

## Ivan Toller Oral History Interview

JOHN FARGO: Today is November 19, 2014. My name is John Fargo, and I am a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today, I am interviewing Ivan Toller concerning his experiences during World War II. This interview is taking place in Mr. Toller's home in Austin, Texas. This interview is in support of the Educational and Research Center in the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to World War II. And so, profits to our interview here. OK, Ivan, tell me a little bit about your early years. When were you born, and where?

IVAN TOLLER: I was born in 1923, in El Dorado, Arkansas.

JF: OK. What was your father's occupation?

IT: My father was general manager of the El Dorado Lumber Company.

JF: You have any siblings?

IT: No.

JF: Where did you go to school?

IT: I started out -- I was living with my grandparents in Arkansas on a farm. It was located about 10 miles from the little town of Chidester, Arkansas. It was a little one-

room schoolhouse, and they had all 12 grades in the one room. Of course, there wasn't a pupil in every grade, and we didn't have any tablets or anything. We had just a slate, and the few books we had stayed at the schoolhouse. And just about the time that I started in the first grade, the Depression hit, and we lost our farm, and I went to live the rest of that school year in Farmersville, Louisiana, with my other grandparents. And I went to this second grade and third grade in Farmersville, Louisiana. Then, I skipped the fourth grade, and returned and went to the fifth grade in Chidester, Arkansas. Then I went to the sixth and seventh grade in a farm community in southern Arkansas, not far from just a little village of Johnsville. Then I went to live with an aunt and uncle on an Indian reservation in Pawnee, Oklahoma, and went to the next two grades. Then, I lived with an aunt in Little Rock, Arkansas, and went to high school there one year. The next two years, I went to school in Longview, Texas, and lived with my mother, and graduated in 1940 in Longview High School.

JF: I see, 1940, before the war.

IT: (laughs) Right.

JF: Did you have any plans to go to college at that point?

IT: I would have liked to have gone to college, and frankly, just about the only ones at that time that went to college were the kids that, their parents had become quite wealthy when they had the big oil boom there. And I tried several places to see if there was some kind of odd job I could get or anything, but there just weren't any jobs available to - - you know, there was no way that I could go to college, but I would have liked to have gone.

JF: You indicated at the meeting here a couple of weeks ago that you graduated at 16.

IT: That's right.

JF: So how did you get involved in joining the Army?

IT: Well, while I was attending high school, I always had jobs, and at that time, the most that you could make was \$1 a day working at a grocery on Saturday or something, and generally the hours were 10 to 12 hours for a dollar. And actually, I had a job working at an ice cream plant when I first graduated from high school, but it was just on Saturday and Sundays. And so, I couldn't live on \$2 a week. And so a friend of mine that worked there with me, his brother came by to visit with him, and his brother had graduated a year ahead of us, and he was wearing an Army uniform. And so I got to chatting with him, and asking him how he liked it and what he did and everything, and I asked

him if he thought there was any chance that I could get in the Army. And he said, "Well, I'll be going back down to San Antonio in a few days," and said, "Why don't you hitchhike down there," and he says, "I'll put you up in a tent down there and you can look it over and see how you like it." And so, about two weeks later, I got up early one morning and hitchhiked down to San Antonio, and hitchhiked out to Brooks Airbase, and he checked a cot, put it in the tent, and I stayed there for little over a week. And the food was real good, and it looked real good to me, and I asked him, I said, "How do I go about joining up?" And he says, "Well, I'll take you over to headquarters." And I went over to headquarters, and went in and talked to the sergeant and told him, "I'd like to join up." And he asked me, he said, "Son, how old are you?" And I said, "I'm 16." And he said, "You're too young to join. You have to be 18 to join the Army." And I said, "How do you get to be 18?" He laughed and explained to me that you could get a false birth certificate. And I said, "Well, that sounds pretty good." And he says, "What's your name?" And I said "I. Ollie Toller, Junior." He said, "Well, we're going to have some trouble on that." He said, "The Army will let you have a middle initial, but they won't allow you to have a first initial." And I thought a

minute, and I said, "Well, if I'm changing my age, I'll just change my name." (laughter)

JF: So that's how you became Ivan?

IT: (laughs) And, well, I didn't particularly like my name anyway, and Ivan was about the only name I could come up with that started with an I. (laughter)

JF: That's funny.

IT: So I hitchhiked back up to Longview and with my mother's help, got a new name and a new age.

JF: Got a new birth certificate?

IT: Yes. And hitchhiked back, (laughs) and joined the Army in 1940.

JF: Where did you go to basic training?

IT: Right there at Brooks Field, San Antonio.

JF: Any stories about that time? How did you adapt to being in the military?

IT: Well, I'd always had numerous jobs growing up, and so working was just second nature to me. And I really enjoyed being there. All the fellows were nice, and, like I say, the food was excellent. The way the food was in those days, the mess sergeants were paid so much a day, for each soldier, and then they could buy raw materials for food and everything.

JF: Is that right?

IT: Mm-hmm. It was before, you know, they got the quartermaster and everything. And you'd either have a real good mess sergeant, or if you had a bad one, that's where the old name came in, "belly robber."

JF: Belly robbers. I know the term. (laughter)

IT: But this one was, man, he was tops. And he served the food just like at home, and the food was in bowls on the tables. And as they'd become empty, well, you'd hold the dish up and a KP would come over and refill it. And, he had real good bakers. And he really took care of the personnel and on the weekends, he liked to give his cooks and all pretty much the weekend off, so he'd have them bring out a huge keg of beer and cold cuts for the weekend meals.

JF: For the soldiers who were going through basic?

IT: For the whole field.

JF: Oh, I see, I see. That's pretty nice.

IT: And I hadn't been there too long, till I was assigned KP duty for a week. And just being used to work meant I was having fun [being?] on KP and working away. And when my week was up, the mess sergeant came over and made me a lot of offers if I'd come and, you know, work for him when I was through with basic training. And promotions, back in the old Army, just were almost nonexistent, and so he offered to immediately, if I would do that, get me a PFC

rating and also he would arrange and send me off to cook and bakers school. And I told him, man, I sure appreciated it but I just didn't feel like I wanted to make that my profession. (laughter)

JF: That's interesting. I can imagine it was tempting, though.

IT: It was very tempting.

JF: So, what happened after basic?

IT: Well, I'll just add that they didn't have any clothing for us. And so all of us taking basic just took it in our regular clothes.

JF: You're kidding?

IT: I'm not kidding. Man, during the time between -- or after World War I, Congress just wouldn't appropriate any money for the armed services.

JF: Oh, that's true.

IT: And they just, also --

JF: Were you getting paid?

IT: Yes. Now, no trouble like that, but they also had a different deal when I first went in, about clothing and equipment for enlisted men. And they gave you a small amount of money per year, and then you would --

JF: Buy your own clothes?

IT: But from the Army, but -- and of course, that ended later on and they started, you know, furnishing everything, and

if something wore out they'd give you a new one. But in fact, it was over four months before I got a complete outfit, including from shoes, you know, and my foot wasn't that unusual but I have a slim foot, and so actually it was around three months before I was issued a pair of boots. And they were a different color and looked very old, and they came from the Philadelphia quartermaster, and I think they were from the Civil War.

JF: (laughs) Are you serious?

