

Justus Asthalter
Narrator

Michael Aikey
New York State Military Museum
Interviewer

Interviewed on April 11, 2001
Kingston Armory

Q: We are interviewing Mr. Justus Asthalter. We are at the Kingston Armory. The interviewer is Michael Ackee and its April 11, 2001. Where were you born sir?

A: Neversink, New York

Q: You grew up there?

A: Right. We walked two miles to school (laughs).

Q: Where was the school? The school was in Neversink?

A: Neversink

Q: Where were you when World War II broke out? Where did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

A: Pearl Harbor. I guess I was trapping (unclear). I just got finished at the Neversink Dam. I finished bulldozing there. I set a few traps there when I heard about it.

Q: When did you decide to enlist?

A: I didn't enlist. They asked me (laughs).

Q: They asked you. They invited you.

A: (unclear) gave me hell. Why didn't you tell me? We would get you deferred. I said no. Let nature take its course.

Q: So, when were you drafted?

A: I was working down in Freehold, New Jersey on a munition dump or whatever it was.

Q: What year was that that you got drafted?

A: '43, I believe.

Q: Where did you go to basic?

A: Camp Claiborne.

Q: What was that like?

A: That was alright. I enjoyed it.

Q: Really?

A: I enjoyed it.

Q: Where was Camp Claiborne located?

A: Louisiana.

Q: OK. What time of year was it?

A: I remember it was cold. I was only there for a little while and went overseas.

Q: What unit were you assigned to?

A: I think the 5th or 6th Army something like that

Q: What regiment was it?

A: 689th Engineers Base Equipment Company.

Q: So, you went to the west coast first?

A: Yes.

Q: And then did you know where you were going to go?

A: No.

Q: And they just put you on a troop ship?

A: That's right... New Guinea.

Q: You were a heavy equipment operator?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of equipment did you run?

A: Bulldozers, graders, shovel (unclear)...

Q: What did you do in New Guinea?

A: I ran the bulldozer, I guess.

Q: Were you doing airfields or roads?

A: No. It was a rock crusher. We supplied the rock crusher. They told us after we got home that there was gold in there (laughs).

Q: How long were you at this rock crushing operation?

A: (unclear) mostly in the airport and so on....

Q: Were you there the whole time?

A: No, we weren't there very long. We were always moving someplace.

Q: What did you do next? Your next assignment? Do you remember?

A: The next assignment was an airport not New Guinea but an airport we enlarged it anyway. I told you the name before but forget –a little isle off New Guinea.

Q: What was it like there?

A: It was nice and dry there....dry..no jungle. There were jungles but it was dry

Q: Were you pretty well treated?

A: Yes. Very good.

Q: So, it was pretty good duty?

A: Yeah, I liked it very good.

Q: The company was basically assigned to whoever needed your assistance?

A: Where ever the army needed work to be done, they'd lend us there.

Q: Were you under any fire at all?

A: The island was Biak – the island that I couldn't figure the name.

Q: Were you ever under any fire at all?

A: Once in Leyte.

Q: What was that like?

A: That was Christmas Eve - an airplane coming through that's all. We were being shot quite often near Manila and also above Clark's Field.

Q: Is this by aircraft or by infantry.

A: Snipers

Q: Snipers.

(Then a question from another person in the back of the room: "He had binoculars. He got hit in the binoculars – saved his life (unclear). Ask him about that")

Q: What happened? I understand that you were carrying some Japanese Binoculars?

A: That was a little but above New Guinea. He just shot one of our guys. Got him right in here (points to chest). We were out looking for him (unclear) He's out here but they didn't have (any) guns. So, I loaned my gun once and we had a scare and I would never do that again. That's yours, you'd better keep it so everybody went looking for it. It was up on a bank looking down. "There he is. There he is. There he is." I couldn't see him. I couldn't see him. Pretty soon he's got his gun right on to me like that. I ducked down like this. When I looked up again, he could see this much of my head before I see him. How I did think that fast, I don't know. I've got to pull that trigger before. Bang bang! As he's going down, I see him fall. So, I got the binoculars. He had binoculars and he had a lot of other stuff: a pack of rice. They always had rice for something to eat. He had a lot of other trinkets. Everybody wanted something. I said "(those) binoculars, that's all" One of my bullets went through it but didn't damage it.

Q: So, you carried those binoculars with you?

A: Yes. ...Oscar (last name unclear) brought them home for me.

(Comment from person in background: "One day he saw MacArthur")

Q: So, you saw General MacArthur?

A: Yes,

Q: What was that like?

