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**Narrator**

**Mike Russert**  
**Wayne Clark**  
**Interviewers**

**New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center**

**October 3, 2003**  
**Division of Military and Naval Affairs Headquarters**  
**Latham, New York**

John Geertsen    **JG**  
Mike Russert    **MR**  
Wayne Clark    **WC**

**MR:** This is an interview at the Division of Military and Naval Affairs Headquarters, Latham, New York. It is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, 2003, approximately 10:15 a.m. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark. Could you give us your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

**JG:** Yes. John T. Geertsen. Date of birth May 21, 1919.

**MR:** And where were you born?

**JG:** Scotia, New York.

**MR:** And what was your educational background prior to entering military service?

**JG:** One year of college at Clarkson Tech. I got drafted almost immediately, when the draft was enacted, in May of 1941, for

supposedly for six months of training, and then I'd be coming back home. That's when the war broke out, and I didn't get back until four years later. [unclear]

**MR:** Ok, I'm going to go back a second. So you were in the service when Pearl Harbor happened. Do you know where you were and what your reaction was when you heard about this?

**JG:** Yes, I was at March Field in California. I was in the 808 Aviation Battalion, Construction Engineers. The specific day was Sunday, and my buddy and I decided to go up to a tower, a flashing light at the end of the runway, and go to the top of that mountain as a hike. It was a lot further than we anticipated, and by the time we got back, we'd missed lunch and they had everybody falling out and the officers explaining about the Pearl Harbor attack. We were alerted that the war was on.

**MR:** Let's go back to when you entered the Engineers. How did you get into an Engineer unit? Did they assign you, because you had college experience?

**JG:** I went to Fort Belvoir for my training in the Engineers. I was inducted at Fort Jay, the island right adjacent to the Statue of Liberty. And I was there a couple of days. They interviewed me there, and they gave me a choice of what branch I would like to be in. I was trying to think about it. One officer said, "We suggest you go into the paratroopers." (Laughs) My first thought was "No, no I don't want that." They said, so what would you like to be in, and I said the Engineers. So I was sent to Fort Belvoir with the idea that I was training for the Engineers.

**MR:** What kind of training did you receive there?

**JG:** Construction, like building bridges and roads, and [unclear]. Mainly we had a lot of drill, rifle drill and target shooting, and all of that. Actually we even had some pick and shovel work. While there I wondered if I made the right choice about which branch, and I

especially thought of that later on, when I got overseas. I've never known for sure which was the right one. Paratroopers turned out to be most of... spent most of the tour, in the United States and England. They were used in the latter part of the war, just before the war ended. No – for Normandy, dropped on Normandy. That was essentially unsuccessful, a lot of them ended up in German prison camps. Anyway, the die was set and I was in the Engineers. Had three months training there, and then shipped across the country to March Field, that's in Riverside, California. Oh, one thing I recall, President Roosevelt had these so-called Fireside Chats, that was before tv, and he made the statement "We'll never send American troops overseas." That didn't turn out to be the case, but he did say that.

**MR:** Did you receive any other kind of specialized training while out in California?

**JG:** I was trained in surveying in Fort Belvoir, and we did some practices out at March Field. Am I giving too much detail?

**MR:** No, no.

**JG:** When the war broke out, they sent us up the coast of California, San Francisco, and we went to Angel's Island, it's a beautiful island in the bay of San Francisco. Not too far away is Alcatraz, where Al Capone was imprisoned. We had a couple days off to see the city's sights in San Francisco. It wasn't long before they loaded us on a ship, the President Coolidge. It was used for the tourist trade in peacetime. But it was all stocked up with all the delicacies and wonderful things to eat for the tourists. But they put us on it. Anyway, I was on the promenade deck of the ship and it was boarded off along the railing so we could actually be in an enclosed area, where it would normally be an open area for the tourists. Almost immediately, I was sick, tremendously seasick, terribly seasick. A lot of the men seemed to like the voyage, it didn't affect them at all, and that was fine for them because they'd go down to the dining room and come back bragging about all the wonderful food

they'd had to eat. But not for me! I was seasick for practically the whole voyage, twenty-some days on the ship.

**MR:** Were you in a convoy?

**JG:** Oh yes, there was another big ocean liner, I believe it was called the Mariposa. And so those two troop ships, and we were escorted by an American cruiser, and we took off to where we didn't know. And we saw people waving when we went under the bridge there. I never thought I'd be gone that many years, three-and-a-half years.

