

Billy Wayne Sherrill Oral History Interview

MARK CUNNINGHAM: This is Mark Cunningham, oral historian for the Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg. Today is the 22nd of April, 2015. I'm interviewing Mr. Billy Wayne Sherrill. The interview is taking place in Houston, Texas, at this home. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information relating to this site. And first off, Mr. Sherrill, I want to thank you for doing the interview with us. I am always honored to be in the presence of veterans of World War II. I'm going to start with your early years. Where were you born?

BILLY WAYNE SHERRILL: I was born here in Houston, Texas on (inaudible) Street in 1926.

MC: Now I want to get to that story about your birthday in a moment, but I want to go with a little bit about your history. Your parents: what were their names?

BWS: That would be Harold Siegman Sherrill was my father's name. And Iva Haywood Sherrill, my mother's name.

MC: When World War II broke out, on Pearl Harbor day, where were you?

BWS: I had been on Holy Street. We had moved from Hutchins to Holy. Hutchins in the east end. My father was working for the Western Union. He had become head of the (inaudible) department. It was a step up. He was on the rise. And we had moved to the up and coming west end. I was on Holy Street, and I was in the eighth grade. But between the time we moved, when we were doing well, the depression had hit, and so we had a tough time. And by the time Pearl Harbor was bombed, I had lost all confidence in schooling, because I was kind of shabby. I was in all hand-me-down clothes by then. I had two older brothers and three older cousins, so I was not very presentable. And these kids kind of took it out on me in school, and I kidded back that I was humiliated. I really didn't like school, so I was in bad shape. I was in eighth grade, and I was failing more than I was passing.

MC: You were in the eighth grade when the war broke out?

BWS: Yes.

MC: How old were you?

BWS: Fifteen.

MC: Fifteen years old. Now, why the Marines?

BWS: They're the best. That was it. My middle brother had already joined a week ahead of me. And again, I couldn't let him get ahead of me in the tops of service.

MC: What was your, do you remember the date you went in?

BWS: Yes, I went in on the 26th of December, 1941.

MC: So you went in right after Pearl Harbor?

BWS: Yes.

MC: You really weren't of age to be in service. Tell me that story.

BWS: Well, in order to do that, I had to adjust my age. I had been asked whether I had lied about it and I said, "of course not. I'm a Texas, I exaggerated my age. So I was 15, and you needed to be 17, so I had to change the year I was born, but had to change the day, because my middle brother had gone in ahead of me, and with his real birthday he could make it. But if I just moved up two years, which I needed to do, it would mean my mother had given birth to two people in six months, so I adjusted the date I was born and year.

MC: So you have two birthdays?

BWS: Yes, I do.

MC: And if I'm not mistaken, one of them is August 23rd, 1926. That was your Marine birthday.

BWS: No, that was the record birthday.

MC: And you moved that to December 21st, 1924?

BWS: I moved my birthday to December 21st to make me 17.

MC: You probably weren't the only guy to do that, right?

BWS: No, it was a different atmosphere. There was, the Japanese were taking island after island. There was the question would they ran on the West Coast any minute. So there was a sense of urgency, and as a result of that, they would take anybody who could carry a rifle. And I knew how to shoot a rifle and pistol, so...

MC: What's the day, again, that you actually went in?

BWS: I actually went in on the 26th of December. I signed up on the 21st of December, and left Houston to actually enroll the 26th of December as my official date.

MC: And where did you go for boot camp?

BWS: To San Diego Base.

MC: Tell me about boot camp.

BWS: It was different for me than it was for most. The idea of boot camp was -- I know now from a psychiatrist -- the idea is to beat you down to a point you are not what you are in your own mind. And they beat you down until you're nothing, and then they bring you back the way they want you to be. And this process of beating you down is very hard on a lot of young men. But I was already nothing, so I had no problem being nothing, and I was in good physical shape, so boot camp was not difficult for me, but it was for a lot of the guys.

MC: Did you establish friends in boot camp, or did you stayed with, or kept in contact with --

BWS: Right after boot camp we were shipped out, because overseas, they needed us. We got to Pearl Harbor pretty much, see, but the boot camp platoon in tact. But then at Pearl Harbor, I got split off the first group of transfers. Eight of us were transferred to Palmyra Island as a reinforcement.

MC: So basically you left the States right after boot camp. So you were probably some of the first into the Pacific area, right?

BWS: Exactly.

MC: What did you do at Pearl Harbor?

BWS: At Pearl Harbor we unloaded our own ship. First time I ever did any stevedoring. And we put ammunition we were carrying into the underground storage at [Lulu Lake?]. So we did that kind of work, which normally would have been done by civilians. We handled it because we were the only labor available. So I did that until it was time to be put on a ship and set down in Palmyra.

MC: Set down where?

BWS: Palmyra. P-A-L-M-Y-R-A.

