

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Russel G. Banwart

Sioux City, Iowa

July 24, 2007

D Company, 2nd Engineer Battalion, 18th Marine Engineers, 2nd Marine Division

Tulagi, Solomon Islands, September 1942

Third Wave at Tarawa, Wounded

Landed on Okinawa on April 1, 1945

Presidential Unit Citation

Purple Heart

My name is Richard Misenhimer and today is July 24, 2007. I am interviewing Mr. Russel G. Banwart by telephone. His phone number is area code 712-276-7062. His address is 2305 South Nicolette, Sioux City, Iowa, 51006. This interview is in support of the National Museum of Pacific War, Center for Pacific War Studies, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer

Russ, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II. Now the first thing that I would like to do is to get an alternate contact. We have found that sometimes two or three years down the road we try to get in contact with a veteran and he has moved or gone to the nursing home or something. Do you have a son or daughter or someone that we can contact in case we can't find you?

Mr. Banwart

I've got a son in Des Moines that is retired. Keith Banwart. His address is 1513 Prairie Court, Altoona, Iowa, 50007. His phone number is 515-967-2686. He's my oldest son.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now the next thing I need to do to is read to you this agreement with the National Museum of the Pacific War. When I do these in person I give it to the man to read and sign, but since this is by phone let me read this to you to make sure that it is okay.

“Agreement Read.” Is that okay?

Mr. Banwart

That's okay.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is your birth date?

Mr. Banwart

March 16, 1923.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where were you born?

Mr. Banwart

Algona, Iowa.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Mr. Banwart

Four of each.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were any of your brothers in World War II?

Mr. Banwart

Yes my oldest brother, he was about 3 ½ years older than me, he was in the Army, actually the Guard. They brought the National Guard in. He was in Italy and Africa. Then my younger brother, who was about 3 ½ years younger than me, he was in Alaska. He was in later in the war so he didn't get any combat in. My other brother did.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did both of them come home?

Mr. Banwart

Yes. We were very fortunate there.

Mr. Misenhimer

But you said that neither one of them is still living?

Mr. Banwart

No, they both died. Two months apart, a few years ago.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your mother and father's first names.

Mr. Banwart

My father was George W. and my mother was Leah.

Mr. Misenhimer

You grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Banwart

With nine kids, we weren't too wealthy. My dad was a truck driver. He had his own truck. He tried to get into drayage and bigger stuff, but mostly it was just little stuff around town. We even picked up trash. For a quarter we would clean up the junk in the alley. We had a little acreage. We had our own cows and we raised some pigs. We had a horse or two, later just one horse. I think he used horses for his drayage to begin with, before I was around too much. We had our own milk and butter. We would churn some butter. We would butcher a hog. We had some cattle, a few cows. Actually we pastured them on the railway. There was a railroad running right past our backyard and that was all fenced in down all the way back to a creek. That was fenced in at the other end. The train only ran once a day, so we had to be out there to be sure the cows weren't causing any problems with the train. We helped keep the grass down.

Mr. Misenhimer

And you probably had a garden too?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, a big one. A couple of them actually. We raised and sold strawberries for I think a nickel a quart. We sold eggs.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you trade eggs or butter or anything like that to the grocery store for food or anything like that?

Mr. Banwart

We sold our milk, the cream to the creamery and would sometimes get butter there. I don't know, maybe we took stuff to the grocery store, probably the strawberries and that kind of stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes, I know that some people would barter and trade for things like that.

Mr. Banwart

We probably hauled the trash out of the grocery store, so we had some help there too.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you go to high school?

Mr. Banwart

Algona.

Mr. Misenhimer

What year did you finish there?

Mr. Banwart

1940.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you do when you finished high school?

Mr. Banwart

That summer I worked at a grocery store. It was kind of boring there. I wanted to go to college in the fall but I wasn't making enough money to save enough to do any good. I thought, "Well, I'm going to try something else." I wanted to see some country so I joined a magazine crew. A good friend of mine was just starting up one. That group, we had a car and there were three or four of us and we went around selling household magazines. Actually, it was a promotion. We gave away a cookbook and 5 years of a household magazine for about \$2. It was a pretty good deal. I got to see quite a bit of the country that way, in the Midwest at least. We worked in Indiana, I know I was in Terre Haute and some other places in Indiana. A little bit in Illinois. Iowa of course and Missouri and Nebraska. In Kansas we were in Wichita.

Mr. Misenhimer

How much would you earn on that?

Mr. Banwart

I had to make enough to buy my meals and hotel room. I made a little extra but I wasn't saving any money. I quit in the fall so I didn't have too much experience before Christmas and what I earned before Christmas I spent on Christmas. Then, I remember I had \$1 left and I had to get back to Des Moines to meet this guy I was traveling with. I hitchhiked a ride with a Des Moines Register truck that came up to Algona and dumped

papers about 2:00 in the morning on Sundays. My dad took some of those papers and took them out to towns in Northwest Iowa. So we knew the driver. I had gone before with my dad and helped. I ended up spending Sunday in Des Moines and I had enough money left for breakfast the next morning. So Monday I had to earn some money to pay my hotel bill. I did that until the summer of 1941. Then we kind of disbanded temporarily. Actually the car that my friend was using, it wasn't his, it was some relative's, a cousin or something. The cousin decided to get out of it. We were kind of stuck there without transportation. He decided to give it up for the time being. I went to work for a bakery in West Bend, Iowa. West Bend is where they have that Grotto of the Redemption that is nationally known as a tourist site. My brother was a baker and I think some distant relative, my dad's cousin or something, was a partner so it wasn't too hard to get a job there. I worked during the summer and that's where I first met the woman that I married. I met her one evening, I was introduced to her. I said, "Hello" and that was it. Then I never saw her again until during the war. In the fall we started up a crew again for magazines. By the fall of 1941 there weren't many people running around looking for jobs of that type. A lot of them had gotten drafted and were in the service. We were having trouble building up. I was supposed to be assistant manager of the crew but he didn't have a crew, so it didn't really help much. During the time that I worked for the bakery this guy came and talked to me and wanted me to go with him. I said, "No, I'm going to stay here." Then he came back later and visited with me and brought a prospect for the crew and wanted me to help persuade him. But I persuaded myself is what happened, so I went with him. In the meantime, he had looked for other work. One of the companies that he had applied to, offered him a job. Or at least I thought they did

anyway. He was going down to interview for that in Des Moines. I went along and while I was there I decided that I would see the world. So I joined the Marine Corps. Actually, there was no way that I was going to save enough money to go to school. I figured that if I did, I would be about halfway through and they would draft me. I thought I might as well join and get it over with. It turned out that they put me in the Reserves anyway, even though I wanted the regular Marines, but they put me in as a Reserve. It was kind of a sneaky deal because I told them what I wanted and they slipped that in on me. I was 18 and my dad had to sign and I don't know why. I had to go back and get his signature. He was a little hesitant but he signed it. I went back to the office. I was supposed to be there by 8:00 and I was there a quarter till, of course. I waited all day long and about closing time suddenly there was a flurry and they got all these papers out. I was signing them and they were stamping them after I signed them. That's when I found out I was classified as a Reserve, after I got on the train. I joined on September 22, 1941 and went through boot camp. After boot camp, they had asked us what we wanted to do. I wanted to get into radio, preferably in the Air Force, the Marine Air Force. They said that you had to go to radio school first. So I went to radio school. We had to go to the school and do mess duty for two weeks before the next class started. Of course, we weren't in the war yet. At the end of the two weeks I hadn't had any liberty yet. I never got into San Diego, but on December 6, 1941, after the inspection at noon, I got my first liberty. I went into San Diego and I even went clear down to Tijuana. I had a little tequila down there. Then I came back and when I woke up the next morning I dressed up and went on liberty again. I still had a pass. I got to the gate and they wouldn't let me out. "We are at War." It was December 7th. I never got liberty for some time after that.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did you choose the Marines?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know, I suppose it was through hype. I had read some place, "Join the Marines and See the World." I did do that I guess, to a certain extent, at least some of it. I would have never seen those beautiful islands out there if I hadn't of joined.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you actually go in to the Marines at, what town?

Mr. Banwart

I joined in Des Moines and they sent me to San Diego.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did you travel out there?

Mr. Banwart

By train.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was that train trip?

Mr. Banwart

It was the first one I had ever had. It was interesting. There were two of us that joined at that time. I never knew the other guy real well. He wasn't too easy to get to know, but I visited with him whenever I could. I never really saw him after he got out there. I understand that he was discharged right away because he had some kind of police record. So I was the only one by myself kind of like there. I forget the number of our platoon. I know that my recollection was that I was trying to shave and worked real hard at it and

yet the Sergeant told me that I had to stand closer to the razor. The indoctrination is such that you learn a lot. The esprit de corps is good and we were proud to be Marines when we got there.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was your boot camp? Was it pretty rough on you?

Mr. Banwart

It wasn't easy but I figured that if anybody else can make it, I can make it too. I think everybody was pretty much that way. I never knew that it was that cold in California in the winter time and it wasn't that late either, October and November. At the rifle range we slept in tents and boy at night, it got cold. I put newspapers on my canvas bed, under my blankets. I don't know if we had a mattress. It seems like we slept on the canvas but maybe we didn't.

Mr. Misenhimer

You had a cot that you slept on?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, a folding cot. We slept in tents. At the base we had nice bunks, double bunks. We lived in barracks there. It was kind of nice.

Mr. Misenhimer

How were your drill instructors, were they pretty rough?

Mr. Banwart

They were pretty thorough, I'll tell you that. But we learned to march and to keep time. By the time we got out we were able to march together. That worked pretty good.

Mr. Misenhimer

How about the obstacle course? Did you have that?

Mr. Banwart

We had some but not like I see on TV though. I don't remember it being that tough but you came out of there in pretty good shape.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have bayonet training?

Mr. Banwart

Yes. I got some kind of badge on that.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have to crawl under the live ammunition, where they shot live ammunition over you?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know if we did that in boot camp but we did that later though. In fact they blew up the beaches there, blowing up all the time with mines. I don't think anybody got hurt on it.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you heard about Pearl Harbor being attacked that day, how did you think that would affect you?

Mr. Banwart

I knew that right away we were going to be involved in it. Then during that short time afterwards they were pretty worried about the Japs. Somehow or other they must have shelled the coast with submarines. We ended up standing out in the boondocks out there,

all dressed up. We had live ammunition. That one night we slept with our boots on because we were supposed to go up and defend the beach up a ways, that was our job.

Mr. Misenhimer

What kind of rifle did you have?

Mr. Banwart

An '03 left over from World War I.

Mr. Misenhimer

The Springfield '03?

Mr. Banwart

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

That's a bolt action as I recall, is that right?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know. It had a bolt on it. If you got one shot off, while you were kicking that bolt back, somebody is going to nail you. It wasn't the safest thing, I don't think. But that was our livelihood. Fortunately, my job was more in communications. So I didn't worry too much about it.

Mr. Misenhimer

Had you finished boot camp when Pearl Harbor day came?

Mr. Banwart

Yes. Pearl Harbor came just two weeks after I got out of boot camp. That was when I was on mess duty over at the radio school. The day after Pearl Harbor was our first day in

radio school.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about radio school.

Mr. Banwart

We learned Morse Code and the equipment and everything. The biggest thing, the one that took the most time I believe was to learn the code and speed up the copying of it. Then we had equipment that we worked on. Two weeks before I graduated from radio school, I guess a week or two, I ended up with measles or something. They put me in the hospital to get me out of there so I wouldn't contaminate everybody. So I came back and had to join another class so I really didn't know most of the guys. They told us that they handpicked us. They had a guy named Albaugh and Anderson and Banwart, you know how they handpicked them, they just picked the top three alphabetically. So they put us in the Pioneer Battalion which was a new outfit they had just started up. We trained at the base. That's where we were stationed, right at the Marine Corps Base. We were out there on the beach for a lot of operations. See what they did actually, they split us up. A group of us were attached to different regiments. In other words, there were usually five communication guys and a couple of other guys from headquarters platoon and my group was usually attached to the 3rd Platoon of the company and then we were attached to the 2nd Regiment of the 2nd Division. I think the engineers were that way too. We ended up in engineering later. That's how they did that, everybody was attached to something else.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is this Pioneer Battalion? What is that?

Mr. Banwart

Our job was to facilitate the landing of troops, supplies and equipment. That was our job. Some of the guys set up markers for the boats to come in to unload certain things at different places. Others of us were communication. We had a group that laid the telephone wire and we set up the radio to get communications ship to shore and beach to beach. It all worked out pretty good on paper. Sometimes it didn't work out so good on the landing.

Mr. Misenhimer

You were in what company?

Mr. Banwart

The A Company, 2nd Pioneer Battalion. Now this Pioneer Battalion was later changed and we ended up as D Company, 2nd Engineer Battalion. We were still the group. But that was when we got down to New Zealand. They decided to enlarge the engineers. The 1st Battalion Engineers was the engineer battalion before and the 2nd Battalion Engineers were the Pioneer battalion and the 3rd Battalion Engineers, believe it or not, were Seabees. They were right with us, some of those guys.

Mr. Misenhimer

Lets finish up your training there. What all did you do there?

Mr. Banwart

We spent a lot of time out in the boonies; what we called the boondocks. We were setting up radios and getting communications and then we started going on a maneuver type thing. We would load up our ship. Usually I ended up on the *Crescent City*. I was on some of the other ones for a while. We would go up and take some beach up the coast a

ways. Then we would load up on trucks and come back to the base again. The next Saturday or so, we would go load up again on the ship. Sometimes we did it different. Sometimes we went back out to the ships. That was the hardest job, climbing back up those nets. It was bad enough going down that net, without going up it because you are going backwards. We always had extra stuff on our back, those radios. Today it wouldn't be so bad because the radios aren't so heavy but they were heavy in those days. One day, we would hit the beach and set up communications and then they got a little more serious and they started blowing up spots here and there to give us a little idea of what was going to happen later. We would usually take off at night and then the next morning we were coming back from those landings. But one day we took off and we never came back. We just kept going.

Mr. Misenhimer

On the ship you mean?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, the whole group. It was a very small convoy actually. It didn't look like much to go out there and meet the Japanese Imperial Navy and Army out there. Then we got a little help from whoever was attached to the 1st Division. We finally found out where we were going.

Mr. Misenhimer

So when you left they didn't tell you, you were going overseas, right?

Mr. Banwart

No, they didn't tell us anything.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let me go back and ask you some questions on this training. You would go out in this APA, the *Crescent City* and then you would climb down the cargo nets into what, a landing craft?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, a Higgins boat.

Mr. Misenhimer

An LCVP?

Mr. Banwart

They were all Higgins boats. They were wooden boats and they had no ramp in the front. We had to jump over into them. You could run around in them. They had a little space where you came out, that you could actually walk around on the thing on top if you were careful.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then you would go into the beach and get off of the boat onto the beach?

Mr. Banwart

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you say that they would have explosions on the beach sometimes?

Mr. Banwart

At the tail end. I don't know what they did, they must have planted something there and blew them up while we were there. Things were blowing up here and there and sand was blowing around. They usually kept it away from us. I guess they were trying to save us

for later.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you say that sometime or other you went under live ammunition that they were shooting over you?

Mr. Banwart

I don't really remember, they might have. It wouldn't have helped much anyway. When they were shooting over you, it didn't bother you too much. Going from a Higgins boat at Tarawa, it was shooting right beside me, like a bunch of real big mosquitoes flying around.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you left on the *Crescent City* and you went to where?

Mr. Banwart

We went to the Solomon Islands. The first stop that we made was a little island in the Pacific. We had been in bad weather for one night and then a day or so later we ended up at the Tongan Islands. This island was Tongatabu and we got to go ashore just for an hour or two. Everybody came back with a coconut. There were guys standing on the dock selling coconuts. If you would walk a block up the street they were half price and if you went out to the park the kids were throwing them down out of the trees for nothing. So it was a kind of interesting situation. I don't know if you've ever been on a ship where everybody is eating coconuts but you just can't hardly stand it. Everybody wanted to be topside that night. (Laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

How crowded was that ship?

