

*The National Museum of the Pacific War*  
*(Admiral Nimitz Museum)*

*Center for Pacific War Studies*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

Interview with

**Mr. Donald O. Dencker**  
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(U.S. Army – Battles of Leyte & Okinawa)**

My name is Ted Connerly for the Admiral Nimitz Museum of the Pacific War and we are here on the occasion of the Annual Symposium at the Fredericksburg High School. I'm sitting with Mr. Don Dencker to collect his oral history. Mr. Dencker, before we begin with your story, if you would, please give me your full name and tell me where you were born.

**Mr. Dencker:** I am Donald O. Dencker. The "O" stands for Owen. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 25, 1924. I am originally from Minnesota. Now I am from San Prairie, Wisconsin, near Madison, Wisconsin.

**Mr. Connerly:** Who were your parents?

**Mr. Dencker:** They were Mabel and Fred Dencker. My Dad was a homebuilding contractor and my Mother was a housewife.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**Mr. Dencker:** No, I am an only child.

**Mr. Connerly:** An only child, just like me. Where did you attend school?

**Mr. Dencker:** I went to Roosevelt High School in South Minneapolis. I graduated in June 1942. I was seventeen years old and I continued my education that Fall until I was eighteen. Then I went into the Army.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did you enlist, or were you drafted into the military at that time?

**Mr. Dencker:** I was a student. In February 1943 the Army came around and gave a test, and if you passed the test, when you went into the Army you would get a letter and tell them that you were to be put in ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program. So I took the test, and passed quite well. The requirements were that you be in good physical condition and have an Army General Classification Test Score five points above that required to go to OCS. I passed the test, and I had this letter. I was told, "Wait until they draft you." So I waited until June 1943. I was inducted and I presented the letter, and I ended with a group of about 50 young men, just eighteen, going to basic training and then assigned to a college or university to take a crash engineering course to be probably a Corps of Engineer Officer.

**Mr. Connerly:** Where did you take your basic training?

**Mr. Dencker:** Oh, in this God forsaken place called North Camp Hood, Texas, near the beautiful city of Gatesville. So that was my first experience with Texas, and this is much better. I can tell you that.

**Mr. Connerly:** We like it over here in the Hill Country. Anything particularly that you remember about your basic training, or anything that you would like to record here?

**Mr. Dencker:** Well, it was July-August-September-into October. All I know is it was damn hot and damn dry in Gatesville, in that part of Texas.

They gave us a rough basic training. I came out of that in pretty good shape, very lean, and in good condition because it was a rigorous basic training. But then life changed. I got shipped by train to the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and started this engineering course. I started on the second term because I had taken enough at Minnesota before I went into the Army to skip the first term. That was a thirteen week course in such subjects as physics. Anyway, it was equivalent to about second year of pre-engineering training at the Illinois Institute of Technology. It was a delightful place to be because you had the weekends off, and you could do anything you wanted, and there were girls in Chicago. There were also a lot of sailors, but a few of them liked soldiers.

**Mr. Connerly:** Had you ever been in Chicago prior to that time?

**Mr. Dencker:** No, I had not.

**Mr. Connerly:** Ever been in a city that large up to that time?

**Mr. Dencker:** Well, I was in Minneapolis, which is a good sized city, but not like Chicago. They treated you royally. You could get tickets to stage shows, tickets to most anything, go to museums, ride the streetcars for free. I remember seeing one I liked, Joan Blondell in "Something for the Boys." It was in a big theater in downtown Chicago. We stayed in an Armory right across the street from what was then the old Chicago White Sox Stadium. It was torn down a few years ago. I got a ticket to see the Chicago Cardinals play the

Chicago Bears and they had an old guy playing running back for the Cardinals, a guy called Bronco Nurgaski, an All American from the University of Minnesota. He was brought out of retirement and I saw him play.

**Mr. Connerly:** Well, I was familiar with the fact that they used a lot of “over the hill” ball players in the baseball leagues, but you know I had never thought about what they did to keep the football leagues going.

**Mr. Dencker:** They kept them going. It was a nice game for free.

**Mr. Connerly:** So you were in Chicago in the winter time then?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes, I was there in the winter time, until the end of February when we got the message which was called the “Kiss of Death.” They said, the Army on second thought decided they had better win the war and forget about Corps of Engineer Officer eighteen months down the line. What they did is they closed down the engineering portion of the ASTP program almost over night, and 2,000 of us ended up in March 1944 with the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division at Camp White, Oregon. We replaced men that were older, some with very low intelligence, some with some physical impairments. So they shipped 2,000 men out of the division and put in 2,000 college boys.

**Mr. Connerly:** Had you been commissioned at this time?

**Mr. Dencker:** No. All ATSP participants were privates. So we were, in effect, replacements. It was a real, raw deal for some of the guys. A good buddy of mine in my company was a Sergeant in the Army Air

Force and was about to be promoted. He decided to take up this college education offer. He was reduced in rank to Private and ends up in an infantry company, and he had never fired a rifle in his life. Of course I had. I had damn, good basic training, but they took those guys out and they formed an Infantry Training Battalion and put them through a six-week crash infantry basic training course. Here these poor guys had been NCOs, now they are Private replacements in a rifle company. All told, we took a while to get accepted by the guys that had been in the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division for eighteen months, but we survived.

**Mr. Connerly:** Well, trace your route for me. After you got to Oregon and when did you first ship out?

**Mr. Dencker:** Well, when I got to Oregon I got assigned to Company “L”. I had remembered basic training and I liked the 60mm mortars and I was interviewed by the Exec Officer. The Company Commander was away on some other training. The Exec Officer looked at my skinny frame, and said, “Dencker, do you think you can carry a bag of mortar ammunition?” I said, “Sure Sir, I can carry it.” He said, “OK, I’ll put into mortars.” That was a wise decision on my part because it was a bit safer. So I was an Ammunition Bearer for 60mm mortars. An Ammunition Bearer had to carry about 60 pounds of mortar shells. About three days after I was there, they

went on a forced march, full field pack. They were in battle conditioning training for thirteen miles. Everyone of the ASTP's in the company made it, but I felt my feet were just about ruined. I had bleeding, blisters, burst blisters, etc. Since we made it we gradually got accepted. Then we went to amphibious training. We were at Camp San Luis Obispo on Morro Bay. I got introduced to LCVP's there, Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel, crewed by the Navy. Then went on to further amphibious training. Went on the Hunter Liggett, the name of an older transport. Made a practice landing on San Clemente Island, off of San Diego. Then went on another one. We had some marines helping to train us and we made a graduation landing on the beach at Camp Pendelton for the President of Mexico. He happened to be a visitor. So, after amphibious training, I managed to get a leave to go home. Most the guys got a leave home. I went back to Minneapolis and to Chicago to visit my girl friend that I had met in Chicago. Went back to the 96<sup>th</sup> and reported to Camp Beale where they were preparing to go overseas. Moved to Camp Stoneman. The one thing that I remember about Camp Stoneman was we were sitting in the barracks about three days before we were going to ship out, about 9:30 at night, shooting the bull, and I was sitting on my bunk and all of a sudden the building shook. A few of the panes of glass cracked. It was the Port Chicago explosion. I don't know if you

ever heard about that. That was the great munition ship that blew up about six miles away and killed over three hundred Navy personnel and the two Merchant Marines crews. It was the greatest disaster in the United States proper during the war.

**Mr. Connerly:** That has become somewhat of a controversial incident to that explosion. It seems like there was a fairly recent motion picture made about that.