MC: Where's that?

BWS: That's 960 miles south of Pearl Harbor.

MC: Out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

BWS: It's almost on the equator. It's a beautiful little Pacific atoll. It's the one you see in the movies. It had the background of palm trees and the weather was wonderful, water was crystal clear, all kinds of colorful fish. Just put you in a visualize of -- we were there with friends only, there was no native population.

MC: How long were you in Pearl?

BWS: I was in Pearl about three weeks.

MC: And then you went back to this island?

BWS: Right.

MC: How long were you there?

BWS: Sixteen months.

MC: Doing what?

BWS: Defending it against possible Japanese invasion. They were taking it Midway and Wake of course we lost those. Our other detachment was at Johnston Island. It was Johnston and Palmyra, the two detachments of the First Defense Battalion that were defending Pearl Harbor, outlying airfields from Pearl Harbor, but were involved in the war.

MC: In those 16 months you were there, did you leave that island at any time?

BWS: No, there was no leaving the island. It was very isolated. It was the first stop by air from maybe Pearl Harbor going to Australia.

MC: So there's an airstrip there?

BWS: Yes, that was the whole purpose of the airstrip.

MC: That was probably one of the few islands that we have. Is that correct?

BWS: It was.

MC: And what type of aircraft were travelling there? Were they bombers?

BWS: Not the heavy bombers. The medium bombers, even fighter aircraft weren't because there was no place for the range was very limited.

MC: Fighter aircraft from aircraft carriers.

BWS: We had an aircraft base on there. The aircraft, the old ones that were rapidly going out, I would hate to have been one of those pilots fighting a Zero.

MC: Wow. What did you do all that time?

BWS: I was assigned to a 30-caliber machine gun training. So I went to school for 30-caliber machine guns. We were trained there by veteran marines, because they were all pre-war at that stage, so they were real professionals, and they knew how things work. I don't know how they were

about what the manual said, but I learned some other side tricks that were very helpful.

MC: What about the lifestyle? What were the living conditions like?

BWS: We were spread out around a periphery, about 14 miles total, all the way around the island. And we were put in little tin sheds that four of us lived in, and we caught water off the roof for all water purposes, and stood watch at night, only four of us to be sure we were expecting them to try us out any time with an invasion, but they never did.

MC: And what size of a force was this?

BWS: I had no way of really ever seeing it together, because it was constantly spread out, but it was a detachment of the First Defense Battalion, so it was up about a third of a battalion, so it company size.

MC: How was the food?

BWS: The food was dry. It was all rations. One of the reasons it was a good break for me is that first, I was a year and a half older, so that didn't hurt. And there was very little sugar, so during these formative years, the teenage years, I had a pretty good diet. It wasn't very tasty, but it was healthy as hell.

MC: So you were there 16 months, so that puts you into 1943 before you got off the island. Is that right?

BWS: That's correct.

MC: And where did you go from there?

BWS: Came back to the United States for the six months of training, advanced training. And then I got shipped out a little less than six months back again that time to the South Pacific. Joined the Third Division, Ninth Marines, who were involved in a Bougainville campaign at the time.

MC: Is that where you saw your first action?

BWS: Yes, it was. I didn't really see any action. The shooting was over by the time I got there. There was not a lot of action going on. So we finished it up. We had [a lot?] of control, turned it over to the Army, and we went back to what is now to train the next one for Guam.

MC: This training that you did -- let me back up a minute. What type of training? What were you training?

BWS: Thirty caliber heavy machine gun. It is a wonderful weapon. It has great firepower, and sustained firepower, because it's water-cooled. At Palmyra it was perfect, because we were in place. We didn't have to call and run. Many times when you have to move, you usually use the light 30, the air-cooled 30. But the water-cooled has a lot of staying power. When I finished the course, I was involved

in the 1,000-inch range. Believe it or not, this is a firing range that a muzzle of a machine gun is 1,000 inches from the target, but the target is two inches tall and one inch wide. As you move the gun with the micrometer wheels at the bottom and so one click is one inch at that distance. So, I shot a score that was pretty unbelievable. It was three points off of perfect, so I was --

MC: You were definitely a machine gunner.

BWS: Yeah, and I was good at machine gun. And since our placements only had one assistant that needed ammunition carriers, we had our ammunition with us. It stacked on the ground, and so I was still barely 15. I was a gun captain, and I had one man I was leader of.

MC: I'm sorry.

BWS: I was leader of one man. (laughter)

MC: Not exactly a platoon.

BWS: It was a (inaudible) at 15 years old.

MC: Probably a pretty effective team. Now did you stay together?

BWS: When I got transferred back to Hawaii when we got transferred out, we did our business after I got done with Palmyra. I was there 16 months, and then a small group of us were sent out to go back into the States, and I was in that first group. So, a couple of the other guys that were

in that original eight that I went down with went back with me. So you see, when you're transferring back, you don't get to keep your friends very long.