Mr. Banwart

There wasn't any extra room. For some reason we were attached to the 3rd Platoon which was attached to something else, so when they started looking for somebody to do extra duty around there they always looked at us. Having a name like I've got, instead of Jones or Smith or something, I'm right at the top of the list. So I got a lot of extra stuff like guard duty, four on and eight off. On that eight off usually we ended up on some other kind of a detail, like pulling stuff out of the hold for the mess hall or something like that. So we kept pretty busy during our trip.

Mr. Misenhimer

How crowded was it, pretty crowded?

Mr. Banwart

Yes but it wasn't that bad. We slept about five or six high. Are you acquainted with how they did that? They had two rods up and down and then they fastened this frame like a bed and then they had a canvas top over that. That's where we slept in between. So you are on a shelf and the guy above you is sticking down into you a little bit.

Mr. Misenhimer

I understand that there really wasn't room to turn over.

Mr. Banwart

I don't believe that we did.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now your first stop was Tongatabu, was it?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, Tongatabu. Then the next time we saw land was, I think and I could be wrong, but it

was the New Hebrides. At that time we were told that we were in the Fiji's but it might not have been. I remember then they dumped the garbage out. They couldn't do that while we were sailing around out there because that would leave a kind of a track.

Mr. Misenhimer

Right, they would know where you were.

Mr. Banwart

So they dumped it there. I remember looking out over the side and I saw these sharks coming around, scavenging. That was interesting. That was while we were waiting for the other convoy. Then we went up to the Solomon Islands. As soon as we got there the Japs showed up. There were a bunch of them up there. I didn't realize that the *Crescent City* was pretty well armed. We had guns all over the place. We even had a 5 inch on the fantail. This had one of those that they called a honeymoon deck. Just below the main deck there was another little deck around the back end. Down there, I don't know why, but they had piled pyrotechnics down there. My buddy was on guard down there. My job was to keep the Marines below deck so they weren't in the way. I remember when they started firing, boy, it scares the liver out of you, just the noise. The final thing, the planes kept disappearing although they did light up the ship behind us. They were burning. I stood there and watched as this one Jap came in. He was planning to crash us. One of those kamikaze deals. He wasn't that young a kid either, I thought he was a little older. I could see his face, he got close enough. There was nothing that could stop him but this one machine gunner, a Marine back there, he just kept firing away. He never moved. He just stood there and kept firing. He had a lot of guts. He chopped off one of the props and that swung the guy around and he fell into the water. The cheers went up. This guy got a

Navy Cross or something for bravery there and he deserved it. It was kind of interesting. I had a position. I really didn't like being on guard duty but I got to see everything up there that day. All these guys that were in the hold, wanted to see too. You know that doorway, the stairs down there had a kind of a doorway. I never saw so many faces in one doorway (laugh) how these guys did it, I don't know, but it was solid faces; to see what was going on. I guess I was kind of lucky to be on duty that day.

Mr. Misenhimer

What date was this?

Mr. Banwart

That would have been on August 7th.

Mr. Misenhimer

That was when they made the landing there.

Mr. Banwart

Right, of 1942. We left on July 1, 1942 and we never had access to a PX or someplace to buy anything until we got to New Zealand.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you get to New Zealand?

Mr. Banwart

It was sometime in 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer

After you left Guadalcanal, okay.

Mr. Banwart

Yes. We did not land on Tulagi that day because we were driven off. I guess the Jap

Navy was on the way and we just didn't have the ships to protect all of us. So they hustled us back down to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. That was a beautiful island. The palm trees were planted in rows just like corn used to be. It was really a beautiful day except that when you got ashore there were these old gals with black teeth chewing beetle nut and picking insides out of the coconut. I don't know if they were saving the coconut meat or the shells. But anyway, we had I think, five ships there. We had to unload all of them and then load one up to make a run back to the Solomon's because those poor guys had left without supplies. While we were on Espiritu Santo our job was to protect the beach. We had trucks with machine guns mounted on them mostly for aerial use. Actually I never fired one, I don't think. But we were ready to head for the beach at anytime. It was a nice island but we weren't there very long. It was French. A French guy had a ranch there. I don't know if they called it a ranch but he had a lot of fruit. We had papayas across the river from us. We would swim over there and steal his papayas (laugh) for a change in diet. We were right beside a creek or a little river. A river I suppose, it would have been a really big creek. It was so clean that you could see the bottom. That's where we bathed. We were swimming in it. That was nice. I don't think I would want to live there.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you go back to Tulagi then?

Mr. Banwart

In just a very few weeks we were on our way back there.

Mr. Misenhimer

So it was several weeks that you were there before you went back?

Mr. Banwart

Yes but not too long. Tulagi was secure by the time we got there. But some of our guys, the ones that got off before we got driven out, they saw quite a bit of combat right there. Tulagi is sitting over there across from a little island called Gavutu. Gavutu they had to fight for that. Later we set up communications between the two. The Florida Islands, to me it was east of there but I don't know whether it was or not, it was on the other side of Gavutu. Tulagi was kind of a hill side and it used to be, I think, the capitol of that area. Some British guy had a place up above which was destroyed when we got there. But we used where the house was, the cement, to set up our little tent where we slept and where we were on duty for our communications set up there. We had a switchboard up there and radios and everything. We didn't get fed too good on Tulagi. I don't think they had many supplies coming in. *(Tape side ended.)*

Mr. Misenhimer

So the mess people were trying the best they could, and then what happened?

Mr. Banwart

I remember one time a canoe came over and the guys had some little green bananas and the mess hall bought a great big mess of them and hung them up. We could have all of them we wanted. They were terrible. (Laugh) You couldn't eat them. I don't know what we had. It seems like we had enough to eat, but nothing fancy, that's for sure. Sometimes you didn't even feel like eating because we got dysentery and malaria. It was kind of a miserable island. While we there, I remember one time I looked out over toward Gavutu and there was a Japanese bomber. I suppose it was leaving the Guadalcanal area. It had probably already dropped its bombs. I saw him flying along there and coming down at an

angle towards him was an American plane shooting at him. But what made it more interesting was there was a Zero behind him. The bomber blew up and the American guy turned around and was heading right straight towards the Jap and they were both shooting and then everybody blew up. When it was all done, there was one parachute. The American was the only one that was left. That was interesting. Off of Tulagi they had a group of PT boats there and right next to the PT boats, one night a cruiser came in and tied up to a coconut tree. We were up on a hill building a bunker, which we did sometimes. It seems like they always kept us busy doing something. We were taking a break and some sailor wandered up there. It turned out that it was a kid from my hometown. That was interesting, of all places to meet somebody you knew. He was off that cruiser. As soon as my friends found out that here was a guy off of a cruiser that had a PX on there. We left on July 1st and this was already into the next year. We hadn't had a chance to buy a toothbrush or toothpaste or anything. We asked him to bring anything he could get. We weren't getting paid much. I think one time we got \$20 or something in all that time. So we didn't have much money circulating and usually that was spent playing poker. The group of us took up a collection. I don't know how much we had but everything we could round up, we gave to this guy and asked if he would get us pogeys. That was candy bars, gum and cigarettes and toothpaste and even toothbrushes. He said, "I don't know when I'm going to get back. It will be as soon as I can though. I'll do the best I can." I'm sure he didn't know. He was just a sailor. The next morning after that, we were sitting there on the hill looking out. We lived on the hill. And there was that cruiser and somebody was towing it out. So our money went with it. It didn't make much difference. We couldn't spend it anyway. That was one thing that happened there.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many people were in your group there?

Mr. Banwart

I think that platoon was probably 90 to 100 people; maybe 120 altogether. I'm just guessing but that's what I would guess.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you came back to Tulagi did you come back on the *Crescent City*?

