

Veteran: HENCKE, John C.
Service Branch: ARMY
Interviewer: Coffey, Stephen
Date of Interview: April 25, 2003
Date of Transcription: June 9, 2003
Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: World War II; Liberated civilian POWs from Santo Tomas, Manila; Philippines & New Guinea; 1st day of Leyte landings (amphibious tanks)

Interviewer: This interview is being conducted at the home of John Hencke. You do understand that this interview is going to be taped?

Veteran: I do.

Interviewer: Please tell me your name and when you were born.

Veteran: John C. Hencke. I was born February 2, 1917.

Interviewer: Where did you live at the time you entered the service?

Veteran: I was living with my mother in New York City. My brother had already gone into the service, and I was the only child left.

Interviewer: And you served in World War II?

Veteran: Yes, but I can't give you the exact dates.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you sign up?

Veteran: I was drafted. My brother had volunteered for the Navy and they turned him down, but the Air Force picked him up.

Interviewer: What branch of the military did you sign up for?

Veteran: The Army got me. When I got my traveling papers, I had AF on it, and I thought, "Boy, the Air Force!" and I wound up tied to the earth.

Interviewer: How old were you when you were drafted?

Veteran: I was 25 or 26.

Interviewer: What was your job in the war?

Veteran: I was a corporal (G5), and I manned the 75 inch guns in the tanks. The captain was in my tank. The driver was a sergeant, and the other two were privates—the radio man and the assistant driver.

Interviewer: How long were you involved in the war?

Veteran: Three years and several months.

Interviewer: What kind of training did you receive after you were drafted?

Veteran: We learned how to march, do a lot of sit-ups, how to clean a pair of shoes in ten minutes.

Interviewer: What kind of rations were you given?

Veteran: While we were in basic training, we ate real good. They would cook it and put it out on the table. The ones who had the longest arms could take what they wanted, and the rest of us got what was left. When we got into outfits, it was cafeteria style, and they just ladled it all out, and you just got whatever they put there.

Interviewer: What were your sleeping quarters like?

Veteran: In basic training, it was single beds in a room full of them—barracks type. Going overseas, I was the top bunk on a five-tier bed. When we got to Camp Washington on New Guinea, we got in there at nighttime, and it was raining. We struggled through the rain to get our cots and then had to find a tent, and we set up our cots in the water. Otherwise, we just slept on the ground, and I tried one time to sleep under a tank, but that didn't work because when I woke up the tank had been slowly going down as the sea came in, and it was almost to my nose, and I had to squirm out of there. The tank in front of me had already gone down, and it took three tanks to pull it out.

Interviewer: Did you have any long term medical problems from your experiences in the war?

Veteran: No, I didn't. I just got wounded, but it was minor. It was more of a bullet splatter.

Interviewer: Did you have any friends from your home town that served with you in the war?

Veteran: We had friends, but primarily it was a five-man crew, and that included the captain. I was friends with all of them. I had other friends, but there weren't as close as my tank crew. We came to rely on each other.

Interviewer: Do you still stay in touch with any of those people?

Veteran: Not those, because they've all passed away. I am a member of the 44th Tank Battalion, and we have our reunion every year, so I have gotten to be friends with all of them.

Interviewer: How did your family feel when you were drafted into the war?

Veteran: Mama didn't want me to go, because that left her alone. I had been working and all my money went into the house. It wasn't much. I made \$25 a week, and five of that went for my personal car fare and lunches. When I went in, I signed an allotment paper for her, so she got \$50.

Interviewer: Did you have a girlfriend when you went in?

Veteran: I had several, but on my last furlough I said goodbye to my girlfriend and went back to my camp and wrote to a girl down in Texas saying that I wouldn't be able to make it because my furlough was so short. She was up in Camden for about a week and stayed with the girlfriend of my radio operator who was going to go home, but when she came up she stayed with her. When they had to go home, they both got on the bus crying their eyes out. I got up there and saw them crying, and something happened—don't ask me what it was. But when I got back to camp, I told the captain I wanted to get married. He told me first to go the hospital to get my Wasserman test—I don't know if they still do that or not—but, I had to have it. Then he gave me two-three day passes, and I went to the bus station, and I got my tickets and got to the phone and called Doris, and asked her if she knew anybody down there that wants to get married, and she said, "yes." I

said, "I'll be in Houston at 8:00 tomorrow morning," and she said, "Oh, alright." She worked in a filling station selling bus tickets, and the boss said she put down the phone and sat there for a few minutes, then got up and raced to the highway and came back running in a circle saying, "I'm getting married!" and she went on home.

Interviewer: That's a good story. When you were fighting in the war, were you aware of how it was going overall or just your own group?

Veteran: We had rumors, but most of what we knew was just where we were situated.

Interviewer: So you really didn't really receive that much information from outside?