MC: After Bougainville?

BWS: Went back to Guam and trained, went back to Guadalcanal for what is now the training for the Guam campaign. Again, they tried me with a test firing on the light 50-caliber, and that's exactly the same gun, just bigger. And of course I knocked them dead in the drill, and therefore I was then assigned the 50s, but three weeks before we go to Guam, they take our 50s away from us, and gave us bazookas. None of us had ever seen one before Guam.

MC: Was that the first time the bazooka was used?

BWS: It was first issued --

MC: The Marines were the first guys who used it. Was it used in Europe at all?

BWS: I don't know.

MC: I think I read somewhere that --

BWS: Eventually, but see they were a long way from Europe --

MC: An untested weapon, really.

BWS: So we're told about them January, February of 1943, is it? Forty-four by now.

MC: Then what did you do?

BWS: Then we took bazooka and we did a drill in which we didn't know a thing about bazookas, so we set them up to fire across a valley at a target that was on a drum. That's a way too small a target for that weapon at that distance, and firing across a valley has winds in the valley. Well the winds knocked the thing off-center. It's a rocket, you know, so it has tailfins. And winds make it untrue, so when I fired this thing, which I wouldn't have hit anyway, it went sailing across, and of course it took off its own direction. It missed that drum by about 100 yards, and then it had also a little firing pin that's weighted, and a spring in front of it. So when the nose hits, the weight compresses the spring, drives forward, and that's what sets it off, so it has to hit on its nose to go off. Well, it didn't. So it hit on its side, and you could hear it [bump, bump, bump). Then finally, woo, way back in the bushes. Well, everybody lost confidence. So we were assigned to follow the lieutenant. We were assigned to a platoon, a rifle platoon. We were to follow Lieutenant, he'd guide our fire. And that's the way Guam started.

MC: How long were you in Guam?

BWS: Well, through the entire campaign?

MC: So you saw action there?

BWS: Oh yeah, a lot of action there. That's where I really got to understand combat.

MC: Tell me about that.

BWS: First we landed. I was in the first wave.

MC: What did you go in on?

BWS: On an Alligator.

MC: I don't know what that is.

BWS: It's a tracked landing vehicle. It has the tracks on it, so the idea is that you go beyond the beach defenses.

MC: I interviewed a guy that was a driver of one of those things.

BWS: In this case, we get to the beach, and there's about a 12-foot sea wall, and this thing won't climb that, so it has to stop. And when it stops, an artillery captain, he was going ahead of his troops to set up, right as you run up one side and you run down the side, and you jump off the front. And he jumped off the front and landed on a vehicle mine. It blew him to smithereens, and caved in the front of the tractor, and that killed both the driver and the assistant driver. So the next up in seniority is a platoon sergeant, gets up, jumps down, and he jumps in that very same spot. Lands in water are up to his shoulders, but not a second mine in there, so all of us, one at a time, jump onto that same spot, and the rest of us unloaded safely.

MC: And what was the nature of the fighting there?

BWS: The nature of --

MC: The fighting.

BWS: Oh, the fighting. At that stage we got through that beach defense without any real fighting, because there were bombed and strafed. So they weren't that focused. They were out of it.

MC: The Japs?

BWS: Japs. And so when you make it through the town barrage, you're not operative for awhile. The idea of the first wave is to get beyond that, and then let the second wave take care of -- in other words, we don't engage the beach defense. We get through and cut off any reinforcements that might be coming. And that's what we did. Then the second wave took off the beach defense. When we took off, we set up beyond them, and we could see the Japanese coming over the hills, and our firepower that we had with the machine guns that I loved were able to turn them back, and we could see them turn around and start going back. So that was for me a no action deal. I followed the lieutenant around, and he didn't designate any targets, and there weren't any real targets. We then turned to the right flank of the land, and started pushing in that direction toward the harbor area. At first meeting this

very light resistance, and so there wasn't any suitable target for me or for the lieutenant, and so all I did was carry for him.

MC: The bazooka?

BWS: Bazooka. Then on the third day we stopped, and I figured let me see if this thing fires. So I went to the lieutenant and I said, "Do you mind if I test fire this?" He said, "Sure, go ahead. Nobody cared." And we had stopped in a spot that was open about 50 yards and a big palm, sort of arches, our regular set up, that were 60, 70 feet high. So I took one of those as my target, and that meant I didn't have to worry about range, because they were vertical. Nobody but me knew where I was aiming on it, so no matter where I hit it, it (inaudible). And there wasn't much for a sideways target. When I fire it, it makes a good amount of noise when you fire it. But then it hit that palm tree, and a big explosion. A huge palm tree that cut off flat. So everybody had a new view of the bazooka.

MC: What it could do.