Mr. Banwart

I'm not sure. I kind of doubt it. It seems like we rode on a different one. I think when we went down to New Zealand from there, I'm not sure we were on the *Crescent City* then either. I know I was on the *Crescent City* one time or another afterwards, but I'm not sure just when.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you went from California to there on the *Crescent City*?

Mr. Banwart

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you came back and landed on Tulagi, did you have to climb down those cargo nets into those Higgins boats?

Mr. Banwart

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

And that's the way you went in?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, we always had to do that. Nobody had gangplanks. I guess that was something unheard of.

Mr. Misenhimer

That would have been when, sometime in late August when you got to Tulagi?

Mr. Banwart

I would say September probably because we weren't gone very long back to Espiritu Santo.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you sat up these radios, were these voice or were they all CW?

Mr. Banwart

Mostly voice.

Mr. Misenhimer

Who did you contact?

Mr. Banwart

Whatever outfit that we were near. Actually on Tulagi we set up a telephone system and we even had electricity for a while. Some of our guys went over to Gavutu and tore down the Japanese lines that were there. I guess there telephone lines were good enough to carry electricity. Then the telephone guys could climb up on the trees and hang that line. We ended up with electricity in some of the camps up on the hill. We got into the generator that I suppose that the rest of the regiment had somewhere.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you on Gavutu yourself?

Mr. Banwart

I wasn't on Gavutu.

Mr. Misenhimer

You never got there.

Mr. Banwart

Some of the guys went over, mostly telephone guys because they were the ones that had to do the climbing. They were a nice bunch of guys. We were there on Tulagi until sometime after the first of the year. I don't know February or March or so. Then we went back to New Zealand. Later on we lost a lot of them on Tarawa.

Mr. Misenhimer

On Tulagi you all were just setting up a telephone system and a radio system?

Mr. Banwart

Yes and we were supposed to be protecting that island too, to keep the Japs from revisiting. We set up bunkers and stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer

This was still part of the Pioneer Battalion?

Mr. Banwart

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you ever attacked by Japanese planes while you were there?

Mr. Banwart

Actually I don't recall them coming in. They flew over us. Washing Machine Charlie was there everyday.

Mr. Misenhimer

Every night, huh?

Mr. Banwart

It seems like that. There was one plane circling around over while we were building this bunker up there. One of the guys noticed him and thought he was a German plane. But I don't know if it was or not. I was looking up there. There was a lot of activity. The Navy was the one that took a beating there in that area.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you shelled by Japanese ships?

Mr. Banwart

No, not really. It wasn't too bad.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you mentioned the sea battle. Did you see any of the sea battles or anything?

Mr. Banwart

No, but we could hear them though.

Mr. Misenhimer

There were quite a few of them there.

Mr. Banwart

Actually the sea battle somewhere, not too far from New Hebrides, because some of the guys in my outfit, I was on Guard Duty again. I don't know why we ended upon guard duty but that's what we did sometimes. But some of the guys that weren't on duty had to go and help clean up a ship. I guess they had a battle or something but the thing was over with. They were all in the mess hall and a torpedo hit them, right at the mess hall. These

guys had to pick up body parts and bury them. They were a sickly bunch. I was glad that I didn't have to do that. Then from Tulagi we went to New Zealand and that was when they were done at Guadalcanal. Some of the guys did go over to Guadalcanal and help there at the end. But then we got to Wellington, New Zealand. That was quite a place. The Marines had went there and I think we'll pretty well agree that they are fine people down there. They treated us like heroes. I guess the Japanese, if we hadn't stopped them somewhere, they just kept moving down. They were going to be in New Zealand eventually and they didn't have any troops down there hardly. Most of their boys were in Africa fighting. They were real pleased. Here we got down to New Zealand and I had gotten from 185 down to 135 at Tulagi. Most of the guys, we were run down pretty bad. They fed us good. We had a lot of mutton I think. I could hardly tell the difference, it was so good. For a change, we got plenty to eat and we got liberty sometimes and we went to Wellington. I even had a chance to buy a couple bottles of British Navy rum. We ended up on Tulagi without any extra stuff. No PX and no way to get to it. One of my buddies and I decided that we were going to start a cache and get together some of these little extra items. We had a chest there that we were getting extra soap and buy a little candy and stuff to put in there. We decided that maybe we ought to add a little booze in there too. One day we went into Wellington purposely to buy a couple jugs of booze of some kind. The beer wasn't very good down there, I didn't think. It was room temperature. We drank it anyway. I went to this bar and I had to go to the bathroom and while I was there some guy asked me if I wanted to buy some genuine British Naval rum. I looked at him and he had these bottles with a cork in them. So he gave me a sample and boy, I'll tell you that was delicious stuff. He wanted \$5 a bottle. He had two bottles. I bought them

and took them back and I'll tell you, we had a real party one night. We only drank one of them. I don't know what happened to the other one. Somebody got it that night before I woke up the next morning. We started training. We had a hill there. We were out in the country. Different outfits were scattered around out in the country. When you wanted to go to town you would get out in the road and hitchhike. It seems like there was always sooner or later a government truck going by and they always picked you up. You didn't ride up front, you always ended up in the back. We trained by going up and down this mountain. When you've got a radio on your back, that makes it more interesting. We were still doing setting up for the same kind of deal that we started out as facilitating the landing of the troops, supplies and equipment, but now we were the 2nd Battalion of the 18th Marine Engineers. The only landing that we made, we went down to South Island and landed on that beach. It was beautiful down there. It was so quiet and calm, just peaceful. I almost felt like it would be a nice place to stay. But of course we didn't, we went back. Then I guess, we had a company party. Everybody put in \$5 automatically. The top Sergeant took \$5 off everybody. We rented a hall. We planned this a long time before but I think it was just almost the last minute that we had that party. I'm not so sure that it wasn't just the day before we left. Because that night, I don't remember really ever going back to camp except to pick up my seabag which was always packed and ready to go. We got on the boats and we took off. We stopped in the Fiji's this time and made some practice landings but our group didn't. It was the ones that were going to go in on the amphibious tractors. During World War II the Pacific did not always have the priorities. Everything always went to Europe. We needed, they thought we needed some amphibious tractors to get into Tarawa and there was some question about these beaches

and the tide and everything. The area behind, the other beaches that we didn't use, the other side of the island, they were mined and it would have been a real problem to get into there. General Holland Smith said that he wasn't going to go until we had something. So they got enough for the first two waves. We were in the third wave, so we started out in a Higgins boat. That morning they fed us pretty good. I think we had a steak breakfast. We were out there waiting to disembark and we were watching battleships shelling the island. They had been bombing it. I don't know if they ever hit anything, but they had been bombing it for so many days before. You just wondered how anybody could be alive in there anymore. It was interesting, it was almost dark out and you could watch. You could hear the guns and you could watch the arcing of those shells going in there. Then standing up there on deck, I decided that I really should go to the bathroom. I had to urinate. Right then, they said, "Load up." So we loaded up. We disembarked and went down the nets into the Higgins boats and you go around in a circle before you go in. We were waiting our turn to go in. We had a delay. The Japs had big guns on the island and they started firing back at the ships. So the ships had to move out further. So then we were circling around a little longer, I think, than we intended to. Finally, it was our turn to go in and they go full throttle I guess it seems like. We were headed for the beach and all of a sudden we got hung up on a sandbar. Along with that, there were shells popping behind us and in front of us. We were bracketed. Fortunately, see we were the third wave, so those amphibious tractors were coming back from the first wave and they still had some wounded on there but two of them pulled up to unload our Higgins boat. While I was running around there, I had a generator and the guy that was supposed to take the antenna made some remark "That if it comes to getting ashore, I

