

**David Lawton
Veteran**

**Herkimer Fulton County Historical Society
Interviewer**

Herkimer, Fulton County, New York

Q: I'm sure it was tough. You know, you learn how to shoot this rifle and that rifle and, you know, just go through when you went overseas on such and such a month or year even, even if you say what year it is.

DL: Ok. My name is David Lawton. I am from Johnstown, New York. And I am an old World War II veteran. I served in the South Pacific during the World War II. I was with the 32nd Infantry Division. That is a red arrow job. I was a sergeant with a machine gun company and we went in from the Philippines in October 1944 and from there we went in through Luzon and we chased General Yamashita all over the island and finally he surrendered in 1945-August.

Q: How about starting from when you went in to basic training. Had you graduated from school?

DL: Alright. We went to Camp Upton. From there, when I first went in I was into the Air Force. I took my basic in Shepard Field, Texas and from there, went to the chemical warfare unit at Edwards arsenal. I took my training there for all the different gases and the one thing they gave us – a needle – I still have the scar from when they put mustard gas on us. After 3 weeks that blister was almost a half an inch high. From there, I went back to Shepard Field and from there I was transferred to Portland, Oregon and I was still in the chemical warfare and for some reason in World War II, the Germans weren't using the gas anyway.

Q: The units?

DL: They were doing away with the chemical warfare, so we had to go through the gas chamber. They had to take the whole base and put us through the gas chamber. Anyway, we ended up with the chlorine gas and while we were in there, we had to loosen up our masks and smell it just for a second; there was a very pungent smell to it. Then, for some reason they dissolved the chemical war vets. And from there, they started putting people from the Air Force into the Army. And that is when I got transferred from the Air Force into the Army, to go overseas. I forgot the name of the base, but I took my basic in Oklahoma, and there I qualified for expert rifle. From there, they put us on a boat, on a ship to the South Pacific. We ended up in New Guinea and then from there went to the Philippines and from Leyte day, we went into Luzon. That is where I finally

ended up with the 32nd division. I was still a sergeant, so they put me in a machine gun company. And we saw quite a bit. We chased Governor Yamashita all over the Luzon islands and he finally surrendered in 1945 just above Manila. Then from there, I went with a special force. I volunteered for other duties. So from there, I went to Ie Shima and from there I went to Iwo Jima. And from there, I went to Okinawa. And from Okinawa, I ended up in Japan. In Japan, I was a volunteer. I had 21 men and we had to liberate all the prisoners of war that were on the island of Japan. We went to Fukuoka (?); that's where our headquarters were; from there we started going to the coal mines. But in the meantime, we run into 18 Australian prisoners that were in the steel mill above Nagasaki. And they were there when the atomic bomb dropped. And they said they never seen anything like it; in 20 minutes from the time it hit until it was gone, everything was gone. They couldn't believe what a thing it was. And from there, we liberated another town. We found no Americans whatsoever, but we found a lot of Chinese prisoners; a lot of them. The first coal mine we went to, that guy I could have shot him. I shouldn't say that, but I could have. He was no good for the human race. All of his prisoners, there were less than 700, all (had) dysentery. The crematory boxes there reminded me of a post office. Each individual had its own little box. It was all squared out; they had them all the way up on the side of the building. And from there, they headed down through the mill and they had to slide in so their heads were showing. There were over 2,000 crematory boxes we had to box up at that first coal mine; (he) was strictly a Japanese that didn't care for the human race. The next one, he was a little better. We had to do the same thing there, but they were not as bad as the first coal mine. There was some dysentery, but not as much as the first one. But we still had a lot of boxes to box up there; over 2,000. But the third guy, he was an ace in the third coal mine. He was an ace; he took care of every one of his men. In 1500 prisoners of war he had in that coal mine, there were less than 700 crematory boxes in that building. And while I was there, there was one Chinese man and he could speak English, and I used him as an interpreter. And he told us he didn't want to leave the coal mine; we had to threaten to shoot them. We got them out and we put them on a boat. And we sent them to China, but they didn't want to go because the Chinese prisoner of war said we were going to have another war, and they were going back to fight. We had a Colonel that was in charge for after a while and he didn't believe that propaganda stuff. It wasn't even four years before the Korean War broke out. If I could ever see that Colonel, I would tell him that he better come back to basics.