BWS: Exactly. So from then on the lieutenant chose many targets, even things like snipers. It was an accepted weapon.

MC: But you had to get used to it. To get accommodated to it. To get a feel for it.

BWS: And this (inaudible).

MC: So that was a two-man operation? A loader and a shooter.

BWS: Right. We men were progressing on that front moving toward the harbor and not meeting the resistance. So they had a banzai in the middle of it we perimeter down from the hills in the middle and they worked through the lines, and they worked all the way to the beach. The beach people, including the aid stations and things like that, actually finished them off, because they were reduced in fighting the various groups.

MC: Where were you when this was taking place?

BWS: We were on the right flank, so behind us was the night attack. So, behind us. We were aware of it, but we did not participate. But the next morning we abandoned our front, turned back and drove them out. After driving we drove them all the way back up the hills back beyond where they'd started, so they were beaten up. So we had trouble driving them.

MC: How long did that prolonged campaign last?

BWS: About 45 days.

MC: Were you there the whole time?

BWS: Yes. My first accident started the day we drove them back up the hill. What we did, we had our headquarters, our control point was set up well up the hill on the side of

where we trailed them up to the very top of the hills. They reported getting sniper fire from this valley below them that was a box-shaped valley. The valley was U-shaped, and it was completely open on the top, but it was covered with brush in the valley part. So you couldn't see what was in the valley at all, and we were totally exposed on the top, but the command center reported that they were getting sniper fire out. So our platoon was selected to go and roust out these snipers. So we go there and we set up, and the lieutenant makes a mistake. He set up one squadron on the far side, and one squad at the dead end of the valley, and one squad on the near side, so he had no reserve. He committed his whole platoon to this position. And they had position on the top of the ridge, which is open, and they start down, and a huge withering small arms fire comes out of the valley, and it just knocks down, you can see almost a third of the company going down with the first round. So we were in trouble from the beginning. Lucky for me, I was behind the lieutenant, who was behind his men, so I'm behind him. And wasn't involved in getting shot at. The lieutenant starts to move down the hilltop, and he's hit, goes down. So I go up to where he was before to get ready to go dragging back in behind to some shelter, and as I get there, he jumps up, and he takes off. And

that's the last I saw of him. But we're on top of the hill now, and I can see into the valley, and I couldn't see any Japanese, but the fire was just sustained. Really heavy fire. And I looked down, and there was a little ledge not far below that had a couple of vines or so on it, so I worked my way down to that, and now of course, no lieutenant, so I get the guy behind fire. And what I could see of it was not a visible target, so I decided the Japanese had a tendency to set up their automatic weapons near their headquarters near a big tree. And there's only one big tree that came out of that low brush and went up. So now my only problem is which side to look for a man, and I decided it was being sided away from me than from here they were shooting at, so they would use that tree for protection. So I slung it out, and had it loaded up, and fired, and when that hit the brush -- it was just a stop in the brush -- all the firing ceased. All the Japanese firing ceased. And it never started again the whole day. So I had two more rockets, and I just spread them out and shot at logical places they should be, but there was no response fire. It just was it. And all of our men, most of them, were already down. You could see them before the firing stopped, the Japanese were really shooting them up the ones already shot. You could see bodies jump.

MC: The Japanese were shooting Japanese?

BWS: No, they were shooting our guys second and third time.

MC: Guys that had gone down.

BWS: Yup, they were already down, and they were shooting them again. It was just ugly site. So, I went back because of course not enough to fight these more, and we had to wait for reinforcements to feed into our spot. We went out of there. The next day, by then they had gotten our artillery set up, and they really gave it to them, the valley. And then went into it, and there were 240 dead Japanese in there. So these couple of snipers were a full company, and so it was a wonder that any had escaped out alive.

MC: So now 45 days, a little rain didn't bother you, did it?

BWS: No, we wore the same clothes. It was an interesting thing, the soil on Guam was red, and pretty soon the wet soil was red.

MC: I wouldn't think that.

BWS: And so pretty soon your uniform was red, your skin is red, everything is red. So if you had fallen down in the open, you pretty much disappeared. It was really interesting how that worked.

MC: You're sleeping in the open.

BWS: We slept in it, and in water, if it was flowing, you slept in water. Holes at night, no noise. Half way through they

replaced our uniforms. They just rotted. And when it was over they put up the showers with gasoline drums. It was interesting as I was going to the shower I see these guys look at me with a funny look. And as I finish my shower and started back, the guys, as they were heading for it smelled terrible. I can understand why they were looking at me like that. So it made a difference whether you had a shower or not.

MC: So during that campaign we lost some guys.

BWS: The campaign was about 30% casualties. It wasn't a particularly heavy campaign like some of them, like Iwo Jima, but it was what I thought combat ought to be. It was new, it had a purpose, we had training that was useful. It was a warfare that I expected. The different from Guam, I mean from Iwo Jima -- we went the next day after this --

MC: This is on Guam?

BWS: On Guam. The next day after the fight in the valley, there were about -- at that stage there were seven of us left. We were given a new lieutenant. It was his first time in combat. That next day we had kept attacking up the hill until we got to the top of Mount Chachou --

MC: How do you spell that?

BWS: C-H-A-C-H-A-U [sic]. It turns out it was the Japanese main headquarters for Guam. It was twin peaks, and the rest of

our company, the other two platoons, had taken the first peak, and we were assigned to take the second peak. Not all of us. Eight of us, including our new lieutenant. As we were moving up to attack, they had tanks, and the tanks had their bores set on top of a mountain, and as we rounded the tanks, they fired, and it knocked us all down. It was the muzzle blast just made its sound. You pop right back up, and you really see why the Japanese had trouble with those things. But then we started attacking, and it's such a steep hill you have to use one of your hands to keep your balance.

MC: Are you carrying your bazooka?

BWS: Yes, I'm carrying my bazooka. My assistant is following me. When we got up to the top there was only the lieutenant, me, and my assistant, who were the three there. He designates one of the ports to fire at, the position they were located at, and that round hit the port. Things were looking OK, and then about 40 Japanese helmets pop up about 30 or 40 yards away. They pop up take a look, and then they pop back down again. The lieutenant says, he turns to me, and he says, "Should we pull back?" I thought officers came from heaven. I was unprepared for an officer to ask me what to do. And I said, "If we pull back now, Captain Crawford will make us come back up." We were lucky

to make it up the first time. We should stay." As it turns out, the Japanese were not attacking us. They were responding to another outfit coming up the far side of the mountain, and they were trying to get out of there. So they actually retreated, and we captured the top. From there on we really had them at that stage, so we chased them for many more days and nights.

MC: That's quite a story. When did you get off of Guam?

BWS: We finished that campaign, and we stayed to train there for the Iwo Jima campaign. So we left for the Iwo Jima in February of '45.

MC: You were on board a ship when you were training?

BWS: No, we trained on Guam. Not on the ship. For months --

MC: After the battle ended, you stayed in Guam training?

BWS: Right. They got us prepared for the Iwo Jima campaign.

MC: Did they finally get you some decent quarters to live in after the battle?

BWS: Well, we were in tents. We were in eight-person tents. So it was compared to what the battle was it was first class.

MC: And when did you leave for Guadalcanal?

BWS: Guam -- ?

MC: I mean Iwo.

BWS: We left right about the 1st of February of '45.

MC: And I think the battle started the 19th.

BWS: Nineteenth. Right.

MC: When you got on, what was the ship? Do you remember?

BWS: It was an attack transport. I've forgotten the number.

MC: Were you aware of where you going?

BWS: Not until we were on board, then they gave us the final.

MC: Did you know it was going to be a bad fight?

BWS: I had no idea. I had a clue, but I was too young to understand it. And that was the assignment of two full Marine divisions to the main landing, and one division in reserve. It showed me that something was so unusual, and the amount of bombardment was phenomenal. The amount of naval bombardment and --

MC: On Iwo. Were you able to get up on deck and see what was going on?

BWS: The last three days when we arrived I had a landing, so those days we got to observe, and that was phenomenal. So I assumed at that stage that this is not much campaigns.

MC: But had you known what had gone the first few days before you went ashore?

BWS: Yes, because we could see it from our ship. We were out a distance, but you couldn't see in detail, but you could see it well enough.

MC: I have to ask you. Did you see your flag go up?

BWS: Yes.

MC: Tell me about that, because they say that was a quite a moment.

BWS: It was a moment and like everybody else I met thought that meant the end of things, but it was not even the beginning. It was on the fourth day. So it was a real fight.

MC: What were your impressions watching all the ships going up and everything?

BWS: At first when I saw it, I thought it might not be that tough. Then I could see what was going on, and it was really going to be a fight. I had joined as a regular. I was going to make the Marine Corps my career. I was worrying that I would not -- when you get in on the (inaudible). I immediately for my career, and I could see it being a great battle, and I would like to be a part of it. So unlike most of them, I was eager to be the first at the beach. It was clear that by the seventh day they sent us in we were needed.

MC: What did you go in on?

BWS: In this case a landing craft, the Higgins boat.

MC: Tell me about what was going on when you got on the beach.

BWS: I was surprised of course there wasn't a lot of action on the beach. I was surprised with that soil. It was loose volcanic ash, and it was hard to climb this steep hill, so we spent the rest of the day climbing the hill. A little

fire, not bad. We set up below Suribachi in the center of the island.

MC: Set up what, I'm sorry?

BWS: Set up just below Suribachi about the center of the island.

MC: You're setting up below in the center of the island?

BWS: It had been captured, the flag went up on the fourth day.