don't care if I get in there with the antenna or not." Which I can understand that, but on the other hand we had to have it. So I took the antenna too. I had the antenna and the generator. I'm running around on that darn Higgins boat and I hear those bullets whizzing by. They didn't hit me. But by the time I got there, the boat was full. The amtrak was pretty full. I had trouble getting in there, let alone supposed to get down. All I could do was duck my head below the gunnel and hope that nobody saw me. That was probably good because they were shooting low. There was a guy in front of me, that as we were starting out in this tractor, they took two tractors, but our particular one, they started machine gunning and the bullets you could see these little holes. Something hit me in the legs. It was like somebody hitting you with a board. The guy in front of me yelled, "I'm hit" and I could see the blood coming out of his shoulders. Just when you think things can't get any worse, in pops a shell. You could see the thing arc right in there inside the boat. The next thing I knew, I'm laying on the deck. Most everybody is gone. There were dead people around and wounded people around. I had holes in my pants. I didn't know what was going on, but I knew in the back of my mind that "I need to get the hell out of here." The shell had already gone off. I was acting like it hadn't. I tried to hurry up but I just didn't have it. My legs wouldn't do what they normally did because I suppose I was shot in them or something. Then I had a few shrapnel holes in my upper leg. There was something hot down my neck. I reached and pulled a piece of hot metal off of me. As I got over to the side, I had never been on an amphibious tractor before and it just wasn't the same as the Higgins boat. I couldn't really get up and out. They are made with that ramp on the front. We were out there in the middle of the water and that ramp can't be opened. There was one guy that was spread eagle on that ramp. I guess he

went up to look out. That was interesting because when we were in the Higgins boat this guy was looking out all the time. The Lieutenant told him to get down. Here I looked over and he's got a little black mark between his eyes. He looked out at the wrong time. He was dead. One guy was screaming and he couldn't help it. His leg was blown off below the hip. His whole thigh and everything was gone. It was just a piece of meat hanging there. Everything else was gone. The poor guy. That wasn't the worse part. I'll tell you about that in a minute. I was trying to get out of there. I finally threw my antenna over the side because I couldn't carry that over with me. Then I tried again and my generator was just too damn heavy. I had the generator over the back of my pack. I took the generator off and set it up on the edge and then I was going to pull my leg up and roll over. I looked over the side to be sure that I wouldn't get skewered because we had fixed bayonets. We still had our '03's. I looked over the side and then I pulled my knee up by my head and then wham! A sniper got me in the knee. He wasn't shooting at my knee I'm sure. I was really lucky there. I fell back into the boat. If he would have hit me in the head of course I would have been dead. If I would have fell the other way, I would have been in real trouble, but I fell back into the boat. There was a machine gun. It was pointing the wrong direction. I don't know how in the heck the guy could have fired it. I kept looking at that. Every time I even looked at it, shells popped. They were continually shooting at us. But what got me I think was a sniper. There was a little ship that had brought supplies in there or something and got sunk during the bombings. They had bombed the heck out of it but the Japs had gone back out and set up sniper positions on there. I finally crawled over and set against where they wouldn't see me, except my leg sticking out. I couldn't do anything about that. I was sitting next to Sergeant Campbell.

He was my Sarge and I dug out my, they gave you some kind of pills you were supposed to take for, I don't know what the heck they call them now. There were a couple of pills in there in a little metal container. We even had a canvas case for it that hooked on to our belt. So I opened that up and there were these two pills. I took one and gave one to Campbell. Then I noticed that the side of his face was blown off. The pill came out the side of his face. But then we just sat there and they kept pecking away at us. After a while we started drifting away and we were drifting out to sea again. It suddenly dawned on me, I don't have my dogtags on. I just hated those things hanging around my neck, so I had them in my pocket. I took off my helmet and put my dogtags on just so they would know who the heck they found when they found me. That's the attitude there. You figured there was no way that anybody was going to be around there. We had lost most of the guys. Everybody on the thing was wounded, one way or another. Some weren't mobile at all. We floated out and it got kind of quiet. Nobody was saying anything except for the one guy that was yelling constantly and I could certainly understand that. Then we heard a voice saying, "Is there anybody alive in there?" I shouted back at them. A boat pulled up and here it was a tank lighter. I don't know what they called it, an LST or whatever. It was a pretty good sized boat and a little tank would fit right in it and a ramp for it to go. They came and pulled us out and they stand up above, right out in the open when they ran that thing. They laid us right around the deck. That's when I noticed this Philips, the guy with the leg shot off, they gave him his Kapok jacket for a pillow to lay on. This guy was trying to lift up and then I noticed that he had a big hole in his head and his brains were sticking to that Kapok jacket. Oh God. Poor guy. No wonder he can't quit screaming. Nobody was saying anything. His voice was the only one we could hear. But

he couldn't help it. He never stopped yelling until he died that night. They headed for shore and there this was the third craft I had been on now. I had lost the Higgins boat and the amtrak and now I'm setting out there in the open. I thought, "My God, what next?" The medic came around and gave us a shot of morphine. That just made world of difference. It just eased us. I could look around and see what was going on. It was the best view I got of the whole line. We were barreling along there, heading for sure and guess what. We hit another sandbar. So they dropped the ramp and this tank rolled off and took off. I'm sure the guys got pretty wet getting in there. I hope they got ashore. As soon as the tank was off we bounced right back up again and he pulled her around and away we went. They took us to another ship. When we got there they hooked us up in baskets like you know and lifted us up on deck. I lay out there and they said, "Are you alright, do you need anything emergency?" I said, "No, those guys are worse off than I am." While I was laying there, an interesting thing I thought. I didn't smoke a lot but I did smoke some. A sailor came up and lit a cigarette and put it in my mouth and walked off. It was a nice gesture on his part. They patched me up and the biggest problem was that knee. They didn't have a cast they could put on it. This was on a transport so they didn't have a big sickbay. I think they had room for probably 4 to 6 people in this room that I was in. Now some of them must have went to some other place because there was just me and this other guy, that died that night, that were in that one room. They patched me up and that night I started going to sleep. I woke up about midnight and guess what. I had to urinate. I hadn't done it all day long. I had to just before I went on that ship. They brought me one of these jugs and I filled it up and I had to have another one (laugh). But anyway, that was a nice ship and they really treated us good. Then when the battle was

over, they picked us all up and we went to one ship. To me it was kind of a hell ship in a way. Everybody was wounded. We were sitting about six or seven high. I was put up on the top bunk and really I would rather have been up there. It was kind of hard to get up there with that leg, but some of the guys were dripping different fluids. It was better to be up there. I don't know how long it took us to get from there to Hawaii but it was long enough that it was just miserable. One of the things, and I don't know why, but somehow they decided that we should walk ashore if we possibly could. They wanted me to walk ashore and I couldn't even stand up you know. I said, "I don't even have any shoes." They had cut them off. One of them was nearly torn off anyway from shrapnel. So they just cut all my clothes off. All I had was a pair of shorts. They said, "We'll find you some shoes." They came in and gave me two shoes and they were both for the same foot and two different sizes (laugh). I had to go to the bathroom, so these guys took me and let go of me and I fell. They got me back up again and I needed a little help right then. Then they decided that I wasn't going to be able to walk ashore. I got to Hawaii and they gave me a cast for my leg and then decided that they weren't going to operate because if they did they might have problems. It was kind of serious I guess. The bullet didn't stay in there, in my knee or kind of the cartilage at the edge of the knee. They patched me up pretty good and I got to the point where I could get around on crutches. First I was in a wheelchair and then I got around on crutches. By the time I left Hawaii I could have walked onboard ship on crutches but they carried me in. I took the crutches along though. When I got to America, to San Diego, that's where they took us, to a naval hospital there. That's where we started from. So they carried me off on a stretcher and two guys were carrying my on to the base there. They set me down to rest a little bit and here I looked

over and there was a coke machine. I hadn't had a coke for a long time. I got up with my crutches and I hobbled over there and got a coke. These two guys looked over and here's this guy that they are carrying around and he's over there getting a coke (laugh). They operated on me before the end of the month. I guess I got back in December and it was before the New Year. As soon as I had a chance I called my folks and told them that I was back in the States and that I was alright. I was told later that my dad got a telegram. I never thought of my dad as being very tender hearted. But I guess it brought tears. What had happened, I guess, I came in and I called them before the end of the year, and I told them that I was back. Then they got this letter from the government telling them that I was wounded. Do you know the date on that was January 14th. That was in January for crying out loud and I was already back in the States. Things were pretty slow. That's why I suppose they didn't know what had happened. Then I was in this ward in the naval hospital for people with bad legs. They tried exercise and stuff. I went in a pool and different things that we were doing to try to rehabilitate. Then when I got to the point where I could get around good with a cane they let me have a furlough, which was the first one that I had since I joined. This was in 1944 now. I got two or three weeks, whatever they gave me there. I took the train back to Algona from San Diego. I think I must have had nearly a month but it couldn't have been too long because it took a while to get there and a while to get back. When I got back I was getting along pretty good. The doctor got us all together in our ward and said, "If any of you guys are able to go back to duty, we're starting to get more people in, more guys coming back." I said, "Sure, I'll go back." After all I was a radio operator, I don't have to stand on my feet much. I was mistaken there. This was the Marine Corps. They took all of the guys from that ward and