So, we got to sea, and they would zigzag to prevent the Japanese submarines from shooting at us, torpedoing us. We had no trouble that way going over. Now, I don't know where we were intended to go, but I think it was to reinforce Corregidor in the Philippines, I think that was the story. But as you probably know, they never told the ordinary soldiers where they were going. We never knew. We got over there, and they changed course, apparently, and we got to the time when they said we were crossing the International Date Line, so we lost a day, skipped a day there. So we went on and on, and pretty soon they told us we were crossing the Equator, and they had, a farrago went on, a tradition. We were told we were members of King Neptune's polliwogs. But we kept going and going, and sailing, and we had no idea where we were going. I guess the American High Command was changing its view as the Japanese progressed down into the Philippines and Indonesia, so I think they kept changing our destination.

As a consequence, it started getting chilly on board, and we were going down into the Southern Hemisphere and it was getting progressively colder for us. Well after a time we ended up on the southeast coast of Australia in Melbourne. We came into the harbor there, and I was sure glad to get to shore!

Then they had us go to — it must have been out in the country a ways — I think the building was a school... But anyway they had us stay there. As we were marching out, all the Australian civilians were

waving, and were very, very friendly. In fact we had one day off and went down on the beach, being summer there, why everyone was down on the beach enjoying themselves, and we talked to all the girls and the people, and they said thanks for coming to help us fight the war.

But we didn't have long to spend there. They soon put us on a train headed westward along the south coast of Australia, eventually to Adelaide. That was a nice city, but we had no chance to enjoy it. They transferred us from the regular train to a little old-fashioned train. On the locomotive it said [it was] built in 1898, and it had these traditional European cars with the side doors you go in. So we were packed in those coaches and started heading north, right toward the center of Australia. As we were going along, things got warmer and hotter, and the vegetation became more scarce. Anyway, we ended up in Alice Springs; now that's just about the dead center of Australia. Of course, Australia's about the size of the United States. Most of Australia is one vast, inhospitable desert. They had us stop off there, and the Australians had old barns set up with picnic benches, and they gave us Australian food there. We didn't stay there very long. One thing that I thought was important that I remember about Alice Springs, you might say it was probably what Tombstone, Arizona looked like in the 1800s; nothing there. One thing, just a few miles from Alice Springs was this large natural formation, solid rock, red colored, and it was sacred to the aborigines. We didn't go over to it, but we could see it in the distance.

Soon after that, a number of days after that, they loaded us on Australian trucks, the Australians called them lorries. Actually, that was the end of the railroad, coming from the south to Alice Springs. So we were loaded on these lorries and we went hundreds of miles, headed north right toward Darwin, which was right on the northern coast of Australia, in the Northern Territory. After many, many miles, we came in contact with the terminal for a railroad that had been built from Darwin a hundred or so miles south into the desert. Originally built by Chinese immigrants, and they built the railroad. They loaded us on that railroad, heading up to Darwin. I was a

pretty lucky guy, I got a pretty good cushioned seat with another guy. So this was pretty good and of course it was very, very hot, 120 degrees, with the sun right out there. One advantage was, being there rather than some of the men that were in the coaches, we could look around and see wild horses going across, and all kinds of wild life, kangaroos, wild cattle, so this was interesting.

As we headed north the climate changed quite a bit, and the territory became more hilly and the train was going around the curves, and seemed to be slowing up. Then we got to a point where the train was having a tough time getting up the hill. It was a wood-burning locomotive, and this time of year it was the dry season. Eleven months was dry season, and one month, monsoons. So there was all this [unclear] grass, high grass about 6 or 8 feet tall, and it started catching fire as the sparks from the locomotive came off. Anyway, we kept going, and we got to a point where we came to a hill and the little train couldn't make the hill, the wheels started spinning, sparks were coming off.... So they had us get off the train. I guess they figured that maybe the train could get up the hill better by lightening the load. So we got off, and the train still couldn't make it. So a guy from Kentucky, I don't remember his name, he was joking that next thing you know, they'll have the troops push the train. Well, that might have been possible, but they didn't try it. The guy from the railroad come back and he uncoupled the back cars, the ones the officers were in at the tail end of the train, and he had us loaded us back onto our part of the train. We got up the hill ok, and went quite a few miles, and at a switchover point, they stopped us and said they had to go back and pick up the officers and bring them up, which they did.