Going back to when we got into the islands, there was a lot of elements besides just chasing the Japanese. You had Malaria which I got; I got that in New Guinea. And on top of that, it rained terrible 6 months a year; every day it rained. And the big leaches they would burn. They would hide within 12-14 foot high

vegetation. Sometimes when you finished walking, you would have twelve to fifteen leaches on your arms.

From there, it was just a terrible element. There was a couple of really bad incidents that we had. We would travel with a mortar company all the way through the Luzon and up in the northern part of Luzon they had arch stone bridges. They were all zeroed in with 77 Japanese mountain guns. One time we went across the bridge with a machine gun company and the next bridge with a mortar company and it seemed like every time that the mortar company got on the bridge, they were clobbered; they lost a lot of men. The bridge was wide without high railings and they had it zeroed so the shell would hit the rail side of the bridge and just splatter everything. We were very lucky every time we crossed a bridge. The mortar company got hit every time. The bridges were on ravines that would go one-thousand to two-thousand feet straight down on the mountain-right straight down. There was one place where there was a river that looked like a small stream until you got down and saw you needed a boat to cross it; that's how high you were on those bridges. We had our elements and we had one Bonzai attack, and that was something too. When they attacked they had little bottles that were about the size of a [American] Red Cross toothache bottle. They were full of raw opium and you could hear them gathering, and take it, and then go in to the sake after the opiates before they would go on the Bonzai attack. I remember they issued a car beam for the officers, a 30-car beam. And that thing was useless as far as I could see. We had one Bonzai attack and there was a lieutenant that was emptying his gun at those people and one man kept coming on to us with a bayonet and I hit him with a .45 and he went back about 20 feet. We didn't have to worry about him again. But not the Lieutenant because he was coming on to us. Those guns were useless. Another thing I talk about; the Japanese tracer bullet was white, but sometimes they would empty a whole box of ammunition and never see one. With us, every seventh we had to have a tracer and ours were red. They could spot us but the one they hated most was the BAR, the Browning automatic rifle. The Japanese hated that guy because they couldn't tell where he was. But with us, with them traceable bullets that would tell us all, then on top of that we worried more about the knee mortars. They would hit and run; they were about a 37mm artillery round. By the time you called artillery, they were 4 or 5 miles up in the woods somewhere.

But the Japanese hated the BAR. It was quite an experience. I was lucky. The only thing I came out of it with was a bout of Malaria; I legit ended up in the hospital and then the field hospital. I had another bout in Japan. They told us when we got back to the states that within three years, it wouldn't bother you anymore because the cold would kill it. But according to the VA hospital, it

doesn't kill it; it just makes it dormant. But anyway, that's what I can come up with; anything goes.

Q: What do you remember most about the war?

DL: It's hell. (PAUSE)

Q: And what would you say your best moment was out of the entire time you were in?

DL: At the tail end, after we got through liberating all of the prisoners of war, we all got together and we had a Christmas party. The officers gave it to us and we had a heck of a good time. They gave us a band and all the beer and liquor. Ah! I was so happy that I was alive to enjoy it.

Q: Now did you lose a lot of friends when you were over there?

DL: Oh yes. A lot of them.

Q: Do you remember their names?

DL: Oh boy. There were two brothers, the Jones boys from Ohio. And one brother was about ten years older than the other one. They were the nicest bunch of guys. They got it on our way up the trail to the San Fernando Valley and there was an ambush up there. I don't remember all of them. There was kid, a BAR man from Georgia. And then there was a kid, Marsh, who didn't last very long; a BAR too. If you got friendly it didn't last very long. That was the only bad thing about the war; you could make friends-but you could lose them almost quicker than you could make friends.

Q: So you would spend a lot of time in the jungle chasing these Japanese?

DL: Aww. We had, I was trying to think of the trail that we went...ain't that funny how a war can take and close your mind if it gets real bad. The fighting and everything would just close your mind right off.

Q: So a lot of it was so ...

DL: There was one, Alberti, that was terrible; we lost a lot of men at Alberti. We lost a lot of men going from Manila up to [Baggio]; a lot of them too. I was very fortunate that I tried to save to all my machine gunners that I was very fortunate. I lost a lot of BAR men. I lost a lot of BAR men. Without my machine gunners, I for some reason the good Lord I guess was with us. Aw, you talk about jungles and the worst of it was the rain, rain, rain and the mud. Sometimes you could get lucky to have an extra pair of shoes and always carry two extra pair of socks

because after you got done walking through the mud, you would take your shoes off and put on clean socks. You had to because otherwise your feet would start to get jungle rot, a smell that was terrible.