Veteran: Moving from one place to another—it took fifty-two days to get from Portland, Oregon, to New Guinea, and with all of our sea travel came to ninety days, so we were moving several hundred miles each time, and maybe as much as a thousand miles from the Leyte islands through the Philippines. We landed there the first day in the sixth wave. We had tanks, so we could go into the water, and it was a monstrosity that they put on it not to get the water into the engine compartment. We went through the infantry and went on out past a U.S. Highway Number 1 on Leyte Island, and we went over to the other side and wound up in a swamp. We had to pull each tank out of it. One would pull the other one and he'd get stuck, so two at a time we were pulling them out. When we got everybody freed, we went back to the road and took off to the right to attack Tacloban, which was the capital of Leyte, which was only twenty miles away. We went up to Tacloban and were there on the outskirts when dark fell, and we pulled back to refuel and get some more ammunition, which we really didn't need, because we hadn't done very much shooting. As we came to the first curve, my tank was in the lead and the second tank pulled around us. I don't know why, but he did. As he did, he hit that curve, he went over a land mine, and it blew the track off, so they were stuck and so were we, because we couldn't leave him. So, during the night my tank pulled around him to be in front of him, and we were facing down the highway. Each man in the tank spent two hours on guard duty and four off, and it was my turn up in the turret when I saw a light way down the highway, and I watched it. I had the 8th Calvary, two men on both sides of the highway with machine guns,

and I heard them loading up that machine gun, and this is about a half hour after I started watching that light. I told them to hold off, I'd get a light, so I raised my search light and shone it down the highway, and there was maybe about two hundred and fifty people coming out of the swamp, and all they had was a little candle and they were shading it with their hands, and we could have easily killed them if we hadn't had that light. Anyway, they passed through us with the light shining over them, so that there wouldn't be any Japs mixed up among them, and they went on right behind us, and squatted down there for the rest of the night. The next morning, we were making our breakfast—we had 5 in 1 rations, which contained a large can of pork and egg yolk. It wasn't very good, but we were hungry, and there was enough in there for five men. We each got some and were eating, and we hadn't eaten it all, and those people were standing right around there just watching every mouthful that we ate. So, I looked at the boys, and they said, "OK," so I handed one man, who seemed to be a leader, a can and said, "Share it with your neighbor," and he did it. He stuck his hand in there, pulled up a handful, and offered it to his neighbor. The neighbor said, "No," so he put it down there, and he had a whole can for his family.

Interviewer: When you were out there fighting, did your group always have a specific objective that you were completing?

Veteran: We always had a place we were aiming for. After we got into Luzon, we didn't know where we going, but were more or less following the southern lines. They didn't put us right into the front lines yet, but we were following them within maybe a half a day travel, and we got into a place called Gimba. We hadn't been there a half a day when the orders came for the battalions (they made three columns) to go to Manila. Our orders were to fight our way there if we had to, but bypass the fight if we could. We traveled mostly at night, especially that night. We left at twelve o'clock and we went to a place called Cabanatuan, which was a Japanese prison camp, and over ten thousand American soldiers had died in it. One of our companies went into Cabanatuan, and said they had a free-for-all. We had set up camp, and we had a Philippine guerilla fighter with us. He went into the camp and brought back several dog tags and said there was a BIG pile of them. We told him to go back and put them there, because that was the only way

they could trace who had passed through there and died, which he did. The next day we took off for Manila, and it took us three days. We got there about four in the afternoon, and just before we got to Manila, we ran out of gas. We were off to the side of the road, and one platoon went around and around to protect us. About an hour or two later, three trucks came up that had come down the same way we did. How they did it, I don't know, because they were loaded with gasoline and mail. I had a birthday the next day, February 3rd, and we loaded up our gas and took off. This other platoon was still out there, so they still had to load up. By the time they did, we were out of sight, so they headed in our direction anyway. We got into the outskirts, and there was a Filipino colonel, regular army, who met us, and he directed us right to the gates of Santo Tomas University, and we got there just before dark. They were sitting there, and the captain got down and walked to the gate, and they had two sandbag places on either side, and a Jap rose up and both the captain and Truhillo(?) shot him. While they were there, I was in the turret again taking the captain's place, and I spotted what looked like a sparkler arching from behind the wall, and I thought, 'fireworks.' But when it got to about half as high as it was going to go before it came back down to the road, I said, "Grenade!" I yelled my head off. The captain and a bunch of the infantry scattered for cover. Truhillo made it back to the tank head first. I don't know where the captain took off, but that grenade did kill the Filipino colonel that had been guiding us all the way in. Right after that, we had orders to crash the gate. It was getting dark real fast, and it was just black—you couldn't see anything. So, when we got our orders to move, I hadn't really seen the gate. I was in the turret as we pulled up to it, and I couldn't see how it was, but there was concrete over it from one side to the other, and I sensed it—I didn't see it, but I knew something was coming at me, so I got one side of the hatch pulled down, and I couldn't get the other side because it was already coming toward the tank. It caught the hatch, broke it down flat, took the machine gun off, and by the time we got outside on the other side of the gate, I had already prayed to God and luckily I just popped out again. Just about that time, somebody yelled, "Gimme a light!" So, I shined my light down onto the ground, and there was a figure like nobody else—just this one figure. He was dressed in a white robe, had long white hair about down to his waist, and he had a shepherd's

staff in his hand. Well, that was a shock, because he was just there, and then I didn't see anymore. But anyway, we went on up to the buildings and within ten minutes we were covered with 3,880 some-odd people. They had been held in there for about four years. They were civilians—men, women, and children, and they were starving.