About this time, General MacArthur was leaving the Philippines; he left General Wainwright in charge. He came in a PT boat, and he even brought his wife and son, and he wanted to get back to Australia. And he did, he made it back to Australia. It seems, I guess, that the Japanese must have been tipped off that he was leaving and that he was on his way. So what they did, they sent the planes that had destroyed all the ships at Pearl Harbor, the complete Japanese air

force, the most skilled pilots, and they sent them and they attacked Darwin. They figured maybe they could catch MacArthur at Darwin. Well, MacArthur was somewhat ahead of them. He had just got to Darwin, and he'd landed in a field called Batchelor Field, I believe was the name of it, which was down the railroad tracks a number of miles from Darwin. So they come over and they bombed the field—actually it was nothing but a grass strip, there wasn't much to it, and they did very little damage. I think they killed an aborigine family, a man and his wife and kids happened to be there. But MacArthur had slipped out and got south and went to Melbourne, Australia, way down in the south where we had landed. He was kind of upset, I understand. He thought he was going to have a big army there to return to the Philippines. He was a little upset when he heard that about the only troops he had was our Engineering Battalion and some Australian infantry at Darwin.

If we had been a few days ahead of schedule to go on a freighter, Portmar -- some of this I've read afterwards, what the strategy was, so I'd have a perspective as to why we were anywhere. Which we didn't know why. At any rate, they had us scheduled to get on the Portmar and go to Timor, an island north of there, and build an airbase. Luckily we didn't get on the ship when all these Japanese planes come over. They kind of wiped Darwin out. People that had seen it said they systematically took their time and they came in from the south, the desert, and practically destroyed all of Darwin except the Portmar. Now this information I learned afterward when I read a history of the Pacific war. People got very friendly with a Japanese admiral up at the Imperial command. They claimed they intended not to bomb the Portmar; they were going to wait till it got out into the harbor, and then sink it in the harbor to obstruct the harbor from being used. Luckily, that didn't happen because the ports bureau was trying to get us anchored so we could get headed out there. But it hit on a reef and sank. I don't think we lost any people on that.

Anyway, what they did with us, they pulled us back from Darwin to a place called Katherine, about halfway down the railroad track to the terminus in the desert. They gave us instructions to build an

airbase there. I was in an advance party to go out and scout around out in the desert. We'd go out in a GMC truck, and there were no roads, and it was kind of rough going. We were plotting, looking for an airbase. We found where we were going to build the airbase and got working on some preliminary work on it. And they come out from headquarters in Darwin to bring us food and water so we could eat.

One time, this Captain Ellison, he was in charge--he worked on that levee on the Mississippi--one day he sent us out there to scout around and all, and our GMC truck broke down, with a [unclear] hole underneath it, and [unclear] sheared off, and the truck was undriveable. So there was a sergeant in the group, he told me to go back to headquarters in Katherine and notify them what happened and to bring a truck out and pick up our truck and also pick up the men. From what they could figure, it was only about ten miles in a straight line from the headquarters, where I was going. So I started out, pretty confident, and I think they were confident that I would make it too. It was like ten miles. Well I got out there in that tremendous heat, about 120 degrees, and I was soon getting discouraged and worried because I couldn't go in a straight line, as I should be going to get to Katherine. I couldn't because there were these big outcroppings and I had to veer around them. I soon realized that in so doing, I was losing my absolute position, and each error was magnified by me going around all these things. Anyway, to make this a little shorter, I ran out of my water, I used my water up. I had a can of beans -- no, I'm not sure about that. The night come and I decided I'd have to stay overnight on the desert, and it gets very cold at night in the desert, although it's very hot in the daytime because of the fact that the radiation goes almost up into outer space. So it got very cold, and I was there without a blanket. I wanted to go to sleep, but I was too worried, I was really scared at this point. In fact, I did start walking but thought this is a mistake, I couldn't see where I was going. I couldn't sleep; I was actually terrified. When the morning came, I started out again. It was terrible. I was out of water, and I got to the point when I didn't know if I was going to make it. Somewhere when I had about given up, I