IT: I'm nodding. By that time, I was over at Kelly Field and they had -- at that time, we were living in tents, and it had been raining for two or three days, and I just hadn't worn these old shoes. I was kind of ashamed to put them on. And so I was going over to the mess hall and I thought, well, I'll just wear these over there and get them muddy. And when I got back from the mess hall, I looked down, and about the only thing that was left was the bottom of the shoe and the shoestrings; the rest was breaking off. (laughs) They just fell apart.

JF: Peacetime [Army?].

IT: (laughs)

JF: That's interesting. So, you finally graduated from basic, and what happened then?



IT: Almost just shortly after basic, they moved us over to Kelly Field.

JF: So you were out of basic at that point, though --

IT: Right.

JF: -- when you went to Kelly? OK.

IT: Just out of basic. And when we got over to Kelly Field, there were several things that we could do. Quite a few started going to different schools, like, to a school to learn how to put parachutes, pack them; and to mechanic school, learn how to work on planes and different things. And somehow, I didn't want to go back to school at that time, and so I got a job in the transit hangar.

JF: Now this is the Army Air Force?

IT: No, it's the Army Corps.

JF: The Army Corps.

IT: Mm-hmm.

JF: United States Army.

IT: Mm-hmm, yeah. So actually, I was in the Army at that point. Now, not too long after that, in October, Roosevelt declared, or had Congress declare, a one-year draft. And he gave a fireside chat and I'll never forget it. He promised the mothers of America that he would never send their sons outside the continental limits of the United States. (laughs)

JF: Is that right? Interesting. So were you then deluged with draftees coming into the Army?

IT: Immediately. And it sounds real funny, but at that one moment, as the draftees started coming in, all of the regular Army became old Army. It didn't matter that you was just off basic training. We were the old Army. Because, they had to have somebody -- and there weren't too many of us -- to train them and everything. And right at first, we didn't have any place to put them immediately, so opened up some of the hangars and got a lot of cots, right at first, and everything just immediately changed at that point. At that point, we started -- they changed the uniform setup, where they were issuing plenty of clothing and equipment, and, if anything wore out or anything you could just take it down to the quartermaster and get more. Everything changed at that point.

JF: Money opened up.

IT: That's right.

JF: Were you, as the old Army, tasked with training these new draftees?

IT: We were, and -- but not everyone in an outfit, but I mean, we were the ones that did it. And it straightened itself out pretty fast. They really handled it real good. We hadn't...

JF: You mentioned, at the meeting, that they sent you to school, to college?

IT: Well, that's way down the line. That's way down the line. No, I was there at Kelly Field for several months, and actually, I was able to get a job in the transit hangar. They had a small supply room there to work on the planes and everything, and we practically didn't have any planes. We had the training planes that the pilots had, but we just had one good plane there. It was a C-40. Beautiful plane, and it was kind of considered the colonel's private property, and the inside was equipped just like an airline. (laughs) Then, we had one old bomber that you had to work on quite a bit between each flight, and the only flights that I ever saw it take was, about every two or three weeks, it'd take a supply of food and beverage down to the Officers' Club on Matagorda Island, and then we'd have to work on it several days to get it where it'd go again. (laughs) And we also had, out in front of the hangar, we had one old radial engine plane from World War I. I don't know what it was doing out there. Once a week, we'd go out and start it up.

JF: So you were like a mechanic, at that point? Working on airplanes?

IT: Not exactly. I was, at that point, I was listed as assistant crew chief, and Sergeant [Eaby?] was listed as the crew chief. But the only thing I did as assistant crew chief is call down and ask for some mechanics to come down.  
(laughs)

JF: To work on the plane, work on the engines?

IT: To work on the plane. And the main reason that I had pulled some strings to get into that situation, is on the side of the hangar, there was a nice apartment had been built with bathroom, and room for two or three, and the only one in this was Staff Sergeant Eaby.

JF: And you?

IT: And so I talked to him about it and made some promises. I'd do all the cleaning up and everything if he'd -- and so it ended up with just the two of us there and I didn't have to stand any formations or anything, so. And about that time, I had bought a used motorcycle, and I thought I was living the life of Riley. (laughter)

JF: I can imagine. So, how long did you stay there at Kelly?

IT: Two or three months, and they decided to open up a new airfield in San Angelo.

JF: Goodfellow.

IT: Goodfellow Field. And so, they took our whole outfit, the 64th Airbase Squadron, and put us on a train, and we went

out to help get the field started. And things -- the barracks were pretty well completed, but there was a lot to do to get things set up to bring in all the new people that were coming in. And by that time, I had made pretty good friends with the first sergeant, and I can't remember the exact details, but in going through some of the records or something, the first sergeant had come up with an old rating from the old-time Army, and it was a "first first." And I think there was only one allowed for each regiment, of that rating, and the rating paid slightly more than a buck sergeant. It was a real strange deal, but anyway, with the first sergeant's influence, I was able to get this one position. (laughs) And anyway, after we were there a little while, the -- most of the people in San Angelo weren't too happy with soldiers coming up and dating their daughters. And for some reason, we didn't have a real good reputation at that time. And so our colonel was doing everything possible to make friends with the city, and somehow, he came up with the idea to send eight or 10 of us down to a business college. I don't know what that was to do. Anyway, the first sergeant told me about it, and so I applied. And so, I went down and graduated from the business college.

JF: Where was that?

IT: Just right downtown San Angelo.

JF: It was just a --

IT: And I was just in there with -- well, all of the ones there were girls. There weren't any, you know, civilian males, and so the eight or 10 of us and about 30 girls down there -- it's a pretty nice setup. I graduated first in the class.

JF: How long was the curriculum? How long did it last, a year?

IT: No, it wasn't that long. I forget exactly what it was, but it wasn't that long. So then, there again, with the help of the first sergeant, I got transferred down to the -- another part of the field where they had all of the barracks and separate mess hall and everything for the cadets. And I was -- got transferred down there, and also they had a setup down there and we occupied, oh, about half of a barracks. And had a regular orderly room for the cadets and a supply setup for the cadets, and then had a completely different mess hall for the cadets, and this was real good because I didn't have to stand any formations. And also, we got to eat with the cadets, which was a completely different diet than regular soldiers were getting. It was fantastic food.

JF: Now the cadets were pilots in training?

IT: Yes. And so, because of attending this, I was put in the orderly room there at the cadet. And I didn't want to work in an office. It just -- I wasn't happy there, so I talked to the captain, and so I was transferred to the supply for the cadets. And I liked that, and we had several in the supply. We had a tech sergeant and we had a master sergeant, and they had served, I don't know, 10 years, 15 years, something like that, and there was several others in that department. And because I really liked to work, and so these old sergeants kind of took me under their wing, and I really learned an awful lot from these sergeants.

JF: What was your rank at this time?