Interviewer: Did you come in contact with many other civilians other than the ones you met earlier with the candles?

Veteran: Yes. The first time we did, we were maybe a mile away from the town, and about twelve of us had set up our tents, and decided to go into town on our own, so we were actually AWOL. We went into town, and I got acquainted with a family, and they invited us over to their house. It wasn't much of a house, it was more of a hut, and they had these lizard-type reptiles crawling up and down the walls and ceiling, which was really just the roof. We got back to camp about twelve o'clock, and they had pulled a bed check, so we were all on the bad list. After that, I didn't see any more civilians until we got into Luzon. The people were very friendly to us and were very happy to see us. The last place before we hit Gimba, we had set up our camp for the night, and we were allowed to go into the little town. A bunch of us went in there—three of us were together—and we bargained for a turkey, a chicken, and I think a duck, and returned them live. We had an awful lot of friends when we got back.

Interviewer: What's the one thing you remember most specifically about your time in the war?

Veteran: Outside of that figure, I can remember being hit. We had gone out, and we were escorting a group of soldiers to the Manila Hotel and set up guard duty. The Manila Hotel was the general's home in the penthouse, at the top. We filed into the lobby, and I shot about seventy-five rounds into it {END OF SIDE A} {SIDE B BEGINS} What I did that for was in the other buildings, the Japs would tear up the floor and make a foxhole, and there could be firing all through that building, and then at the last minute they would pop out and catch a soldier unawares. We did that so our shrapnel would be bouncing around the place and catch anybody, hopefully. So we pulled back, and the soldiers stayed up in there, and we were being fired upon. It seemed like it was coming from the top of the

building, so I raised my machine gun, and I sprayed the upper part of the building. It had a cornice overhang, and it was made of wood, and some of my tracer bullets hit it and started smoking, and so it caught on fire and burned the general's {thought not completed here}. I can't remember his name, but I never did like the guy—he was an egotist. Anyway, a short moment later, a shot was fired and the captain was up in the turret, and I was down on my gun, and I was bare-chested and turned around to say something to him as this bullet hit the edge of the turret, or hatch, and it splattered. The lead inside the bullet just became molten, and he got a piece in his elbow and the rest of it came down, and I got the majority of that. I got the shell casing in my temple, and split my lower eyelid with one of them, and then I got several of them through my arms and what-not. I did need a Band-Aid on my temple, but that was all.

Interviewer: Is there anything learned in training or in fighting that you still remember?

Veteran: Don't volunteer. {Laughter}

Interviewer: Do you feel that your time in the war changed you in your personality or your outlook on life?

Veteran: Yes, very, very much. Not necessarily the Army itself, but I was not exactly a good boy. I loved my girls, and I had met this one girl in New York. She was waiting for her sisters, and I was on L and Information, and she hung around right there around the telephones, and so finally I told her, "I get off at eleven o'clock. Could we take a walk?" And so we did, and so we got a little close. So I took her the next day to the train, and she went back to Milwaukee, and we were stationed in Fort Knox, close to Louisville. I wrote to her and she wrote to me, and we made a date in Chicago. So, I got there and everything was going fine. We were eating a late breakfast or lunch, and while we're talking she asked, "Johnny, what do you think about what's happening over in Europe with them killing all those people?" I don't know where that sentence came from, because I did not hate the Jews, but I said off the top of my head, "They ought to kill another six million." Well, she got awfully quiet, and we walked around town, and she developed a real serious cough, and I put her back on the train that afternoon back to Milwaukee, and by the time I got back to camp there was a

letter waiting, and she said, “Johnny, didn’t you know I was Jewish?” Man, if ever a guy would feel terrible, it was me. I was not man enough to answer her letter, but from then on I treated everybody as a single human being rather than as a group.

Interviewer: How were you treated when you came back from your time in the war?

Veteran: I wasn’t treated as the European bunch that came over, but we got to San Francisco, California, and disembarked and turned in all our clothes. That was the first time I had uniforms that fit me, and I had to turn them back in, and all the personal stuff—even the piece of shrapnel that hit me—never realizing I wasn’t gonna get that back. We walked out the other side of the building, and there was a ferry for us to get on, and we went up to the next camp and stayed there. Then we headed for San Antonio. I had changed the place where I wanted to get out of the Army—from New York, where I technically came in, to Texas. So I called my wife as soon as I got to San Antonio, and she was up there that afternoon. That was November 8, 1945.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW }