course, the Dutch in Java were colonials, and the bulk of their army were native-type Javanese.

Marcello: Are these the people that they usually referred as "black Dutch?" Did you ever hear that term used?

Thompson: No, I never did.

Marcello: Now were the runways grass and so on?

Thompson: No, they had concrete runways. This was a regular air-field that the B-17's used, and they had hangars. Later on, I went to work for the adjutant of the Air Corps group. They needed someone who could type, and I had taken typing in high school. So I got a desk job and went to work for the. . . I believe his name was Major Cosgrove. I'm not sure, but I think it was. He was the adjutant of the Air Corps group. After the Japanese bombings and strafings became quite frequent, we moved into Malang into a building to get away from the daily bombing.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about your first contact with the Japanese, and, of course, it took the form of bombing and strafing. I believe that first raid occurred on February 5, 1942. Regardless of the date, describe that raid as best you can remember it.

Thompson: This must have been a bombing, I suppose. The sequence of those particular events, I don't really have a good picture of. And I'm not sure; the Zeros could have come in. The first hostile incident that I recall were the bombers. I do remember that we had a few P-40 fighter planes on the island, and there was one P-40 that came out of a bank of clouds and dove right in the middle of these Japanese bombers--there must have been eight or ten of them--with his guns blazing, and he broke up the bombing formation. In this particular case, they dropped their bombs way off target and left. Apparently, they had no fighter escort at that time. Later on, there were numerous fighters, and as they got closer to Java, they could fly their Zeros in and strafe and so forth. I think we shot down one Zero with one of our .50-caliber machine gun crews.

Marcello: With what frequency were these raids occurring as time went on?

Thompson: Well, from February 5th, we had . . . at this point, we were only a little over three weeks away from the landing on the island, so they were becoming quite frequent. I would hesitate to say they were daily, but it seemed to me like they came every thirty minutes.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did when that first attack took place? Do you recall where you were and what you did?

Thompson: The only thing I recall is that it scared the hell out of me. I guess I'm really basically a coward at heart; and when somebody's shooting at me, it upsets me. You know, this is where you really start realizing, well, you know, "There's something serious going on here, and what are we going to do about it?" I think I was in the barracks laying down, and this was a surprise attack. We had no warning. The first thing I can remember is that we heard guns firing and bombs falling. I rushed out and lay down in a small trench that was, I guess, maybe a foot deep or something. I'm sure I was sticking up over it, but I just lay there with my head down in my arms, you know, expecting to get hit any minute.

Marcello: Now how long was it after that initial raid took place that you moved into Malang?

Thompson: Really, just a matter of a few days. This particular period, you know, in retrospect, seems like a long time, but you're only talking about three weeks' time.

Marcello: In the meantime, is the base being shot up and damaged rather seriously?

Thompson: The hangars. . . they started bombing. . . they were really bombing the airplanes more than they were. . . occasionally,

a bomb would drop . . . but as I recall, the Japanese bombing was not all that good. They would miss, you know, pretty bad, although, you know, you thought that they were going to hit right where you were. But some of the bombs would fall out in the woods, you know, a hundred feet away from where their targets were.

Marcello: I gather from what you're saying, then, is that the strafing was usually much more serious, much worse.

Thompson: Yes. Right. Yes, they would come down. . . and when the fighter planes started coming, they would swoop down. . . they were trying to get the B-17's, is what they were after basically. Then occasionally, they would shoot a few rounds at our barracks and that kind of stuff, but basically they were after the airplanes.

Later on, there was a British ack-ack crew that set up near the hangars. This was the first time I'd seen the rapid fire antiaircraft gun; we had nothing like that at all. Of course, we were a field artillery battalion and would not be expected to have antiaircraft guns. But I was quite impressed with the. . . one day the air raid alarm sounded, and I went out and got in the trench near where the antiaircraft guns were. Later on, I thought, "Boy, that was rather a foolish thing to do, because this

is a target for the planes." But anyway, I watched this British antiaircraft group. They didn't hit anything, but they were getting pretty close.

Marcello: What did you do after you moved into Malang?

Thompson: We would stay out in the barracks at night and then go in early in the morning and spend the day there. I worked in an office.

Marcello: Was it strictly clerical work?

Thompson: Clerical work, yes. I was the only enlisted man in this office; they were all Air Corps officers. I recall there was a . . .we hired an Eurasian girl--part Dutch and the Javanese mixture--really a gorgeous girl about in the early twenties, around twenty years old. Incidentally, I think probably those are the most beautiful women I've ever seen in my life, are those mixtures of Europeans and the Asians. I thought, "Boy, this is just real nice! I'll see if I can get a date with her." But being that everybody (chuckle) else was officers, I didn't have a chance. But anyway, we did work just a few days until . . .

Marcello: Now was Malang hit at all?

Thompson: No, there was no military targets there. This is a small town and had no industry or impact. Really, it was not a type of a target to be bombed or strafed.

Marcello: Now on February 27, 1942, the remnants of the bomb group leave Java for Australia.

Thompson: Right.

Marcello: What do you recall about this particular event, and what feelings did you have when you found out they were leaving?

Thompson: Well, as I recall, I was told. . . of course, I was a private first class, so I really wasn't in on the councils of what decisions were being made, but we were told that the Air Corps group offered to fly us out of Java. They could take all of the men--were going to Australia--but none of our equipment. We were under the jurisdiction of the Dutch government at this time, and the Dutch would not let us leave, so we stayed and they left.

Marcello: I'm sure this must have been a blow to morale, was it not?

Thompson: Yes, this is where most of us begun to get the sinking feeling, because, you know, we knew it was just a matter of time before the Japanese would come. We were following the news; they were capturing Sumatra, which was just west of the island of Java, part of the Indonesian chain now; Singapore fell; the Philippines. . . I think Mindanao was the last hold-out, and everything else had already fallen to the Japanese. You know, all the countries that they took--the Malay Penninsula and. . . so there we were--sticking out. I think they even went around us and took the island of Timor before they captured Java.

Marcello: Now were you able to keep up with the course of the war as it was progressing or regressing?

Thompson: Well, more or less, but, you know, we were somewhat isolated; we had no contact with our own country or our own military people.

Marcello: I'm sure you had no idea of the gravity of the situation at Pearl Harbor.

Thompson: No. No, we had no concept of what had happened at Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: And consequently, were you more or less expecting to be evacuated by the Navy or anything of this sort?

Thompson: Well, we really thought that we would get off. As a matter of fact, we tried. When the Dutch surrendered, many of us went to the coast trying to find a canoe or something, you know, to get off the island with. But there is one thing I recall that, I think, was maybe a key and sort of justified our being in Java. Several days before the Japanese landed, we got into our trucks and drove during the daylight hours up and down the island on the main highway. Java had a major highway that ran from one end down to the other; I think it was 500 miles long. We spent a lot of time out when the Japanese reconnaissance planes were taking pictures of us. I think probably as a

result of that--and they didn't have adequate information --they made a major landing on Java. I think they must have landed about 40,000 troops there.

Marcello: In other words, you were trying to give the impression that there were a lot more troops on Java than there actually were.

Thompson: Right. I heard a report that, after we were captured, there was extensive questioning of our officers on where the other American troops were, because they had anticipated quite a bit more. After the Japanese landed, we went toward. . .

Marcello: I was going to ask you what happened after the Japanese landed. And it was shortly after the bomb groups left.

Thompson: Yes. I think they landed the night of February 28th or March 1st during the night. Incidentally, it was during this landing process that they ran into the USS Houston and the Australian cruiser Perth, and both of them were sunk after extensive fighting between them. Of course, the survivors of the Houston and the Perth ultimately would up in the prison camp with the rest of us. Of course, the Houston guys. . . I think about 350, 380, or so out of about 1,000 men survived the Houston, and they are members of our organization now, you know, just like

the rest of us--the "Lost Battalion" group.

When the Japanese landed, we were dispatched to the wide end of the island and that would be . . . I don't recall whether that's east or west; my geography slips me right now, but anyway, one of the major landings was made. We were supporting--our artillery--about 3,000 or 3,500 . . . I think they were British "pioneers," as they were called. They were a sort of a combination engineering-infantry group. They had their lines set up on the creek, and I think it was the Buitenzorg, near a town called Buitenzorg.

We set up camp in a rubber plantation. I was the chief radio operator for our battalion. We had about two or three days of fighting, which we supported with artillery. We knocked out several tanks--our gun crews did. I was not at the front lines; I was back in the headquarters. After a couple or three days, I think the Japanese must have had 10,000 or 15,000 troops across this creek from where our 3,500 to 4,000 were. They decided to come on across, and we started retreating. This must have been around the 3rd or 4th of March.

Marcello: Now up until this time, have you actually seen any Japanese yourself?

Thompson: No, not personally.

Marcello: And I assume that you were mainly on the move during this period.

Thompson: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, now I think it was on March 9, 1942, that the surrender became official.

Thompson: Seems to me like it was March 8th, but maybe it was the 8th or 9th.

Marcello: Okay. Do you recall what your reaction was when you got word that the island was surrendering to the Japanese?

Thompson: Well, yes. We were camped in a bamboo forest, I think, at this time, and a Dutch officer came out and informed our commanding officer that the government had surrendered to the Japanese, that the island had capitulated. We were directed to move to a certain point and keep our arms intact and surrender all of our equipment.

I was quite stunned, you know. It was . . . I don't know how to explain it. . . something similar if somebody comes in and said, "A fire's just destroyed your home. All your family is dead," or something that profound. It was almost incomprehensible, you know. "What were we going to do?" It was so unknown that we really . . . personally I had no great concept of what we were facing.

Marcello: Had you ever heard the rumors that the Japanese did not take prisoners?

Thompson: No. See, this is so early in the war that we were among the first. . . the American forces in the Philippines and our group probably coincided with the first Americans to really experience any contact with the Japanese in hostilities. So there were a lot of unknowns. Now, of course, we were not a large, organized type of resistance; we were so small and insignificant that a lot of the concepts we never had time, really, to think about--"the Japanese don't take prisoners" or anything like this. Because when you think of less than a week now--they landed and a week later we were prisoners.

Marcello: After the surrender order came down, where did you then go?

Thompson: I had a car with my radio equipment in it. Our captain, the commander of our battery, ordered us all to stay still and to stay where we were, but me and this friend of mine ignored him. First of all, we took our. . . we had M-1 rifles, I think it was, and we took the firing pins and the bolts out and threw them out and destroyed our bayonets and all of our ammunition. I had a .45-caliber pistol, and I threw it in a pond of water somewhere; I wasn't going to turn over any usable equipment personally. We also took firing pins out of our field artillery pieces and destroyed most of them and any equipment that could be

used. We kept our trucks intact because, you know, we were going to have to use them to transport ourselves.

Anyway, several of us went to the beach, which was not too far from where we were, looking for some way to get off, but there was nothing. I think one morning and by afternoon, we were back with our group.

Marcello: What thoughts did you give to heading toward the hills and perhaps engaging in guerrilla activities?

Thompson: Yes, there was a lot of talk like that, but we pretty well, I think, were discouraged from doing this because of the uncertainty of this situation. Now we had already seen evidence that the native population of Java were siding with the Japanese. The Japanese had quite an extensive propaganda situation going. They had what they called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and they were saying, "Asia for the Asiatics," you know, and "Get the colonialists out," and "White men go home," et cetera, et cetera. They had sold the nationals on this. As a consequence, I recall seeing--I don't know where they got them--the Javanese break out Japanese flags. They had them everywhere and waving them, you know, and they were welcoming the "great conquerors" and "our brothers." It didn't take them long to find out they were in worse shape, though, than they had been under the Dutch.

Marcello: In other words, I guess the Javanese were going to be loyal to whomever was in control.

Thompson: Yes, to a great extent. I think that's true throughout a lot of that part of the country.

Marcello: Okay, after you destroyed your equipment and returned to your unit, where did you go from there?

Thompson: We moved to . . . we were told to report to a certain staging area and to stay there until the Japanese Army or the Japanese military came and told us what to do. I think we were there--I don't remember--several days.

Marcello: Now did you go to this tea plantation where a lot of the other troops went? Some of them, during this period, I believe, were waiting at a tea plantation.

Thompson: Well, it quite conceivably could have been. I don't really recall specifically that we were on a tea plantation. You know, this period is a little hazy to me. You know, this is such a profound change of anything that I had ever conceived that I would be involved in that perhaps I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation.

One thing that really sticks out in my mind is that one night it rained real hard. We got up the next morning, and there were huge black scorpions everywhere--hundreds of them! They were the most ferocious-looking things I've

ever seen. You know, this thing is something that sticks out in my mind. Not being in on the decision-making end of the military situation, the other things, you know, don't really stick to mind too much.

Marcello: Describe your first encounter with the Japanese. . . face-to-face.

Thompson: Well, the contingent of Japanese troops came out, and, of course, there again, they dealt with our officers. They had an interpreter and were told, you know, what to do. It was real frightening. They were. . . you know, it was our first encounter with them. We drove our vehicles to a small near-by town, the name of which I don't recall, where the railroad was and got on a train, and this was our first "Speedo, speedo," they were all saying, you know, "Get off of it and get with it!" They were using their rifle butts and this type of stuff to make us go a little faster loading in the boxcars that we were getting into in the train.

Marcello: I understand they were rather scruffy-looking soldiers.

Thompson: Well, I guess compared to . . . they were different. There's no question about that. It didn't impress me that they were that scruffy. As I recall, of course, this group that came and got us, they had a job to do and there--I

don't know--must have been a hundred troops, maybe, of Japanese, and there were 500 or 600 of us, so they were not taking any chances. And I'm sure that these fellows had never seen an American soldier before, so they were probably somewhat taken back by us as we were with them. But at any rate, we got on the train. My first impression, as I recall, was that I was surprised they were so small; they were little guys. Most of them are smaller people, as you know--the Japanese. The guns and the little peaked caps were the two things that were my impression, I guess, was the most.

Marcello: What is it about the guns that impressed you?

Thompson: Well, not the shape or unusualness of them but the fact that they had the guns and we didn't, and they had bayonets on them and they did not hesitate to use the gun butts to get across a point. I tried my best to stay, you know, out of reach of any of them. I don't think I had any physical contact at this particular time; later on, in Bicycle Camp in Batavia, which is now Jakarta, was where I had the first physical contact with any Japanese.

Marcello: Okay, where did they take you on this train trip?

Thompson: Well, we went into the capital city of Batavia, and I think we marched from the train station down the street to a place called the Bicycle Camp.

Marcello: You went directly into the Bicycle Camp.

