

Tom Dowding Oral History Interview

LARRY RABALAIS: This is Larry Rabalais, and today is August 28, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Tom Dowding, and this interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, at the National Museum of the Pacific War. This interview is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. And with that mouthful, I'm going to turn it over to Tom and let him tell us the story of your life through the war. Go ahead, Tom.

TOM DOWDING: Well, I was in the bakery division --

LR: Well, where were -- when were you born?

TD: I was born in Payne, Ohio --

LR: What date?

TD: -- in 1920. Going through high school in the mid-'30s.

LR: Did you have brothers and sisters?

TD: I have one brother and two sisters.

LR: What did your dad do in that area?

TD: My dad worked at a machine shop, filling station, all combination.

LR: Let me pull you up just a little bit. There we go. I think it might help a little bit, there. There we go. Okay.

TD: But I was fortunate enough -- I worked in a little old bakery in the small town of a thousand people, going to high school. And fortunately, the head baker had been a baker in World War I, and he told me, he says, "Tom, if there's ever a war, you only volunteer one time, and that's to be a baker. And don't ever, ever volunteer again." Well, I got my little greetings. I go to Camp Lee, Virginia (inaudible).

LR: So, you got your draft notice (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). Yeah.

TD: Yeah. I went to Camp Perry.

LR: So, this was before the war started.

TD: Oh, yeah. This was '35 or '36.

LR: Oh, my goodness.

TD: And, of course, here I am, 15, 16-year-old, that went over my head. But anyway, I go to Camp Perry, passed my physical, walked up in front of an old sarge sitting there at a card table. And he looked up, and he said, "What would you like?" And I snapped, and I said, "Bakery." He said, "That line." So, I go to Camp Lee, Virginia.

LR: Well, now, didn't your parents have to sign for you, since you weren't 18?

TD: No.

LR: No?

TD: No. I was of age -- see, this was when I was 15, 16. I'm still in high school. So, in -- this was 1942, was when I went in the service.

LR: Okay. Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor? That would '41.

TD: Fort Wayne, Indiana. In the town of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

LR: Were you working there?

TD: No. We were still in school -- no, we'd gotten out of school, but I was -- my buddy and I had double dates, and we was going to Fort Wayne. (laughs)

LR: [But?] that was a Sunday, so that's when we heard about -- what was your reaction when you heard about that? Did you have any feeling of anger to the Japs, or...?

TD: I'm not sure what I -- I'm really not sure.

LR: It wasn't real -- anything real --

TD: It registered, but I may not...

LR: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was? A lot of people hadn't a clue where it was at.

TD: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

LR: Oh, you knew it was in the Hawaiian Islands.

TD: Yeah. Well, anyway, I get to Camp Lee. Took our basic training.

LR: How many weeks was that of being --?

TD: Four. Four weeks.

LR: Oh, was that all? So, they had shortened it a lot, then.

LR: Four weeks of basic. Then I had two weeks -- one week in a classroom in the bakery, and I lasted the first coffee break, because the major asked -- or, I asked a question. He couldn't answer it. He looked -- he watched -- he says, "Oh my land. It's coffee time." This old sergeant came over and tapped me on the shoulder. He said, "The major wants to see you." He said, "Were you a baker in civilian life?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "The PX is right over there. Just be back in time to go back to your unit." So that's what I did all week. So, then we go out to the field bakery the next week. I ran into the same thing. Knew more than they did.

LR: Well, did you take regular basic in terms of shooting weapons and all that, or --?

TD: Oh, yes. I --

LR: That would've been early '42?

TD: Yeah. I -- we was on maneuvers. We went to Camp Forrest, Tennessee, on maneuvers. Go back to Fort Bragg, and then we were shipped to Camp Stoneman.

LR: Were you in some kind of a particular division, or a unit, or...?

TD: Just a baking unit.

LR: Just a baking unit. Huh. And attached, probably, to different -- or, you would be attached to some regular unit.

TD: No.

LR: No?

TD: We went -- from Fort Bragg, we went to Camp Stoneman, just north of San Francisco.

LR: That's a long trip across the country.

TD: Well, we went from the Gulf to the Canadian border, or Chicago, and back and forth.