put us in the guard battalion. This is all we do, is guard. So I'm standing 4 on and 8 off, whatever. I was on guard duty all the time. I was guarding the gate and guarding the Marine prisoners. There was one prisoner, he was really beat up, the poor guy. You could tell that he had seen a lot at Guadalcanal. I guess he took a furlough when he got back. He had been back a while. He took a furlough and he went out somewhere in Washington or Oregon to see his family and he was a little late getting back. So they sent an MP out because he was AWOL, absent without leave, to bring him back. He wasn't handcuffed or anything like that. They got this guard who was armed, a side arm. This is the story they told me anyway, that somebody told me. That they were coming back and they stopped at a restaurant to eat. While they were sitting there at the table, some guy comes in and holds up the place. All of a sudden, there was a lot of activity there, and the cook noticed what was happening, a little Chinese cook and he came charging out of the kitchen with his big knife and this poor Marine looked over there and he grabbed the guard's gun and decked the cook. I guess he was in real trouble. That's what they told me anyway. I felt sorry for these guys, some of them. While I was in the hospital I met a guy from my outfit and I don't even remember if he was on my boat or in my amtrak. No he wasn't even on our beach. He was on a different beach. But, this guy's name was Lawson and he had a good friend named Larson and these two guys grew up together. They were best of friends and they both got married. Their wives and them did things together, they were real close. Lawson came in on one of the other beaches. Those guys didn't get hit so hard. They came up to our beach and they found Larson laying by the shore, dead. So Lawson was going to take his wristwatch, which his wife had given him. Of course Lawson knew this and here somebody had stolen his wristwatch. I don't know if it was a

Marine or a Jap or what, those things happened. When that happened, and seeing his best friend there, it just blew him away. He was a mental case. I was walking along on my crutches there (*tape side ended*).

Mr. Misenhimer

So you were on your crutches and this fellow came walking up. (Lawson)

Mr. Banwart

I met him there at the hospital and his friend had gotten shot up pretty bad on Tarawa and was dead. He said, "Russ, do you have a match?" I said, "Sure" and I handed him a book of matches. So he offers me a cigarette. I didn't really want a cigarette but I took it. He lit it with the match. He handed me the matches back, puts his cigarettes away and we're walking along and I'm the only one smoking. Anyway, I got this furlough and I went home and a few days before I had to leave to come back I went over to check on the lady that I had worked for at the bakery. I went over to visit her and here I find this cute little girl that I met when I worked there. One night I was introduced to her. She is now working in the bakery. The lady I went to see, her name was Leah, and she introduced me and mentioned Darlene. She kind of played Cupid there and said, "Why don't you go out with him tonight." I said, "Sure, why don't you." She said, "Well, I'm going to Walther League at the Lutheran Church." I said, "Well, when we get back, I'll go with you." I took this lady to another town to visit some relatives that she knew and I knew. When I got back Darlene wasn't around and by golly, Leah saw to it that she found her and sent her down. She told me to get out to the restaurant there and have a cup of coffee and she would send her down and she did. You know I fell in love and married her before I went back overseas again. Then I went back and went into this guard battalion. I just didn't

like that at all. I was very uncomfortable standing on that leg all the time. I thought, "Why don't I go back into communications." So I went to the radio school and talked to the officer in charge and he said, "The only way you can get back in here, you have to have a letter from the Commandant to the Marine Corps." I said, "Man, how do you go about that?" He said, "Well, I'll try to get the letter for you." He finally got me transferred back in by calling and checking with the Commandant of the Marine Corps. He got me back into radio and I went to a school in Omaha, Nebraska to learn how to repair and service these radios. Then when I got to Omaha, I bought an old jalopy and started going up to visit Darlene and my family. I ended up getting married and she moved to Omaha with me. I wasn't there that long. We were married less than four months before I got sent back overseas again. During that time, I graduated from this radio school and then they 'handpicked' again, a group of us to take an advanced school. That was the one with the highest grade and the one that had been in combat. So I fell in that category I guess, because I don't think that I had the top grades. I went to Red Bank, New Jersey. That was an Army base. They trained us on the ANTRC equipment, whatever that is. Communications has taken a big change since World War II, but this is one of the things that had come out. In the past we would go on the air and we would send one message with either code or verbal. With this new set up we had an instrument that looked like about the size of a big combination freezer/refrigerator that we hauled around. We hooked up into that with kind of a scrambler. With one wave we had four channels on there so that the first channel we would talk with the other radio operator to adjust the sets, to tune up everything. The second one we scrambled that first and second wave conversation. Then the next channel scrambled all of them and the last channel

scrambled everything together in such a way that it would be hard for somebody to decipher it. Then they gave you a little extra safety, the Navajo Indians talked on that last channel. The Japs couldn't understand what was going on. This was what we had when we went to Okinawa. I was checked out with a trailer and all this junk on it. We had a 50' antenna that we had to set up. We had done this so much that we could do it in the dark with our eyes closed, almost. We put that antenna up and set up the equipment. We got the best communication that we had ever had. When we got to Okinawa, after Tarawa, heading for that beach again on D-Day it wasn't exactly the finest thing in the world as far as I was concerned. But you had to do it. We never got shot at all. We went ashore and we went through a little town called Sobe and dug in. I noticed in Sobe they had these straw mats all over the place. They looked like they were about the size of our foxhole, so I went back and borrowed one. I thought that was a little better because it was kind of muddy out there. That was a mistake. We got fleas. They were terrible. I don't know if it was the first or second night that we were there, it might have been the second night, but anyway, we were the first ones out. We went out and set up at night. I don't know where we were even, but we went and set up our equipment. We had all these officers around there and when we got done they were talking back and forth, ship to shore and beach to beach. They were just thrilled with that. The next morning we went back and then we had to pack up in the dark and went back to our base by that little town of Sobe. The next morning we were off again looking for somebody. I had two guys from our group, the three of us were the radio guys. Then there was one guy that had the scrambler. I really didn't know the guy. He just wasn't one of these guys that you get acquainted with. He didn't talk to us. He was sharp. He would set his equipment up. We

would have to move it for him but he always hooked up the wires and everything and he knew what he was doing. Then he disappeared. We had two generators and when we went from one to the other, we would switch over real quick so we didn't lose any communications. What we would do is when it came to the Regimental Headquarters, we would hook up the wire from their switchboard to our equipment and then they could talk anywhere. This was a real big improvement over the communications we had before. Because if we used wires, the Japs would tap into them or cut them down. If we put them in the ground and bury them, the tanks and stuff would tear them up. This was just beautiful and these guys were thrilled with it. But since we had these fleas, we were unhappy. There was a Quartermaster right next to us at this one place. We got some aerosol cans and put our pant legs in our socks and sprayed around inside our clothes and we killed those fleas. Everything was just fine until the officers came down to encourage us and to thank us for the nice job that we were doing. They were real happy with us. These guys sat there scratching around and I knew they were going to have fleas when they left, and they did. So we went back to the Quartermaster, no problem, only they don't have any more aerosol cans. We lived with those fleas for a couple of weeks, maybe three. We ended up someplace where one of my friends there said, "Hey, there is a dog platoon over here. I've got a friend in there. Do you want to go over with me and visit?" I thought, "Boy, there's a chance in a lifetime." So we went over and visited the dog platoon and we got rid of the fleas. The first time when we were picked to go out the next morning, after the first night, I never sat up front. We were always in the back of this truck and we were pulling this trailer. The driver was from the motor pool. I didn't have any instructions but this other guy, that had the scrambler, he sat up front and he