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. Studs Terkel's book, "The Good War" covers that to some degree. About all these black munition handlers and how they felt they were doing unsafe duty. They probably were. Then we shipped out to Hawaii a few days later. They dispatched all our medical personnel to that explosion site.

**Mr. Connerly:** Where were you in Hawaii? Or did you remain billeted aboard ship?

**Mr. Dencker:** We took a river boat from Camp Stoneman, which is up the Sacramento River, runs into San Francisco Bay. Believe it or not, it was the Delta Queen. It is still in service. The river boat went to a dock in San Francisco. We boarded a ship, the US Army Transport Sea Sturgeon. In my particular outfit there were five Army Transports that they crowded the Division on. We went to Honolulu, took the pineapple express, which was a bunch of narrow gauge cars to Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. That was in July '44. Went through some additional training there, including the Army



Jungle Fighting Course up on northern Oahu island. September 1<sup>st</sup>, my Company L, 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, 96<sup>th</sup> Division, also called “Love Company” from the phonetic alphabet, boarded LST 745.

**Mr. Connerly:** September 1, 1944?

**Mr. Dencker:** We boarded a transport, Frederick Funston. We sailed to Maui, climbed down the cargo nets into LCVP's, got transferred to LST 745, then we made a couple of practice landings on a beach on Maui. We stayed overnight on Maui; one night. Dug our foxholes. The next morning we went back to the beach, boarded a landing vehicle tank, LVT, alligators, went back. This was a combat loaded practice landing for some amphibious operation in the Pacific. We didn't know where. We went back on the LVT's to LST 745 and we sailed back to Pearl Harbor on the LST. Then we got to Pearl Harbor and a Lt Young, who happened to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Platoon Leader of Company L read off a list of men to stay on LST 745, and he called my name. My job was to look after the 60mm mortars and make sure they didn't rust. That was about it. Or make sure that the Navy didn't throw them overboard. Most of the troops went back to Schofield Barracks. I stayed on LST 745 and didn't get off again until October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944. So my first pacific cruise was on LST 745. Very pleasant because there were very few Army guys on it and the Navy crew treated us very nice. We had Navy chow and that was pretty good.

**Mr. Connerly:** Those were big ships too. They were over 300 feet long. Of course the LST, Landing Ship Tank, also stood for Large Slow Target.

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes, supposedly. Good ship. About the 10<sup>th</sup> of September we pulled out of Pearl Harbor, 22 LST's. That was to carry the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division for landing on "X" Beach.

**Mr. Connerly:** Still unknown to you.

**Mr. Dencker:** Unknown. Right before we left, Lt Young (he had been staying on board) went ashore and he got a packet. I told the guys we were going to Yap Island because I had read an article in the National Geographic Magazine about Yap Island and I remembered that the natives there had these big circular stones and that was their money. The name "Yap" being three letters, stuck in my mind. Well we got onboard, we're out at sea, and heading for somewhere. He brings out the information that we are going to Yap Island. They started calling me "G2" Dencker. They wanted to know how I knew. I couldn't tell them and I said that I had heard, so on. That just compounded the mystery. We are on the LST's, the convoy, a couple of destroyer escorts for guards and we lumbered along. Nice cruise. I think we went a southern route, away from where the Japanese submarines would be and we ended up at Eniwetok Atol about the 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> of September. About the same day, the troops ships, another twenty some vessels, sailed in with our troops and

then another big group of troop ships and LST's arrived. That was the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. There we were told Operation Stalemate II, our landing on Yap Island, is cancelled. You are now going to a place called Leyte in the Philippines and your landing date is changed from October 5<sup>th</sup> to October 20<sup>th</sup> and Blue Beach One on Yap became Blue Beach One on Leyte. So we stayed in anchorage at Eniwetok a few days and then we set out for Admiralty Islands. Our troops stayed on Frederick Funsten, APA-89, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry was on that ship, but I was still on the LST. Then we arrived about the 4<sup>th</sup> of October on Manus Island of the Admiralty Islands. There we dropped anchor, and more or less waited. The troop ships apparently stayed at Eniwetok. They were faster than the LST's.

**Mr. Connerly:** The LST is a pretty slow ship. How many days were you at sea?

**Mr. Dencker:** I was on the LST 50 days, except excluding the one day overnight on Maui, so that would be 49. On October 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>, my buddies from L Company rejoined us on LST 745, and we, the 22 LST's from the 96<sup>th</sup> Division and the same number of LST's for the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division started to run north. We recrossed the equator and were heading for Leyte. It was very hot on the LST's sitting there in the harbor at Admiralty Island, but we didn't get ashore, unfortunately. The guys on the troop ships had it tougher because they were cramped. I had a cot next to a truck that was on the deck

of the LST and I had a shelter half and a piece of canvas. I had shade when we were at sea. It was really nice. The temperature wasn't too bad and there was always a breeze so it was a nice cruise.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did you have anything for entertainment on ship?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes.

**Mr. Connerly:** This is kind of a side note.

**Mr. Dencker:** The Army guys played poker for pennies, nickels, and once in a while a dime, because we weren't allowed to take more than fifteen dollars with us on our persons. So we played poker almost continuously for "next to nothing." I think after hundreds of hands of poker I ended up with about \$12, or something like that. I got a lot of practice playing poker. Also, I made rings. I didn't know how to do it, but I soon learned. You take a quarter of silver, go down to the galley and borrow a tablespoon from the Navy. You put the quarter between your finger and you hit it with the heel of the spoon and slowly turn it. Silver is malleable. Then beating on it, roll back the edge. Then you went down to the machine shop and asked the sailor to drill a hole in it and loan you a rattail file. You would then file out the interior, and rolling back the edge you would have the printing that is on the edge of the coin on the inside of your ring. So I made a ring for my girl friend, one for my Mother. It took quite a bit of time.

**Mr. Connerly:** But you had a lot of time.

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes, I had a hell of a lot of time. The lettering that is on the edge ended up on the inside of your ring. Then we batted the breeze, played poker, chatted with the sailors, sunned ourselves, ate well, and once in a while looked at the mortar.

**Mr. Connerly:** Checked the mortars.

**Mr. Dencker:** Once I had oiled them up and the oil stayed there and there wasn't much to do. The Navy wasn't interested in throwing them overboard, so I didn't have anything to worry about. On October 20, 1944, L Company was an assault company for landing on Blue Beach One. We were the left hand company, and K Company was the right hand company. They were on LST 1013. We rode in amphibious tractors, LVT-4 (the one with the ramp that went down in the rear), and we were blared out about 4 a.m. in the morning. We went down to the galley. Then we had the whole company. We had about 300 men on the LST for the assault landing. It was the amphibious tank crews. We had 12 amphibious tractors and five amphibious tanks on LST 745. They called the tanks tare wave, and behind it was wave one and two. L Company, along with a squad or two of combat engineers, demolition men, were riding the first and second waves. We occupied eight amphibious tractors. The same thing for K company. They occupied eight amphibious tractors, following one platoon of amphibious tanks, which was five tanks. The four remaining amphibious tractors, for

some reason or other, contained the sixth wave. I don't remember what the sixth wave was. I was in the second wave, in the right hand amphibious tank, with the mortar section.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did the LST unload you directly on the beach?