IT: They had discontinued the "first first" I had, and completely did away with that and promoted me to buck sergeant which, I was making \$2 or \$3 less as buck sergeant, but that didn't make me any difference. And it wasn't too long after this that Pearl Harbor came about. I'll never forget. Several of us -- by that time, I had an old used car I'd bought downtown, and several of us had been out -- it was Sunday -- had been out and spent the day out at Lake Nasworthy. And so, it was long about dusk dark, and we was driving back. So when we pulled up to the gate to enter Goodfellow Field, the guard on the gate was all excited and came out and said something about, "You

know what's happened?" We said, "No." And he said, "Man, we got bombed at Pearl Harbor." Well, of course, we hadn't heard of Pearl Harbor, and he told us all about it and we got excited about it, too. And I never will forget -- it sounds rather strange -- the guard said, "Well," said, "if you want to wear these civilian clothes anymore" -- because at that time, most of us, when we'd go off base, we'd wear civilian clothes. He said, "If you want to" (laughs) "wear your civilian clothes anymore," said, "you'd better turn around and go to town, because" he said, "in the morning, you're going to have to box up all your civilian clothes and send them home." And that's what we did. And of course, the whole town was excited and unhappy and mad about Pearl Harbor.

JF: So that must have created an immediate change in everything that you fellows were exposed to, at that point.

IT: It just went wild. You can't believe how fast Washington just changed everything, and very efficient. I mean, it was -- just seems like almost the next day you'd -- well, I'll just take the tech sergeant and master sergeant. Within about three or four weeks, I think one of them had been automatically promoted to captain and one of them to major. Now mind you, these were smart men and had been in the service a long time and made good officers. And we



started getting a lot of lieutenants in, that had attended places like A&M and places like that, and it took several months for most of them to kind of settle in, you know, because they never had really been soldiers before. And just everything, in every way, and just -- Ratings were just going crazy, and I hadn't been in all that long, and the major kept wanting me to take a direct jump to second lieutenant, and at that age, I was just having too much fun and happy with what I was doing, and so I was promoted to staff sergeant and I was pretty happy with that. But the other thing that happened is, along with every one of my friends -- which I had dozens of good friends -- we started applying for anything that would get us where the fighting was. And so, man, we went down, we applied for flight training; we tried for bombardier; we tried for this, and different ones would be accepted and everything. I found out that I was slightly colorblind and, of course, wore glasses, so that cut me out on, you know --

JF: Pilot training.

IT: -- and some other things like that. And before too long, they posted that everyone on the base had to take a test. And so, I went over that morning to take the test, and seems to me it took about four hours. I remember that it was a very hard test, and quite long. And if you made an

exceptionally high grade on it, you were forced to go to college. And I didn't want to do that, because at that time, I really wanted to get in on the fighting. (laughs) But, like I say, you didn't have any choice in the matter and so I was transferred to the ASTP, Army Specialized Training Corps. And, it sounds crazy, but you had to go as a private. So, I was given a choice of Drexel Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or, I forget, it was an excellent college over in Nashville, Tennessee. And I never had been north of the Mason-Dixon line, so I thought, man --

JF: Drexel.

IT: Drexel it is. So college wasn't going to start for a couple of months or something like that, so they sent us up to Camp Maxey in Paris, Texas, at an infantry camp, and took infantry basic for the second time, (laughs) waiting for college to start.

JF: Where was that, Camp where?

IT: Camp Maxey at Paris, Texas.

JF: Never heard of that. I'll bet that was not a good experience, having to go through basic again.

IT: Well, (laughs) it wasn't the highlight of my life.

(laughter) But then, they put us on a train and we went up to -- or rather I did; different ones went different

places. And I went up to Philadelphia. And I found out after getting up there that Drexel was really a highly-rated engineering --

JF: Still is.

IT: And wonderful school. In fact, I don't think that they graduated people there. I think the only thing they had other -- at that time, other than engineering, was a degree you could get in library science, and I think they had that so you could have -- women, too, could go there. And about a mile from the campus, we occupied several floors of a very nice hotel. And it'd be two or three double-bunk beds in a room, and then we'd share a bathroom, and we took over the dining room, and then they brought in a cadre to keep our records and be in charge of us, from Valley Forge. And so, things were going real good there, and I was doing OK in studies and all of that.

JF: What exactly did you study, engineering?

IT: Basic -- yeah, just --

JF: (inaudible) engineering?

IT: Yeah, just regular. Except, we were -- it was accelerated because we were going straight through, and somehow we were taking it -- the courses, more of them than everything -- than normal. They had it set up where that, seems to me, that we were going to, if I remember right, do a four-year

course in something over two years, and at that time, we would graduate as an officer. And so, we had been going to college there pretty close to a year -- I forget just how long -- and after breakfast one morning, they announced that we weren't to go back to our rooms, you know, to get the books and things, that we were to assemble out in the hallways.

JF: How many of you were there? Big group?

IT: Just off the top of my head, I'd say probably around 50. Might have been few less than that. I don't remember exactly how many of us we were. That we were to assemble out in the hall after breakfast. And so, we did, and there was an officer there from the Pentagon, and he told us that they had decided down in Washington to eliminate this program, and that we had, I forget, an hour, two hours, something like that, to go and get our barracks bag and put all our possessions in our barracks bag, and they'd issue us our next orders. And they did it on an individual basis, and so, they gave me orders to report to Fort Bragg, over in the Carolinas. I don't know where the others went. And so, I got on the train and went down to Fort Bragg -- and it's long in the winter, and kind of misting rain, but just nasty weather -- and I got in down there and reported

in and they told me that I was immediately assigned to take infantry basic for the third time.

JF: Is that right?

IT: (laughs)

JF: Well that's... So at that point, they had demoted you from staff sergeant down to private, while you were going to college, correct?

IT: Correct.

JF: So now you were still a private at that point?

IT: That's right. (laughs)

JF: Strange ways the Army (inaudible). And how long was that third basic?

IT: (laughs) Well, it was just regular.

JF: Regular basic training?

IT: Yeah.

JF: You were in there with draftees just coming [in?] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

IT: A hundred percent.

JF: A hundred percent draftees.

IT: Oh, yeah. And treated just like one of them.

JF: That's interesting.

IT: (laughs)

JF: So after that tour of duty, and Fort Bragg, what happened then?

IT: Well, what happened is that it was extremely bad weather. It wasn't freezing, it was just a degree over freezing. It was misting, it was muddy, and it was nasty. Things were going along OK, and along about that time had just about finished basic, and I think I got the flu, or felt like it, anyway. But to go on sick call, you had to get up very early in the morning, before daylight, and form outside your barrack and march down to a little dispensary where, not a doctor but a corpsman, would check you over, and so, somehow I managed to get outside. I couldn't hardly stand up, and some little corporal attempted to march us, kind of, in the drizzly rain, I don't know, I guess city blocks. It would have been maybe two or three blocks. Wasn't all that far, but man, I was practically out of my head, you know. And we finally got down to the dispensary, and this little corporal made us stand out there. And you could see in through the window, and the group ahead of us, most of them were -- had already been examined and there was a lot of vacant benches in there, but he wouldn't let us go in. Made us stand out there until every one of them were out. Well, after a little while, I couldn't take it anymore, so I just broke ranks and went in and sat down at the back. And so he came in there and started trying to drag me out. So we got into kind of a scuffle or pretty heavy

disagreement. Anyway, I went ahead and saw the corpsman, and he was very nice. He gave me a bottle of aspirin, told me I could go back to the barracks and stay in the barracks, you know, in bed for a couple of days. So I came out and didn't get with my bunch, I just walked on back. And I guess I had probably gotten asleep, and little later that morning, a couple of MPs came in, got me out of bed, and said the captain wanted to see me. And asked them what about, and they said this corporal had filed a complaint against me. So I went over and the captain started telling me the penalty for striking a noncommissioned officer, (laughs) and that I was in deep, deep trouble. (laughs) Well, I was practically out of my head, and I asked the captain if he had checked my service record, and he said no, and I asked him if he'd check it. And so, I think he called to the first sergeant to bring my service record in, which he did. And the captain read it, and I think he read it about twice, and asked me two or three questions: "Is this true? Is this true?" and I said yeah. And he said, "Man, this is darnedest thing I ever saw." And he called the ser-- I mean the corporal in, and dressed him down real good and told him to take off, that he'd take care of him later. And so he had me sit down and we had a nice visit, and I think we had maybe four or five days left --

JF: In basic?