Thompson: Yes. Right.

Marcello: You didn't stop at any of the other smaller camps prior to going into Bicycle Camp.

Thompson: No, we went directly to the Bicycle Camp. Now I think, as I recall, the bulk of us did.

Marcello: Describe what Bicycle Camp looked like from a physical standpoint.

Thompson: Well, there were large. . . it had about, I would guess, a fourteen-foot fence around it. The entry gate was a guardpost where the Japanese always stayed. And then right inside the camp they had some barracks for their troops where they stayed. The rest of the camp was just large, open buildings with no furniture. We just had what equipment we were able to carry with us at that point.

Marcello: Did they ever loot you in any way at this point?

Thompson: No, they never did. They would go through our equipment and examine it but really not all that closely. We were told what we could have and what we couldn't have, and I think they more or less expected and. . . you know, we followed. I do recall that I kept a .45-caliber bullet that I thought, well, you know, "Just for the heck of it, I'll keep it." I don't know why I did, but I kept it most

of the time that I was interned until later on, I guess, around 1944 when they started really getting tough and searching everything. I thought, you know, "This is foolish to risk your life over such a stupid thing as this," so I threw it away. But now we did manage. . . my radio sergeant, whose name was Jess Stambrough--he's the one that works at Woods Hole Oceanographic--he managed to keep a radio, and we smuggled it into camp.

Marcello: Obviously, you had broken it down into components.

Thompson: Yes, I think we had scattered it out among a lot of people, you know; you'd put it in your sock or in your underwear or things like this and get it into the camp. Jess reassembled the radio in the hollow leg of a bamboo pole, which he used as one of the corners of his bed. Most of us would put up bamboo frames and stretch canvas across it and make a hammock-type bed, which we slept in. This is what. . . there was plenty of bamboo available. Jess kept this radio during the nine months that we were in the Bicycle Camp.

Marcello: Did you carry one of the parts in?

Thompson: Yes.

Marcello: Do you recall what part it was?

Thompson: A couple of tubes.

Marcello: Now why did you do something like this this early in the war, when you knew damned well that if they caught you with it, there'd be hell to pay?

Thompson: Yes. Well, perhaps we were a little naive to some extent. We didn't really know the extent of what the Japanese. . . we were told that, you know, we couldn't have radios and this type of stuff. But Jess. . . I don't really remember a lot of the details of the plans on it, because he's the one that kind of masterminded the whole thing. But he just slipped a few of these parts. . . he said, "Let's keep a radio, because we want to know what's going on." I recall listening to the short wave radio out of San Francisco.

Marcello: You might describe the procedure by which you listened to these broadcasts and then how the news was distributed to the other troops.

Thompson: Well, as I recall, he tried to keep the fact that he had it as quiet as possible, so not too many people were in on it. A few of us late at night--he had some earphones --we'd put the earphones on and usually tune in the short wave radio out of San Francisco. Apparently, there was a large broadcasting station there--international-type of thing. We'd pick up . . . I remember enjoying the music more than I did the news--you know, the old big orchestra, Guy Lombardo, and that type of big band music, which I was

very fond of. But we did keep up with the news, and there wasn't much of it good during those first nine months.

Marcello: How would you distribute the news to the rest of the troops?

Thompson: There was no formal plan or anything of that nature--just sort of word of mouth. We had a lot of time to sit around and talk. We were not extensively worked, although we had work crews that went out during this period in Java, handling gasoline drums and loading ships and that kind of stuff on the docks. But I would say that never more than half of us was having to work at any one time, so we had a lot of time. You know, we talked and played cards, and I learned to play bridge during this period. We carved things out of wood; I still have parts of a wooden cigarette case that I carved out of mahogany. . . no, not mahogany.

Marcello: Teak?

Thompson: Teak, I think it was, yes. Teak was plentiful in the tropics. As a matter of fact, the wood in our barracks was teak--most of it--which they used to put up barracks with. It was the common wood over there, really.

Marcello: What were some of the items that you were not allowed to have? Obviously, you couldn't have weapons or radio components.

Thompson: We were only allowed. . . I think I can remember more what. . . we were allowed personal items, any of our clothing, shaving gear--anything of that nature. That was what we were allowed; nearly everything else was forbidden.

Marcello: What did you personally go into camp with? Do you recall what items you carried in?

Thompson: No, I would be hard-pressed to really go into detail on it. I think I had what the average soldier at that time would have had, which is really not a great deal. We had a couple of pair of pants and skivvy shirts, and pretty soon our underwear, for instance, wore out and we had . . . of course, it's not essential so you can do without it. And a canteen and a mess kit. . . shaving gear, toothbrush, which pretty soon became useless because there's nothing to brush your teeth with, and that type of stuff basically. I do recall I had a little GI Bible, a New Testament, which was issued by the government.

Marcello: Are you still living three months at a time by the time you enter Bicycle Camp?

Thompson: Oh, yes, this is really basically where it started, because, you see, when we got to Bicycle Camp, we were still less than three months away from the time we'd arrived in Java. This is mid-March, and we'd only gotten to Java in mid-

January. So I was very optimistic and naive, and I figured, "Well, shoot," you know, "we could just pick up our guns and go knock the hell out of them, and in three months time it would be over." But it wasn't that simple.

Marcello: Now when you entered Bicycle Camp, the survivors off the Houston were already there, is that correct?

Thompson: I believe that's right.

Marcello: Describe your first encounter with the Houston survivors. In other words, what'd they look like?

Thompson: Well, some of them were wounded. They were in much worse shape than we were. As I recall, I think we shared what we had with them. They became, you know. . . of course, at first, you know, they were sailors and we were soldiers, and there was that little rivalry and this type of stuff. But they didn't get off with much. Most of these fellows had to swim several miles to get to the shore, or at least quite a ways; some of them were picked up by ships and then let off. I'm sure they set up the procedure of sort of integrating them with us--our officers did.

I think we got into camp with a lot of money, too. Our paymaster had something like \$120,000, I believe, in cash. I don't know how we got by with keeping it, but the Japanese apparently let us keep it or else they didn't

know we had it. It seems to me that they didn't do a great deal of extensive searching of our gear and whatever we brought in when we came in. I do know that we used this money during this period--or a lot of it--to buy extra food. I can remember having red beans and rice, you know, which was quite a treat. We were given a little money occasionally; we could buy through the canteen which the Japanese had set up in the camp. One of the things that sticks out in my mind was getting some Eagle Brand milk and canned peaches--eating them together as desert. It was fabulous.

Marcello: Okay, very shortly after you arrived here, the Japanese had you sign a non-escape pledge. Do you remember that particular incident?

Thompson: Yes. Let's see, I remember something about that. I think they lined us up and read this situation to us, and there was considerable resistance among some of our guys. You know, I hadn't even thought of that in a long time. As I recall, though, I think it was decided. . . you know, "What the hell! Sign it anyway, because it doesn't make any difference. If we get a chance to escape, we'll escape whether we sign something or not."

Marcello: What sort of thought did you give to escape?

Thompson: In Java, very little, because by this time you've realized that here you were, you know, on an island hundreds and thousands of miles from any possibility of anybody rescuing you, and where could you go? We had also gotten reports that the Javanese were cooperating with the Japanese and would turn us in if we were captured. I know later on in Burma, for instance, the Japanese would put a price on an escaped prisoner, and most of the nationals would turn you in for the money.

Marcello: Now here in Bicycle Camp, did the Japanese ever warn you as to what would happen to people who tried to escape and were caught?

Thompson: Well, they made it quite clear that we would be shot.

Marcello: Did you doubt them?

Thompson: No, not for a minute, because by this time we had been exposed to their system of discipline, and it was quite severe.

Marcello: Let's talk about their system of discipline.

Thompson: Well, they were firm believers in corporal punishment, and they would use physical torture quite extensively on anyone who got out of line. They would never hesitate. If you even acted slow in responding to some order, they would not hesitate to club with the butt of their

rifle or even threaten you with a bayonet. I don't ever remember any instance where they would actually bayonet anyone, but they would use the butt of their rifle and then their fist or club or anything else that was handy.

Marcello: Did you ever see any example of what we would term "torture?"

Thompson: Not in Bicycle Camp. Well, I remember one guy. I don't recall exactly what he did, but he was made to . . . one of the Americans was made to sit--squat, rather--in front of the Japanese guard hut with a bamboo pole under his knees and for many hours, and this became quite excruciatingly painful. I did see some torture later on in Thailand of some fellows they caught doing something . . . sabotage or something.

Marcello: I assume, however, that most of the corporal punishment took the form of gun butts, beating--things of that nature.

Thompson: Slapping, yes. They would slap at the drop of a hat, you know, and it was pretty hard to take, really. I'm 6'2" and a little Japanese was about 5'4" or something like. There's no question of what he was just berating you to no end in Japanese. Of course, you didn't know what he was saying, but he was generally really letting you have it and then just slap the hell out of you, you know, quite hard. There would usually be several of them around armed, and, you know, you had to stand there and take it.

Marcello: Did they seem to pick out the taller individuals for this sort of thing? Or were they not that discriminating?

Thompson: I don't think so. Most of us, you know, were tall; the average guy probably would have been 5'10" or 5'11". We had, you know, all sizes, but . . . well, they did, too. You know, some of them were quite large, and particularly the Koreans. Later on, you ran into the Korean guards; they were larger than the Japanese. But they dispersed their punishment without discrimination, I would say. You know, it was a game that I played personally --stay away from them as much as possible; be as quiet as I could; to try to do what I was told and this type of stuff. You know, it didn't take you long to get in the habit of trying to survive.

Marcello: Now did you actually have a whole lot of contact with the Japanese?

Thompson: In Bicycle Camp? Well, yes. Almost daily they would come through our camp, and, of course, when one of them showed up--even a buck private--the whole hut or barracks would have to . . . somebody would yell, "Attention!" and we'd all have to stand at strict attention beside our bed, and they would come through.

I recall one incident. A couple of them came through, and I was asleep in my top bunk, and I woke up just about

the time he was halfway down the barracks. I lay dead still, you know, because if he'd have caught me in my bunk, I would have really been worked over.

This was about the extent of it. Then we went out on . . . I guess I'd go out on work parties a couple or three times a week down to the docks and this type of thing. There was not a great deal of personal contact.

Marcello: Suppose you did encounter a Japanese out somewhere in the camp. Did you have to bow to him or anything of this sort?

Thompson: Yes. Oh, yes. We were subservient to the Japanese, of course, and they required us to adopt their very strict military discipline codes. If you were just idling along or something, you had to get attention and either bow or . . . usually bow, you know, when they came by.

Marcello: You mentioned the work details awhile ago, so let's talk just a little bit about them. What sort of work were you doing here at Bicycle Camp?

Thompson: Basically, most of the work I was involved in was loading ships with ammunition, aviation fuel--which is contrary to the Geneva Convention, incidentally, but the Japanese did not sign, so they really didn't worry about it. We saw a few front line Japanese troops, which were very friendly. When they found out that we were Americans and

were prisoners, they would give us cigarettes. The army of occupation, which the Japanese used, was quite different from their front line troops, in my personal opinion. These guys were always sympathetic.

Later on in Burma when we were building the railroad, I recall a group of Japanese fighting troops that were having to . . . there was no roads or railroads or anything of this nature between Burma and Thailand to go to where the fighting was going on in northern Burma. This large . . . it must have been several battalions of troops that came through our area. They had been dumped at the other end of the jungles--and it was 280 miles or so through the jungles--and had to march with all their equipment. These guys were in really terrible shape. They were pulling artillery pieces and machine guns, and they had their own guns and their backpacks. I think they were given a pint of rice and said to report, you know, to the other end of the jungle, and they had to live off it. Many of them were about to starve to death, so we shared our food with them when they came through. But the front line guys were quite different. . . in the couple or three contacts we had with them.

The troops that were in Java were loading on these ships going on down to where the battle was in New Guinea,

and we thought that they were going to try to get to Australia, which they were trying to do, but they never quite made it.

Marcello: How hard or tough is this work here at Batavia?

Thompson: Well, it was pretty heavy manual labor, but there were enough of us. The Asiatic theory is that if you get enough people, you know, the work's not all that hard, like building the wall of China, you know, in 200 or 300 years or whatever it takes. This is the theory used later in building the railroad.

Marcello: Did you ever have the opportunity to steal anything on the job? I'm referring, now, to food or something of this sort.

Thompson: Well, I don't remember in this particular incident. Perhaps we did. We were not this hard up yet, see. In Java we still had this money. We were able to supplement our food that the Japanese gave us; and we weren't all that bad off for food. So it wasn't quite the problem, you know, that it would become later on. We perhaps did but I don't really remember specifically getting anything.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the food here at Java. What were you eating?

Thompson: The basic diet was rice. Our issues from the Japanese we supplemented by a vegetable-type stew and occasionally some meat.

Marcello: Did it take awhile to learn how to cook that rice properly?
Do you recall?

Thompson: Well, I was not involved in the cooking of it. Apparently, it didn't. I guess necessity would. . . we had a regular kitchen set up, and I don't remember the equipment; I never did work in the kitchen at this time. But the food wasn't. . . you know, it began to get a little scarce toward the end of the period we were there, but for us, anyway, it wasn't quite the problem that it would become later, as I said earlier.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that company funds were used to buy food. Who would do the buying?

Thompson: Our supply officer would, I suppose. Colonel Tharp-- Lieutenant Colonel Tharp--was our commanding officer. We'd have a council, I suppose, and they would. . . here again, I was not involved in this type of thing. The buying was done through the Japanese. Here again, I suppose they were somewhat lenient on us. They allowed us to keep whatever we had in the way of anything of this nature, and if we had the money, we could purchase food. I guess in a way our treatment that first nine months was not all that bad.

Marcello: I've heard it said that there were some resentment because some men accused the officers of living a little bit better

than the enlisted men in terms of food and so on.

Thompson: Well, I would say this is a routine-type thing. I'm sure that there was resentment at Camp Bowie because the officers lived a little bit better than enlisted men. I remember this type of stuff, but I don't think there was anything of any significance, really.

Marcello: How was the food here in terms of quantity? Were you getting enough to eat?

Thompson: Yes, as I recall. Now personally, I was not a heavy eater; I never was. In growing up, I was very thin and a light eater. I think this was good for me, because later on when the food got scarce, I think a person who is accustomed to eating heavier demands more, you know. So perhaps I don't really suffer as much as some of the other, maybe older, fellows that had been heavier eaters and this type of thing. But it seems to me, as I recall, that food in Bicycle Camp generally was adequate.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the bathing and sanitary facilities here at Bicycle Camp. What were they like? For example, did you have showers?