This was on the seventh day. We were not getting any fire from the mountain, so we didn't have any fire.

MC: I've been told you very rarely saw any Japs on the ground.

The Japs were in the ground.

BWS: That's true. That first day I didn't see them at all.

There was no action at all. Firing, but you couldn't tell where it was coming from. Where we were, it was very light, because they had obviously chosen a position that was not used anymore after we got ready to go into action.

MC: Were you moving toward the north end of the island?

BWS: Yes.

MC: You weren't already mopped up, pushing off stage, right?

BWS: Yeah. On the first day we were setting up, but then the second and third day, we moved down to the center of the island, up to the center of the island, north on the center of the island, and past the first airfield, and took our place in line in the middle of the second airfield. It was

only two strips had the junction in that particular airfield.

MC: Were you there the day the B-29 came in?

BWS: I was not.

MC: Was that before you got on the island?

BWS: It was after. I was there for seven days when I was shot, and so that was the 14th day of the battle, and it was way, way too heavy, and we barely had security at the airfield. We had just taken --

MC: Barely had secured when you got hit?

BWS: Yes, because I got hit just north of the third airfield, which was under construction, but we had moved up the day before from the middle of the second airfield.

MC: I want to talk about you getting hit in detail. But I want to back up a minute. The type of fighting you were doing, you are using your bazooka, right?

BWS: Yes.

MC: You are still the bazooka man.

BWS: By then I had risen to the rank of corporal, and I'm head of a fire group.

MC: You are going after pillboxes, is that it?

BWS: Going after anything that fought back. We were after territory, really, and whatever that took. We were getting ready to make a standard attack, which we were really well

trained for, and we moved into position in the center of the second airfield, which was halfway up the second airfield. Where we had this intersection, the airfield strip had been dug in a little bit about eight feet down, and then as you got up the plateau above the airstrip, that's where the action was out on a big plain, about 200 yards, and then a ridge. That's where we were gonna attacked. Another outfit had dug in at this position, and we had replaced them, so the foxholes were already prepared, and that sort of thing. I had been on Guam, the fire group head of the first group of the first squad. I was the point. Three weeks before the campaign on Iwo I was promoted to the third squad, third group, which is the tail end. And it's a promotion, because you have the responsibility of seeing that everybody keeps up and it doesn't break off or drop out. And so it's a promotion, but it took me away from men I trained in my other group, and I hated it. As it turns out, at this very first attack, that group, my old group, got wiped out, so it just made it one of those things. When we went into position, the whole action was up on top of this plateau, so the whole company where I was stopped, at the back, were still on the strip, and the strip had a fox hole cut deeper than when I was sitting and my head was below. Whoever dug that

fox hole really dug it. I was sitting in that when the mortar barrage started. And mortars throw fire, and you could see them in the air. I could look up from that hole and it was just 20 - 30 mortars in the air at a time. It was a real attack. It just kept coming. They had set their machine guns looking on the edge of the plateau. They got wiped out. I could see them get completely wiped out. Our mortars had set up on the airstrip, and they got wiped out.

MC: They being?

BWS: The mortar crews.

MC: Our guys.

BWS: All our guys were just getting wiped out. It continued and continued, and I thought it would kill everybody, and I was in this hole, but the mortar... if it didn't come into the hole, it wasn't going to hurt me, but I was worried one was going to come in the hole on top of me, that's how many were falling. But it didn't. After awhile it lightened just a little bit, and a sergeant came running off the plateau saying, "Pull back." So we pulled back across the strip, and set up a defense, or what there was of a defense on that side. There was just a handful of people. You would think I was scared, but I was furious. I was so angry I would never pull back at any time before. That was

one thing. The other thing is so many of my friends killed. I was angry. About half hour later, the mortar fire stopped, and we immediately got up, went back across, and took the positions again. And then we just held them for two more days while replacements came for us, and moved through us to take that ridge.

MC: Now tell me about when you got hit.

BWS: That was again on the 14th day, my seventh day.

MC: So you were in combat on Iwo for seven days.

BWS: Correct. Now, the day before I got hit we were moved into position, and the first time we got out of this place where we had been put, the few of us left got out and moved forward to join the outfit that went through us and take a spot in the line. We were assigned a position that evening that was in front of one of these little plateaus. This area was full of these little plateau situations that were maybe 10 feet high. We had a big hole that night, it was a shell hole. My scout and I were the principle, but a runner had a little something extra (inaudible), so he joined us. So the three of us in this foxhole, big shell hole actually, and I said I would take the first break of the watch of the evening, and so they went to sleep, and I was watching. The first turnover times -- the turnover were to get the other guy out -- I turned around from the