**Mr. Dencker:** Oh no. We were in Leyte Gulf some place. We watched a bombardment. Particularly Blue Beach One was worked over. One and Two were worked over by the light cruiser Columbia (I guess for Columbia, Missouri). About 8:30 a.m. we boarded the LVT on the Tank Deck and then they started disembarking and all seventeen of us got off quite well. They stopped, dropped an anchor, opened the bow doors, lowered the ramps. The amphibious vehicles started up. Loaded in front were the tanks; they went off. They were loaded in the order that we were to go off. Go up the approach a little bit and then down the ramp, and then we were swimming. The vehicles were swimming. The tracks were what propelled it. Basically, the tracks had a little cleat on the top of each one and that was the little paddle.

**Mr. Connerly:** Like little dog paddles.

**Mr. Dencker:** We could go about 5 knots, 6 miles an hour. We got out of the LST's and we formed up in a file. I know we waved to the Navy crew. They were looking at us, and we waved back. We went to a designated assembly area. I think it was about 3,000 yards off the beach. When we got there, the Columbia was still firing at the

beach and the Navy came over with bombers off the carriers. They dropped loads of bombs on our target beach, and then Wildcats came over and shot up the beach and strafed as we were moving. We formed up in rows and started heading toward the beach; five amphibious tanks, four LVT's, four LVT's. That was our assault wave for Company L. Same thing, just off to our right was K Company.

**Mr. Connerly:** About how many men on the LVT with you?

**Mr. Dencker:** About thirty per LVT.

**Mr. Connerly:** How did everybody fare on that little boat ride?

**Mr. Dencker:** You know, we'd been at sea so long and trained so long, the soldiers were charged up, when we got about a thousand yards, and there was no out-coming fire at us, guys started sticking their hands up over the sides and looking over, going like this – pumping their arm up and down with their fist clenched. That was the Army signal for double-time, believe it or not. We were ready. We were going to land at 10 a.m. and everything was going on time, no opposition coming out at us (thank goodness), and when we got maybe 500 yards off the beach the first wave closed on the tanks and the second wave closed on the first wave, so we were spread out about over less than a hundred yards. We didn't want the tanks to be unsupported by infantry when we hit the beach. Then we were told to hunker down, crouch down, make sure you aren't exposing yourself. On

our left side was an Landing Craft Infantry (Rodet), going right in with us and maybe only 500 yards off the beach it discharged its rockets – a tremendous barrage of rockets. Salvo after salvo after salvo and they must have thrown out the anchor because they didn't hit the beach, but they stopped pretty close to the beach. We were supposed to go 300 or 400 yards inland so that we didn't bunch up on the beach. We are all hunched down below and there was dust in the air from the bombardment. All of a sudden “wham!” The front end of our LVT went up in the air and the tracks started spinning.

**Mr. Connerly:** What had happened?

**Mr. Dencker:** The Japanese had planted coconut logs, about a foot in diameter, right at the surf line. They had sharpened the points, not really sharpened, but they had rounded them off, and deeply implanted them in the sand pointing out at 45 degrees. The sloped front of the LVT's hit these logs and rode up on it until the tracks started spinning. So rather than the second wave going in the 300+ yards inland, down went the ramp and here was a couple inches of water as I ran out. The Naval bombardment had taken virtually everything out and left all of these hundreds of logs virtually untouched. I think about one tank and two LVT's got through. Then they saw the others weren't getting through, so they stopped. We all bailed out at the surf line basically, then charged ahead.



There were still some Japanese troops. In one particular LVT, they zeroed in on that apparently and we had two men of the first platoon killed and several wounded in exiting the LVT's.

**Mr. Connerly:** What kind of opposition were you receiving by that time? Was it sighted in mortar fire?

**Mr. Dencker:** No, no mortar fire, just some machine gun fire. The machine guns appeared to be firing blindly and a few surviving riflemen. Of course, all of these people we surged ahead and our objective — Company L had two objectives basically: To seize the bridge over what was Philippine Highway #1, 500 yards inland. We were the extreme left flank company of the 96<sup>th</sup> Division and there was the Calbasago River on our left flank and south of that was the 7<sup>th</sup> Division territory, but apparently there was a little gap where the 7<sup>th</sup> Division troops because our 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon was assigned to seize a little hill, Ninety, near the outlet to the ocean and capture the bridge intact. Well the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon went forward. Seven hundred and fifty yards inland there was a hill, called Hill 120, which was the commanding elevation. Basically that was the dividing line between K Company and L Company. I think it was the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon of L Company and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon of K Company were to take Hill 120. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, there were a gap in between, and it was to occupy the gap. The reason we were going to go about 400 yards

inland was the Japs had dug an anti-tank ditch. Apparently they hand dug it with Filipino, slave labor. It was about five feet deep and 16-20 feet wide. It was quite a ditch. We surged forward to the anti-tank ditch. I was behind the riflemen with my 60 pound bag of mortar shell, plus other equipment. We had these inflatable life belts, you squeeze it and two CO2 tubes inflate the belt. We dropped those on the beach, or near the beach. We noticed it was hot, 100% humidity and 90 degrees, at least. Here we had been out in the cool breezes in the ocean, and out of shape from so many days on the ships. So, guys started throwing away their gas masks, thank goodness. We didn't need those anyway. So, I dropped my gas mask, and kept going. I got to the anti-tank ditch. There was shooting up ahead. I went down in the anti-tank ditch. It was some effort to climb out the other side. Then I decided I had to go ahead forward, so I dropped my pack, which was a mistake. Fortunately I got it back early that evening. My poncho was in it for rain protection. Then I went forward and the area there had a lot of coconut palm trees and brush. It was all a tangled, jumbled mess. I was all alone in this wilderness. I knew a lot was going on because I could hear shooting, but I kept going forward. All of a sudden, I came upon this Japanese bunker that was built of coconut logs and earth. I could see that it had been struck by a bomb or Naval shell in the front firing ports. It was damaged fairly badly.

As I passed it, I noticed it had a side entrance which was a wall of logs and an embankment and the bunker had firing ports to the front and had these curtain walls and an entrance. I went down to the entrance level and did something very foolish. I looked in and here were some wounded Jap soldiers and one started to point his rifle at me and I fired my carbine at him. I killed him. He was wounded. I could see him in there because there was an entrance on the other side also and the light was showing in. I could make him out pretty good. I thought about that afterwards, "Boy did I ever do something foolish, silhouetting myself in the entrance of that bunker." If they had been other than wounded or shell-shocked, they would have killed me. The bunker was about 500 yards inland. So then I went on and finally arrived at Highway #1, which turned out to be a sand and gravel surface road, maybe 18 feet wide. There I met up, as planned, with the other members of the mortar section. This was about 10:30 a.m. We moved to our designated assembly points, set up the mortars and were ready to fire about 10:35.

**Mr. Connerly:** Sounds like your landing was on time and your progressed quickly.

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. It was a little bit ahead of schedule because our men took Hill 120 at about 10:40 and we had some men on top of it. At 10:45 a destroyer fired on the hill. They fired white phosphorous shells. Those shells whistled in, exploded, and there was a big puff of

white-greyish smoke. Then another shell whistled in and all kinds of flares went up – cease fire. I think they probably fired three shells, and then they quit, Thank God. We had about six casualties, burn casualties, from white phosphorus. Today, they call that “friendly fire.” I don’t know what happened, but I think we were ahead of schedule and the destroyer decided to give us support, and we didn’t need it.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did you dig in at that stage and wait for further troop landings, or did you begin moving inland?