IT: In basic. And he says, "Well, I'm taking you off of that right now," he says, "that's stupid." And he said, "I'm going to get you transferred back to the Air Force." And he says, "I see that you haven't had any time off for well over a year," and he says, "I'm going to give you," I believe it was 20 days furlough, and here's the part that I still can't understand him doing it and how he did it at that time. He says, "I'm going to pay for your train fare with the 20 days' delay in your hometown of Longview, and, I'm going to get you Pullman." Well, during the war, I think a general had trouble getting a Pullman.

JF: Is that right?

IT: Oh, travel was -- just to get a regular ticket on a train was hard. But to get a Pullman -- which I'd never had -- to Longview and then --

JF: The sleeping car, is that what you mean?

IT: Yeah, uh-huh, and he had me transferred to a camp down in Florida that was on the outskirts of Tampa.

JF: That was part of the Army Air Force at that point.

IT: Yeah. Yeah, this was Air Force base. And that operated -- they were a secondary base that operated under MacDill Air Force Base. And we're kind of, at that time, acting as a transfer for outfits that were being reorganized and things



like that, and they were getting in a lot of cadets that's washed out of flight training and things like that. They were sent in to this particular camp until they would be reassigned. Kind of a reassignment place, but it was a regular airbase. So I had time back in Longview and nice trip down to Florida, and I checked in there, oh, about 12:30, and I went in and asked to see the first sergeant, and the only one there was a major. I guess the others were out eating lunch. And so, kind of unusual, he seemed very friendly, and asked me a few questions, and I told him that I was sorry to had bothered him but that I'd come back later on when the first sergeant was there. And he says, "I'm not doing anything." He says, "Let me see your service record." And so he sit down there and he glanced through it and he looked up at me and he said, "You know something?" He said, "You and I are the only two regular Army men on this base." (laughs)

JF: Is that right?

IT: Yeah! (laughs) And we had -- which is, you know, is very unusual -- had a nice chat, and he says, "What would you like to do?" And I said, "Well, truthfully, for a little while, nothing." (laughter) And he says, "Well," he said, "I'll assign you to the supply." He says, "Man," (laughs) he says, "they've got more rank and everything." He said,

"There's no chance of" -- see, I was back to private again. He says, "There's no chance for rank or anything." I said, "Man, I'm not looking for any rank or anything; I'll be happy down there." And I told him that I would like to be able to see the memos coming in from MacDill with available, you know, transfers and things that you could transfer for, and he was very cooperative. He said if I'd drop by, that he'd see that I could be kept posted on what was available. So, I did, and I think the first thing that came through that looked interesting: They were forming a group, I think an officer WAC -- you know what a WAC is?

JF: Sure.

IT: -- and an enlisted WAC were going to make a tour and talk to people in different towns. They wanted to enlist and get more WACs. And they wanted a qualified male soldier to go along to handle their arrangements, their lodging, their -- you know. And I thought, well (laughs) --

JF: Boy, that'd be [living?].

IT: (laughs) I thought, you know, I still wanted to go over and get in the fighting, but this sounded enticing, and so I got all ready and accepted, and they called me and they just got word in from the Pentagon that the only one that could get that position had to be limited service.

JF: What do they mean by that?

IT: Well, evidently, and I didn't know at the time, I guess after the war started, they took in some soldiers that had limited service. Maybe they had a hand or something --

JF: Oh, I see. Limited duty type thing.

IT: Yes. But they couldn't be sent outside the continental limits of the United States. And I hadn't heard of it before. So they canceled me off on that. Several weeks later, a deal came through and it really sounded good. And it was from JAG, and they were forming a group of, it was two or three officers and I think it was going to be a colonel and I forget, but it was two or three officers, and they were going to go to different locations -- now this could be any place in the world -- and hold, I guess, court-martials. (coughs) And they wanted the same thing. They wanted an enlisted man to go along, carry the luggage, make just --

JF: [Handle?] the arrangements, (inaudible)?

IT: Right, just, whatever was needed. (coughs) And they had seven requirements as to age and different things. One was that you had to be at least a staff sergeant. And you were to come up to Washington, take a 10-week course, and at the end of the 10 weeks, you'd be promoted to master sergeant, and then you would just be assigned to JAG permanently.

And anyway, the major, he laughed about it and he said,  
(laughs) "You don't qualify for this."

JF: Because you're a private.

IT: And a couple of other things. It happened that I was a little young; there was an age requirement. And so, I'd been in the Army quite a while at that time, and I really knew how things worked, and so I talked to him about it and asked him if I could go ahead and apply for it, and if he would put down recommendations about the requirements. And he said he'd be glad to, and so, he wrote a nice letter that answered all of the different things, sent it back over to MacDill, MacDill sent it on up -- OKed it and sent it on up to Washington. Lo and behold, in several weeks, came back approved by Hap Arnold.

JF: No kidding?

IT: Yeah. And (laughs) so, it was, once again, it was going to be, I don't know, several weeks before the school started. So, once again, he had my orders cut to go up and get a 10-day delay in Longview. And I think I had been in Longview about 10 hours when I got a telegram to report immediately to the 2nd Air Commando Group in Florida. (laughter)

JF: You came so close to having some really peachy deals, there. (laughter) That's funny. It wasn't funny, but I can imagine you were very disappointed.

IT: You know, I really wasn't. I guess it was the fact that my upbringing and, you know, just living with different families and things, [and?] my whole life, whatever would come along, I figured... So, it really didn't -- I'd preferred, but I didn't know. I hadn't heard about the secondary commandos, and I liked the sound of it, so really, I think I probably -- it probably pleased me at that point. Sounded good.

JF: I can understand that. You sure it was the 2nd Commando, Air Commandos, and not the 1st Air Commandos?

IT: Well, you know, the deal over in Burma, the Japs had just swept through, and they came into Burma, and if they made it through Burma, they would have taken India, you know, fast, and Merrill's Marauders were already there. And you know, they were really -- most of them either died there or later. They've really had it rough. They didn't have any backing, you know; I'm sure you've seen some of the movies about them. And so, they formed the 1st Air Commandos to go over there. I didn't know anything about that, you know, at that time, and do you know what they comprised of? I mean, evidently, you've heard of the 1st.

JF: Yes, yes.

IT: They were comprised of fighter planes and had some DC-3s, paratroopers, gliders, and we had some L-5s for just right

down on the lines and behind the enemy lines, and they were set up as a complete unit, not needing to call on any other unit for anything. And so, they were over there awhile and they brought them all home.

JF: The 1st Commando Group.