had the instructions to what outfit we were going to. We were driving around and were going up this one road and we saw this whole bunch of tanks and troops walking behind them. When they saw us coming up the road, they all pulled over to one side and we went on by. We went on to the next town and drove around town, the city square and didn't see anybody and that was supposed to be where they thought the headquarters was. So we came back and when we came back the officer for these tanks stopped us and asked us conditions in the town up there. "Did you see any Japs or anything?" We told him, no and he said, "That's good. We're just going in to take that town." (Laugh) He could have stopped us on the way in, you know. I didn't realize that we were in front of the troops. Finally we got that thing finished. One other thing happened. One time when we moved up to an area that was a cemetery, I guess. Their burial is, they put them in a casket or a box and set them in kind of a cave like deal with cement over the top and there is a little place out front where they put brick around so it's just like a house in there. The only thing was that the troops that were there first must have thought that it was a little safer inside than out there in front of it, so they moved the boxes out and they used that for sleeping I suppose or for protection anyway. So when we moved up, here was this box partly open and grandma was in there and she looked pretty bad. Then we moved up from there to another place and we got word that some outfit down the road, another outfit, had bread. That somebody had baked some bread. We hadn't had that for a long time. So two of us took our mess gear and when down to have supper with them. That sounds kind of crazy but while we were gone, we had just moved up here. One of the guys decided, the other two guys were back by that equipment, so one of them decided to wash up and he takes this can of water and gets some in his hand and then he realizes that

it's not water, its sickbay alcohol. He didn't know what to do so he called the Lieutenant back at headquarters. The Lieutenant came and picked up that 5 gallon can of sickbay alcohol. We didn't know anything about it until we got back. I guess they had a lot of fun there because they shared with the cooks and bakers and they got grape juice from them and they mixed that and they had a lot of fun. We never got any. After the thing was over, we went back to Guam and started preparing for the assault on Japan. When the war ended, this Lieutenant showed up and he gave everyone, every tent in our group a bottle of booze, bourbon. Good bourbon. I thought that was pretty nice of him. I should mention too, that after I was married, before I went back overseas I had my first airplane ride. I had to report back to San Francisco on December 1st and then they flew us over to Hawaii. From there I don't know. We went to a couple different islands. One of them was in the Marshall Islands which we didn't even own when I was over the first time. Then we ended up on Guadalcanal. That was where we trained for Okinawa. Then after I left home to go out there I started getting letters from my wife that she was pregnant so I looked forward to that. While I was on Guam I found out that I became a dad about the time the war ended. So I was ready to go home. Our outfit was headed for China. All these guys in Omaha, that didn't go to Red Bank, they showed up at Red Bank as we were leaving and we went to Omaha. These guys hadn't even been overseas. Now they were over on Guam and we were getting ready to go to China and then to Japan. These guys haven't seen anything yet and they've all go the same education or same training that we had. They were letting us out on a point system. I had plenty of points. I went down to the headquarters office and told them that I wanted to go home. I wanted to see my kid, you know. They said, "No, you're indispensable." "What do you mean

indispensable?" "We're going out to China." That's kind of where you kind of stepped in. I thought, "These guys all have the same training that I've got as far as the equipment goes. As for combat, they might not have been fired at, but they are there and they might as well do something." My leg started hurting too, so I went to sickbay to check and see if I was alright. The doctor looked at my record and said, "You shouldn't have been over here in the first place. They shouldn't have sent you over here." He said, "Go get your seabag." They sent me back on a hospital ship. So I got back and went to Oregon to Klamath Falls. That's where I was discharged from.

Mr. Misenhimer

What date were you discharged?

Mr. Banwart

On December 22, 1945. I didn't quite make it home for Christmas. We were discharged and I bought a ticket on a Greyhound bus. That was the only way to get out of there. I sent my seabag ahead. So all I had was a little thing that I carried because I was just going on the bus. So what do they do, they wait until 2:00 in the afternoon to give us our discharge. The bus left at noon. So I got down there and it was gone. I thought, I might as well start hitchhiking. I've got no place to go anymore. I'm already out. I started hitchhiking and some guy gave me a ride. He said, "I'm only going out to the truck stop out here but it's a big place and you'll be able to get a ride there." So he let me out and I saw big lights over there and a big building. I walked over there and he took off. As I walked over, the lights started going out and the car drove off and there I'm standing in the dark. (Laugh) The place closed down. So I look ahead and I've got to walk up a mountain there I guess. I get about halfway up and it starts snowing and here I've got a

bus ticket but it wasn't any good. So I finally kept walking and I got up to the top there and there was a little town and it is dark. I was walking along and somebody said something and I realized that there were a bunch of servicemen there that were also hitchhiking. There is no traffic. I joined them. There were 3 or 4 or 5 of us there. Here came a coupe, one of these deals with a trunk. The guy stopped and said, I think he must have had 4 people in the front with him. He said, "There's room in the trunk." We all got in there somehow and there was already somebody in there. (Laugh) I remember most of me was hanging out but we were just glad to get a ride into Reno, Nevada. I went down to the bus station and they said, "There aren't any openings, but why don't you come back at such and such a time." That's when the bus was going to come later, "And maybe we'll have an opening." So I went back and they said, "Still no openings." I said, "Well, I might as well cash this ticket back in and get a refund since I'm not going to be able to use it." "Oh, you've got a ticket?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Then you've got a space on there." So they got me on the bus and I got clear to Omaha, finally. I finally say my kid and it was the day after Christmas before I got home.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was this a little boy?

Mr. Banwart

Yes, a little boy. I think I gave you his name. He was born on August 22, 1945.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let me go back and ask you some questions. There in Tarawa, when you all were in that amtrak going in, how many people were on it?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know. They aren't very big really.

Mr. Misenhimer

10, 15 or 20, do you think?

Mr. Banwart

Probably 20 at least, or more because we were all pretty much on a Higgins boat. Maybe there was more than one Higgins boat. Have you ever read the book *Tarawa*?

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes.

Mr. Banwart

Back in there is a place where they talk about the guy running into a bunch of graves, where the men from the other beaches came up and dug graves and put a cross before each. That was my outfit. I knew all those people. They weren't just friends, they were kind of family-like. You lived together for months and you knew them personally. I couldn't talk much about this when I first got out. But now, it doesn't make any difference anymore. To me that was an awful blow.

Mr. Misenhimer

On this amtrak, when this shell hit there, how about the coxswain that was driving? What happened to him?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know. I don't even know where he was at. There must have been quite a bit of room because the shell didn't kill everybody. I think that one guy took the brunt of it, on his leg. It must have went right down between his legs or something and blew up.

Mr. Misenhimer

I wonder what size shell it was?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know. I don't know if it was a mortar. It was a shell. I could see it. When it came in, it was kind whooshing pretty fast.

Mr. Misenhimer

It didn't knock a hole in the bottom of the amtrak?

Mr. Banwart

No, it didn't. But we had a little water in there from the holes that we had gotten from the machine gunning, but nothing elaborate.

Mr. Misenhimer

But it didn't keep on going towards the shore? It just stopped?

Mr. Banwart

It stopped us dead in the water. Apparently whoever was driving it was hit. I didn't even know where he was.

Mr. Misenhimer

They are up in the very front. They are like a truck, way up in the front driving them.

Mr. Banwart

But that ramp is in the front so he had to be behind that. I was sitting back by the metal superstructure. There was some kind of door there I think that you could even get in there. I suppose there could probably be someone in there. But it must have knocked them out. I don't even know where the driver was. I always wondered about that.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you never actually got on the shore at Tarawa, did you?

Mr. Banwart

No, I never set foot on the shore. I guess it was terrible at the end because it started smelling pretty bad.

Mr. Misenhimer

I think November 20, 1943 was when the Battle of Tarawa started, is that right?