**Mr. Dencker:** Basically after we took Hill 120, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon took this little hill #90, and there was a Japanese position there, but it had been flattened by the bombardment and the Japanese killed. They moved along the river bank, below the level of the bank, until they got to the bridge and they crept up the bank. The bridge was intact and here was a Japanese machine gun crew waiting for somebody to come down the road, but they were behind them and they killed the crew and took the bridge intact. So then we moved a little bit ahead and stopped, dug-in, and we were in our mortar positions. The idea was to await further orders and see how the landing went. Then we were supposed to move ahead. Then the opposition started. There was a Jap 75mm Howitzer in the 7<sup>th</sup> Division territory across the river. They had not gotten that far, and it started firing at us. About 12:30 an 81mm mortar shell went right

into the center of our Headquarters Group and killed one man and badly wounded our Company Commander, wounded our Executive Officer and about four or five other men. We never saw our Company Commander again. He was a casualty and was evacuated.

**Mr. Connerly:** What was his name?

**Mr. Dencker:** Captain Hoye. 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Fitzpatrick was the Executive Officer. He came back to us later in the operation earlier than he should have because he was still bandaged up with his arm in a sling. It was ironic, he was our Company Commander when we landed on Okinawa. We were a reserve company, and on our first combat day, April 5<sup>th</sup>, we were still moving up behind the front line troops and we got caught in a heavy Japanese artillery bombardment. Lt Fitzpatrick was seriously wounded again. On the Morning Reports for the landing day on Okinawa and Leyte our first casualty listed our Company Commander in both operations.

**Mr. Connerly:** Both operations.

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. To diverse a bit, the Japanese tried to counter-attack in the early afternoon and they had to go through woods in the left front of us and they made so much noise that they were coming. Thank goodness they made a lot of noise. So we fired our mortars in that direction. The tanks had landed by then and were able to fire. Some of them tried to counter-attack and they were cut down and

that was the basic end of the Japanese. We killed about 75 of them, all told. Very feeble.

**Mr. Connerly:** Was it sort of desperation charge type, suicidal attack?

**Mr. Dencker:** I would say so, yes, because we had the fire power. That was the best way to kill Japs – was for them to try to attack us because we suffered less casualties. The same was true on Okinawa. When you had to root them out, that is when we took the casualties.

**Mr. Connerly:** (Side Two, Tape #1) That was an interesting solution to that problem of the tank ditch that you just mentioned in the break. Would you repeat that.

**Mr. Dencker:** When I went back for ammunition that evening, there was the A&P Platoon, Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon. They had our mortar shells and they were centered between K and L Company. I got to look at the K Company sector. In there the tank ditch was wider and somebody had driven an LVT right into the ditch and it fit perfectly. It was tapered in front and tapered in back, and they had then driven vehicles right over the top of it, across the anti-tank ditch.

**Mr. Connerly:** Used it as a bridge. You just can't beat that "Yankee Ingenuity."

**Mr. Dencker:** We sang a song this morning – God Bless America.

**Mr. Connerly:** At the opening of the Symposium?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. About 2:30 in the afternoon and things had quieted down and the Japanese had withdrawn, there were some jungle trails that led

into our front lines. Down one trail came an old Filipino man and a little girl about six years old. They had a bamboo pole with an American flag on it and as they walked into our lines they sang the great Kate Smith Song, “God Bless America.” That is true. Now, this song, I went back to Leyte in 1994 with the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division group, which I mentioned Amelda Marcos.

**Mr. Connerly:** Yes, Amelda Marcos entertained you.

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. The flights from Manila usually left at 5:00-5:30 in the morning to go to the outlying islands. We got into Leyte about 6:00 a.m. and we had a 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division group of about 30 people and they escorted us into a greeting room. Kind of a large room at the airport. In this room they had assembled the Tacloban City Chorus and the first song they sang was “God Bless America.” That brought tears to our eyes. I might say, if there is any place where U.S. Soldiers are well thought of and treated, it is on Leyte still. They still celebrate a holiday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, the Liberation Day. In 1994 I walked down Blue Beach One, the kids would run out and yell, “Hi Joe, Hi Joe.” I have a sentimental attachment to Leyte.

**Mr. Connerly:** I’m sure. After the beach was secured and the troop movement began inland, where did you go. Were you relieved, and did you get back on the LST, or what happened from there?

**Mr. Dencker:** I was going to say, we moved forward on orders at about 3:00-3:30

p.m. We went through some woods in the jungle another 500 yards and all of a sudden we were confronted by a vast swamp. Our Intelligence, the terrain study, called it farm land. It was a vast swamp.

**Mr. Connerly:** Maybe they thought it was an alligator farm.

**Mr. Dencker:** The tanks couldn't move any further, so we dug in for the night. At about 5:00 o'clock we had a rain shower and that was a harbinger of things to come, but it cleared up by supper. Our Platoon Leader said we have to go back and get ammunition and I volunteered to go back. I had an ulterior motive because I didn't have my poncho, but I went back and got the ammunition and I found my pack and got my poncho at the same time. I'll tell you another interesting story. On my way back I ran into a young Filipino man. Filipinos were tremendously glad to see us. He was wearing only shorts. I had my canteens. We had two canteens, one on each side of our cartridge belt. He said, "Want a drink, want a drink." I thought he wanted a drink from the canteen. He said, "No, no. Tuba, Tuba." Then he said, "The Philippine drink, Philippine drink." I thought, "Well, he is being sociable and glad to see us." I said, "OK." There were coconut palm trees there. He climbed up, barefoot, the coconut palm tree. He brings down this catch vessel made of leaves and it was the fermented juice of the coconut palm tree in this leaf container. I took out my canteen cup. He



said, “Tuba, drink.” In the spirit of Philippine-American friendship I drank. Then I made the mistake of looking into this leaf container, and here were six or seven dead flies floating around on top of the brownish liquid in it. I said, “flies, no, no.” He whips a dirty, old handkerchief out of his hip pocket, slaps it over my canteen cup, pours the Tuba through it, strains out the flies, and he had about this much Tuba in the canteen cup. I didn’t know what I was doing, but anyway, I said, “OK.” I drank about half of it and then handed the cup to him and he drank the rest. Then we shook hands and he went on his way. That was my introduction to Tuba, kind of a national drink, at least, of Leyte and quite popular in other places. So, when I’ve gone back to the Philippines I’ve drunk Tuba with the Filipinos.

**Mr. Connerly:** With, or without flies?

**Mr. Dencker:** Well, the flies have all been strained out. Anyway, the next day we moved out into this swamp. Thank God I had retrieved my poncho. Then it started to rain. The first forty days on Leyte we had thirty-five inches of rain. Virtually every day it rained, and it rained, and it rained. We were in this swamp and we couldn’t get supplies. I remember there were a few fields at the higher parts and I remember there was some corn, little corn, about this high and had little tiny cobs on it, and I took some cobs and ate the little immature

kernels on these for food. There were a few Filipino houses that were scattered around that were part of the swamp. I would dip some water out of the wells, and it was murky. I put in Halizone tablets, about four times the dosage. For about three days we couldn't get supplies through. I don't know if you've ever heard of the M-29 Weasels, but they bogged down. They couldn't get through the swamp. We finally stole, borrowed, Philippine water buffalos and used them to carry supplies. Finally, we got far enough in there where there was a road that came in from the 7<sup>th</sup> Division territory. About the fourth or fifth day they started to get some supplies to us. We were basically through the swamp and into a better area. We continued advancing until we got to the burrio of Tabontabon and there we opposed the Japanese 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division defending Leyte. There was kind of a junction in the road there and they decided to make a stand there, so we had a battle with the Japanese at Tabontabon. We absolutely leveled the place with our artillery fire. Only the skeleton of the masonry brick Catholic church remained. Killed a lot of Japanese; we had quite a few casualties. We went onto another place, another road junction where we stopped for a few days, which was another major Japanese supply point. There it was interesting what we found. They had a lot of American equipment there; a 1940 Plymouth car that they had used for a staff car. Apparently they had hauled it

down from Manila, or Bataan, or something. Even had some American weapons there, machine guns.