hole to wake him up, look up at the top of that plateau, and there's a Japanese helmet. And just as I see the helmet the arm comes up, throws a grenade, throws a hand grenade. And so I dove to the bottom of the hole, watching for the grenade, because my buddies are asleep. So what I have to do if it lands in the hole is try to throw it out. Normally you jump out, and you jump out of a hole and let it go off, but not with two guys asleep. Luckily, it missed the hole. So it went off. About then, they're awake. And I looked back up again and here that head pops back up again, and now I'm ready for him, and I fire, but it's night and I'm firing from the hip. And I saw a flash like I hit his helmet or something, but the head dropped back down, and then the arm comes back again throwing another grenade, but now my buddies are awake, so we're all ready to jump out of that hole, but he missed the hole again, so we now run up to this slant sort of thing at the top of the hill, and got where I could see him, but the Japanese, there was a trench to the back to a cave opening, and obviously as soon as he threw the second one he took off, because there was nobody there. I spent the rest of the night there, but the next morning my automatic rifle and his pistol were dead. The hand grenades had been in the hole, throwing at the hole next to us. He was

almost directly above us, and they were down the line some way. He was throwing at them, not us. But that again.

MC: The night situation, Iwo must have been pretty terrifying.

BWS: Iwo at night really bothered me. I guess I was a kid, but night fighting I hated. I didn't hate daytime that much --

MC: Were they after you all during the night? Was there activity every night?

BWS: There wasn't, but there was activity enough nights to make you sure you didn't want to sleep. The idea was somebody's got to be on watch, and no noise.

MC: No fire, no lights, no cigarettes.

BWS: No cigarettes. At night it was dangerous.

MC: Did you and your buddies take turns sleeping? Somebody is always awake?

BWS: Yes, two hours. You take two hours.

MC: You take two hours. Could you sleep?

BWS: You bet. You get so tired. You get really, really tired by the time the campaign's over. And you don't react to danger as sharply. Who cares? You and probably, don't worry about it.

MC: Now tell me how you got hit.

BWS: That day we were assigned a new lieutenant, and there were a total of 14 of us left out of our company, and I was the only non-com, so I was acting as a platoon sergeant, in

effect. We are given a slant off to the east type attack, and we took off, and I as I look back I think what happened, that direction took us through what had been a village before, and therefore it wasn't tunneled.

MC: It wasn't what?

BWS: It wasn't tunneled. It didn't have defenses. The underground defenses were not in this area, so we moved right through it and got well on our way to the third airfield, which was under construction. So we stopped there. The lieutenant takes a look at this open ground. He clearly doesn't know what to do. He was a young man, first combat. I feel really sorry for him. He's looking at something, so I suggest to him, "Would you like me to scout it?" And of course he jumped on that. Now I knew that that wasn't as dangerous as it sounded. Dangerous enough, but not as much as it sounded, because Japanese had a habit of letting the scout through, and then ambushing the main force when it came. So there was some help in that I wouldn't be singled out as a target, but I scouted across, and no problem, and we get across, and there isn't an ambush. Across the way is a revetment for parking aircraft that was from that point flattened out way into the hills that went all the way around, so it was an amphitheater of hills around this parking spot. And our

line went across the mouth of the parking spot. So then when he gets across, the Japanese had anti-aircraft up on the top of this hill, and they turn them down on us. Well they fire these things, and they sound like a freight train going over us, but they couldn't explode until way behind us. They couldn't cut the fuse short enough. The anti-aircraft, they had a fuse that wouldn't let them go off until they get to a certain height. So, they couldn't hit us with them. So once we saw that, we got to serious sniping at them, and that caused them to pull out, and go back over the hill. So then we were ready to start our attack, and the lieutenant called for artillery barrage before we started attacking on this thing. And *boom*, we had one *boom*, and another *boom*, and a third one. And I thought, "Well, they're sitting in. They're getting ready to do a barrage." That was the barrage. It was a three-shell barrage, and then we started to move out. So I'm behind the line, because I'm --

MC: The line?

BWS: The line. The front line, because I was supervising, and you do that about five yards behind the line, so you can see what's happening. And I can see all up and down that a lot of firing, but nobody getting hit. And then all of a sudden my whole line goes in foxholes, they jump in a hole.

I thought I looked and there's nothing to cause that, and I thought one man spooked, and men react to each other in combat, so when one runs, they all went in the hole. So I'm not seeing anything. I walk [one through?] and I'm going careful with [the life?] one has, and I (inaudible) all right and everyone follows me with firepower, and I turn around to him, and I say, "Come on, guys, let's go. I'm ashamed of you guys coming out of the holes. Come on, guys." And I turn around looking at a Japanese with a rifle pointed at me. He fired, and my arm dropped, and I dive behind a rock, and my part of the line was as soon as Bas of course [respects?] the rifle, and then my whole line gets up and moves on forward, and that's the last I saw of him.

MC: Which arm?

BWS: Left arm.

MC: Where?

BWS: Just above the elbow. If you look at it, he was four inches off. If you look at it carefully, he was four inches off a heart shot.