Mr. Banwart

That's right. I didn't last very long in that. I did get shot at on Okinawa. That night that we set up our equipment, the snipers were shooting in on us. They were getting pretty close and we realized finally what was happening. One of our generators glowed like a light out there, like a beacon, the muffler. So we were attracting them. We got one of the cardboard boxes and put over it so they couldn't see it. One time, I stood guard again, I had volunteered for it. They asked for some help. That night I was sitting out there and somebody shot something and some stuff fell out of a tree. They were shooting above us. But aside from that, we never had any. I was pretty darn lucky, really.

Mr. Misenhimer

So on Okinawa you weren't on the front line then?

Mr. Banwart

Only that one time when we were in front of the front line.

Mr. Misenhimer

But as far as combat, you weren't in combat on Okinawa?

Mr. Banwart

No I wasn't. That's not what I was sent for. If I would have gotten ashore on Tarawa it wouldn't have been to operate a radio. I would have ended up in the combat end of it. There was not any way you were going to set up a radio on that beach. Anyway, we didn't get everything in there. Our Corporal had one part of the radio and he was killed on the way in. He was left handed and I understand that his left arm was blown off. He had a pistol in his right hand, shooting until he fell down. He was one of them buried in that group.

Mr. Misenhimer

What would you consider your most frightening time?

Mr. Banwart

I suppose it was at Tarawa because you didn't know what was going to happen. I had a lot of apprehension when we went in to Okinawa too of course, on the way in. But when we hit the beach, it was clear. And probably the first time I was under that air raid by Tulagi. I think that was where the Jap tried to crash us. That was a little scary.

Mr. Misenhimer

What ribbons and medals did you get?

Mr. Banwart

I don't know. I got a Purple Heart of course. American Defense Medal and Asiatic Pacific. We got the Presidential Unit Citation for Tarawa and for Guadalcanal area and I never got any medal for that, just the letter that the outfit had got it. The Victory Medal. I've got about five of them.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now did the Marines give a Combat Infantryman's Badge or anything like that?

Mr. Banwart

No the Marines, I don't think so. Did you guys have that?

Mr. Misenhimer

The Army did, yes.

Mr. Banwart

My brother in Africa, I don't know if it was in Africa or Italy, he got a Legion of Merit.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose?

Mr. Banwart

Oh yes. We heard her sometimes.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you think of her?

Mr. Banwart

I think of her now whenever I used to hear Jane Fonda. About the same thing.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you crossed the equator, did you all have any kind of a ceremony?

Mr. Banwart

We sort of did. It wasn't an initiation type thing. They say, "Go across the Equator and have an initiation" because for almost everybody it was the first time. We had several hundred. I don't know how many people were on that ship but it was in the hundreds at least and maybe a thousand. I don't know how many people were on there but for almost

everybody it was the first time so there was nobody there to do the initiation.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now on April 12, 1945, President Roosevelt died, did you hear about that? You would have been on Okinawa.

Mr. Banwart

Yes, I suppose we did but I don't remember that specifically, the news on it. But I knew that Truman took over. Incidentally, I voted for Truman afterwards. I figured that he made a big decision that saved a lot of lives. These people that get all worked up about, 'We killed so many people.' Well, we didn't kill half as many people as would have been killed if we would have went in there. Those Japs, they didn't quit. We would surrender, I suppose, if we had to, but hey would rather die than surrender. They weren't going to do that. One thing about it, we were worried about the Russians afterwards. It would have not been as bad fighting them, even the Germans, at least they were human beings and then were in a uniform. These guys today, they've got a rough row to hoe.

Mr. Misenhimer

Right. You don't know who your enemy is.

Mr. Banwart

And one thing about the Communists, they are atheists. They don't believe in Christ, so they aren't so apt to pull this suicide stuff. They've got no place to go.

Mr. Misenhimer

When Japan surrendered on August 15th, where were you then?

Mr. Banwart

Guam.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was there any kind of a celebration?

Mr. Banwart

Oh, yelling and shouting. Maybe it wasn't that day, but right after it, everybody was so happy. That was the biggest thrill of my life when that war ended.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes because you were getting ready to go to Japan weren't you?

Mr. Banwart

Yes. When we went from Tulagi down to New Zealand it was a while before they started repainting all the equipment and everything to go, and the trunks and everything with new letters on it and everything. When we got to Guam they started almost immediately repainting everything. They were getting ready to go. We would surely have been right up there. I would say that half of the people that were out there would have been killed.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you got out, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Banwart

No, not really. I had my mind made up that I was going to go to school. That was one thing that the government did that I think was really intelligent. We had millions of guys in uniform. Where are these people going to work? By having this school thing, we just flooded the colleges. There were a few kids there, but most of us were old guys (in our early 20's), but we were old comparatively. Any guy that was 20-something and had been through the war, I think you are a lot older than you age indicates. I tell you, when I got back to West Bend, which was a little town of 700 people or maybe less than that, there

weren't any jobs. I could have gotten a job picking up eggs; driving the truck out and picking up eggs in the country or something like that or working in the filling station but I wanted to go to school. I got back on the 26th of December. I went to West Bend and saw my wife. Between then and the end of the year, I managed to get down to Ames and rent an apartment, sign up for school and on New Year's Day we had a truck to take us down with what little furniture we had and we moved to Ames. I wasn't in West Bend very long. I started the winter quarter in January of 1946.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you study?

Mr. Banwart

Chemical engineering.

Mr. Misenhimer

And you graduated in that, I assume?

Mr. Banwart

I graduated in August of 1949. The only problem was that nobody needed a chemical engineer. A lot of the guys graduated in the spring. There was a graduation every quarter then. Because they had so many people, they didn't go by just fall to spring. I graduated at the end of the summer and there weren't any jobs. I worked for a grocery store part time and they offered me a full time job. I still wanted to be an engineer. I had this degree now. In chemical, there just weren't any. However, the Highway Commission was hiring engineers. I went down there and showed up in my suit of clothes, white shirt and tie. I got in there I find out that our job is to sort gravel and junk. (Laugh) The guy looked at me and he said, "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I think I'll send you up." I

drove up to another place and took samples some place. When I walked in, I knew half the people in the place. They were in the chemical engineering class that graduated in the spring, most of them. Then I stayed there for a very short period of time. I kept looking. I read in the paper that some outfit in Des Moines, a furnace company, wanted to hire a heating engineering salesman. Keith Furnace Company. They made a big cast iron coal furnace. Actually it was sales more than engineering. But you had to design the job and figure the heat loss. When I was in engineering class, in one of our classes we all took portions of this plant. We were going to design a big plant and one of the things was somebody constructed the building. My particular little group, we did the heating and air conditioning. I don't know if we even said air conditioning, I think we said ventilation. I happened to be in that group that worked that end of it. We switched around but I figured that I could handle it and that's what I ended up doing. I stayed in the heating and air conditioning.

Mr. Misenhimer

Have you had any reunions?

Mr. Banwart

The second time over I was in what they called the 3rd Corps Signal Battalion. We were meshed with the Army on Okinawa. So part of the people that we were in communications with, most of them were Army. In fact, they got tied down in that one place and when they moved out we moved in. The next morning we had an offensive. I looked over at the next hill and we were lobbing shells right over the top of my antenna. You could stand there and watch the Japanese on the next hill as those shells dropped down on them. We didn't fool around but the Army was tied down there. We moved

right into their foxholes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Have you had reunions?

Mr. Banwart

That Signal Battalion did but I never went to it because by the time I found out about it, I was too old to mess around any more. They were down in Texas.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you used your GI Bill to go to college. Did you use it for anything else?

Mr. Banwart

When I bought my house I think there was something. Then in 1999 they built this VA clinic here in Sioux City. Before that you had to go to Omaha or Sioux Falls or Des Moines. With this little clinic here I thought I would sign up because I was retired then. The first time I went to the clinic for medical was in December of 1999. Since then I've been going. I've got an appointment next month.

End of Interview

Transcribed by:

Lesle W. Dial
Beeville, Texas
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Oral History by:

Richard Misenhimer
P.O. Box 3453
Alice, Texas 78333
Home: (361) 664-4071
Cell: (361) 701-5848