**Mr. Connerly:** All appeared to be pre-war equipment?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. All appeared to be pre-war equipment, plus some Japanese trucks. I pried the nameplate off of one truck. It was a weapons carrier. I still have it. I've had it translated for me. It was made in 1942 at some Japanese Army ordnance establishment. We continued fighting. The Japanese were driven back into an area we called Dagami Heights, where there are 6,000 survivors of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of Japan made their last stand. Dagami Heights was a "green hell" actually. It was an operation where we took a lot of casualties. Virtually all of the Japanese perished there from our fire power. They went down fighting and they caused us a lot of casualties. I had a very good buddy that was killed there.

**Mr. Connerly:** What was his name?

**Mr. Dencker:** Tony Nichilo. This is what sticks in my mind. This was about the 20<sup>th</sup> of November. Another buddy, Ernie Zimmer, and I were talking to him after that day's action and we had four guys that were wounded in the legs by Japanese machine gun fire through the kooni branch, which were about four feet high. Tony said, "Those guys that got hit today were lucky. I have a feeling when I get hit, I will be hit bad." Well, the next time I saw him, the next day, he was on the liter dead with a Japanese bullet through his heart. That is why

I remember Tony quite well. I think he had a premonition. We stayed in action on Leyte, in Dagami Heights, drove the Japs back, and took their positions. By then the Japs were starving. They were in terrible shape. Of course, we weren't in very good shape either, but we started to get lots of jungle rot. It rained and was wet all of the time. My fatigue pants and jacket were just rotting off of me. One morning I woke up in a wet fox hole, or got out of it. I felt something in my belly. I ripped open my field jacket, and here was a great big leech curled up around my belly button. Things like that you don't forget. About the day before Thanksgiving we got relieved. We had wiped out most of the Japanese. We were in poor shape. We had yellow jaundice, dysentery, jungle rot, fungus growth on the legs and feet and even on hands. So by that time we had lots of disease casualties. Guys were sick. You had to have 102 fever to be taken away from the front line action. I had 101 one day. I was there every day and I was lucky. Then we were relieved, and the other outfits of the division had been hit less hard than the 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry so they really finished up the battle. Our last action, last casualty, was about the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1944, and Thanksgiving Day we had our first good meal since that morning meal on LST-745 on October 20<sup>th</sup>. That is the Leyte story.

**Mr. Connerly:** Before we move you in the direction of Okinawa, something I always heard was that the Navy, when it was your morning to hit the

beach, they fed you a good breakfast of steak and eggs.

**Mr. Dencker:** They didn't have any steak, but they fed us a good breakfast. They had bacon, fresh coffee, eggs. They gave us a good meal. I've written a book. That is why I know all of these facts. I've interviewed a lot of buddies, and I've been to the National Archives and got a lot of combat reports for the 96<sup>th</sup> Division. I went to the Center for Military History, Carlisle Barracks, Army Military History and got information.

**Mr. Connerly:** Let's get the name of your book in here. What is the name of the book that you wrote?

**Mr. Dencker:** "Love Company."

**Mr. Connerly:** "Love Company."

**Mr. Dencker:** It is not a romance. It is basically the story of my military service with emphasis on my time in Company L, 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division on Leyte and Okinawa. There are 23 chapters. Most of the chapters are Leyte and Okinawa, and some on Mindoro after the War. It is going to be published by Sunflower University Press. Publication date is February 2002. Supposedly it is going to have 380 pages and 70 illustrations. They are very generous with their illustrations, most of which will be photographs. I hired a map maker and he made eleven battle maps that are pretty good that are going to be in it, and a few other documents that count as illustrations.

**Mr. Connerly:** Well we will certainly need to make sure that we have a copy of that in the Museum Library when it comes out. Well, after you were relieved in Leyte, where did you go next?

**Mr. Dencker:** There was an interval in there. My particular regiment got involved in one more action, but not L Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December we were near what was called Burauen Airfields. There was Buri, San Pablo and Burauen Air Bases that the Japanese had started and Americans tried to improve. I was standing in the chow line about 6:30, just before dark, and I saw about 26, at first I thought they were DC-3 transport planes, but they were a Japanese copy of them. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Brigade of the Japanese Army, part of it, descended upon San Pablo and Buri Airfield. That was kind of a wild night. They was shooting and explosions. Of course, the Army Air Force, they weren't expecting a combat operation. They jumped into their trucks and headed off and they would get mired down in the swamp. You would hear truck engines racing. It was kind of chaos. The 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne was nearby, and a couple battalions from the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne and our 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry had to wipe out the Japanese. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had a guy win the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was killed though after the action that he won the medal for. L Company was detached and we went in the darkness to guard the 116<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital. We set up a perimeter around the hospital.

The next day we started teaching the hospital personnel how to rifle marksmanship. That ended and we went down and guarded the 6<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters for about a week or two and then they pulled out for Luzon. Then we were in camp by the beach and we were alerted for another operation. We got some replacements. We trained, got some new equipment, reorganized. We landed with 187 men present for duty with L Company on Leyte. We were supposed to get a lot of replacements; we only got some so we then embarked for Okinawa. We got on ships about the 12<sup>th</sup> of March. Sat in the harbor off of Leyte for quite a few days, took off for Okinawa, and we were the reserve regiment. So the landing was made by the 381<sup>st</sup> and 383<sup>rd</sup> Infantry. Actually we were to come ashore the next day, but it went so well that we landed about 12:30 that day. The landing was earlier. It was 8:00 a.m. on April 1, 1945, Easter Sunday.

**Mr. Connerly:** Was the landing unopposed where you were?

**Mr. Dencker:** For the most part. And the same way in the Marine section. The Japanese had changed their tactics. They were waiting for us, dug in, pill boxes, previously registered artillery fire, machine gun position, anti-tank gun positions, 320mm mortar positions, waiting for us on a series of defensive ridges that ran across the island and they had the commanding ground and they were waiting for us to

move against their positions. When we landed on Okinawa we had the Table of Organization for a rifle company, and the Army called for 193 men and we had 168 when we landed on Okinawa. Then began the battle of Okinawa for us. We were the reserve; we were still reserve on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April. We were moving south and the heavy opposition really started about the 4<sup>th</sup> of April. Our troops were still moving forward. It was the outpost defenses, Cactus Ridge, etc., where they more or less posted companies of Japanese in well prepared positions to hold us up until they were overwhelmed. So we moved in about noon. We were probably 500 yards behind the front lines and all of a sudden the shells start coming. We moved into an area that the Japanese apparently had designated as an area of fire. The artillery was pretty well coordinated or prepared on Okinawa. That is where we had our first casualties, including our Company Commander and my foxhole buddy on Leyte, Tony Sack. He was killed on April 5<sup>th</sup> by a Japanese artillery shell on Okinawa. That is another sad thing. He was a good guy. He was buried at Punch Bowl. I visited his grave. That for us was April 5<sup>th</sup>, the start of the combat on Okinawa. My Company L was in combat until about noon on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, and then we had had so many casualties we were relieved. They pulled the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, they pulled our regiment back and they said we were going to help guard Kadena Airfield.