Thompson: No, I think we had to improvise showers, it seems to me. I'm just really at a loss there. I don't recall it being particularly the great inconvenience. I guess the toilets were crude outdoor-type things, as I recall. But no, there

again, I really don't remember. I don't know whether we had showers or not. It doesn't leave much of an impression on me.

Marcello: Was this a fairly clean camp?

Thompson: Yes, I think it was. We were right in the heart of Batavia, and I don't think they would. . . you know, we must have had commodes and that type of stuff, at least in basic facilities. I suppose we were probably on the city sewer system there. But I really don't remember whether we had showers or whether we improvised with buckets or just what.

Marcello: What did you do for recreation here?

Thompson: We put together an entertainment group. I joined a chorus or singing group; we put on entertainment once a week for everyone. We had a large open-type building with a roof over it, and there was a stage and, I think, long benches sort of like old primitive church-type things. We could put on entertainment for a large group. We got hold of a piano--there was a piano in the camp--and there was one of the fellows that was real good at the piano. We did a quite a bit of this, and then we'd play a lot of cards. We also learned to play mahjong. . . and I guess there was probably checkers, dominoes, and some of that type of stuff that we was able either to get possession of or someone had, you know, and then brought in. There were some

books. We brought in books that we had, and we would exchange books and read a lot and just sort of pass away the time like that.

Marcello: Were you still maintaining discipline? In other words, were you still obeying your officers and things of this sort?

Thompson: Yes. We kept our own units intact. We would bunk by units, you know; I stayed with my particular group. The Navy fellows would have a separate hut and be under their officers and such.

Marcello: Did you have much contact with the other nationalities in this camp?

Thompson: Not at this point; not a great deal. There was some resentment built up among the British and Australians over the fact that we had the money and was able to eat better than they; I think I recall some dissention about this. There may be even been an incident. They were demanding, you know, to get part of the stuff, but I don't know.

Marcello: Already you were building up a hatred for the British? Or at least a dislike for the British?

Thompson: No, I really had no great deal of contact. As a matter of fact, I personally had a great rapport with the British. Later on, my best friends were British that I was in camp with.

Marcello: This is unusual.

Thompson: Yes. I'm a great admirer of the British. I always have been because I felt that. . . my roots go back to Great Britian, and my ancestors came from there. I've admired the British; I think they're a great people. But in the Bicycle Camp, I had little or no personal contact, because we were kept intact with our units, and the British were . . . you know, we were learning to get to know each other, I suppose.

Marcello: Being a prisoner-of-war under any circumstances is bad, but if you could have spent the whole war in Bicycle Camp, would being a POW have been at least tolerable?

Thompson: Under those conditions, yes. You know, you get banged around occasionally but not a great deal, and there was no great project of work to do like later on that we wound up doing. So I would say that we would have been much better off under those conditions.

Marcello: Okay, in October of 1942, you're about to leave Bicycle Camp.

Thompson: Yes. We were told by the Japanese that they were going to ship us to . . . well, we were going to get on a ship. I'm not sure they told us where we were going. We were given. . . this was our first opportunity to try to contact our parents. We were given cards that had some multiple

choice statements on them, like you said, "I am or am not well," and you checked whichever one was left. These were sort of international postcard-type things; they were in English and Japanese and in French, I think, or something. I did--I mailed one or two cards; I left them with the Japanese. This was October or November of '42. Incidentally, it took about fourteen months for them to get to my parents. They got them right around Christmas in 1943, and this was the first word they had that I was actually still alive after we were captured.

Marcello: Was it a rather unsettling experience to pick up and leave? In other words, are you getting into a routine now?

Thompson: Yes, because, you know, here was another unknown; we didn't know where we were going and what we were going to wind up doing. Of course, we were at the complete total mercy of an alien force, and. . . you know, everyday you were not quite certain that tomorrow was going to be here. Because you have no control over your life at all; your life is completely in someone else's hands, and whatever your destiny is is what they're going to determine. So it was another. . . I would say that it was not the same as when we were captured, because this was just so profound in terms of uncertainty and the unknown that it was a very

numbing experience, you know. Being captured is . . . I mean, it's just not done, you know. It never occurs to you that you're going to wind up in anything like that. It's not in your . . . you know, your greatest imagination.

Marcello: Okay, now you didn't know where you were going, so maybe I should let you pick up the story at this point.

Thompson: Okay, we got all of our gear and were marched. . . I don't know, it could be several miles down to the docks, and we boarded this Japanese . . . it was an old tramp steamer, I guess, of some type--real old ship. I would guess it was 7,000 or 8,000 tons--that size--and we were put into the holds of this ship, and we took off. This is almost on the equator, you know, and it was quite hot. We were pretty miserable. I guess it was about a two or three-day trip from Batavia up to Singapore--however long it was, I don't recall specifically--but fortunately, it was not that long. But we were so crowded that we had to sleep in shifts; there was not room enough for everyone to lay down at the same time. So we were not allowed up on the decks. I do recall that there was large quantities of dried potatoes in sacks, and we discovered these and we broke into a bunch of them. Actually, this supplemented what little food we were able to get on this ship.

Marcello: Are you now really getting a taste of what it's honestly like to be a prisoner-of-war?

Thompson: Yes, I suppose this is probably the first real hard-type of a situation we got into. But, you know, we're prisoners now already for nine months; we're acquainted with the Japanese; we know what their system is. Most of us have been personally introduced to their punishment-type situation; at least if you hadn't, you'd witnessed someone that had. The fellow next to you might have been knocked down and clubbed or something. So it was, you know, that type of situation, so I think probably by this time we were prepared not to be surprised at whatever happened, you know. If it comes along, you know, you try to do it and try to survive. But we were quite comfortable, and it was a pretty bad situation.

Marcello: Were you ever allowed up on deck?

Thompson: I think we may have been to relieve ourself or something of this nature, but other than that, you basically had to stay down in the hold. There again, the time has erased my capabilities of telling how many days; I just don't recall, you know, how long it was, but it couldn't have been all that long--two or three at the most, I think.

Marcello: Okay, so you land at Changi.

Thompson: Yes, at Singapore, and then we were marched. Changi, as I recall, is out from the city more or less on its own out on a hill.

Marcello: Now is Changi an old British Army camp?

Thompson: It's a British camp, yes. This is where we were put in with the British. We were quite surprised to find such a large number. . . there must have been 60,000 or 70,000 British prisoners there. It was a huge, huge camp.

Marcello: What did it look like from a physical standpoint?

Thompson: It was rather bleak, really. We were put into a building that was just completely vacant and had no furniture of any type. We slept on the floor. The British, of course, had all their equipment; they were allowed to keep whatever they had when they were interned. So they had beds and utensils and cooking stuff. We were given the basic utensils, I suppose, to cook with and this type of stuff. Singapore was sort of a "nothing" to me. We did a little work. Singapore didn't make a great impression on me. We just sort of . . . there again, we were waiting and existing until the next incident was going to be unveiled to us.

Marcello: I've heard that British morale was rather low here at this camp.

Thompson: There again, I had little contact with the British. I stayed pretty well within. . . I worked in the kitchen while we were in Changi. So this was mostly the extent . . . once or twice I went out on a little working party, because usually you would get a chance to swipe a stalk of bananas or something like this, you know, or find something if you went outside. Here again, food had not gotten to be a major problem yet; we had enough to exist on in Changi. We were only there a month, I think, or something like that. . . maybe two months.

Marcello: What advantages were there to working in the kitchen here at Changi?

Thompson: Well, the same advantage it would be at any other time if you were where the source of food was, and if there was a little extra, you could get, you know, get. . . basically, our major diet, of course, is rice still. One of the rewards of working in the kitchen was that you'd get to scrape out the rice pots after it's cooked and get the . . . what did we call it? It was sort of a caked rice; it would be more or less brown like a crust. So as far as bulk is concerned, you'd get a chance for a little more than the average guy.

Marcello: Was the Japanese treatment of the prisoners about the same here as it had been in Bicycle Camp?

Thompson: Actually, we were less exposed to the Japanese at Changi than we were in Bicycle Camp, because the British ran Bicycle Camp. The Japanese apparently left the internal doings of what goes on inside the camp up to the British. The only time we were. . . the Japanese never came to our building, as I recall, the time we were staying in Changi --maybe once or something--but they more or less left us alone. They could have if someone had discovered there was a group of Americans and out of curiosity come over and looked at us, you know, like you would a cage of monkeys or something. But other than that, I think the Japanese left us pretty well alone. So there were no great problems as far as I was, personally, concerned.

Only little incident I remember is when a friend of mine and I had spotted a stalk of bananas growing on a banana tree right outside the window of one of the officer's huts. We kept eyeballing these bananas as they began to mature, and when they started turning, we decided we were going to get our hands on those bananas. So late one night, we slipped down about midnight. I was larger than he, so he got on my shoulders and had a knife, and they were pretty high, I guess, about ten or twelve feet up there. He cut this stalk of bananas off, and we got by

with it; you know, we'd have had hell to pay if we'd been caught. This was quite an asset to us, because we still had bananas after we got in the train going up after we left Changi going north again.

Marcello: Now were these bananas outside the barracks of British officers?

Thompson: Yes. Yes, they belonged to the British. Some of the British had chickens, and, you know, they had a lot going with stuff. They seemed to be settled down for the war.

Marcello: Evidently, they jealously guarded what they had, also.

Thompson: Oh, yes. Yes, very much so.

Marcello: I think there was some problems concerning the "King's Coconuts."

Thompson: Yes. I was not involved in it, so I don't, you know. . . but anyway, the British would not hesitate to let you know that they were running things. But I personally had very little. . . I was not involved in any incidents. I've heard some stories from some of the fellows who-- especially, a few that stayed behind after we left--had it rather hard and had some bitterness toward the British, which I never really developed.

Marcello: Now was it at this point that part of the unit is detached and sent to Japan?

Thompson: Yes. I believe it was. . . well, now wait a minute; it was either here or just before we left Java. The Japanese, in looking at our records, determined that anyone that had any technical capabilities at all. . . now my radio sergeant was one that was taken out, and I'm not quite sure whether it was just before we left Java or in the Bicycle Camp. Perhaps it was in Changi. But they were put on the ship and sent to Japan. I think some of them didn't make it. I think our submarines sunk one or two ships that some of our fellows was on, and they were lost at sea. I don't know; this probably was somewhere less than a hundred--maybe forty or fifty or something of that nature--of the fellows that were taken out.

Marcello: Have you carried your radio with you from Bicycle Camp to Changi?

Thompson: No, I think when we got ready to put our gear together, I believe, I lost contact with the radio, because Sergeant Stambrough and I were separated. I think he destroyed it --I'm not sure--because of the chance. . . because they had begun to crack down and look pretty closely at what we had when we left. As a matter of fact, they made a lot of surprise inspections of our barracks even during the period there at Bicycle Camp, and they were looking for illegal things like radios or anything of this nature. A

lot of times they would poke into your beds and this type of stuff, and you could tell that they were looking for . . . particularly radios. They always, somehow or another, didn't want us to keep up with what was going on, I suppose.

Marcello: In general, how did you fare at Changi? Would you have liked to have stayed there?

Thompson: No, it was hot and dry, and my experience with Changi was not really all that great. It was rather dull, really--just nothing to do.

Marcello: Now were you maintaining your weight fairly well at this point?

Thompson: I suppose so. There again, I was very slender, and my average weight was about, I suppose, 140 pounds. And I suppose that I was probably maintaining it pretty well by then.

Marcello: Okay, now sometime in January--early January--of 1943, I guess you leave Changi.

Thompson: I believe it was January 11th.

Marcello: And you're on your way toward Burma.

Thompson: Yes. We went to. . .

Marcello: I suppose leaving Changi wasn't quite so unsettling as leaving Bicycle Camp because you hadn't been there that long.

Thompson: No. We knew, too, that we were itinerants; we were just stopped there on the way to somewhere else. I don't know how we knew it, but somehow or another we did. Perhaps the Japanese told us that we were going to be shipped out in a short time, or told our officers. I don't really recall. But I never had any type of a permanence, you know, a feeling of permanence there at Changi. So we crossed. . . I think we must have. . . well, we got on a train in Singapore. . . it was a freight station, I guess.

Marcello: I think you were heading for a town called George Town, isn't that correct, up the coast where you would eventually board another ship?

Thompson: Well, let me see here. We went up to Malay Peninsula, and I've got here in my notes. . . is that Penang?

Marcello: Looks like Penang, yes.

Thompson: That, I think, is the point where we. . . it seems to me that it took us two or three days to go. We were put in a small, narrow-gauge-type boxcars, and we were quite crowded. I've read some accounts of how the Nazis shipped Jews off of these camps and how they crowded them in there; we were almost similar to this. Here again, you'd have to sleep standing up; there was no room for anyone to lay down. We were actually, literally jammed in there, you know, against each other. This was another pretty bad experience.

Marcello: Had dysentery and malaria broken out by this time?

Thompson: Well, it was beginning to show up, yes. I would not say profusely, but there were some cases of it. I guess malaria is pretty widespread throughout that part of the country.

Marcello: What provisions did the Japanese make for food and water and sanitary facilities and things of this sort?

Thompson: Well, I think we stopped once or twice for sanitary facility breaks. You'd get off and use a bush or something, but basically, you know, if you got caught short in moving, there you were. We got fed a little bit once or twice but really not a great deal. Water was very scarce; we had little or no water. I think probably most of us filled up our canteens, you know, and took them with us, so perhaps we were not quite as bad off. But I do remember getting quite thirsty before we got off that train.

Marcello: Okay, so you get off the train, and you board another ship. Do you remember the name of this ship?

Thompson: No.

Marcello: Is it the Dai Nichi Maru?

Thompson: Yes, that was it; it sure was. I was trying to . . . Maru something; I think maru is Japanese for ship, isn't it?

Marcello: I believe.

Thompson: Yes. And the Dai Nichi was the name of the. . . yes, it just was another old tramp-type ship. Here again, we were put in the holds. We were allowed, though, a few of us at a time, to go up on the deck.

Marcello: You're put on a convoy, are you not?

Thompson: Yes, three vessels, actually. There was two transport vessels and one small escort. It was not even. . . I don't know what you would call it. It was not much bigger than a large yacht, but it was our escort. Apparently, these were quite slow, because it took us . . . I never have really measured the distance from the Malay Peninsula there over to Moulmein, Burma, where we ultimately wound up. We had our first experience with the American Air Force about forty-eight miles out of Moulmein.