IT: And formed the 2nd. And I know nothing about the 1st, except, you know, things I've heard, but I'm sure they were -- that we were identical to them, and had never had a camp or a base or anything, in other words, they just borrowed bases on three or four different states and would go different places with all of their training. And when I got this to go down there, I could tell that they were well along.

JF: In their training?

IT: Right, and that this was down in central Florida, and so I -- on the 1st, I don't know how true it was, but what I heard -- and this was back before I got into it -- that *Terry and the Pirates*, that comic strip in the paper, was fashioned after the 1st Air Commandos. Anyway, I reported in and they were -- they was very belligerent. Just kind of getting tossed in jail, you know. They just -- somebody new coming in -- in other words, they was going to kick you around a little bit first. (laughs) They were a pretty rough outfit, and of course I'd been in the service by that

time, a long time, so that didn't phase me a bit. So I reported over to -- and there again, I'm still a private. So I reported over to supply and they had -- Lieutenant Arnold was supply officer, and they had a corporal, and, I don't know what had happened to the staff sergeant, and that's who I was replacing. And so anyway, I reported in and they told me to take over and start running the thing, and I did. And after about a week, Lieutenant Arnold told me that he was leaving and that I probably wouldn't see him for a long time. And he took off.

JF: So he left you in charge?

IT: He said that a fighter pilot, Lieutenant [Decells?], would -- didn't know anything about supply, but that he would... You know --

JF: Take on the responsibility.

IT: Yeah. And so, I just took, I mean, took over. Well, immediately, I hadn't been there but a day or two, and they informed me that they wanted everything -- everything -- new. Didn't matter what shape anything was in. Everything. Clothes -- anything. And they wanted me to do that, and also get ready to pack up the whole outfit. Well, now when I say the whole outfit, the outfit that I was in was the 156th Liaison Squadron.

JF: A part of the 1st Air Commando Group?

IT: Second.

JF: Second Air --

IT: Right.

JF: And a hundred and what?

IT: A hundred and fifty-six. Liaison Squadron. And we had L-5s.

JF: What is that?

IT: It was used primarily kind of like what later on when they got helicopters. It was a little plane that you could have a pilot, and then there was room for somebody that was wounded or something, you had to carry or something; but it's a small little one-engine, just that can take off and hack a place out a jungle or something and take off like that. And anyway, Decells hung around the supply there for three or four days and didn't say much, and at the end of that time, he told me one morning, he says, "I don't know anything about this deal," and he says, "I care less." He says, "I can see that you know what the hell you're doing," and this part is going to sound real stupid to you because it sounded real stupid to me. He took a pad and wrote a deal on it that somehow, I was in charge and could write out my own passes and just -- you'd have to know the guys in a commando unit to believe this would even happen. And he handed this to me and he said he wasn't going to mess



with that anymore. He just (descriptive sound) (laughs) and...

JF: Once a fighter pilot, always a fighter pilot.

IT: And so I thanked him and put it in my pocket. I never did use it, because anybody would thought I was crazy.

(laughs) But, I actually, I did act and do all the duties -  
-

JF: Of the supply sergeant.

IT: Officer.

JF: Yeah, the officer in charge of the supply.

IT: Yeah, and that was quite a job getting everything together and we had to -- some of them we could get; others we had to go and build boxes to put stuff in and everything. But we got the thing going real good. So they announced the next day that we would be leaving. Now I kind of hate to admit it, but the town was a little worse for the celebrating when we left. (laughter) It was. Anyway, we got on the train and we headed west and we ended up on the outskirts -- some camp on the outskirts of Los Angeles. And at that point, we didn't know exactly when we'd get on the boat. And so everybody was contained there in the place and I was the only one that had to do something. I had to see that all of the equipment -- which was considerable and everything -- was accounted for and loaded

and taken down to Long Beach and everything. So, I went down and checked out the trucks and drivers, and was pretty busy doing all of that. And so then, we got on the troop ship. I think it was the USS *Pope*, I believe it was. That's been a long time. And it was a large troop ship, and we were going to go single. We weren't going in convoy. And it's pretty dangerous, because a good portion of the Pacific, the Japs had it. And so, we weren't to have radio contact or anything once we left Long Beach. And so after we got on the boat -- I think it was maybe a couple of days before that, we sailed -- and so the captain -- you know, normally, on a ship, they'll have a number of Marines, you know. They guard the captain and so forth. Well, they designated my little outfit --

JF: To perform those duties?

IT: Mm-hmm. To guard the ship and, we had 40 nurses and you had -- that was a touchy thing.

JF: How many people in your outfit, at that point? The supply group?

IT: Let me get a record in here; I think I've got something. Do you mind?

JF: No, no, let me just pause this.

END OF AUDIO FILE

JF: OK. We're now resuming the interview of Staff Sergeant Toller. And he's going to talk about the Burma operation. Mr. Toller, microphone.

IT: When we arrived in India, I was in charge of getting all of the equipment across India, and establishing a rear base, and then getting all that we needed down on the front lines in Burma. My outfit primarily had L-5 planes that operated along the front lines and also behind the lines of the Japanese. My duties, almost 100%, were to keep the supply lines open and keep the troops well supplied on the front lines. Quite a few of our people were constantly operating either on the line or behind the lines. It was mainly conducted along the Irrawaddy River. Whoever controlled the river really controlled the whole situation. By the time the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Commando Group took over below Mandalay, we had the Japanese in a retreat. It was very, very dangerous, but the British 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were wonderful soldiers and the Gurkhas guards were really, really good. They're the ones that have the swords that they don't take out unless they mean to use them. You want to...

JF: Huh?

IT: I can't think of much else except that the British Army was just excellent. They had many of the troops were from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada. You couldn't have asked for better soldiers.

JF: Were they part of the 2nd Commando Group?

IT: No, no. We were backing them up. We were doing their behind-the-lines operation and things such as that.

JF: OK. Did you have to fly the L-5s into the forward lines there with your supplies? Was that part of your job?

IT: No. I didn't actually fly anything in except myself because I would work back-and-forth to see what was needed, go back. If we didn't have it, I would find some other outfit, and while they were sleeping, I would appropriate it.

JF: Good supply (inaudible).

IT: Yeah. I got caught one time, and this high-ranking officer -- that I had appropriated some equipment we needed from another base back in India -- got together with our commander. It was the only time that I ever had meeting with the head of our complete outfit, and he called me in, and he told me in no uncertain terms what he would do if I was ever caught again. He didn't tell me not to do it again. He told me never to get caught again.

JF: That's funny.

IT: But all in all, it was an extremely, extremely mean, mean outfit. The Japanese were just -- and some of the things that they did -- subhuman, unbelievable. And our commander once or twice just kind of broke contact with the British for two or three days, and we had our own fight with the Japanese. And after that, they quit some of the atrocities that had brought this on. There's some other things I'd like to tell you, but I don't think I will.

JF: OK. So just to summarize what you just said though, the 156<sup>th</sup> Squadron was actually in some firefights with the Japanese?

IT: There was no weapons on the L-5s. They were more to take somebody in behind the lines, retrieve somebody to bring back wounded.

JF: I see, OK. Well, how did they get into a fight with the Japs?

IT: He called in, for a period of three or four days, all of our fighters. Remember, we were self-contained. We had several varieties of fighters.