That was great except the Japs tried to bomb Kadena many nights and they also had a one 150mm gun or a couple of them could shell it from eight miles away. 150mm shells kept coming over, but they never landed near us, but you would hear them go overhead. A particular day was the 20<sup>th</sup> of April. My good friend, our second Company Commander was wounded badly that day, Bob Glassman. He still lives in Hayes, Kansas. He was my Platoon Leader on Leyte. He was our second Company Commander on Okinawa. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April we took Tombstone Ridge. L Company was on the left flank and there was a little hill called Hill Seven, which we were trying to take and we reached the crest and all of a sudden we were almost surrounded by the Japanese. A desperate situation.

**Mr. Connerly:** Was it a Japanese infantry assault?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. Infantry and heavy fire, supporting fire. So we withdrew under smoke, but we had about 35 casualties in that. A lot of good guys killed, including the guy that I rode home on my one furlough on the train ride. He got on it. He was from Iowa and got on in Des Moines. Al Engan was killed that day. My good ASTP buddy, Jack Kramer, was seriously wounded for the second time; once on Leyte. He was badly wounded on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April we did something that was unique. We had taken Tombstone Ridge and then we had to attack the next hill ahead called Nishibaru Ridge. We went over into the 381<sup>st</sup> Infantry on

the right and then I don't know why the Japs didn't see us, but then we made an attack. Rather than a frontal attack, we made our attack down the length of the ridge. We took most of the ridge before they realized what was going on and mounted a counter attack. That was the day we really stopped them, but they really got close. I got a chance to fire my 45 caliber. Then I was assistant gunner of 60mm mortar. I started out as ammunition bearer. I got a chance to fire my 45 caliber pistol at them because they were that close. There is a story on that. There was a light counter attack around noon and we'd fired most of our mortar shells. I went back for ammunition the way that we had come. Here on the hillside, sprawled out dead, were two mortar ammunition bearers. They must have been from the 381<sup>st</sup> Infantry. It was in their territory.

**Mr. Connerly:** That was their territory that you were crossing?

**Mr. Dencker:** We went like this, and I was going back like this. They both had virtually full ammunition bags and there were a lot of shell holes in the area, but there wasn't a mark on them. The concussion must have killed them. I pulled the ammunition bags from them and with great effort I dragged them back to the mortar. I always wondered who those poor guys were. Still wonder. They were a Godsend really. Then came the main Japanese counter attack. It was a top of a ridge and it was strewn with a lot of big boulders,

places where you could take shelter and run up to the next one. We were very much under strength then. There was K, L, and I Company and there were lots of Japs and it got pretty close because we elevated our mortars to actually maximum elevation. At 45 degrees was their maximum range, about a mile. As you went up like this, the range got shorter.

**Mr. Connerly:** Yes, as you increase the angle.

**Mr. Dencker:** A mortar shell weighed a little over three pounds. It had a main propellant, which is like a shotgun cartridge in the center base, and then it had explosive charges. It had four fins. Between the four fins they had these little squares of explosives. You had a firing chart which would tell you, if you want to fire it 300 yards, it would be 75 degrees elevation and charge 2, or charge 1. Then you would rip off three of those little explosive pads and throw them away. You would drop the shell down the tube and it would go the distance you wanted to fire it unless it was a defective shell. Fortunately, there were very, very few of those. So we were firing at 86 degrees elevation and charge Zero, which was about 50 yards away.

**Mr. Connerly:** What was the blast radius? What did they tell you the blast radius was on one of those mortar shells?

**Mr. Dencker:** About 35 yards.

**Mr. Connerly:** At 50 yards, you could potentially be hit by your own shells, couldn't you?

**Mr. Dencker:** It would be pretty much spent. You could see the shell almost struggling out of the tube. We fired shells an absolute minimum range for the 60mm mortar. That was the only day that I had to fire at that elevation. Well, the Japanese attack was stopped, but we still had a number of casualties. We were getting down low in strength so they were going to relieve us the next day. By that time, I was pretty exhausted. Ernie Zimmer, my buddy, was a gunner and I was the assistant gunner. That night, for some reason or other, we both fell asleep in our foxhole. All of a sudden we woke up, and here was a hail of rifle fire right at the side of our foxhole. That sure got us awake. We couldn't get out of the hole. It was as black as the pitch of spades. Some guys were alert and they shot two Japs about 25 yards from our hold. One was an officer, and one was an enlisted man with a rifle and a hand grenade. They could have thrown the hand grenade into our foxhole, but that was foolishness on our part. We were exhausted. The next day, that was kind of a tragic day. About 7:00 o'clock in the morning the Japanese 150 Howitzer started firing at us and we had a foxhole on the reverse slope of this ridge, and this must have been the engineer in me because the first pair of rounds landed about 150 yards over. About a minute later, 75 yards over. I remember yelling to Ernie, "God, the next one is it, we got to get out of here." We did what we

shouldn't do, and that is get out of our foxhole. The hill had a terrace, and up at the terrace up above us the Japanese had kind of hollowed out a little recess on the side of the hill.

**Mr. Connerly:** Was it something like rifle pit?

**Mr. Dencker:** No. It had no depth, but I had the recess. So we scrambled up there, and at least the shell couldn't hit us directly. The next shells came in. They were spaced apart, but the one went right near our foxhole and exploded. The 150 is a 6 inch shell, pretty good size. The concussion slammed me against the side of the terrace. I think if we had stayed in the foxhole the concussion could have killed us. I know I was dazed. The very unfortunate thing about it, not very far from me was the foxhole of my platoon sergeant. He was killed. Our mortar squad leader was badly wounded, and a couple of other men were badly wounded. I won't forget that morning even though we were going to be relieved two or three hours later. That was my lucky break there.

**Mr. Connerly:** That was. So you were relieved?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes, and then we went up to Kadena Air Base to guard that. Then at Kadena we got a bunch of replacements. We got 67 replacements in one day about May 1<sup>st</sup>. They were pretty good guys, but boy they were sure put in a hell of a spot. A lot of them were 1944 High School graduates, 18 years old, infantry replacements. We tried to integrate them in the rifle platoons,

some in the mortar section, some in the machine gun section, and we went back into the front lines. Very nice day. It was raining. As we marched up the front lines we were spread out. They told us the Germans had surrendered, VE Day. It didn't matter, not the position we were in. Then our next objective was the Dick Hill area. That was the most prolonged, toughest battle where I nearly got killed again. Lucky me, I didn't, but I could have been. We got more replacements. This was going on while the Marines were fighting for Sugar Loaf and we were fighting for Dick Hill. Our 383<sup>rd</sup> Infantry took Conical Hill, which was the right as the Japanese were facing, anchor of their Main Shuri Defense Line. It guarded the coastal plain. Then they sent the whole 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division through the gap and were about to encircle Shuri, the main headquarters and bastion of the Japanese, when they decided to move to the south. We were assaulting basically the Dick Hill mass. There Company L got another 20 some replacements during the battle and in taking Item Hill, Baker Hill, and then the main hill, Dick Hill, Company L had another 121 battle casualties. We were down to next to nothing. In fact, it was so bad that on our 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, they combined A, B, and C Company into what they called "Church Company," which was commanded by an officer by the name of Church, last name Church. Finally we got relieved there about the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. We had taken Dick Hill and the next

ridge beyond it.