Marcello: Do you want to describe this incident? I think it's important.

Thompson: Yes, okay. I was playing bridge in the hold with three other fellows--it takes four to play bridge, of course. There was a commotion that started on our deck. . . and the hold was open because, you know, that was the system of getting air down to us. We looked up and saw these two bombers, and then somebody said, you know, "We're being bombed!" There was a lot of confusion, and we were told to stay in the holds where we were. Later on, I

learned that the two American Liberator bombers, I think they were called. . . I'm not sure.

Marcello: B-24 Liberators.

Thompson: B-24's, okay. The other ship was larger than the one I was on, and it had, I think, basically, a lot of Dutch and some British, and then there was the Japanese crew that was going to be engineers et cetera for building this railroad. They had all of the equipment on this other ship--the picks and shovels and I think there was a couple of locomotives--you know, all of the equipment that we were going to use working on this railroad.

So the two bombers made a bombing run on this other ship, and they hit it, I think, with their first batch of bombs. I don't know how many they dropped, but I think it sunk in about seven minutes, so they really blasted it. I think one of the bombs hit right in the hold where the Japanese crew was, and all this equipment . . . blew it up.

Marcello: Now did you actually witness this, or were you told this?

Thompson: No, no. We were told by survivors that we picked up later on--fellow prisoners. I think that the bombers, when they got through with the first ship, each had two bombs left. The first bomber, then. . . they turned to

try to get our ship, and the first one placed his two bombs right. . . one on either side just about midships. The second bomber also missed--near miss, we called it. It was right about the fantail--one on either side. We got some shrapnel holes, and I think there may have been a few people killed on the deck.

But I think that most of the casualties were self-inflicted by the Japanese. The Japanese had some old guns on this ship that were meant for surface-to-surface battle-type stuff, and it was not a fighting vessel; it was a merchant vessel, but it was armed with, I would say, something like 50 to 60-millimeter rifles or guns. The first shot this crew in the front of the ship fired hit the corner of the bridge and exploded and killed some of the people in the bridge; the next one hit an antenna wire and exploded over the deck. I think there were fourteen or fifteen people killed from these things; I don't think there was any casualties from the bombers.

Marcello: What thoughts or emotions did you experience when this raid was taking place?

Thompson: I was probably more frightened than I've ever been before in my life, because I think one of the most frightening experiences is to be bombed at sea in a ship where, you

know. . . if we were a fighting ship and had antiaircraft guns, you can fire back, you know; there's something you can do. But when you're there helpless and you know, you know, who they're shooting at. . . there's no question, because you're out there all alone. I just really figured, you know, "This is it! We're going to get it!" It was quite unnerving.

Marcello: How did the attitude of the Japanese. . . or how was the attitude of the Japanese affected by this bombing raid?

Thompson: Well, they were quite upset. Right after the bombers left, we went up on deck. We, incidentally, circled around for an hour or two picking up survivors. I'd say more than half of them survived off the other ship.

I remember one incident that really made an impression on me. One fellow. . . he was Dutch. We had rope ladders down over the side into the water, and these fellows were swimming in the water, and then they were climbing up this rope ladder. This one particular guy had. . . his clothes had all been blown off of him, and his stomach was ripped open, and you could see his entrails. When he climbed all the way up that ladder. . . he'd been in water probably half an hour or more--in this salt water--and he climbed up the rope ladder and got on the deck, and he fell and

died right there. It's quite amazing, you know, what the human will can endure and go through. Because this fellow was. . . well, he was mortally wounded, you know, and he went through all of that and just made it to the deck.

But anyway, it took us a couple of hours, probably, to pick up all the survivors, and we were quite crowded. Maybe even as many as two-thirds of the prisoners that were on the other ships survived, and we had almost two loads of prisoners on this one small vessel. There was just barely standing room. One of the Japanese guards, for some reason or other, took his wrath out on me and just beat the hell out of me with his rifle butt and the end of his rifle in the stomach. He didn't have a bayonet on it, fortunately. He was really about to inflict some serious injury on me when a Japanese sergeant stopped him, you know. But they were quite upset, as you can understand.

Marcello: You might describe this incident in a little bit more detail. How did it all come about that he managed to single you out?

Thompson: I was the nearest person to him, I suppose. I think I was smoking a cigarette, and maybe I was not supposed to do this, and maybe he used this excuse to berate and then

attack me. He was also very frightened, because he had, shall we say, looked death in the face, you know, and here we were--we had survived. So, you know, it was a release of tension, is what it was. You know, I really had no idea the guy was going to do anything. He just came out of the blue; here he came just yelling and clubbing with his rifle. You know, I really had no idea why he was doing it.

Marcello: How long did he beat you?

Thompson: Oh, a couple or three minutes probably.

Marcello: You can do a lot of damage in two or three minutes.

Thompson: Yes, yes. I would say that he probably inflicted twelve or fifteen blows with his rifle butt and the point of it.

Marcello: Did he knock you down?

Thompson: Several times, yes.

Marcello: I understand this was bad to be knocked down.

Thompson: Oh, yes, yes. You know, you're supposed to stand at attention. Even while they're inflicting punishment, you know, you can't ward them off or use your hands to inflict the blows; you have to stand there with your, you know, hands to your side and that type of stuff.

Marcello: Did he hurt you in terms of breaking any bones or anything of this nature?

Thompson: No, I had some bruises on my stomach from the point of the rifle that, you know, cured all right. There was nothing real serious. I was sore, you know. . . a few black places. There were no bad cuts or anything of that nature that required extensive repairs. He was a very small guy. I've had them have to stand on their tiptoes to hit me, you know, with their fists; some of them were that small.

Marcello: Is this the first time you'd really ever been beaten?

Thompson: To that extent, yes. I'd been bashed around a few times in Bicycle Camp--a couple of slaps here and there, you know. The Japanese would . . . it just depended on how he'd feel, you know. If he didn't like the way you looked, he'd just knock the hell out of you. Later on, in camps where Americans were a very small majority--mostly British and Dutch and Australians--there were incidents where. . . and particularly when the war was going against the Japanese and the Americans were winning, they'd ask you if you were American and if you said, "yes," they'd knock the hell out of you, you know, just for no reason than just because you were an American.

Marcello: Okay, so you land in Moulmein, Burma. What happens at this point?

Thompson: Well, the first thing I did is took a vow that I'd never get on another ship as long as I lived if I could keep from it. I was never so delighted to see old "mother terra firma," shall we say.

Marcello: Was it mainly because of that air raid?

Thompson: Because of the bombing, yes. Because, you know, this is really, I'm sure, probably the most unnerving thing that's ever occurred to me. You're so helpless, you know. If our ship had've been knocked from under us, there was no way any of us could have gotten out of it, because you can't swim forty-eight miles, you know, against the tide or whatever. It's so frustrating; you can't do anything about it, you know. There you are; you're helpless. If you can fight back, you know, it's not near as bad. If you've got a gun in your hand or something, and you say, "You're shooting at me, so I'm going to shoot at you!" But under those circumstances, it's just really dehumanizing and everything else.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens when you get to Moulmein?

Thompson: At Moulmein we were taken off and marched to a prison-- literally a prison. We were put in buildings that across the fence was where the Burmese criminals were interned, just like our state penitentiary. They were kept in chains,

these guys were. I remember this made quite an impression on us. We watched them march, and their legs were chained to each other--actually had ball and chains, you know, which I never had seen before. But they were in another compound; we were never personally. . . there wasn't any connection between us. We were kept here, I think, longer than had been planned, because a lot of our equipment had been lost in the bombing raid; the Japanese had to assemble more equipment. I believe we were there about six weeks in this prison before we went up to our first work camp.

Marcello: What did you do while you were there?

Thompson: Nothing. We were just there.

Marcello: Were you in cells?

Thompson: We were in . . . not bars. I slept on a veranda; the buildings had verandas, and I was lucky enough to get some space outside. You know, it was hot so this was more comfortable sleeping on the veranda on the second floor of this building.

Marcello: Describe the food that you received here.

Thompson: Well, by this time, we were accustomed to the rice and watery stew diet; this is basically what we got. . . just existence, you know.

Marcello: Were the Japanese harassing you here?

Thompson: Not a great deal. I think this was sort of a holding. . . we were in a holding pattern, is what we were, until they could accumulate equipment to start the railroad.

Marcello: Okay, then you go from there. . .

Thompson: To 18 Kilo.

Marcello: . . . up to 18 Kilo. Now you pass through Thanbyuzayat on your way to 18 Kilo, is that correct?

Thompson: I don't recall that. Is that a town?

Marcello: Kind of like a base camp, I think, before you arrived at the 18 Kilo. I know some of the people were given a type of speech here by a Colonel Nagatomo.

Thompson: Yes, I remember that speech. As a matter of fact, I think I have a copy of it at home. We were assembled--all of us were assembled--on a parade ground, and he got up on a platform. I can still see him. . . he was a . . . I think, you know, a colonel in the Japanese Army is really higher than God, you know. To them, you know, he's. . . well, even a sergeant, you know. . . but anyway, he made this speech. I believe I have a copy of it at home. But he said, "You are prisoners-of-war. You are a disgrace to your own country. It's a disgrace to be a prisoner-of-war. You've been brought here to work and build a railroad. You will be expected to remain healthy and to work,

but if you become sick, you'll be no longer of use to us," and things of this nature. He could speak English, so he read it to us in English.

Marcello: I've seen a copy of that speech. How did you manage to get it?

Thompson: I think it was preserved by someone, and we passed copies around after we came back home.

Marcello: I wonder how somebody got the original copy.

Thompson: I don't know. I really don't know. Maybe it was. . . maybe the Allied forces--MacArthur's group may have found it or something. The Japanese may have kept it in their files. I don't know.

Marcello: Okay, so you now know that you're going to build a railroad, and they drop you off at the 18 Kilo Camp.

Thompson: Yes.

Marcello: And all these camps are so-named according to the progress back into the jungle.

Thompson: Yes, the kilometers. I think we worked into 110 Kilo. I believe that was our last work camp.

Marcello: Okay, describe what 18 Kilo was like from a physical standpoint.

Thompson: Well, this was on the edge of the jungles; we were not yet into the jungles itself. These were bamboo huts. There

was a fence around the camp. I'm not sure whether . . . it must have been barbed wire, but it was fenced. It was the last fenced camp until after we finished the railroad.

We sort of were beginning to organize our work groups. Most of us were still fairly healthy; our health had really not broken yet. The monsoons had not started; it was still fairly dry. Now by this time, too, we had discarded a lot of our personal gear, because we'd had one or two long marches. I think coming up from Singapore before we got on the ship . . . or maybe it was. . . I don't remember specifically. We had one long, forced march; I think it was about forty miles or maybe more. We were. . . two or three days and we never stopped; we couldn't stop. Well, we stopped and took our ten-mile break occasionally. You know, the more gear you had, the heavier it was. As you went on hour after hour after hour, you know, you began to wonder if some of that stuff was essential, and, you know, a lot of us started tossing away some extra stuff that we had hoarded up, like helmets and this type of thing.

Marcello: What sort of quarters did you have here at 18 Kilo? What were your barracks like?

Thompson: They were made from bamboo with the thatched roofs; there was a split bamboo platform about 2½ or three feet above

the ground. On either side there were long rectangular-shaped buildings.

Marcello: Now these platforms that you're referring to are your sleeping areas.

Thompson: This is our sleeping area. We usually had about three-by-six feet or three-by-6½ feet space. This is where you lived. We just lined up, you know, across the bamboo platform and usually had a blanket and whatever little personal gear that you had managed to survive with by this time; maybe you had an extra pair of short pants and probably still had a pair of shoes by this time. Later on, our shoes wear out and we go without shoes. That was about it. . . your mess kit to eat out of.

Marcello: What sort of bathing and sanitation facilities did you have here?

Thompson: Well, we made our own outdoor toilets. You'd dig a trench and build a bamboo platform to squat over for toilet facilities. Bathing is sort of thing of the past. I don't think, you know. . . perhaps, occasionally, if we were out and you run across a stream or something, you could wash yourself a little bit. But somehow or another, it loses its importance or significance, you know; you can get along without bathing, really. You know, if everyone stinks, well, what difference does it make?

Marcello: But don't you more or less try to become a little conscious of hygiene under these circumstances, because it might ultimately become very, very important to your survival?

Thompson: Well, yes, I suppose because of our background, you know, we. . . but to me, that was kind of a part of the routine of living or existing or whatever. It's. . . I don't know. You get into a routine of survival, and if you get a chance to wash, you know, you wash; if you don't, you don't. You know, really, it's not that important.

Marcello: Describe what a typical workday was like here at 18 Kilo. Now again, this is before you actually get into the jungle.

Thompson: Yes. Well, we started doing some clearing for the railroad right-of-way. I think the railroad bed and right-of-way had already been extended up to about 18 Kilo. We were going up ahead and starting the basic work of getting ready, you know, to build this railroad. Of course, the hard work started later on when we got up into the jungles.

Marcello: How long a day were you putting in here at 18 Kilo?

Thompson: Oh, I would guess probably ten or twelve hours--something like that.

Marcello: Now was this where you were required to move a certain amount of dirt per man per day? Or did this occur later on?

Thompson: I believe it was later on. But the hard part that I recall was later on in the jungles; 18 Kilo was just sort of the

beginning, you know. The monsoons had not started yet, so that adds an incredible amount of burden by having to work in the rain all the time.

Marcello: How long did you stay at 18 Kilo?

Thompson: It doesn't seem to me that it was very long, but I really don't remember. I would guess it was a month or less--something like that.

Marcello: How was the physical condition of the men holding up here at 18 Kilo?

Thompson: It was still, I think, pretty good, but I believe, as I recall, some of the tropical diseases started showing up--a bit of dysentery here and there. We had a cholera scare. One incident I recall. . . I think I may have had personally a small or a minor--if there is such a thing--attack of cholera, because I became very ill and had excruciating pains in my stomach and some diarrhea. I later did a self-diagnosis of it that I had a small attack of the cholera. We got. . . I do know that the Japanese brought in serum, and we got anti-cholera shots.

Marcello: And this occurred here at 18 Kilo?

Thompson: At 18 Kilo, yes. Some of our British fellows on the other end were not as fortunate, because they had plagues of cholera in some of those camps that wiped out 6,000 and 7,000 men. We were fortunate that we got the cholera shots. The reason that I remember this is that Commander Epstein,

who was the doctor off the USS Houston, and our own doctor, Captain Lumpkin, I think his name was, and our medical people were giving the shots, and we were lined up, of course--everyone. I got up and Commander Epstein put the needle in my arm, and he looked down and there was nothing in the syringe, so he took the syringe off and left the needle hanging and went back and got some more stuff and came back and connected it back up and gave me my shot. (Chuckle) So that's why I remember the cholera shot. I thought, "What an odd way to do it," but anyway. . .