Q: Did your food and supplies keep up with you when you were in the jungle?

DL: The only food that we had were the K rations. We never...I don't remember any time that we had any C rations. The only C rations we got was after we got through fighting the war with General Yamashita and we ended up in Japan. There we got all the C rations we wanted while we were in Japan. But back in the islands, all we got were K rations.

Q: When the war was over where were you sent?

DL: I came back to Port Lawton, Washington is where we ended up and we were in a three-month quarantine. And then from there I transferred to Fort Dix; I got my discharge there. Then I came back to Gloversville and before I went in, right after I came out of school in '42, I hooked up with a Fulton County soap mill. They hired me and I was there only about four months when they drafted me in '43. And when I got back my discharge from Fort Dix, the Fulton County soap mill, Mr. Rogers came right to the house and told me you're going back to work. I said I want a vacation. He said, "You don't get no vacation; you had it!" (I said), "What did he mean I had it? I had a hell of a vacation, I'll tell you." [Laughs] So I went to work and worked for 45 years at that soap mill.

Q: So he was very excited to have you back at work?

DL: He was very happy because a lot of the boys that worked at the mill all got killed in Germany.

Q: If there was anything that you would say, what did you miss about that time? Was there anything that you missed about those years that you were in service?

DL: Yeah, the good times [Laughs]. When everybody would go dancing and to beer parties. We didn't see those kinds of good times here.

Q: So, there were a few good times?

DL: Aw you better believe.

Q: But few and far between?

DL: [Laughs] The best time we had was after the war ended and the Japanese

surrendered we were in Japan liberating the prisoners of war. That's when we had the good times. Once a month, we had our beer and rations and we had a chance to meet the Geisha girls [Extended chuckles].

Q: How about if you had to classify one specific day, what would you say your longest day was in terms of maybe your worst day?

DL: The worst day was when we had a Bonsai attack. Every one of us prayed. You could hear them. They always waited until between twilight and the break of dawn. And you knew something was moving, but you couldn't tell what it was. They were screaming so you knew they were coming for you. Once were hopped up, you would have to cut them in two with a machine gun.

Q: They wouldn't stop for anything?

DL: Nothing would stop them. They were so hopped up. Aw! They were nuts; they were nuts people. Why would anybody... Well I suppose each nationality, each race of people has their own prerogative way of living. To me, I am glad I am American because God Bless 'em. Boy, I would never under any circumstances, would ever be in another country, nothing! Even in Australia, or any of those places, no way; war is hell. I don't care what anybody says. Nobody comes out a winner. They think they do just because they won the war. We aren't a winner same as they are. Japanese lost more men than we did. What was it; right after all the surrendering and everything we put more money into that Japanese country to rebuild it? And here our own people were starving to death and we're on rations and all that. And there they were feeding the very (same) people that we were fighting.

Q: Did you develop some good friendships with some of your comrades?

DL: Never! You'd like to if you could. You always wanted to find a buddy. You never could get close to any of them even though we wanted to. It's too bad the way things turned out. A lot of people wanted to be your friends; you'd be here today and they would be gone tomorrow.

Q: Did you lose any friends from Johnstown/Gloversville?

DL: I never ran into any people over there that were from Fulton County. But Dan Rivenburg, he got killed in Germany. The Armstrong boys both got killed over there (as well). Lou Riley was a prisoner of war in Germany; he passed away. Another good friend was Sam Passerole (?). I knew him and his family. He got killed in (Saipan). You wanted to but for some reason human nature to try and get in and be friends. I don't know; where the good Lord probably this that and the other thing. You don't know. It's just something that you have to live

with. It's too bad. I always think a lot of them. They're gone. You wonder how their family is. I kept in contact for a little while with the one Loudon his name was. For some reason, his sister just stopped writing. His brother was in Nashville making recordings with big artists in his own recording studio. He wrote a couple of times but that stopped too. Over the years, when I travel to Florida, I stop by there trying to find him, but never can find him. Well, life goes on. You can't stop living even though there is war. I don't envy those boys in Iraq. I know what they are going through. I think the desert is just as bad as going to the jungle. They have camel fleas and they bite worse than a bed bug. So anyways, that's the way it goes. Anything else?

Q: I think we are all set.