**Mr. Connerly:** Was that about the last combat that you saw?

**Mr. Dencker:** Oh no.

**Mr. Connerly:** More to come on Okinawa?

**Mr. Dencker:** Oh yes. That's right. We were in awfully bad shape.

**Mr. Connerly:** OK. We are ready to begin Tape #2 with Mr. Donald Dencker.

**Mr. Dencker:** Maybe I'm taking too much time.

**Mr. Connerly:** No. It is about 20 minutes to 12 right now and we do have lunch at 12:30.

**Mr. Dencker:** OK. I'll be done by that time.

**Mr. Connerly:** I believe we were around the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1945.

**Mr. Dencker:** That's right, and that was the rainy period. It rained all the time. Actually, when we were attacking Dick Hill, about the 15<sup>th</sup>, it rained almost continuously after that and the whole battle area was mired down in mud. We had trouble getting supplies even though we were in reserve. One day while waiting there I decided I wanted to take one last look at Dick Hill so I waded through the mud, up the face of Dick Hill, slipping and sliding, and I got to the reverse slope. That was a moonscape. Japs were great reverse slope defenders. You've probably heard that before. The stench was bad. There

were dead Japanese bodies all over the place. Some had been partially buried. I looked around and I stepped wrong and I stepped on the chest of a just barely buried dead Japanese and a whole bunch of stinking ooze and muck came on my boots. I just about threw up. I'd seen enough of Dick Hill so I went back, rinsed off my boots in a mud puddle, told the guys what I'd seen. That was about it. So we waited while the Marines and the Army advanced after the Japanese had withdrawn their main forces. They left rear guards. There was fighting all the way. We were in bad shape. We got a few more replacements and then toward early June we moved south again. We stopped short of the battle area. The battle area for the 96<sup>th</sup> was basically being carried out by the 381<sup>st</sup> Infantry, which had had the least casualties and part of the 383<sup>rd</sup>, which had had more replacements. The 383<sup>rd</sup> had the heaviest casualties in April, but they had more replacements. The 382<sup>nd</sup> had the most casualties by far in May and the 381<sup>st</sup> had the most casualties (infantry) in June, but about the 15<sup>th</sup> of June they decided we were needed again. So we went down to a place called Ozato and relieved a company of the 383<sup>rd</sup> Infantry. Ozato was a dangerous area because a Japanese engineering battalion had been there and they had laid a great number of mines. We were already down to our fifth Company Commander. The four previous being wounded. Two in April and two in May; very seriously wounded



three of them, but not killed. Company L was the extreme right hand company of the Army and on our immediate right was a Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. There was kind of a dirt road, and that was the boundary line between us. So we were in the last push against the last Japanese desperate resistance. I was then combination gunner and squad leader of the Mortar Squad. Didn't have any squad leaders for the gunners. We had not had any officers in the weapons platoons since the 20<sup>th</sup> of April so we operated on our own. We didn't have hardly any officers. We had a Company Commander and one other officer usually. One day we didn't have any officer. Anyway, we took part in the final attack and drove down to where Medeera and Anagachi. About where I ended the battle. I nearly got killed again. I was crossing a field. I had gone up to the machine gun section at the end of the day to visit with my buddy, Ernie Zimmer. He had been my foxhole buddy during April and he had gone to the machine gun section and became a squad leader and then eventually a section leader of the machine gun section due to casualties. He was a very brave man and pretty lucky too. I'd gone up to chat with him and I started back, what I thought was a safe route. A couple Japs started shooting at me. I dived into a big shell hole. The next thing I knew, a bullet came into the shell hole and hit right in front of my nose. It didn't take me long, more than a fraction of a second, to

decided to get the hell out of there. Fortunately, the Japanese had bolt action rifles and it took them at least a couple of seconds to fire a second shot. I was out of that hole and running as they were firing at me. They missed! I got back to my assistant gunner and he had seen it from his side elevated position. He said, "God, Dencker I thought you were a goner." I remember his very words. I said, "Jim you were so damned close to right." Then all of a sudden, we were kind of crouched behind a big rock, and all of a sudden a Jap bullet ricocheted off the top of the rock. We decided to get out of there too. We made a fast move to a little safer position, but he apparently had been watching the thing. Those are just some of my close escapes. The Japs were beaten; they were all killed. I helped take four Japanese women prisoners. They had been clerks in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Army Headquarters we found out later from Intelligence. One of them had a hand grenade. I grabbed her wrist while another guy pried the grenade out of her hand. So, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June was our last combat day. We occupied ourselves with blowing caves, destroying Japanese positions, and then about the 25<sup>th</sup> of June they took the 96<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup>, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, turned us around to form a skirmish line and we moved back North. They formed a blocking force and our job was to clean out Japanese stragglers; clear the area, all the way back, quite ways back to the Naha-Shuri Yonabaru Road. That was

the mop-up phase. We had two minor casualties during that period and that was the end of our combat. On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1945, at noon, our Company L arrived at our objective, which was a hill overlooking the remains of Yonabaru and that sure was a beautiful day in my life. I sat on this hillside, the sun was out, I was overlooking the Pacific and I swore I could see home. I had a good feeling that I had made it. By the Grace of God I had. I'd been there every single day of combat and I was in one piece. I was only partially deafened in my right ear. That was due to two things. I think that Japanese shell on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April and all the mortar shells I put down the tube. I'd be the gunner on the right hand side, or the assistant gunner put down the tube, but I fired and aimed. I ducked my head down, but it would go "bam". That was a great story – the end of the battle. Before the end of July we were on LST-824 going to Mindora Island to get new weapons, get a lot of replacements to get back into better shape and get ready for the Invasion of Japan.

**Mr. Connerly:** Yes. Is that where you were when the word came that the Japanese had surrendered.

**Mr. Dencker:** Actually, the 381<sup>st</sup> went in the first convoy; 382<sup>nd</sup> was the second. When the first atomic bomb was dropped we were heading for Mindoro. When the second one was dropped we were near Mindoro. We had just gotten ashore when they surrendered. So

Mindora was a pleasant stay and a wait to come home. That is where I got my record at Fatigue Junction, the USO Club. I went there one day and they had a drawing and the prize was one of these crank-up phonographs and one record. The record I got on one side was “Sentimental Journey”, Doris Day singing for Les Brown and His Band of Renowned. I must have worn that record out. I don’t have any idea what was on the flip side. That was my song.

**Mr. Connerly:** That’s great.

**Mr. Dencker:** That is basically the story. I came home on points.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did you come home on a troop ship?

**Mr. Dencker:** The Navy let us down. No they really didn’t, but they disbanded the Navy so fast that there weren’t enough Navy crews to haul the Army guys home from the Pacific. So they were sending us back on Merchant Ships and I rode back on a slow Victory Ship. As it got near the Hawaiian Islands, or someplace out in the middle of the Pacific, it got a distress call from another ship. It turned around and went the wrong direction for one day. Anyway, I got home and about the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1946 I was in the registration line at the University of Minnesota. Up comes my buddy, Jack Kramer, and he said, “Are you Don Dencker, or am I seeing a ghost?” He had just been released from the hospital, discharged from the Army, and he had heard that Company L had been wiped out. I said, “Jack, I’m very glad to tell you that I’m not a ghost.” We had a nice

reunion.

**Mr. Connerly:** That's terrific. So you got right out of the war and back into college then?

**Mr. Dencker:** That's right.

**Mr. Connerly:** Just as an aside, since the war ended and you resumed your civilian career then, what have you done over the years?