JF: Mm-hmm, OK. So were there any casualties in your squadron?

IT: No, not in the 156<sup>th</sup>.

JF: Of course, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commando Group, there were.

IT: And some of them, they're just things that were perpetuated that you just don't want to talk about --

JF: I understand.

IT: -- by the Japanese.

JF: OK, OK. So where was the behind-the-lines location? Was that in India?

IT: No, no, no, no. This was along below Mandalay in Burma. The first air commandos started out above Mandalay because the Japanese were really getting ready to pour...

JF: (inaudible).

IT: Yeah, to (inaudible). In fact, when we landed in Bombay, we had to go all the way across India. And I followed in four or five days after I got all of our equipment on another train going through, and it took several days to get over to our rear area. And I got over there...

JF: Which was where?

IT: About 80 or 90 miles south of Calcutta. And I got in there late on Christmas Eve. And they had set up tents in this British camp, and had the tents, and everything up, and I was glad to see all my buddies once again. And it seems to me that they gave us two bottles of beer and a pack of cigarettes for Christmas. And we were sitting there in the dust and chatting about what was going on. And one of them

had a little old radio, and he was listening to Tokyo Rose. And our whole outfit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Commandos, was a hush-hush deal. No one was supposed to even know that we were over there and strict secrecy. And we're sitting there, and all of a sudden, Tokyo Rose starts naming, I think it was, three or four people in my immediate group.

JF: By name?

IT: By name. And really got our attention, and then just at dusk/dark, we're chatting. And we hadn't even dug a foxhole or anything, and all of a sudden, we see all of this firing. Well, I had never been in a firing situation up until then, and what I thought it was -- it was the British were just firing off some...

JF: Celebration.

IT: Uh-huh, and so man, then the tents started folding up, and the bombs started dropping all around, and it was too late to dig a hole, and man. And Tokyo Rose had just, before all of the firing and bombs started, had said, "I've got a little Christmas present for you, --"

JF: Is that right?

IT: -- and called us by name, and the name of our outfit, so that was our initiation.

JF: What did you do? Where did you go when the bombs were falling?

IT: There was no places to go.

JF: Just got on the ground and covered your head?

IT: Yeah.

JF: That's the worst feeling.

IT: It was a good initiation.

JF: Yes, yes. So this rear base, and you had all your supplies there, and you brought those supplies up to the lines in the L-5s. Do I understand that right?

IT: No. We didn't use the L-5s. They were too small to carry very much. No, we had other ways of trucking in and bringing...

JF: Trucking it in.

IT: And it's kind of a funny thing. We actually utilized a lot from the British.

JF: Uh-huh, a lot of their supplies?

IT: Well, and we got our food from them and just a lot of things, ammunition. We'd get it both ways, but mainly, we'd bring that in like with the DC-3s or different...

JF: OK. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Commando Group, the big part of the group, they were how many miles away from you?

IT: Oh, they were primarily back in India.



JF: Oh, they were?

IT: Yeah.

JF: OK, OK. So what did they do, parachute into the Burma area?

IT: No. The war, at that point, was going pretty fast, and so actually, we didn't use the gliders, and we didn't use the paratroopers.

JF: Oh, you didn't?

IT: But we had them standing by. In other words, when I speak of the rear area, it was a British camp, and we were just using a portion of it with tents. In fact, we got all of our tents from the British, and their tents were completely different. They had made them in India, and it was actually out of cloth. But you'd put up one tent, and then you'd put another one over it, and it had about a six-inch space in there to keep you cool or warm.

JF: Is that right?

IT: Yeah.

JF: Interesting.

IT: But at any time that we had needed the paratroopers or the gliders, man, in two hours, we'd have had them.

JF: They were ready to go?

IT: They were ready to go. Now, we use our fighter planes.

JF: You had fighter planes as part of the Commando Group?

IT: Oh, yeah. Like I say, we were a complete -- we didn't draw anything from anybody.

JF: OK. So that -- and time-wise, that entire Burma operation and when you were there, how long was that, how many months

IT: It must have been about a year.

JF: About a year. OK, OK. So what was the weather like?

IT: Well, at a certain time of year, you get the monsoon, and generally, things kind of slowed down because they're monstrous. I happened to be back in India about the time that the monsoons set in, and all of a sudden, they were digging me out. And there had been a monstrous storm, and the hail was as big as an orange.

JF: Hail?

IT: Hail.

JF: Is that right?

IT: Now, this is in the rear area back below Calcutta. The local paper in that area said that there were thousands, thousands of the natives just close around where we were, were killed.

JF: By the hail?

IT: By the hail. And we had several killed not in the 156 but in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Commando Group by this. And I was in a

little building that we used, and I think it was built out of maybe mud and straw or something with posts. And evidently, some posts fell on either side of me and then an immense amount of this mud thing covered me up. They were able to dig me out.

JF: Wow. So how long were you in there? Do you have any idea?

IT: Well, those things come in, and go out, and I assume I wasn't there too long because after I got out, after about 30 or 40 minutes, I got in a jeep with some of my friends, and we were out checking things. And that's when we found some places where some of our people had been killed and everything. We had some buildings that we had there for some of our fighter planes and things like that, and they're made out of steel, and this stuff just destroyed all of that. So it was...

JF: So the planes and the gliders. You must have a lot of destruction there?

IT: Thankfully, we didn't have it all there, but what was there, man, it was just terrible. And the monsoons, that wasn't a monsoon. This was just a storm that went with it, but the monsoons, when they came on, you could set your watch by them when they'd start and stop.

JF: What do you mean by that, the length of time that it was all happening?

IT: Um-hmm, each day.

JF: Oh each day? I see. I got you. That's interesting.

IT: And it's hard to fight in a monsoon. It's just...

JF: You can't. No, I agree. So one year in Burma, and I'm sure you were happy to get out of there.

IT: Well, actually, we more or less had a contract or it wasn't a contract, but it was understood that when we took Rangoon, that our commitment was up, and that we'd return to the States. And so we all got ready, got our barracks bag, and everything. We went down to the ships there in Calcutta, and they hadn't given us any notice on it. But the bulk of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Commandos, they got on the ship, and they hadn't called us to get on the ship, and we're standing there wondering when we're going to get on the troop ship. They came over and told us that we got on one on down the harbor. Somebody, in all their wisdom, had wanted two or three of the liaison squadrons for the attack of the mainland of Japan. And so they boarded us on that ship and headed us to Okinawa.

JF: OK. That's how you got to Okinawa?

IT: Right.

JF: Uh-huh. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commando, where...

IT: They came home.

JF: They came home?

IT: Mm-hmm, the bulk of them.

JF: So you were the lucky people at the...

IT: We drew the short straw.

JF: So what exactly did you do on Okinawa, your 156?

IT: Well, when we got up close to Okinawa, maybe a day or two before we got there, the captain made an announcement on the ship that they'd dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. So we kept going and so we got up close to Okinawa. You couldn't bring a ship in any place on Okinawa because the shore was too -- and so we anchored, and they had us real fast get everybody off the ship except one person from each group. And I was picked to be the one from the 156 to stay on the ship.

JF: OK. Why was that?