Marcello: Now is this where you meet the Korean guards?

Thompson: Yes, it sure was. I remember one guy in particular who was quite brutal. I can't remember what we called him; I think we called him "Blubber" or "Blubbermouth" or something. He was a large guy, and he seemed to enjoy beating the hell out of people if they didn't "toe the mark." You know, the Koreans were. . . my experience with the Koreans are a lot worse than the Japanese in this type of thing.

Marcello: Why do you think that was?

Thompson: Well, I think the cause is because the Koreans had been serfs of the Japanese since the early 1930's. I don't recall the year, but the Japanese, you know, took over Korea and really made them serfs of the Japanese. They used them in lowly tasks as prison camp guards and this

type of thing; they were never allowed to advance in any way. They were looked down on by the Japanese as inferiors, and they had been treated as inferiors. In this structure of the military of the Japanese, the Korean, when they found someone lower in stature than they were, then the only thing they knew was to take out and vent some of their frustrations that had been vented on them. So really, I personally don't hold any animosity toward the Koreans, because I think they had an excuse for it. I believe their reason was because they had been treated this way and this was the only thing they knew.

Marcello: Did you actually witness maltreatment dealt out to the Koreans by the Japanese?

Thompson: Yes, but also by the Japanese to the Japanese, too. As I had said earlier, their system of punishment. . . they actually had the determination of life or death over inferiors. They were so strict in their discipline that if someone really got out of line enough, they could kill them, literally, and not be punished for it, because this was the way they were structured. They used punishment. I've seen, you know, a corporal beat the hell out of a private in the Japanese structure. I think they were a little more so on the Koreans, because they looked on the Koreans as inferior humans.

Marcello: Now did the Koreans deal out the same sort of punishment that the Japanese guards had dealt out back in Bicycle Camp and Changi and so on?

Thompson: Yes, but I think more extensively. Of course, also, another thing, though, is that they wanted to get every ounce of work out of us that they could, so they didn't overdo it, you know, particularly if you were working. But if you got out of line or anything of this nature or were not working up to what they thought your capabilities were, well, they wouldn't hesitate to use a club or a gun butt or what-have-you--fist, slapping, so forth.

Marcello: Where did you move from 18 Kilo?

Thompson: I believe we went into 85 Kilo Camp.

Marcello: Eighteen all the way to 85?

Thompson: I think so. There may have been an intermediate stop, but. . . as I recall, there was a group that had gone on ahead of us. My notes that I made from the first days after our release in this little book that I have--just jotted down to places where I'd been--shows that I went from 18 to 85 Kilo.

Marcello: Now are these camps already prepared for you when you got there?

Thompson: Yes. A work party had gone ahead and built the camp. They'd cleared out the jungles and fell the bamboo trees.

There was just bamboo forests actually; we had big clumps of them. They grow. . . oh, you know, you can get pieces thirty or forty feet long, and it's very strong--the structure of it. They'd use these. . . and roots or vines or what-have-you to tie it together. There was never any nails or no implements needed, except maybe a saw to saw off the bamboo.

Marcello: Now from a physical standpoint, does this camp resemble the 18 Kilo Camp fairly closely?

Thompson: Well, yes, of course, except that it was in the jungle. Eighteen Kilo was sort of on a plain, and this was our. . . we really got into the jungles. I think by the time we got up to 85 Kilo, the rains had started. It really had begun. . . you know, the work was starting to get tough.

Marcello: Okay, I think the monsoons coincide with the start of the so-called "Speedo" campaign, isn't that correct?

Thompson: Yes, and we had. . . the Japanese had set up a schedule. They wanted to complete this 285-mile railroad within a year's time. If we had not progressed up to the point where they felt we should, they would increase our work. I recall, I think, out of 100 Kilo Camp one time, we worked for three weeks about eighteen or twenty hours a day. We'd go out. . . we'd leave the camp at dark and get out there when there was just barely enough light to start working.

We would get to work, and then it'd be after dark before we'd knock off.

Marcello: I think that "Speedo" campaign started in May of 1943. Now describe the type of work that you were doing here at the 85 Kilo. In other words, let's talk about a typical workday.

Thompson: Okay.

Marcello: When would it start?

Thompson: Well, we could get up well before sunup. Our rice would be prepared for breakfast and by this time we were making what we called "rice coffee." You take brown rice--leavings from pots--and boil this in water, and it would make sort of a brown brew which we drank with our meal, and we called it "rice coffee." Wasn't too bad, really, you know, if that's all you have. I think with the price of coffee today, we may need to go back to it.

But anyway, we would march out to the work site-- wherever we were working. Say, for instance, this particular day we were making a fill--a dip in the contour of the earth. We would use the. . . we'd have a pole, I'd say, about four to six feet long; usually, the end of it would have a notch, and you'd have a bamboo woven basket on either end of the pole. You'd go up and someone with

shovels would fill your two baskets; I would say that they probably weighed thirty to forty-five pounds each, maybe ninety to a hundred pounds, on both ends. Then you would put it on your shoulder and carry it coolie-style to wherever the fill was, dump it, and go back. Maybe some days are ten or twelve hours long. All day this is all you do--the same thing; you'd just go pick up dirt and carry it. There'd be hundreds of us doing the same thing. Then gradually, slowly but surely, your fill comes up, and someone would be leveling it and staking it. Sometimes we would make rock for the finishing of the top of the railroad bed. We might even . . . occasionally, we would use explosives--dynamite--to blast rock and then take sledge-hammers and break them up, make little ones out of big ones, and carry these rocks in on the poles to cover the bed for the gravel or crushed rock.

Marcello: All this was done with hand tools.

Thompson: Yes. Right. On other occasions, we'd also build bridges over rivers. I remember working on one bridge for weeks and weeks. It was a double-decker-type situation. And all this, again, was by hand work. We would go into the woods; the Japanese would select the piling; we would cut the piling, trim them, and carry them down to the site.

We had a large home-made-type structure that we used as a pounding implement. The way we would drive piling was that we could bore a hole in the top of the log; we'd set the log up and probably point it somewhat. Then there would be a large metal bar that you put in there, and then there's about a 500 to 1,000-pound weight with a hole in it that would fit over this bar. It had a handle at the top, and ropes were attached to us; and about twenty of us had to get out here and each one would have his own rope tied off of a large rope. Then the Japanese would count in cadence, and we would lift the thing and let it hit, and that's the way we drove piling then.

Marcello: I assume that bridge was a rather rickety structure.

Thompson: No, believe it or not, it was pretty sturdy. Of course, we would occasionally try to do things to weaken it. . . . deliberately, you know. In some way or another--I don't remember specific incidents--we would try to leave a loose tying or something, you know. And they had some wrecks, you know; I think they occurred where some of the stuff was not structurally sound. I remember one time we got a bridge about half-way up and it washed down, you know, because it hadn't been properly put together. But basically, these things were well constructed.

Marcello: Describe what it was like working in the monsoons.

Thompson: Oh, it's miserable! We had been prisoners now for more than a year, and we had made several moves and some long marches, and, you know, our personal equipment was down pretty well. Our clothing consisted, generally by this time, of maybe just one pair of cut-off shorts and no tops or no shoes.

It rains over there about six months, and then it doesn't rain for six months. When the rainy season starts coming, it'll rain awhile and then quit. But about midway in the monsoons, it rains constantly. I would guess it rains for about three months, really, that it never stops raining; it's just day and night. You know, it's just raining; it's never hard. . . just a light rain all the time. It's muddy, and, you know, everything is mildewed and slippery. It just sort of doubles your work.

Also, by this time, too, is when disease became quite prevalent. . . in the tropics and with no medicine and all the tropical diseases. Also, we were working hard; our diet was very bad, poor. Our systems began to run down, and as a consequence, you know, we were susceptible to a lot of major illnesses. The tropical ulcers were one of the worst things, but we also got malaria, dysentery, and beriberi--all types of diseases that result from malnutrition.

Marcello: Now this starts coming in at about 85 Kilo. . .

Thompson: Yes. Right.

Marcello: . . . with the coming of the monsoons and the "Speedo" campaign.

Thompson: Yes. Right.

Marcello: Now you talked about the tropical ulcers. Go into a little bit more detail on those. How would they form, and what treatments could you possibly use to try and cure them and this sort of thing?

Thompson: Well, usually they started with a scratch or something. I had two major tropical ulcers and several small ones on my right shin between my knee and my ankle. I got them on the bridge that we were building at 85 Kilo. A log dropped against my leg and just sort of scratched it pretty bad in two places, and these became infected. For a long time, there were two just black ulcerous-looking open wounds. I'd say they were about the size of a quarter. Maybe they were four to five inches apart on my middle shin.

But after awhile they became quite bad and began to spread. You know, you could just see the difference overnight, practically, in the size of these things. Ultimately, these two wounds merged and became, I guess, from one end to the other probably eight or ten inches up and down. Nearly my whole shin was an open wound. It became quite

bad in my personal case. You could see the bone in two places in my leg. At the worst of it, I had to keep my leg elevated, because apparently, if it got lower than my heart where my major blood supply came from, it would start hemorrhaging. I guess for about three to five months, I was flat on my back.

This was where later on I was sent back to 80 Kilo Camp, which was a deserted work camp and it was converted into a hospital camp. But as far as treatment was concerned, we had no medicine. . . virtually no medicine. Major treatment was. . . we'd heat water and just run hot water over it. We usually had some old. . . oh, something like sheets or ripped sheets for bandages, and we'd keep them wrapped up and try to wash the bandages once a day if you could.

But when you got down like this, the Japanese would put you on half rations, and they literally would. . . we called it the "death camp," and they sent you back to a place to die, and most of them did die when they were sent there.

Marcello: Did you ever see them use maggots to try and eat out the dead flesh from the ulcers?

Thompson: Yes. As a matter of fact, I've had them in my leg.

Marcello: What do they do--just put the maggots on the open wound?

Thompson: Yes. You see, this tropical ulcer at the height of its bloom, shall we say, is very terrible-looking--black and dead flesh and ulcerated; you know, it's just almost indescribable. I've seen guys' toes drop off. I know of one fellow that later had his leg cut off; his foot became ulcerated, and you could see all the one structure in his foot. It would just eat all the flesh away, and the toes would drop off. Another friend of mine, who died from ulcers and other type of things, had ulcers on his leg, and he had various types of malaria and dysentery. He became. . . you lose your control of your thoughts. He was not unconscious, but he was delirious, is what I was trying to think of. He developed a severe problem with his gums, and his hands created ulcers in his gums. His gums became ulcerated, all of his teeth fell out, and this type of thing. He got ulcers into his gums. They're quite a bad situation.

Marcello: Did the maggots help any in your particular case?

Thompson: Yes, yes. Actually, I didn't put them in there; they got in there on their own. Apparently, they did help some. Also, when we got back to 80 Kilo Camp, there was a little Dutch doctor, and I don't recall his name.

Marcello: Hekking?

Thompson: No, this is not Dr. Hekking at this time; we ran across him later. This fellow was a Eurasian, but he was an M.D., and he had two Dutch orderlies. They usually had to take care of from 300 to 500 patients, none of which hardly was ever ambulatory; they were nearly all helpless. There was not too much they could do for them.

Actually, the two orderlies spent most of their time burying the dead, and they usually stayed from three to five days behind. It'd take them sometimes as long as a week to get to someone. I've had people die next to me, and, you know, it'd be several days before they could get to them to bury them.

This little Dutch doctor got hold of some iodoform, which was a gold-colored powder. It was used in this country--and I don't think it's used anymore--but it used to be a treatment for open wounds in animals--horses and cows. It's a disinfectant type of thing, but it was very precious, you know, more precious than gold. He would only treat those who had the appearance of a chance of mending. I remember one little English fellow--a British guy--that was next to me in 80 Kilo Camp there. He and I both were . . . we became pretty good friends; we were next to each other, and there we were twenty-four hours a day; we never

got off of this platform. We talked for hours and this kind of stuff. One morning he woke up, and his ulcers had turned bad. That morning when the doctor came by, well, he unwrapped his leg and looked at it and then shook his head and passed him up. So this was sort of a signal; the guy was dead in three days. You know, he would save what little treatment he had for those which he thought he could save.

Marcello: Now did you go from 85 Kilo back down to 80 Kilo?

Thompson: Back down to 80 Kilo, yes.

Marcello: How long were you at 80 Kilo altogether?

Thompson: About six months.

Marcello: You were almost on your back the entire time you were there.

Thompson: I was on my back the entire time. I don't think. . . maybe toward the end of it I started getting up and walking a little bit.

Marcello: Were you suffering from anything besides the tropical ulcers?

Thompson: Malaria. At various times, you'd have dysentery, but I never had, really, a severe case of dysentery. But it would come occasionally; you couldn't avoid it.

Marcello: Even charcoal was used to stem dysentery, was it not?

Thompson: Yes. Yes, it was. Another thing we did, we would get hold of the rice polishings, which contained a lot of Vitamin something-or-other; I don't know what it was, but it

was a lot of vitamins. But it was kind of a bitter taste. They would pass those out, say, a spoonful at a time for treatment. . . just try to help build up your system to some extent.

Marcello: I've also heard it said that on occasions they would simply use a sharp instrument and dig out the dead flesh from those tropical ulcers.

Thompson: Yes, Dr. Hekking did this on me. He did it on the one on my left leg.

Marcello: Evidently, the pain must be excruciating when that takes place.

Thompson: Yes, yes. I also had all my wisdom teeth pulled by an Australian dentist with no novocain.

Marcello: I was going to ask what sort of dental facilities he would have had.

Thompson: Well, he had the basic dental tooth-pullers or pliers or whatever they were; I don't know what they call them. But as far as cavities and treatment of that type, he had nothing to fill cavities with. Pull teeth, basically, was about all he could do.

Marcello: I would assume that when you were back at 80 Kilo Camp, the Japanese didn't have to send back very many guards.

Thompson: No. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure they had any guards. They may have had a basic. . . you're talking about 300 to

500 men that are laying there with their bodies half-rotten, and the smell was terrible. You know, it's just like dead bodies that have been laying around a long time. Everybody had tropical ulcers; you know, they were so prevalent --among other things. Some were seriously ill with the dysentery and maybe bad attacks of malaria, but tropical ulcers were predominant. The Japanese, occasionally when they would come through, would wear heavy masks over their face, because they just didn't want to get around that close. Of course, we weren't about to go anywhere, because none of us could walk.