MC: Like this?

BWS: Yes, that's it. This arm was like so about there.

MC: So your arm was out like that, and this went under your elbow?

BWS: It went across my back just barely.

MC: At the time, did you think that was a career-ending blow?

BWS: I thought to myself, "Hey, this is great. This is for enhancing. This is a medal, a purple heart. This is good news, not bad. I'm going to get out without getting killed, and I don't think I'm going to lose an arm." It looked as if it were a career promotion, so I was not at all upset with it. Went back to Guam aboard ship, and they discovered it was a nerve injury, so they sent me back to Honolulu, and then Pearl Harbor, and then Pearl Harbor wasn't ready for that nerve injury, so they sent me to Oakland Naval Hospital, where they have specialist for nerve injuries.

MC: And did you recover fully?

BWS: No, I was in there 14 months in the hospital, and they used physical therapy as the method to see if it would grow back.

MC: Back up a minute. What kind of treatment did you get on the island right as you got shot?

BWS: Yes. I couldn't move the arm, of course. And then to hold a rifle so I could fire it. I was watching for any more of the Japanese might stick their head up when the company runner comes forward.

MC: Now didn't I read in your article that one of your guys got the guy that shot you.

BWS: Well, I was calling on that round. He was two yards behind me. This guy should have shot back, to eliminate him.

MC: You had first aid or something on the island?

BWS: Yeah. The company runner was behind. He was a young guy, first time in combat, and he has to cut my waterproof jacket off, so he cuts around above the elbow, and then takes his sleeve, and pulls it off over my hand. All the blood had been collecting in that waterproof jacket, and when he cut that sleeve, it went splash, and he turned white. And I said, "Don't faint on me." So he straightens up, and he reaches for his first aid packet instead of mine. I said, "No, no, no, you use mine on me, you keep yours for you." He was not encouraged by that information.

MC: Who was this guy?

BWS: He was the company runner. A young kid, first time in combat. I was impressed that he had the courage to hang in. He was really scared.

MC: You couldn't move your arm because it was paralyzed, or was it painful?

BWS: It was not painful, just dead.

MC: And that's because of the nerve?

BWS: Exactly. I had no sling. I just zipped my jacket down, and stuck it in the jacket.

MC: Did you stop the bleeding?

BWS: The bandage did that. It really was not much of a bleeding wound. It must have been, as you look at the whole history, an awkward piercing. It was just like the perfect hole through the arm.

MC: Did you feel it?

BWS: No, everything went dead. You could take an axe and whack it and I wouldn't know it. It was completely dead.

MC: So then you spent over a year in a hospital?

BWS: Yeah, and the good duty at Oakland Hospital in San Francisco right next to it, I was enjoying my stay. And feeling that this was again a career enhancer for me. Within a couple months of the time I actually got discharged, they explained to me I was going to be kicked out and be medically discharged.

MC: You're going to be what?

BWS: Discharged me with a disability. And that's when I thought the world had ended, because you take my view of what happened, I had done absolutely nothing, and I come to the Marine Corps, and I had been successful, I was doing well, I was on a way to a good career, and all of a sudden, I'm nothing again, but without the use of a hand. I could see

everything that I had gained I had lost plus some. So I was suicidal. This was the only time in my life I ever had that. I just didn't see any way out.

MC: How did you get over that?

BWS: It was the strangest thing. It was in a dream. Not about the arm or anything, but it was a dream that had involved in it a plant guard, and he was in khaki, and he had a pistol, one had a weapon. And I thought, "OK, I can be a plant guard. I know how to guard. I'm good with a pistol, so I can get out of this thing." And I woke up from it --

MC: And this is while you were in the hospital?

BWS: Yup. I got over from that.

MC: Iwo was followed by Okinawa, and that was the last big battle. Where were you in the war ended?

BWS: In the hospital.

MC: In this hospital in the States?

BWS: In Oakland Naval Hospital.

MC: Oakland Naval Hospital, OK.

BWS: I was in Oakland Naval Hospital with We Day, with VJ Day. I spent the time in the hospital while everybody else won the war.

MC: I'm sorry?

BWS: I said I spent my time in the hospital while everyone else won the war.

MC: You did your share.

BWS: I would have loved to have been able to go back at that time.

MC: And when did you get discharged again?

BWS: In May, 1946.

MC: You were in the uniform the entire --

BWS: My four-year hitch was up. I was put up in December, and I was discharged the following May. They didn't give me a chance to re-enlist. They knew it at that time they were not going to keep me.

MC: Well it sounds like we have a pretty good view of your military career there. So what I'm going to do is I'll go ahead and say I'll end the tape, and I want to say again thank you on behalf of the museum for doing the interview with us. But more importantly, thank you for your service to our country.

BWS: A privilege.

END OF AUDIO FILE