IT: Evidently, I guess possession. See, we were leaving all of our equipment. Technically, I would say it's a rule, whatever it was, and so we immediately steamed out. And one of the worst typhoons they've ever had swept in almost immediately when we got underway. And I don't remember too much about it. I just remember that it was extremely

violent, and it ended up that the few of us that were on this big ship went to the very lowest part of it and laid down. And the thing was just completely out of control, and I don't know how long this went on. And when it finally ended, and we went up, you could look over, and you could almost throw a rock, and hit a shore. I don't know whether it was Japan or whatever it was. Like I say, I don't remember some of those things.

JF: Yeah, the poor troops on the ground at Okinawa. Boy, that must have really...

IT: Well, so we immediately set steam or whatever, and went back over to Okinawa, and we got off the boat. Okinawa was a junk heap. There were ships laying on their side up on the shore. There were planes twisted. I mean everything was destroyed, and it was one of the awfulest scenes I've ever seen in my life.

JF: Well, the Battle of Okinawa at that time was over with?

IT: Well --

JF: The island was secured?

IT: -- see, they had dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Now, what happened while this was going on, I don't remember about the second bomb being dropped, but by the time that I'm telling you about all of the damage and everything, it's

right in that. And so you remember, that's the time that finally after the second bomb, Japan surrendered. And if I remember right, there was still quite a few of the Japs back in the tunnels that didn't come out and surrender, but the rest was just stark trash. I mean there was no food. I wandered around. I remember wandering around three or four days just trying to find somebody from my outfit.

JF: I was going to ask you that. Did you ever make contact with the rest of the 156<sup>th</sup>?

IT: After several days, I did, but like I say, man, everything was gone.

JF: How did they survive the typhoon?

IT: I don't know, and frankly, I don't remember if all of them did. You know when you get into some of those situations, you don't remember some things.

JF: Oh, no question about it. Yeah, your memory is exceptionally good though. But they must have -- most of them must have survived.

IT: Of the 156?

JF: Yeah.

IT: I don't remember any casualties. Now, there might have been some hurt, but I don't remember any casualties.

JF: So after you arrived on the island, you and the other few people that were on the boat, what happened? What did you do?

IT: To the best that I remember, I wandered around. And I remember seeing the airstrip, and all of the damage there, and I was looking for food.

JF: Oh, really?

IT: Yes, I was hungry. I hadn't had anything on that ship for about a week or whatever it was. There was one sailor that told me he'd been in the Navy 18 years. He was the one that was laying down there all that time. Yeah, and man, he just puked all over the thing, and he said that he'd been in 18 years, and that's the first time he'd upchucked.

JF: Never gotten sick, huh?

IT: Yeah.

JF: (inaudible).

IT: I remember some little splotches. I remember sitting at the top on just a lot of buildings that had just collapsed and everything. And I was sitting there, and we had been told that there's only one kind of snake on Okinawa, and it was extremely poisonous.

JF: I read that.



IT: And so there was, and I forget who it was, but it was somebody -- I think it was from my outfit -- that was sitting there with me. And we were wet and hungry, and everything, and man, this soldier just turned white. It looked like he was going to pass out. And I said, "What's wrong?" He finally kind of -- and he said that one of these snakes had crawled out of the trash and had crawled over my foot.

JF: Your foot? But he's the one that turned white. He saw that the snake was heading in his direction. That's funny. But he never stop -- you never got bit or anything, did you?

IT: No. I know that didn't happen. And I remember that I got back, and the outfit got together, and was having an immense problem about food. Well, you can see with all of the damage and everything, and so I've always kind of been a scavenger my whole life. As a kid, if I needed something, I'd find it. And so somehow, I got acquainted with a naval chief, and he was in charge of a fairly nice size -- they call them -- ships, boat. And everybody was in a quandary about food and everything. And so it seems to me that he and a couple more naval guys -- he was in charge of this boat -- were going out, and get some fish,

and wanted to know if I would like to go along with them, and I could maybe get a few baskets full of fish, too, and take to my --

JF: Take it back to the outfit?

IT: -- mm-hmm, take it back to the outfit, and so we went out. The (inaudible) seemed to know what he was doing. We got way off out from Okinawa. And I was up in kind of the front of the ship looking it over and everything, and here's this navy chief and his demolition man back there, and I figured they knew what they was doing. But they set off a charge, and I think they had qualities in something else, and didn't know what they were doing, and they blew a hole in that boat.

JF: Really?

IT: Yeah. What the crazy nuts had done, you don't do that. You throw the charge in and kill the fish. If they'd ask my opinion, I'd have done it for them, but man, this guy was supposed to be a demolition guy. I was...

JF: Just along for the ride.

IT: Yeah. And this crazy nut had used wire, bundled up the charge, and crazy, he had dropped it off of the fantail of the little old boat and evidently, it got wound up in the

propellor. And when it went off, it blew hell out of that boat, and it blew me about five feet.

JF: Did it really?

IT: Yeah, and I couldn't get up. Well, threw a little old rubber boat out, and they helped me in that. And we went over in this little atoll, or we call them islands, pretty close, and we got over there, and I was just laying there on the beach, and I kind of took control. They were kind of shook up about it. I told one of them to go one way, and one to go the other, and go around this little atoll, and see if they could find anything, especially if they could find something like a can or mirror that would reflect or something. So they came back, and I forgot what it was, but it was something that you could kind of get (inaudible). And after about four or five hours, way off in the distance, they did see us out there. And they came in, and they took us in, and they took me to a kind of bombed-out old building for an operation.

JF: On your legs?

IT: On my left leg, my knee and leg. And so I lay out there on that stretcher for about an hour or two. Evidently, a lot of others, for one reason or another, were waiting. Finally, it's my time, and so they operated on me for about

an hour, and everything came alive. And they tried to give me more, but it didn't work, and so then they put some straps on me, and I broke those. And so then they just went ahead, and got two big old ward boys to sit on me, and continue. And I eventually went into shock, and I woke up out in the tent later on. They just had a tent they took us to after they operated on you there. And in a couple of days, this doctor came out there, and explained to me that he had devised something in operating that they never had used before, and that he had done this. And I think what it entailed, which was a novelty at that time, he had taken a lot of bone in other places and built some stuff or something. He says, "When you get back to the States, they won't know what I've done." And he said, "But don't let them fuse your knee. That's what they want to do."

JF: Fuse your knee?

IT: Mm-hmm.

JF: What would that entail? I mean how would that affect your ability to walk?

IT: Well, then whatever it's in, it's permanent.

JF: Oh, OK, I got you. You couldn't bend your knee?

IT: Yeah. And so they got a hospital ship in, in about a week, and they took me down there, and put me in a wire basket

with my hands bound. And they had to take me out in a little bitty, tiny boat, and it was going -- I was all bound up, and put a little cable down, and slowly pulled me up. That was the scariest I've been in my life with that thing going. They finally got me up, and they took me into a ward. And there was just a wonderful nurse standing there, and they took me over, and put me in the bed over there, not a bed, a place, but I couldn't see either end. They had a partition. I'd been there about 15 minutes, and man, she came over there with a huge tray just full of wonderful food. I hadn't seen anything like that in a year. Oh, and so in my addled condition, I looked at it, and I thought that she was setting it there, and it was going to be parceled out to four or five others. So in about 15 minutes, she came over, and she says, "Soldier, aren't you going to eat your lunch?" I said, "Is all of that for me?" and wonderful treatment on the boat. Got in to Los Angeles, went out to Letterman General Hospital, and Christmas Eve, and along about middle of the afternoon, came by, and said, "What do you want?" And the guy next to me said, "Well, what's available?" They said, "Anything you want." And I think he wanted a big, thick steak or something. And they asked me, I said, "I wanted Florida

sweet milk and half a head of lettuce with 1,000 Island on it." And anyway long about dusk/dark, here came half of the citizens of the town --

JF: Of the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

IT: -- to the ward.