LR: By train, I guess?

TD: Yeah. As the rumor went, the ship we was supposed to go head out on left before we got there, so were in Camp Stoneman probably two and a half months before we --

(break in audio)

LR: All right. So, your ship had left already.

TD: Yeah, well, that's the rumor. Now, you know the army rumors. So, we finally shipped out, and we stopped in the Fiji Islands.

LR: That was on a troop ship of some sort, with a bunch of other guys?

TD: Yeah, well, the one we first went out on was a mail ship, the USS *Island Mail*. And it was a mail ship, and we were assigned to a convoy, but the second day out, we broke out of the convoy and took off, because --

LR: Y'all were faster than they were?

TD: We were running 25 knots.

LR: Did y'all go directly to the Hawaiian Islands, or directly to Fiji?

TD: We went to Fiji. And then we went to the New Hebrides, just overnight. And then to Guadalcanal. We went to dock. We was on an LST. But they couldn't get in, so we backed out between Tulagi and Guadalcanal, till the tide come up. We started in the next day, and the Jap fighters strafed our ship. Burned up all of our equipment.

LR: The ship that you were on?

TD: Yeah. And we lost 10 men in my company, and I lost a man on this shoulder, and I lost a man on this shoulder. I was just standing -- well, you know how they strafe, bullet holes that far apart, and I just -- I didn't get a scratch.

LR: Wow, you're fortunate.

TD: Yeah, very fortunate.

LR: So, this was right at the beginning of the landings of the Marine Corps?

TD: No, this was the latter part of it.

LR: The latter part of it. But the Jap planes were still coming over?

TD: Oh, yes. Then we got -- we were stationed there at Guadalcanal for two or three weeks.

LR: Well, this would have been early '43 or late '42?

TD: Yes.

LR: Early '43.

TD: Then we went -- we finally got new equipment come in, and we made the invasion of Munda.

LR: The Munda isl-- yeah.

TD: We made the invasion of Munda.

LR: Did y'all go over on an LST, probably?

TD: Yeah, yeah. And --

LR: Now, when you were on Guadalcanal, what were y'all's duty? What were you -- just baking --

TD: Nothing. We had nothing to do.

LR: Oh, you didn't have equipment.

TD: We had no equipment. But we relieved -- to get our minds off of what happened, they signed us up, and we relieved the baking company there for -- let them have a rest. And then, like I say, we get to Munda.

LR: So, they were stationed behind the lines in a field kitchen or something like that?

TD: We were stationed [about?] right at the end of Henderson Field. We was right at the end of Henderson Field.

LR: Did we have a lot of air traffic on our Henderson Field all the time --

TD: Yes, yes.

LR: -- planes taking off, and all that? Yeah? Now, did the -- the Japanese shelled Guadalcanal for quite some time at night. Did you ever hear any of that?

TD: Oh, yeah. Every night.

LR: Oh, almost every night.

TD: Every night. Washing Machine Charlie.

LR: (inaudible) Washing Machine Charlie would come over and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

TD: Washing Machine Charlie was coming. So, we get to Munda and set up. And I guess they forgot us, because we were there for over a year. Never moved. And, naturally, with our trading ability, we -- there's nothing that we didn't want that we couldn't have.

LR: Well, who were y'all supplying in terms of baked goods?

TD: Troops.

LR: Army or Marines, or both?

TD: Army, Marines, and outlying is-- Bougainville, and Kolombangara, and that. We could get anything we wanted, because we could trade.



LR: You had stuff to trade.

TD: We had stuff to trade. So, on the island of Munda, we controlled the ration dump. We controlled all of the freezers. We controlled the ice house and the ice cream plant. We controlled the beer dump. We controlled the supply dump. There was just nothing that we didn't want.

LR: When y'all first went to Munda, when it was first invaded, was there any Japanese activity there --?

TD: Yes.

LR: A little bit?

TD: That was the invasion of Munda. We was stationed right at the end of the runway there.

LR: Well, was that pretty jungly-like, or --?

TD: Yes.

LR: -- pretty tropical, humid?

TD: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LR: Rain showers, and...?

TD: Yeah.