**Mr. Dencker:** OK. I went to the University of Minnesota. The Cold War was starting. I didn't like my military occupation specialty (MOS) number, which was Weapons Squad Leader or Section Leader for a rifle company, weapons platoon. So I took ROTC. I became a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. I had a reserve military obligation for three years and I was in the Minnesota National Guard, 682<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion. I was a Reconnaissance Officer. The Minnesota National Guard got called up for the Korean War. We got shipped down to Camp Rucker, Alabama. We reopened the camp, started training. I was then a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. That is as high as I got in the Army. The Intelligence Officer, a Major, he was an older guy and he was going to retire, but he ended up getting called up. He was about two or three months from retiring from the Guard when he was called up. The Battalion Commander wanted me to be the S-2 Intelligence Officer. So he arranged to send me to Staff Officers' Intelligence School.

**Mr. Connerly:** Do you suppose he heard about that Yap Island thing?

**Mr. Dencker:** He might have. Anyway, he sent me to Staff Officers' Intelligence School at Ft. Riley, Kansas. Staff Officers are Major and above and I was the only 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant in the class. I was doing very good in the class and was about two-thirds of the way through when the Commandant, the Colonel, called me in to see him in his office. I remember what he said was, "Lt Dencker, I've got good news and bad news for you." I said, "Well, Colonel, please give me the bad news first." He said, "You have been assigned to Korea." I said, "Well, OK. What's the good news?" He said, "The Army Department computer in Washington has selected you to serve in SCARWAF. I said, "Colonel, sir, what the hell is SCARWAF?" He said, "Special Category Army with Air Force." So I ended up in Korea in the 802<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Aviation Battalion, which was assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force and that was my first experience with a computer and I'll be darn if they didn't put square pegs in square holes and round pegs in round holes because I was a Civil Engineering....I found myself on a Jeep aircraft carrier, the Windam Bay going to Japan and then to Korea with about 20 other 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenants, all recent Civil Engineer graduates. That is what I worked on. That was a relatively safe job.

**Mr. Connerly:** Well, you are retired now. What business did you retire from?

**Mr. Dencker:** Oh, well, when I got back out of Korea I worked for a consulting engineer. I had enough GI Bill time so I finished my Civil

Engineering course and then I could take a plan B, which was a non-thesis, but I had to have so many credits and a big paper and get my Masters Degree in Civil Engineering. I had majored in what was called Sanitary Engineering, now it is Environmental Engineering. I got my Masters Degree, went to work for a consulting engineering firm in Minneapolis. I worked for them for about eight months, got called back in the National Guard. Went back to them after the Guard. Worked another year or so there. Got hired as City Engineer for a suburb of about 17,000 people; Columbia Heights next to Minneapolis. I spent two years there. Then, one of my instructors, who had been my surveying instructor called me up one day and says, “Don, would you come to work for Oscar Mayer?” I said, “Who’s Oscar Mayer?” That was Stan Johnson. So I said that I wanted to work for private industry, so I went down there and started February 17, 1958, working for Oscar Mayer. I did all right at Oscar Mayer. They were a great company to work for. They gave you a lot of responsibilities. In a couple of years I became the Environmental Engineering Manager and kept everybody out of jail and did a good job. Then they gave me another title as Manager of a Major Engineering Projects.

**Mr. Connerly:** That kept you working a lot of those years – eating those Oscar Mayer.

**Mr. Dencker:** I built plants for them. I had a good guy in charge of environment,

so I had two hats and was elected to the Executive Management Committee for Oscar Meyer. Then they were bought out by General Foods, but they kind of left Oscar Meyer alone because they were doing better than General Foods.

**Mr. Connerly:** Did you have a family over the years?

**Mr. Dencker:** Yes. I finally retired at age 66 after I built my last plant. I built a big addition to a plant in Columbia, Missouri, in April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1991. My first wife died at the age of 39 and left me four relatively young daughters. She died of lung cancer. Then I had a second wife and then she had two young daughters, my stepdaughters. So, I've got six daughters. They are all married. I've got six nice guys as sons-in-law. I get along pretty good with all of them. I have a whole bunch of grandkids.

**Mr. Connerly:** That's great.

**Mr. Dencker:** Then after I retired I did consulting work for about 6-7 years. I got involved with the World Environment Fund and Agency for International Development. Made a fair amount of trips to Poland. I helped them with their meat packing industry after they split away from the Soviet Union. I went to Estonia a number of times to help the Estonians right after they were liberated from the Russians, which was very interesting. I went to Jordan and that was really interesting. I found out I was an arbitrator when I got there between the Jordan Department of Water, Irrigation, Environment



and the greater Municipality of Amman and their municipal slaughter house was overloading their waste treatment plant and it wasn't performing properly. I had to try to bring peace between the two, but I had a great time in Jordan.

**Mr. Connerly:** It sounds like you've had an interesting life. Of course, we so appreciate and so value everything you did with your wartime service. But, like so many others, you didn't stop contributing after that. It sounds like you had a real interesting and productive life.

**Mr. Dencker:** I've been very fortunate. I've been very active in the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association. That is kind of a "payback" in my mind to my buddies, particularly those that didn't make it.

**Mr. Connerly:** If anybody is interested in affiliating with the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Association, how would they do that, who would they contact?

**Mr. Dencker:** Me.

**Mr. Connerly:** They would contact you.

**Mr. Dencker:** I run the web site.

**Mr. Connerly:** OK. What is the web address?

**Mr. Dencker:** It is [www.96th-infantry-division.com](http://www.96th-infantry-division.com).

**Mr. Connerly:** OK. Now we've got that on the tape too. Any closing remarks there? I do have one final question that I would like to ask you. Then I'll give you an opportunity to wrap up in whichever way you like. I would just be interested in your feelings, or your comments, the manner in which the war ended there in the Pacific. We had, of

course, taken such horrendous, there had been almost a 100% sacrifice in terms of the Japanese defenders, and I imagine you all were looking at that invasion of Japan and thinking what that would be like. What were your thoughts about having to invade the Japanese mainland, and how did you feel, and in reflecting about how we brought that war to a conclusion with those atomic bombs?

**Mr. Dencker:**

Well, I guess I was ready to do it, but I was a little nervous that I had used up eight of my nine lives, you might say. Company L had over 300 battle casualties. I figured out in my research – first of all, not one man in a rifle platoon made it all the way through Leyte and Okinawa. I was fortunate to be in the Weapons Platoon. It was damned dangerous, but it was safer than the Rifle Platoon. I figured out at the end of the Battle of Okinawa there were seven of us of the 187 that had made the landing on Leyte and were still there unscathed. We had a lot of wounded returned after the Battle of Okinawa. So, that was a pretty small percentage. They were all either in Company Headquarters or the Mortar Section and one man in the Machine Gun Section. Nobody in the Rifle Platoon. So I give the Rifle Platoons all the credit in the world, and I was so happy about the Atomic Bomb that I can't fathom anybody condemning the use of it because it sure saved a lot of lives. Probably more Japanese lives than American lives. That is my opinion. Also, I was mighty glad to get home.

**Mr. Connerly:** I'm mighty glad you made it home too.

**Mr. Dencker:** Well, I was lucky, lucky. Grace of God and luck is what I tell people. I've had a great life.

**Mr. Connerly:** Well, I think that is a good way to bring the tape to a close.

**Mr. Dencker:** OK. Thank you Ted. I appreciate it.

**Mr. Connerly:** Well, thank you Don, it has been my great pleasure and privilege to take down this information for the Museum.

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