A: I was griping (laughs). (unclear) We could do better if we had an underwater cutting torch. He said "you're doing alright" or something like that. To me, he was just another person which he is really.

(Somebody talking in the background. Not clear)

Q: I understand there was one time where you had a very steep grade with your bulldozer? How did you deal with that?

A: That was up above Manila. We were snaking logs out. One time, I let Oscar run because he was pretty heavy and I was slim. You have to watch out. You go this way (makes gesture) right along the bank (unclear) so I kind of went ahead. You've got to watch out that trees don't fall over you. One time he was snaked a log up here. I went to unhook it. A Filipino grabbed me and pulled me back (unclear). He said "snake, snake, snake" and right there on a little coconut tree right about there the snakes were up in that tree. He said if the snakes bite you, you turn cold and die just that quick. I passed my cigarettes around then (laughs).

Q: What other islands were you on? You mentioned building a bridge-the longest bridge?

A: That's in Manila. That's where I met MacArthur. That bridge was lying down in the water. They blew off this end and just lay in the water. I got pictures of it too. I didn't show him that one (gestures to other person accompanying him). He didn't see that one or didn't find it rather. Then we had to take it out to I think twelve feet of water or twenty some feet of water so the boats could get by. We had no underwater cutting torch. We had to dynamite it down. I didn't have dynamite. I had TNT wrapped around this post with a cable on a crane down and hooked on to it and blew it off here. The diver came up and the fella set it off. One time, he'd be out wiring up another set while he was down. One time, he set it off and blew himself up.

Q: Pretty dangerous work.

A: Yeah. This bridge went from land to abutment -abutment to abutment. We had to drive piling in here first and then from another crane. That was H20. Just above it a

little bit we put a Bailey bridge they push out. H20 is a steel girder I guess about seven feet tall or something like that and you push them out with girders underneath the road. From land to abutment to abutment to abutment and the last one out, I helped several.

Always, the Filipinos (said) "I'll go" but they take their time. Oh Joe, that's too dangerous for me. I'll go. (unclear) twenty, thirty forty feet or something like that. I ran out and hooked the cable. But anyway, the last one out with the crane down on the bottom. We had another crane on the opposite side. He picked up and pulled it out so far, then that crane came over and I'd go out and hook them fast. Then they both picked it up and set it down in place.

While I was there, I would jump off the other side. So therefore, I was the first one to cross that bridge (laughs).

(Comment from person in the background: "Tell them about you getting hurt")

A: That was another bridge up the river a ways. That was from land to abutment to abutment and abutment to land. They put Bailey bridge in. Some other company had a bulldozer. So, I went to it to lay it down in the water. I got out and put a Baily in there. I was in there jacking it up. It must be that the jack slipped and hit me in the head. They said I fell down. It was twenty some feet. I remember (being on the) concrete floor of the bridge and (there was) about that much water flowing over the top of it (makes hand gestures indicating water height).

Every once and awhile you can smell a dead person. You can identify that. It's the worst stink that there is. You can crawl up on a dead cow and go to sleep but a dead person over there you couldn't stand the smell. Every once and awhile a dead person would be floating down the stream. They float right on top not half submerged.

Q: When they dropped the bomb, were you still in the Pacific?

A: I think it it was after I got hurt. I think I was home. I was in the hospital anyway.

Q: When you got hurt, you got sent back stateside.

A: Yes, after awhile. The hospital was on the way home.

Q: How long were you in the hospital?

A: I don't know exactly how many months.

Q: Were you discharged out of the hospital?

A: Yes at Staten Island.

Q: So you were pretty close to home.

A: Yes. I flew all the way from Manila. The longest in the air one time was eleven and a half hours – fifty flying hours from Manila to New York City.

Q: That's a long trip.

A: We landed first down in Louisiana, I believe, some place then Newark was the next one. Anyway, we got out over Washington and they sent us back again because of a thundershower, I remember. They sent us back, Of course, I was a litter patient. That day we flew eight hours and all we gained was fifty miles.

Q: So you were discharged out at Staten Island?

A: (unclear) Hospital

Q: What did you do after you were discharged?

A: I came home and went back to construction work.

Q: And you pretty well did construction work until you retired?

A: Yes. I couldn't run. That's one thing I couldn't do.

Q: How old are you sir?

A: Eight. Eight. Eighty eight.

Q: A spry eighty eight. Well, thank you very much. We appreciate you stopping in.

A: Any time you want pictures, I can show you pictures. I showed him (gestures to person accompanying him) maybe half of them.

Q: OK. We would love to see them.