LR: Was it as nasty as Guadalcanal?

TD: Yes. Yes. Yeah, it was nasty.

LR: Someone else told me that on Bougainville, it was always roots, and mangrove, and swampy, and really muddy.

TD: It was the same there.

LR: Same thing at Munda.

TD: We were fortunate enough to -- we got our -- we bivouacked right on the water. There was no tide, so we didn't have to worry about the tides.

LR: Ocean breezes, a little bit.

TD: Yeah. We had -- and we got our orders to move, and we landed in New Guinea, at Hollandia and Finschafen. Just a couple days. No -- didn't set up.

LR: This would have been late '43, or middle --

TD: Forty-four.

LR: Oh, '44. Okay.

TD: Then we go into the Philippines. [Then?] we changed ships, and we moved down to Parang, southern Mindanao. We set up there.

LR: Again, were y'all supporting or supplying stuff --

TD: Army.

LR: For army, big army, anybody.

TD: The company moved out and left my squad behind, and they moved up to Bugo, northern Mindanao, up on a Del Monte plantation. We were behind three months before we joined the company. And right after that, with a bang, bang, she's over with, and home we come.

LR: Well, when you heard about the atomic bomb, and the fact that the war ended, did you wonder what the atomic bomb

was? A lot of people didn't fully understand what that was.

TD: Well, we just knew it was something big.

LR: Something big happened, huh?

TD: Something big, when they said it wiped out a whole community. You know, you knew it had to be something big.

LR: When y'all traveled around, it was usually on LSTs in that area in there?

TD: Yes.

LR: But coming home, now --

TD: I can't remember if it was -- *General Aultman*.

LR: Oh, it was a troop ship.

TD: That was just the name of it, was *General Aultman*. It wasn't a troop ship. But I lied when I said, you know, that we only volunteered once. We volunteered when we was on-board ship to go down and work in the bakery. That way, we got good food, we got fresh water showers, (laughs) instead of salt water.

LR: You'd get treated special like that.

TD: Well, sure.

LR: My goodness. Well, what was -- in your opinion, what was the worst location? Would it have been Guadalcanal, would have been the worst of them, or...? Physically --

TD: Yeah.

LR: -- uncomfortable and all? It was Guadalcanal?

TD: Mm-hmm.

LR: And by the time y'all got to the Philippines, most of the action had already taken place, I'd assume, or was there still some action?

TD: No, it was -- right after we landed down in Parang, in southern Mindanao, and right after that's when the Leyte -- up in the Leyte Gulf, and that started. But we didn't go, because other units went ahead of us.

LR: Yeah. You were baking bread.

TD: Yep.

LR: (laughs) So all this time, you sort of stayed together as a baking unit.

TD: That's right.

LR: You were not necessarily a part of a --

TD: We were just a baking company.

LR: -- [a section of?] a division that went around. You were just a baking unit that went and set up to support different (inaudible).

TD: When we went to Camp Lee, Virginia, there was two -- well, a full company. And when we graduated out of there, we split -- two platoons when this way, two platoons went this way. And where the other one was, I don't know which way they went.

LR: You never kept track of those, huh?

TD: Well, we never -- you know, you're in a hurry.

LR: Never ran across them.

TD: But we went...

LR: Do you think that they had similar units that went to Europe, something like that?

TD: Oh, yeah.

LR: Yeah?

TD: I think that's where that other unit went. But the most surprising thing of all is on Munda, the CBs made us a nice boat, in-board, outdoor, outboard motorboat. Sergeant [Walden?] and I, we got in it and went across to another island. We got walking up on the beach, and oh, a big native sitting there on a log. "Hi. Where are you guys from?"

LR: In English?

TD: Yeah. We told him. I said, "Well, I'm from Ohio." He said, "Where?" And I told him. And he says, "Oh, yeah." He knew more about northern Ohio than I ever even --

LR: And he was a native?

TD: He was a native. I come to find out, two Australians picked him up, and he was a prize fighter from Chicago to Cleveland. And he knew all the towns. He knew every darn

thing that was up there. And that was the biggest surprise.

LR: That's amazing.

TD: It was. He was a big native. I mean, he was big.

LR: So, you had been in long enough -- you had been in almost from the beginning, to have enough points to get out right away, to get discharged. So, in '45, did you get discharged in '45?

TD: I got discharged Christmas Day, '45. You couldn't even get off the base.

LR: That's what I was going to say. Where did y'all come to the US onto? San Francisco, or...?

TD: Back to Camp Stoneman. When we got [out?], all they told us is, "The loudspeakers will tell you when trains go [in?] so and so. And if you ain't on it, you wait till the next one." And they just turned you loose. You was absolutely on your own.

LR: You had discharge papers, and --

TD: No.

LR: No?

TD: I got to Camp Atterbury, Indiana. That's when we got to get our discharge papers.

LR: Did you have a lot of pay coming, or -- at that point?

TD: No.

LR: No, no. Not a lot of backed up pay or anything like that.

TD: No.

LR: Some of the combat troops did, you know. They didn't have a chance to spend it all. Now, were you ready to go back to civilian life? Did you give --

TD: Yes, sir.

LR: -- a thought about staying in?

TD: No.

LR: No? (laughs)

TD: If I would have, Del Monte wanted us to take our discharge there and go to work on their plantations, and we would've had, you know, all --

LR: In where? In Hawaii?

TD: No, Mindanao, at Bugo. They had big pineapple plantations. We'd have had living quarters, and --

LR: What would you have done there?

TD: Well, supervisors over the Filipinos.

LR: I'll be. That's interesting.

TD: No, all that I had in your mind was home.

LR: Were your parents glad to see you, I guess?

TD: Oh, yeah.

LR: Were you still living at home then? You weren't married yet?

TD: No. Well, I was living in Lima. That's a big city. I was working in a steel mill in Lima.

LR: They make big, heavy equipment there, too.

TD: Yeah. They made barrels, gun barrels.

LR: Oh, did they? Oh, in terms of war stuff? Yeah. I was thinking of the big heavy industries like the cranes.

TD: Well, right across the street was Lima Locomotive, and on the back side of us was Westinghouse, and on the other side of us was... Well, Lima was all manufacturing.

LR: Okay. So, who'd you go to work for, then?

TD: When I got out?

LR: Well, this was Christmas Day. I couldn't get off the base. So, a couple of days later, I got -- my sister and brother-in-law lived in Wapakoneta, just outside of Lima. January 6, we came to Texas, Kerrville. My dad and mom, and my brother and his wife, lived in Kerrville, so we came down to see them. Well, my brother-in-law and sister went back up, and I stayed a little while. Then come along time for me to get my job back at the steel mill. I told my brother, I said, "Well, let's go. I'm getting my old job back." So we started out, and about 15, 20 miles from Indianapolis, we blew a tire. Got out to change the tire, and all I had on was just a t-shirt.

LR: It's cold up there then.



TD: Cold? I have never been that cold in all my life. But fortunately, I was driving. I just made a U-turn, came ba-  
- he said, "We were almost home. Let's go." (inaudible) I just made the U-turn, came back to Texas, and that's it.

LR: (laughs) That cold was too much (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TD: Oh, man, I --

LR: You'd been in the tropics, too, for awhile.

TD: Yeah. I never was so cold in all my life.

LR: Well, I appreciate you sharing details like that with us. The saddest thing, I guess, was maybe losing some of the guys near you.

TD: Yes.

LR: That was a pretty sad experience, I would assume. [Messy?].

TD: Yeah, you kind of get close to them. You sleep with them, you know, and all of that.

LR: Now, when you went in, did you go in with a schoolmate or a buddy, or anything --?

TD: No.

LR: You went in on your own.

TD: Yeah.

LR: Sometimes right at the war like that, a lot of the high school boys got together and went together. Sometimes, you know, one would get killed, and that was a bad --

TD: Well, I didn't -- I figured I was pretty safe [by?] working in a steel mill.

LR: Yeah. Of course, you were already about 21 --

TD: Twenty-one.

LR: -- or so, so you had a little bit more maturity than a lot of the kids did. Well, that should end it there, and again, on behalf of the National Museum of the Pacific War, I'd like to thank you, Tom, for sharing these experiences with us.

END OF AUDIO FILE