Marcello: Now how sick did one have to be to stay off a work detail?

Thompson: You had to have just malaria or dysentery, unless you were really emaciated or something of that nature. But you had to be physically incapacitated--something that you could see, you know. Of course, the large ulcers. . . I had a Japanese officer--a lieutenant, I think he was--come by at one time when I was staying off the work detail and so forth--he couldn't speak English. I started unwrapping my old dirty bandage off of my leg and got about to where he could see all the pus and the blood and the gore and everything. He said, "That's enough! That's enough! Wrap it back up," and he went on. He was satisfied. But you had to be really physically down in order to not work.

When we were sent back to the 80 Kilo Camp--the hospital camp--the Japanese commandant told us that we were no longer of any use to them and that we'd been sent back there to die; and they didn't have enough food to keep everybody going, so we would have very small rations. Most of them actually did die when they went back there.

Marcello: Now by this time, even the supply trains are having trouble keeping with the camps, are they not?

Thompson: Yes, yes. Well, you know, the war's getting tougher, and the Japanese are having trouble supplying their own troops, really. They have a major problem. This is really why they wanted the railroad built, because they had access to that country from the sea over on the other side, you know, toward the Philippines--that side--but to get through. . .

Marcello: The Malacca Straits.

Thompson: Yes, and then, too, what we call French Indochina, then into Thailand and Burma. There was some major fighting going on between the British and the Japanese up in northern Burma and out of India, you know. The Japanese, I think, once had plans to try to go through, capture India, and link up with the Germans in Turkey or somewhere like this. This was one of their great overall schemes of winning the war. So the railroad was essential to this plan of being able to transport, because there was no way to get anything overland;

there was no overland communications or facilities at all --roads or nothing. I understand that the British had surveyed this particular site for a railroad and had said it was too costly and not worth. . . just couldn't be done under the conditions that they were. . . of course, the Japanese used slave labor. I think they had 120,000 people working on the railroad, which was including the local nationals--Burmese and Siamese.

Marcello: Now did you actually see cases where men literally gave up and died?

Thompson: Oh, sure, yes. Numerous cases.

Marcello: How could you tell when a man had lost the will to live?

Thompson: Well, it became quite easy to tell. They would quit eating and just lay there docile. And actually, I talked to many of them; I used to try to talk them out of it, because, you know, you can't help them in any way. I have literally talked to them, and they'd say, "No, I've had enough. I want to die." They literally would want to die and they would. I don't know. It's something inside you that the will to live is very strong, but when you lose it. . . it's a pretty important part of the process of dying, really.

Marcello: Under these circumstances, what role does religion play? In other words, do people become more religious under these circumstances or what?

Thompson: Yes. My personal experience was. . . I'm a professing Christian. You know, I was raised as a Baptist. I recall praying, you know, every night before I would go to sleep, and I think I did it without fail. I can recall waking up in the middle of the night and saying, you know, "I hadn't talked to God before I went to sleep," so I did. Generally, the basic prayer was that, you know, "I would like to get out of this, but whatever is gonna be is gonna be," you know, and you accepted it.

Marcello: You're still living the three months at a time.

Thompson: Right. Yes, all through this situation. I would actually, you know, like if this was the first month, I'd say, "April, May, June. Okay, on June 1st, the war's gonna be over and we'll go home."

Marcello: Now did you work anymore on the railroad after you were sent back to 80 Kilo?

Thompson: No, because we had worked about six months and had gotten up to, I think, either 100 or 110 Kilo Camp where I got sick and sent back. . . must have been 100 Kilo Camp.

Marcello: In other words, you mentioned 85 Kilo awhile ago, but it was actually 100?

Thompson: Well, 85 Kilo, yes. We had moved on, see, to the 100 Kilo Camp before I became sick.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Thompson: We had completed. . . see, what you would do is you would work up so far, and then it would become not feasible to walk so far to your job. It would be more prudent to go on deeper into the jungle and build another camp and walk back. These camps generally would run about fifteen or twenty kilometers apart. You know, you could walk, say, five kilometers in a short period of time and not waste all your time getting to the job.

Marcello: And how long a day would you normally put in during the "Speedo" campaign?

Thompson: Basically, you worked from daylight to dark, however long that was--generally, about twelve or fourteen hours a day. When we were concentrating and trying to catch up. . . we'd get behind our schedule. There were certain periods. . . I think I mentioned one three-week period where we worked about eighteen hours a day. This was at 100 Kilo Camp, and I think this was the thing that finally got me down. I became. . . you know, at the end of two or three weeks of this--seven days a week and with no more than three or four or five hours of sleep at the most at night--you become physically exhausted, and not having an adequate diet, you couldn't replenish your strength. Your resistance was very low, and you'd become addicted to all types of illnesses. My ulcers got the best of me and started spreading real bad. This is, then, when I got down after this particular phase.

Marcello: And when did you pick up the railroad again? Or is the railroad finished by the time you get out of 80 Kilo?

Thompson: Yes, the railroad was finished when I recovered sufficiently to get back on my feet--the few of us that were left.

I'll give you an illustration of the survival rate in the hospital camp. These bamboo huts were sectioned off; about every fifteen or twenty feet, there would be a little section there to break up the thing. There was about thirty-five or forty men in one section; you'd have both aisles. In this section that I was in, there was about that many when I arrived there, and there were only two of them that survived. This other fellow was another American that lost his leg--had his leg amputated by a British surgeon who just roved around the camps doing what he could. About all he could do was amputate or cut something off. This was the one fellow who was losing his toes and you could see the bone structure of his foot, and his leg was cut off just below the knee. Thirty-six out of thirty-eight of them died, including, you know, several close friends of mine.

Marcello: Where do you go, then, from 80 Kilo Camp?

Thompson: Up to 110 Kilo Camp.

Marcello: Now have things eased off by this time?

Thompson: The basic railroad had been completed. This is approximately a year after we started the railroad. As a matter of fact, I think trains were running already all the way across the railroad.

Marcello: How did you get from 80 up to 110 Kilo?

Thompson: I believe it was on a truck.

Marcello: And what did you do after you got there?

Thompson: Well, we were there. . . and just as I got up there, they were getting ready to move out. We got on a train and rode the train out of the jungle over to Thailand. I think our first camp. . . Kanburi.

Marcello: Kanburi was sometimes called Kanchanaburi, is it not?

Thompson: Yes. Camp 2, I've got on my notes here--Kanchanaburi.

Marcello: Now I guess any camp was better than the camps in the jungle.

Thompson: Yes. Right. Yes. We got out of the jungles, and you could see this was an open country. I think the monsoons had begun by now. Maybe it was already over; I'm sure it must have.

Marcello: Now is your ulcer completely better by this time?

Thompson: Yes, it's manageable. It never healed. As a matter of fact, it didn't heal completely until after I got back in the United States after the war. But it was manageable; the new skin had begun to grow; and it was narrowing down;

and it was healthy, pink flesh, you know, inside--none of the dead flesh. All the dead flesh had been gone by now.

Marcello: Did you limp around, or how do you get around?

Thompson: No, the circulation is not as good in my leg, but I have no major problems with it. This is the first part of my body that gets tired with I start getting tired.

Marcello: But at that time, did you have to walk with a crutch, a cane, or anything of that nature?

Thompson: I probably did for awhile, but. . . yes, I used a little homemade cane. I may have even started off with a homemade crutch. We'd take a bamboo stick and take another piece of bamboo about six or eight inches long and hollow it out and then fit it over the top of the other stick and make a homemade crutch. They were quite easy to make like that.

Marcello: By this time, what do you do for shaving, brushing the teeth, haircuts, and things of that nature?

Thompson: There was always someone around with a pair of scissors. As a matter of fact, most of the camps would have a camp barber. This is what the Japanese would allow us to have --one man to cut hair--and he cut hair all day long. . . just sort of cut your hair off. Most of the time, we just clipped all of our hair off. As a matter of fact, the Japanese made us cut all of our hair off right as we were captured.

Marcello: And in terms of shaving, do you simply just cut it down to stubble or what do you do?

Thompson: Some of the guys wore beards. There was usually a straight-edge razor around that you could use. I never had a heavy . . . I still do not have a lot of hair on my body, so I never had major problems with a beard or a mustache, but I would shave occasionally just to keep it from, you know, getting all that long. We would. . . the only brushing of your teeth like that would be just cut a stick off a tree and make a homemade toothbrush.

Marcello: In other words, you would chew one end of it to get it bristly.

Thompson: Yes, yes. Just kind of, you know, brush your teeth, but then you never had to worry about too much food hanging in your teeth, because there was little solid food to mess with. You know, if we'd get a . . . sometimes we'd get, say, four hogs that would have to be split among 5,000 people, so your odds of even getting a chunk of pork in your stew. . . the basic thing was it would flavor the stew up a little, but this was not too often. Generally, our watery stew. . . we called it "seaweed"; I don't know what the stuff was--some type of dried celery-type plant that the Japanese seemed to grow profusely around that part of the country.

Marcello: How do you go about supplementing your diet? Are dogs, cats, and snakes fair game?

Thompson: Yes, yes. I remember a couple of Dutchmen had two. . . I don't know where they got these two puppies, and they raised them and fattened them just like you would a hog and butchered them later when they got bigger. I don't remember too many cats; there were a few around. I do remember on one occasion there was a python that was in the rafters of one of the huts one morning when the daylight came, and we captured that thing and cooked it. He was a big one; I think he was somewhere near twenty feet long but maybe not quite that long; a mammoth thing, you know, twice as long as any of us. We would sometimes gather what we'd call "wild spinach"; we'd run into it in the jungles and cook that, eat it.

Outside of that, there was just not . . . we one time stole one oxen from the natives. The Japanese guards. . . we were coming back on a work party early, and it was still light. We came up on this poor fellow that had two oxen that were work beasts, and he was asleep. One of us got a club and stood over him in case he awakened--we were going to clobber him (chuckle)--and the others untied his two oxen, and we walked off with them. The Japanese let us take them

in and slaughter them. They got some of the choice steaks, but we got some meat, too. Then when you worked, they would pay us usually fifteen cents a day, as I recall--maybe no more than twenty-five cents--and this was in Japanese occupation money. We could on occasions buy duck eggs, a type of candied sugar that the locals made--it was not refined, not granulated--and a few odds and ends like that. Like, you could buy duck eggs for two dollars--one egg. That represented--at fifteen cents a day, I don't know how many days. . . that's ten, twelve, fourteen days, maybe two weeks work, you know, to buy one egg. But that was about the only way you could supplement your diet. We also could purchase native tobacco, and a lot of us smoked. I started smoking when I was sixteen or seventeen and continued smoking all through this confinement there. It was really tough stuff.

Marcello: Is this what they refer to as the "wog" tobacco?

Thompson: Yes. As a matter of fact, I still have my tobacco can at home with some tobacco in it that I kept all these years. Some of the fellows were at our house. . . some of the "Lost Battalion" boys that live in our area meet once a month now; usually, it's a covered dish dinner. We had them out in January, and I was showing them my tobacco there. Everybody was amazed. I think I'm probably the only one that got back with any "wog" tobacco.

Marcello: Is it accurate to say that the thought that was most constantly on your mind was food?

Thompson: Yes, it really was.

Marcello: Obviously, you couldn't help thinking about that.

Thompson: Yes. We were typical soldiers. I would say that from the point of our capture until about three months, we talked a lot about girls; then the next three months or so we started talking about girls and food; and then after about six months, we just thought about food, you know. Everybody would talk about great dishes they remembered and this kind of stuff. But basic survival. . . it's really amazing, you know, what you can do, what the body can take, and what you go through and still survive.

Marcello: Now what food was most constantly on your mind while you were a prisoner? Is there one that you thought about more than any other?

Thompson: Oh, you know, steak and potatoes. . . probably potatoes, because I used to love french fries. I remember coming from school in high school, and I'd always go get a couple of potatoes and peel them and fry them and eat them, you know. Oh, you'd think about coconut pie or cake. You know, we had little or no sweets. I don't know, it gets down to . . . at the toughest part there during the height of the

monsoon when we were working real hard, you're sort of dulled, you know. You're just droning on and on; you're sort of living in agony; you're exhausted all the time; you never really get rest; you're hungry all the time; something is hurting probably--you either have an attack of malaria or maybe running down to the "john" with dysentery. Our doctor died at 100 Kilo Camp--Dr. Lumpkin.

Marcello: How did that affect the morale of the troops?

Thompson: Well, it was pretty tough, because, you know, we thought, "My God! If the doctor can't live, well, can anybody?" He was really a sharp guy and probably would have had a great career ahead of him. You know, he had this experience that very few people have ever had in being around all this much illness, you know. I guess in the medical profession that that type of experience is quite profound. He used to perform autopsies on the bodies right outside. . . after I. . .when I first became ill and stayed in from the working party, well, he had a little platform built out of a bamboo hut, I'd say, twenty or thirty feet outside of where I slept. I used to watch him performing autopsies. . . saw off the skull, and he'd examine the brain and go into the mid-section. It was kind of interesting, you know. You got sort of accustomed to death, you know. A'body didn't

really affect you all that much. You know, I've slept beside guys that had died several days before they. . . you know, you just go on. There they are, until someone comes and carries them off.

Marcello: Evidently, that must be something else, that is, to have to sleep next to a dead person for several days. I would assume that in that tropical climate they get pretty ripe.

Thompson: Well, it really wasn't a problem, because most of us were pretty ripe in parts of our body, anyway. So it really wasn't. . . you know, these ulcers. . . it's really a part of your body that's rotten. It's putrifying. Is that the term? The smell is quite profound. . . very foul. But when you live with it, you know, day and night, then after awhile, I guess your system. . . you don't smell it, you know, because everybody else smells. That's like the business of bathing, you know. If everybody has "BO," well, nobody notices it.

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned that you move to Kanchanaburi or Kanburi. This was a large camp, was it not?

Thompson: Yes. Yes, I believe this camp was. . . it was on the banks of a river. I was in two camps. I'm a little confused about. . . in one of them we were bombed quite a bit by the American Air Force. There was a steel railroad bridge and

then a wooden one, and I was thinking that was actually the River Kwei, which the movie, you know, was based on. It may not have been; there was two rivers there. But I know at one of those camps, I was on the banks of the River Kwei. This was the first camp. . .

Marcello: Okay, you must have gone from Kanburi to Tamarkan.

Thompson: Yes, right. I think Tamarkan was the one that was on the river bank. Kanburi was the first one that was at the edge of the jungles.

Marcello: How long were you in Kanburi?

Thompson: Just a few weeks, I believe.

Marcello: I gather that this was kind of a rest and recuperation camp?

Thompson: I believe it was, yes. I think it was right at the edge of the jungles, and this is where you first landed. Then they dispersed some of us out. Some of them went on into Bangkok even, and there were some camps there. There were several camps around Kanchanaburi. . . two or three POW camps. Also, the Japanese had some camps of their own troops around there. I've heard of occasions where they moved our people out of one camp and put their troops in there and put the prisoners in the camp where the troops were to keep the Allies confused in their bombing and so forth.

Marcello: What did you do at Kanchanaburi?

Thompson: I was still recuperating somewhat and was excused from . . . we had some work parties. It was not too hard. They would go into a warehouse and load rice and this kind of stuff. But then I became friends. . . this is where I became friends with an Australian named Frank Bridges from Sidney and one British guy in particular. His name was John Branchflower from Birmingham. They were both involved in . . . the British and the Australians had this camp going, and they had an entertainment party, they called it--a group that put on plays. They found some fellows that had been in the band and still had some instruments. There were a few trumpets, and they made some homemade string instruments and this type of thing. We got a little orchestra together, and I became friends with. . . Frank Bridges was an artist with the Sydney Herald, and he did all the backdrops. We would take. . . what is the black stuff made from. . . on a fireplace?

Marcello: Charcoal?

Thompson: Charcoal. We used it for various shades of black. Then we would take something else that we could make an orange color. Anyway, we would make scenes for the backdrop and the stage and this kind of stuff. I worked with him and became involved in . . . I actually did a couple of little

skits with a couple of the British guys, but I didn't turn out to have much acting ability. So I wound up mostly doing stage props and this type of stuff. The British and Australians would exempt all of these fellows from the work parties.

So occasionally, the Japanese would want a group of maybe twenty to fifty men to go back down in the jungles and repair a bridge that had been bombed or something of this nature. Generally, we never did hear from these fellows again. I don't know what happened to them; they'd either go to another camp or they'd never come out of the jungles.

But I had determined that I wasn't going back into the jungles. One day my name showed up on a list to go back to the jungles, and I was the only American assigned to go. We had to do our quota of whatever. . . you know, we were, say, 10 per cent of the population of the camp, so if they wanted ten men, we had to furnish one or something like that. So Frank Bridges had a friend who was an orderly for the camp doctor, and he said. . . we had a lieutenant--who I will not name--that didn't like me very well, and I think he deliberately put me on this work party because he wanted to get me out of camp. By all rights, in my estimation at least, I should have been exempt from these work parties, because everyone else was.

Anyway, Frank had a friend that was over in the medical office, and so he got hold of him, and so he told me to go get in my bunk and I had 104-degree temperature. We faked me an attack of malaria to get out (chuckle) of this work party, which I certainly didn't mind doing. You know, I was sorry for whoever had to go, but I didn't want to go back to the jungles. I'd had enough of it, so I got out of it. Our lieutenant was upset and accused me of faking and all that kind of stuff. But that's a little incident that I managed to worm out of going back.

Marcello: You brought up the subject, and I'll pursue it a little bit farther. Were administrative records being kept and so on either by the Japanese or by the Americans or the British or whomever?

Thompson: No, not really very extensively. Our service records. . . we destroyed all of our service records when we were captured. There was really nothing. . . there was a roll kept, you know, and everyday we had to muster and our people would have to account for everyone of the prisoners that were under their. . . to the Japanese.

Marcello: How did the food and quarters compare here at Kanburi with what it had been in the jungle?

Thompson: Well, they improved somewhat. We were closer to civilization, shall we say, or more people and more supplies. We

were out of the jungles where there was nothing available. The food did improve; it was more regular. We were able to barter, and occasionally, you know, if you had a towel or something, you could swap it on the black market to the nationals outside. There was always someone slipping out of the camp at night and going out trading. . . you know, illegally, of course.

Marcello: What were your quarters like here at Kanburi?

Thompson: They were still the same bamboo-type huts.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you actually didn't stay here too long.

Thompson: Well, now not in Kanburi. But in Kanchanaburi we were there, I guess, nearly a year.

Marcello: Oh, there is a difference between Kanburi and Kanchanaburi?

Thompson: Kanburi and Kanchanaburi, yes. I'm pretty sure. . . let's see. . . no, Tamarkan. I'm sorry. Tamarkan and Kanchanaburi are two different places. These are the two different locations I was in.

Marcello: As you mention, you were at Tamarkan for quite awhile.

Thompson: Yes, right. Yes.

Marcello: Now what was that camp like from a physical standpoint? And it wasn't too far from Kanchanaburi, was it?

Thompson: No, it really wasn't. It was just a short walk, really . . . maybe an hour or something like that. It was rather

pleasant. I have a lot of pleasant recollections of Kan-
chanaburi. I became real close friends with these two
fellows--the Australian and the British guy--and we had a
lot of fun putting on these plays. The Japanese would
come watch them; they would enjoy them, too, you know.

Marcello: Were they well-received by the fellow prisoners, that is,
the plays?

Thompson: Oh, yes. Yes, great. We had some English fellows that
were quite good. . . and a couple of the Dutch. We would
make wigs and gowns and have female impersonators, you
know, in the plays and everything. I remember one Javanese
fellow that was a very handsome guy. He may have been a
little Eurasian; I think he wasn't full-blooded Javanese,
but very good-looking. We could make him up to be quite
a pretty girl, you know. As a matter of fact, he quit
doing it because he was having problems (chuckle) fighting
the guys off to some extent, you know. I guess not literally.
He was. . . anyway, he quit doing it.

But we had a lot of fun. The food was not too bad;
the work was pleasant. Occasionally, we'd have to do a
little outside work. We had finished the railroad; we had
survived that damned jungle and gotten out of it.

Marcello: Anything was going to be an improvement.

Thompson: Anything, you know, it's all uphill from there.

Marcello: Now are your guards still with you, that is, the guards that you had in the jungle, or do you have different guards now?

Thompson: I think some of them were still the same ones that came through with us at this point. The guards were no great problem here. I had little or no contact directly with the Japanese, except occasionally.

Now on one Japanese holiday, the Japanese wanted to challenge the Americans to a baseball game. There was a great commotion over who would umpire. They wanted some American to umpire, because we were supposed to know all about baseball. Nobody wanted to do it, because who wanted to call a Japanese out, you know, one of the guards. Finally, I volunteered for it, and we had a baseball game. Of course, the Japanese beat us--fortunately, maybe I should say. Once or twice there was a little close call that I got some. . . but the Japanese sergeant who was in charge of the. . . he was the coach for the Japanese and was very explicit. He explained to us, he said, "Now we're going to play it according to the rules." He told me that I was to call it the way I saw it, and he would back me up. So I got a couple of dirty looks, you know, but other than that it was. . . but that was about the major contact that I

had with the Japanese.

It was a lot looser-type of situation; we had no major project to do. There were a few work parties, but most of the fellows, you know, didn't have to work. Of course, the bombing raids started picking up then pretty soon.

Marcello: Okay, I was going to ask you to talk about the raids that took place here at Tamarkan.

Thompson: Well, at first, our first experience was with the B-25's--I think they were--that they had by this time. Our railroad bridge, which was just outside one of the corners of our camp, was a secondary target. They would go into bombing raids up around Bangkok or other military places, and if they had any bombs left, they'd come by and drop them at our bridge. Pretty soon the Japanese put a . . . they were also. . . nearby there was some supply depots, too, that they bombed occasionally. The first bombings around our area were at those supply things. I can remember watching the bombers come over, and I'd see their. . . they were probably bombing from 8,000 to 10,000 feet. . . see the bombs come out and start down. A bomb, if it's falling anywhere within a mile or so of you, it looks like it's going to hit you until it gets down to a certain distance. I used to say, "Now the next time I want to watch

those things," because the bombs would come down and when they'd get a certain distance, well, I'd cover my head up, you know, and protect myself as if it was going to hit me. It literally looks like they're going to come right on you. One time I did get enough nerve to watch them, and you could see them, then, after they got that certain distance; it looked like they just curved and went off like this (gesture). Then later they started bombing at our bridge, and they come down to just a few hundred feet and dropped a bomb.

Marcello: Did you have trenches and so on that you would go to?

Thompson: Yes. But then once when they were bombing the bridge, I was with. . . John Branchflower and I were laying in this ditch. There were several bombers; they were bombing individually. One'd come over and drop his bombs. I looked at John and he looked at me, and I said, "I think the bomb's gonna hit right in this ditch! Let's get out of here!" Something possessed me. We got up and ran, and, you know, it's a thousand wonders we hadn't have got. . . because shrapnel was flying around, bombs were exploding, and the Japanese were shooting at them with their rifles and machine guns and everything else. Fortunately, they didn't see us, because I think the Japanese would have shot us if they'd seen us up, you know, running around like a bunch of fools.

They would bomb the bridge out, and we'd repair it. We weren't too happy about that. Later on, the Japanese put batteries of antiaircraft guns right outside our camp, and they would start shooting at these bombers when they came over and then when they came back.

Finally, the Air Force must have gotten tired of that, because one afternoon. . . just. . . well, on this particular day, I'd had an attack of malaria. My hut was over against the fence, and right outside the fence was where those antiaircraft guns were. I had moved all the way across the camp, which was a very large camp, to where we had a hospital area; if you were sick, you just moved over there. I was laying over there in the hospital hut when the bombers came, and there were a dozen or more of them. I think these were B-17's. But they all . . . every one of them dropped all their bombs right on those antiaircraft guns. Fourteen bombs leaked into our camp. . . no, not fourteen. . . several, six or eight. Fourteen prisoners were killed. So, you know, if I had've been there, you know, I would have been one of the casualties.

Marcello: What did these air raids do for your morale?

Thompson: Well, not very much. You know, you got to wondering whether if the Japanese didn't kill us, the Americans would, you know.

As a matter of fact, we were not too fond of the Air Force. I had thought in my mind, you know, "If I ever see an Air Force guy, I'm going to punch him right in the nose!" for all this bombing, you know. I was hit by a small piece of shrapnel in one bombing raid in the leg; it was a superficial wound. It didn't amount to a great deal, but I managed to get a Purple Heart for it.

Marcello: What was the reaction of the Japanese when one of these raids would take place?

Thompson: At this point. . . well, you know, they really started losing the war. They got. . . they were getting frustrated, but it was not like on the ship, you know. They would not go around pacing through the camp beating prisoners up or anything like that. It got to be kind of routine, really. You know, if you didn't get hit by the bombs, well, you went until the next one.

Marcello: How long were you at Tamarkan altogether?

Thompson: I would estimate about a year.

Marcello: In other words, we're getting into almost up to 1945?

Thompson: Yes, late '44.

Marcello: Where did you go from Tamarkan?

Thompson: I don't know. It was toward the end of 1944 when we got on a train and went into Bangkok. They marched us down to

some wharves; there's a river or something there; they had a lot of docks in Bangkok. We stayed there a couple of days, and then we got on trucks and went out about ninety miles to a camp. . . I think my notes indicate it was. . . the last one I was in . . . (checks notes) I just can't see it. . . if you can make it out. That was an 'n' there, isn't it?

Marcello: Nachumni.

Thompson: That sounds like it. Nachumni or something like this.

Marcello: You have one before this here--Patinburg, it looks like. Where was that?

Thompson: I think this is near Bangkok.

Marcello: I see. And you weren't there very long.

Thompson: No, we were just sort of there in a holding pattern for awhile.

Marcello: And then you went out to this other camp--Nachumni.

Thompson: Yes. We were there approximately the last six months of the war.

Marcello: I assume you hated to leave Tamarkan.

Thompson: Yes. Yes, very much, because we were always moved as a unit, you know; the Americans were all moved together. But my friend Branchflower wound up in the same camp I did at the end; he arrived a couple of days after I did.

Marcello: So what did you do when you got to this camp?

Thompson: Well, we started working, and they were forming. . . most of us were on work parties. The Japanese were building . . . I'm under the impression that they were building three rings of defense getting ready to defend Bangkok against the Allied invasion if it came. We were on the outer ring about ninety miles out of Bangkok. There were some small mountains out there, and we were building gun emplacements, emergency air strip, things of this nature . . . fortifications for the Japanese preparing to defend an invasion.

Marcello: Has your ulcer pretty well cleared up by this time?

Thompson: Yes. Yes, I'm ambulatory, you know, without too much problem. It's still a little open, you know. . . pink, healthy-type wound, but no problems. It doesn't bleed anymore or anything of this nature.

Marcello: How were the guards here?

Thompson: We got a brand new set of guards when we got to this last camp. They completely changed. . . I think the Japanese could see the handwriting on the wall. Of course, Germany was all in the process of collapsing, you know, in early 1945, and they knew what was going on. Also, I think we had recaptured the Philippines by now. We were bombing

Tokyo and all this kind of stuff. The Japanese knew that they were losing, and they changed the old guards that had been pretty rough on us, you know. A lot of them--the Koreans--were being pulled out, and they put new crews in.

Marcello: Were you kind of sorry to see those guards leave? I mean, were you thinking about some scores that you wanted to settle at the end of the war?

Thompson: I think a lot of the fellows were, and I believe there would have been some reprisals toward some of these guys that were more cruel than others. But the last group was sort of detached; they really didn't bother us all this much. I remember the Japanese sergeant had a flock of chickens; he liked growing his own eggs, and occasionally he'd have a chicken to cook. One of our fellows, whose name was Dempsey Key, and I conspired to steal one of the sergeant's chickens one night, and we did. I stood watch and Dempsey slipped into the pen and got this hen. We got by with it, fortunately. I think this guy would have been upset at us stealing his chicken. We took the chicken and cleaned it that night and got a pot and boiled and had a great feast. . . drank the soup and everything.

Marcello: Now did you do this because you were actually that hungry.

Thompson: Yes.

Marcello: . . . or did you do it because it was a good way to put something over on your captors?

Thompson: I think the challenge of it had something to do with it, but basically it was to get the food, you know.

Marcello: You were still getting mostly rice?

Thompson: Yes, our food was still inadequate. You know, a chicken is. . . I love chicken still. Incidentally, I also love rice, too. I figured up one time, and I think I had eaten over 12,000 pounds of rice during that period over there.

Marcello: How did you arrive at the 12,000-pounds figure?

Thompson: Oh, I estimated, you know, an average of a pint three times a day. That may have been 12,000 bushels--I don't know--but it's quite an extensive amount of rice.

Marcello: Were they working you very hard here at this camp?

Thompson: Yes, pretty good. Actually, though, I managed to get what I . . . twice in my experience I got "political" jobs. Once back in the jungle at 100 Kilo Camp, I got on the kitchen detail. We got. . . I managed to hang onto that for about six weeks, and we got a new kitchen officer; they would change details. A particular lieutenant that was not too fond of me came in and kicked me out, so I went back out on the work detail.

In this last camp, I had a little basic knowledge of carpentry, and the Japanese wanted some people that could

do some carpentry work. So I volunteered for it. I said, "Yes, I'm a good carpenter." So I worked in the . . . doing some minor repairs to buildings and this type of stuff, which was sort of an inside job.

This, incidentally, was when I saw the real torture that the Japanese inflicted on some of the Siamese people. We believe that they were spies, or at least the Japanese thought they were spies. They had these two guys that they were trying to get confessions out of, I suppose. One of the tortures they used, they'd pour lukewarm or semi-hot water down their stomach until they become bloated, and then they would beat them on the stomach with a club. They tell me that this. . . the warm water loosens the linings of the stomach, and if you have an excess amount in there, any pressure will put strains on the inside, you know, and it's quite painful. Another method they used was putting bamboo slivers under their fingernails and toenails.

Marcello: You actually did see that?

Thompson: Yes.

Marcello: Now by this time, have they more or less eased up on the prisoners in terms of the bashings and so on?

Thompson: Yes, I really think so. We'd get lectures occasionally by this Japanese officer who was our commandante about, you know,

how great the Japanese were and this type of stuff and that the emperor was the good guy and so forth. They had eased up somewhat.

I remember in this camp, I had a . . . incidentally, I had moved from being an optimist to a pessimist, and in the last six months of the war, I thought it would never end. I thought, you know, "This thing's going on forever. We'll just never go home," you know, because after thirty-five or forty months, you know, you begin to wonder if it ever is going to end.

I had one incident, I recall, of a severe attack of malaria. Every morning for seventeen days, I had a severe chill, my temperature would go from either around 104 to 107 degrees, and then when it breaks, you know, you perspire profusely. After this thing had gone on past two weeks, I really got worried. I thought, you know, "This thing is gonna get me." I went to a Japanese that I'd gotten acquainted with--one of the guards--and tried to get some quinine or anything of that nature, and he was very sympathetic, but he didn't have anything. They were. . . I felt, you know, there was a difference there; you could approach them. They were actually friendly to the few of us that was working in this carpenter shop. They would give us some of their food and this type of stuff.

Marcello: Now up until this time, had you received any mail from home?

Thompson: Yes. At Tamarkan I got three postcards that had been mailed at various times. This was in 1944. I think the latest one was somewhere between ten and fourteen months old since it had been mailed. But I did get three postcards from my folks. Also, we got our first Red Cross parcel at Tamarkan. We got . . . I believe it was one parcel for every two men on the one issue that we got.

Marcello: What did those Red Cross parcels mean to you in terms of survival?

Thompson: Oh, it was fantastic! Of course, we really didn't get. . . we may have gotten one or two issues of it. Incidentally, we had seen Japanese marching by inside our camp with American Red Cross parcels strapped to their backpack. I think they gave them, you know, to themselves, which I don't blame them in a way, because they were pretty hard-pressed. The Allies had them pretty isolated, and they were running out of. . . it was hard to get supplies.

Marcello: Do you remember what were in those Red Cross parcels?

Thompson: There were some cheese and cigarettes, I remember. . . some Lucky Strikes and Camels. . . canned fruit.

Marcello: Powdered milk?

Thompson: Yes.

Marcello: The Klim.

Thompson: Yes, but it was all a packet of stuff. You know, we hoarded it and made it last as long as possible. I remember waking up one night after I'd gotten my Red Cross parcel; I still had my cheese, and a big rat was crawling across my body, and it'd wake me up, you know. He had smelled that cheese, and he was after it. I batted him off and. . . you know.

Marcello: Were rats and lice and vermin problems in these camps?

Thompson: Well, yes, body lice was quite prevalent. As a matter of fact, the natives, the Burmese and Siamese, always had it, too. I can recall seeing the girls, you know, over across the fence going through each other's hair, you know, getting lice out of it. But I suppose we were infested with lice; you never got rid of them. They were just, you know, ever-present. They were about as sure as the sun was coming out.

Marcello: You mentioned the letters from home awhile ago. What did they do for your morale?

Thompson: Well, it was. . . you know, it was great for our morale, you know, to hear from home. This was. . .

Marcello: At least somebody had not forgotten you.

Thompson: Yes. Well, and, of course, we realized, too, that it was next to impossible to get anything through, so just the fact that they got through was great, you know, for our morale.

Marcello: Okay, I think this more or less brings us up to the days immediately prior to your liberation, so why don't you describe the details surrounding your liberation. Why don't we talk about the surrender. Do you remember when you heard the news that the war was over and how you received that news?

Thompson: Yes. I had my . . . my ulcer had flared up a little bit and had gotten . . . not bad, but bad enough to keep me in from the work parties. The work parties were going out; most of the fellows who were able to work were going out working on these things. On the day that the war ended . . . it was August 15th, I believe. The work party went out, and they sat there for several hours and never worked. Pretty soon some Japanese officer came along and told the Japanese guards to load them back up, and everybody was brought back into camp. Well, this had never happened before. And we were able, to a degree, to keep up with the progress of the war. I think there was a radio hid in some camp at all times, and we usually would stay within

of about two weeks of what was going on of the major. . . and we had an idea that the war was coming to a climax. I think by this time, too, we had heard about the Germans surrendering, and it was all over there. Of course, my major concern was that the Allies would have to invade to recapture all the country where we were, and I really thought our chances of survival were not very good if they did, which they probably wouldn't have been.

Anyway, the rumors really got rampant. The Japanese didn't say a word, and then all the next day no work parties went out on the 16th of August. You know, then everybody kept saying, "Well, the war must be over," but I refused to believe it, because, you know, we had no word officially. The Japanese stayed away from us; they stayed outside the camp. They just told us to . . . you know, we were to remain in the camp.

Then the morning of the 17th, the Japanese commandant sent instructions that everyone who was able was to assemble on the parade ground. He got up and his voice was broken, and he said that he had received word that the war had ended; and that the Allies had been victorious; and they had instructions by the Allies that they would be responsible for our safe-keeping until they could come in and repatriate

us. It was almost. . . you know, everybody was. . . there was just dead silence, and then all of a sudden everyone started cheering. The people were crying and . . . you know, it was. . . you know, after all this, you just couldn't believe it was over. It was quite an emotional thing.

Marcello: How long did the celebrating continue?

Thompson: Well, I don't know. It must have been. . . you know, we were just like. . . it was very confusing, really, to me . . . you know, what we were going to do. We all got together and talked, and my British buddy. . . you know, we got started talking about what we'd do when we got home, and we determined to keep in touch afterwards and all this kind of stuff. You know, it was quite. . . we were almost delirious, I suppose, to a great extent.

All of our officers had been separated from the enlisted men, so that afternoon they brought our officers back and we re-established our units. We got back into, you know. . . by this time we were pretty . . . well, all of us had melded together; we were just 5,000 POW's--British, Australians, what-have-you. We reformed our units and got started to try to put the military structure back together.

I think we were. . . we got an issue of clothing, and

we got to getting better rations. The Japanese requested that we stay in the camp; there were a lot of armed Japanese troops still around the area. We made us a home-made American flag that we put up on the flagpole. We were there about two weeks, I think, before we got out. About two weeks after the war ended, well, the Americans were the first to leave the camp.

Marcello: Now you had never been outside the camp during that two-week period.

Thompson: I had not.

Marcello: Do you get a little impatient?

Thompson: Well, yes, we were. . .

Marcello: Irritated?

Thompson: No, you know, it was such a great relief, you know, because you were in a situation where for three and one-half years. like I'd said earlier, you had absolutely no control over your destiny; you're totally under the supervision of a hostile force; and you really, you know, had no guarantee that you were going to be here tomorrow. Then finally, you know, after all this time, it's finally there. You know, I was nineteen when I started; now I'm nearly twenty-three by this time. . . or I am, I guess, in 1945. You know, just such a great weight is lifted off of you. I had a pretty serious problem of psychological adjustment when I came back.

Marcello: Okay, that was kind of going to be my next question, but I assume you went from this camp and ultimately went to Calcutta.

Thompson: Yes. We went into Bangkok, and the Air Force came in in C-47's. We got in and we saw our first Allied. . . you know, friends. By this time, I'd forgotten about the bombings. I was so, you know, exhilarated to be getting out, you know, and starting back.

The pilot that flew our plane would let each one of us come up to the front and sit in the co-pilot's seat, you know. They were great with us, you know, because they knew what we'd been through. This fellow was a young pilot that had trained at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, which was my home, you know, and it was kind of a coincidence, we thought.

We stopped at Rangoon, Burma, and then they flew us on to Calcutta, where they had an Army general hospital. Then we were put through all the process. I think I was there several weeks before they turned me loose, you know. We had a lot of things. . . the first thing they had to do was de-louse us, you know. They took all of our clothes away and burned them, you know. By this point, though, we didn't give a damn, because we knew we could get some more,

you know, because you didn't have to hoard things any longer.

But then I was. . . you know, the whole situation there was a problem for me of adjusting again, you know . . . just all of a sudden turning from death to life, shall we say. I couldn't eat very well. I think, in retrospect, the Army made a mistake with us, because they just brought us in and just sort of turned us loose, you know. We probably should have been given psychiatric help. At least they should have. . .but it never occurred to me, and maybe it didn't occur to them that we needed any. We should have been kind of eased in on the food, because I got sick several times because the food was too rich. I'm not accustomed. . . couldn't eat anything with salt, because we'd been on salt-free diet for three and one-half years. Chocolate was something I couldn't eat; it made me violently ill in the stomach. I've only, incidentally, just in recent years got to where I even cared about eating chocolate, and I still don't like it very well. But there were little things like that.

But in Calcutta we got passes, and there were some Red Cross people that worked with us. There were some WAC's that volunteered to take us. . . more or less as semi-dates; we went out and we'd go to dinner. This one WAC

sergeant--I don't remember her name, but she was really a great gal--she took me and we toured the town. We went over into some of the forbidden areas that were off limits actually, but she said, "You're only going to be in Calcutta a short time; you ought to see what's going on here." We saw some of the, you know, the real terrible diseased people, and, you know, the low-caste people in India. I guess they're not as bad now as they were, but they really used to have a bad life. . . probably worse than we ever had in prison camp.

Marcello: Now when you get back to the States, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Thompson: Yes, I did. I had several things that came up. Now I had hookworms--a real bad case of it--and I stayed in the hospital. I was in the hospital nearly a year getting the malaria out of my system, getting rid of these hookworms, and the final curing of my leg. My ulcerated leg was still an open wound to some extent.

Also, my military records were messed up. I was a private first class and a third class specialist when we were captured. This is the equivalent of about a buck sergeant in pay and all that kind of stuff. The Army gave us an automatic one-step rank increase when we were repatriated.

The guy that filled out my temporary records in Calcutta didn't know what a third class specialist was, so all he caught of my rank was PFC. So he put down that I was a PFC. Well, I was promoted to corporal, and there was quite a bit of difference in three and a half years of back pay between a PFC and a sergeant. So I had a big problem with the Army of getting all my back pay.

So I had a major at Fort Lewis, Washington--my folks had moved to Seattle during the war, and I went back to Fort Lewis, Washington--that took an interest in my case. He was a lawyer and he was advising on everyting. He got the commanding general there to promote me to staff sergeant, which in the old ranking system I should have gone to. He started, you know, working with the Pentagon trying to get my pay situation corrected. He advised me not to accept my discharge until I got my back pay, because he said it'd be a lot harder to get it as a civilian than it would as a . . . still in the military. I stayed, actually, in the military until August of 1946 getting everything straightened out. We got all of it except about 250 or 300 dollars that I had coming to me and wound up getting a special bill in Congress. My congressman from Wichita Falls handled it for me and got the last bit of my money I had coming to me.

On the adjustment bit, I can recall for several months it really was a problem. I still had a psychological situation that I couldn't cope with. I couldn't. . . somehow or another, I couldn't work my way back into being with people. I would . . . I can recall being in restaurants, and I, you know. . . I was uncomfortable; I couldn't cope with it, really. I'd ride the bus from Fort Lewis up to Seattle going home on weekend passes and this type of stuff, and I just didn't feel like I was part of the people. I couldn't. . . I just really couldn't put myself where I was or something, you know. But it finally. . . you know, with the good cooking of my mother. . . and I had a sister that lived there, and they were all treating me real good, and finally I worked my way out of that on my own. But I think I could have used some help from a psychiatrist, really. You know, later, it took me years and years, really, to figure out that type of thing. I guess it turned out all right; I'm not quite sure sometimes.

Marcello: I have one last question. What do you see as being the key to your survival?

Thompson: I don't know. I'm probably a bit of a fatalist, shall we say. I think. . . I think my religion had a key point to it. But basically, it was the will to live. You know, I

I determined that I was going to get out of it. . . even when I was bad sick, I had a lot of people that were surprised that I ever came out of 80 Kilo Camp. But I never doubted it, you know; I never really had any doubts. It was the will to survive, I think, more than anything else. I wanted to get out of it. I never really reached the point where--so many people I had seen--it wasn't worth, you know, fighting anymore. That will to live, really, is very strong.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Thompson, I want to thank you very much for taking part in our project. You've said a lot of very interesting things, and I'm positive that historians will find it very valuable when they use it to write about World War II.

Thompson: Well, I've enjoyed it. You know, I'm not one of those that say, "Well, I don't want to talk about it, or anything like this. You know, in subsequent years, I've made a lot of talks at Sunday school departments and that type of stuff, and people have questioned me, and, you know, they want to know, "Now does it bother you to talk about it?" It really doesn't; I don't have any . . . I don't think it left any permanent scars on me. I have an admiration for Japanese people; I don't have any animosities toward them. And I don't, you know. . . I think you have to understand the

Oriental philosophy a lot of the time when you're measuring things like this, because under the circumstances, the Japanese really didn't treat us bad. It was harsh and hard, and from our standards it was tough and unusual; but from theirs, I don't think it was. I don't think they ever treated us any worse from what they were taught to treat us.

Marcello: I think that's probably a good place to end the interview.

Thompson: Yes, I think so, too.