JF: Is that right? Isn't that nice?

IT: Man, they left gifts. They left money on our bed. They wanted to talk to us. I've still got a soft spot in my heart for San Franciscans. Oh, they were wonderful. So then they got a hospital train, and we started out East, and they dropped our coach off in Kansas City to catch a train going south. And you couldn't walk or anything. You were in the upper bunk. And if you couldn't walk, you were in the lower bunk, and then they had a little compartment on the end for the nurse. And so they parked it there in Kansas City. It seemed to me we were there the rest -- we got in there in the afternoon, and the ones that could walk, man, they all hopped off, and I guess went to the bars.

JF: But you couldn't walk?

IT: Well, I didn't drink.

JF: No, but you couldn't walk. Were you in the upper bunks?

IT: Oh, I was in the upper bunks. In one of the lower bunks across from me was a policeman from Fort Worth. He could walk, and then on one side was a kid that his family owned a big ranch someplace here in West Texas, and so the three of us just told wild tales the whole trip. Some of them got a little squirrely. The nurse would run back to her quarters. Well, I'm up there in that bunk and they came back. Whenever the bars closed, they came back. It must have been about 11, 11:30, something like that. They came back. About half of them were singing and happy, and of course, the lights were out, and man, I had just gotten to sleep. And they came in there, and all of sudden, I didn't know what they were doing, but what they were doing, they said -- and like I said, the three of us had been entertaining the whole car -- and so I heard one of them say, "Ivan, we brought you a present." And they had picked up some old gal, and they was trying to shove her up my bunk.

JF: Oh, that's funny.

IT: Man, that nurse came flying. She kicked her off of the train.

JF: She threw her off of the train. That's good buddies though.

IT: Yeah.

JF: That is funny. That is funny.

IT: And so they went on down to Chickasha, Oklahoma, and stopped, and took me in to the hospital there -- this is Saturday -- and put me -- suspended my leg, and had me wired up, or whatever you call it. And I started -- everybody wanted to know who I was up and down the ward. I had been there just an hour or two, and I found out that 90% of them in there had from one to two to three joints fused. And they all started saying the doctor would be in Monday morning and fuse my knee. And I said, "He ain't going to fuse mine" because I knew that the doctor told me what to tell him. Well, Monday morning, he came in, and he had a couple of nurses following him, and he didn't even look at me. He just looked at the card at the bottom, and told the nurse to cut me out of traction Tuesday morning, and send me down to surgery to fuse my knee. He had never said a word to me. And he turned to the guy next to me, and I said, "Hey, doc, wait a minute. I want to tell you something." And he looked back at me, and I tried to tell him, and he says, "Soldier, I don't know what you're complaining about." He says, "I'm going to give you 100% disability." I said, "I don't want 100% disability. I



want to talk to you." He turned to the nurse, and he says, "Cut him down and send him to Fort Sam for discharge." You would say that...

JF: Is he an Army doctor?

IT: Yes. I think he was the captain. And so after he left, these nurses came back there, and one of them started crying. And so they cut me down, and the minute my feet touched the floor, I fainted. They put me on a stretcher, and two ward boys took us down to the train, took me down to San Antonio. They took me out to Fort Sam about seven o'clock in the morning, and headquarters was closed. And so they just set me on the stretcher down in front of the door, and got back in the ambulance, and took off. It just happened that the first one that opened up that morning, about 8, was a colonel, and he looked down at me, and I won't tell you what he said because it was -- he said, "What in the blank, blank, blank is going on?" And so he had them bring me in, and set the stretcher on his desk, and I told him what had happened. Man, in about 15 minutes, they had an ambulance out there, took me right over to Brooke General. I got one of the best doctors and surgeons in the world over there, and I was there seven

months. The most wonderful treatment; the nurses and everything you've ever had in your life.

JF: I wondered if that colonel went back and did something about -- to that army (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

IT: Well --

JF: I mean that's pretty bad.

IT: -- about a week or two after that, some of the ones up there were sent down, were ready to be discharged. And so when they got down there and being discharged, they asked that a soldier come through, and they told them about me and everything. And so the word got back to me that the ones that had come down said and the time fit perfect. Just hours after that happened, according to the ones coming down, that they had come in, and contacted this doctor, and that he went away with them, and nobody knows where.

JF: Whatever happened to him. Well, that's good.

IT: But within the seven months, this doctor didn't think that I would be able to make it in civilian life, and so he wanted to -- or he offered to get me transferred into the Medical Corps and stay there, and that he would advance me up to Master Sergeant, and just be there. And I said, "No, I want to get out."

JF: Right, right, but at least your knee was not frozen. It wasn't fused.

IT: Oh, no. See, that's...

JF: (inaudible) yeah, yeah.

IT: -- that's why he had me cut down because I refused, and so they put on my record that I refused an operation.

JF: Thank God, you did.

IT: Yeah.

JF: Well, then shortly after that, after seven months at Brooke Hospital, they released you and discharged you?

IT: Well, they sent me back over to Fort Sam, which is about five minutes, and so I went over there, and they made me up a uniform and everything to get discharged in. And so it was a hot day in July, I think, and went out to be discharged. And there's about 20 or 30 others that day, and I was only regular Army though; the others all draftees. And so that was one privilege you got. You were paid first. That was it, and so anyway, all the others were being paid -- if they were from Connecticut, well, they got paid back in Connecticut. So I went over to get paid, and I'm on crutches, and they gave me my \$100 (inaudible), and a little bit of money I had coming, and I said, "Hey, how about transportation to Longview?" The guy

reached in there, and he handed me a quarter. I said, "What's that for?" He said, "That's for the bus trip downtown." He said, "You're regular Army." He says, "You joined in San Anton. That's what you get."

JF: Regular Army. That's funny. That was the end of, what, six years?

IT: A little over.

JF: Yeah, well, what an auspicious end to your saga, the Armed Forces of the United States.

IT: Yeah.

JF: But the interesting, the ironic thing that really gets me, based upon what you've just said, is that you survived that Burma Operation, and probably would have survived the typhoon in Okinawa if it weren't for the fact that this Navy chief took you out on that boat, and did whatever he did, which was totally wrong. And that's ironic.

IT: Yeah.

JF: Did you ever get a Purple Heart for that?

IT: No. A Purple Heart, it's distinct what's that for.

JF: Yeah, that's for...

IT: In action.

JF: And sometimes...

IT: And illegally, that amount of fish doesn't (inaudible).

JF: Well, Ivan, I think your experiences and your ability to relate to me in a very succinct manner is tremendous. And I thank you very much for your service, and I thank you for the couple of hours that we spent today.

IT: Well, I certainly appreciate your service.

JF: Well, I thank you. I thank you. OK. That ends our interview with Staff Sergeant Ivan Toller.

END OF AUDIO FILE