saw tracks where trucks or cars had gone, and I couldn't believe it. I felt encouraged by this, so I started up in one direction, and I couldn't see if it was leading more east or west. I don't know to this day why I decided... maybe I wasn't thinking rationally... I thought I was going the wrong way so I turned around and went back. It probably wasn't wise, but it wouldn't have made any difference anyway. But I came to a point when I could hardly see or walk, and I saw a truck with headlights right ahead of me, stopped. I had no idea who was in it and didn't care. I don't think... if it had been Japs I'd have still done the same, they were human beings. And I went up and saw a water bag hanging around one of the headlights. Even though it was in the desert there, it was kind of porous, made of two layers of canvas and a cork stopper at the top. It loses some water, and it sweats but there's enough to allow you to cool off. Anyway, I grabbed that thing and I started gulping it and next thing I know I was sitting in the truck between the driver and another man. I had no idea who it was; they weren't soldiers. And there was another man on the back of the truck. Anyway, they took me to a mine, what was a mine they had set up. They had a corrugated tin building with a place where they could sleep on cots and eat at a picnic table. They gave me some water, and I remember they put me down on a cot, and I don't know how long I slept, an awful long time I slept. When I woke up, amazingly I felt pretty good and they gave me some food. They took me back to my headquarters, and they let me off at my headquarters, which wasn't very far away. I notified the carpool sergeant to send a wrecker out. You know, I never really said anything to the officers, which was kind of stupid of me. But anyway, it was a close call.

**MR:** How long were you in Australia?

**JG:** I think it must have been a couple of months, because we built that airfield we needed and we built a road parallel to the railroad, there was no road before. Anyway one of the things that happened to me there, I was out surveying and I was looking through my transit, and all of a sudden I got very dizzy. What my buddies told me, I fell down and passed out. You know I didn't become conscious

again till I was back at Katherine at a medical section they had set up, and they said I had dengue fever. That's much like malaria fever, at least it's from a mosquito, and the only cure was to take aspirin and lie there until I recovered from that.

One time I was on guard duty and went up into Darwin and saw all the damage the Japanese planes caused. The whole city was evacuated; they were sent back to Brisbane and Collinson [?], and wherever; they were ordered out of there. Anyway I came back after being relieved from guard duty by another relief guard, and I was going back with this guy from Brooklyn, and he says "There's a woman on a side street there." We had this old 20 mm cannon on the back—we had no ammunition—so we went around the block and stopped at this place, and this elderly lady came out, and she had a little black aborigine boy with her. She invited us in and put a lace tablecloth out as if we were just coming for tea which she was serving. We said "How come you didn't leave with the rest of them?" She said, "I left England many years ago with my husband; he died recently. I don't want to leave this home, I want to stay here. I've got this little abo boy to help me." And anyway we sat at the table and surprisingly enough, we felt—and I'm sure she felt that way too—that the Japanese, which would soon land a big force there, and of course we couldn't resist them. Anyway she treated us very nicely and she was very brave about it, and so we talked about other things, and the whole city was still burning some, but we tried to keep that from our minds. We wished her good luck, and she did likewise.

Anyway we left there and soon after that we were loaded onto ships and taken up to Port Moresby. Port Moresby is on the south coast of New Guinea, and at that time that was being threatened by the Japanese, and in fact they had every intention of taking it. We got up there and immediately we started building airbases at Port Moresby. A three mile one we built, and a nine mile was up the coast trail toward [unclear]. Anyway, we were working on that, and we worked day and night. We had bright lights on. We always took the attitude-- surprisingly enough we didn't think so much about

fighting. We had our old Springfield 203s, and sure we had a gun, but mostly we were concentrating on the work. The work was the important thing; they wanted us to construct airfields so that's what we did.

In the meantime, the Japanese had landed a big force at Buna, which is only about 90 miles from our airfield. They start coming over across the Owen Stanleys. MacArthur didn't believe that would be possible, even with the short distance, but the Japanese came up and over the thing. So they sent the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division that fought in Tobruk against the Germans. We saw them go back up on horses and mules, up to meet the Japanese. The Australians get up over the high pass and ran right into the Japanese jungle veterans. There was fierce fighting, but it wasn't long before the Japanese had sneaked through around the back and put a roadblock in and the Japanese kept pushing the Aussies back, no matter what. They came to the point, where--at that time we thought, from what we had heard, that the Japanese were starving to death, they couldn't supply the route. Actually, the Japanese air force, from the Japanese standpoint, they were ordered to stop there. They claimed they saw the lights from our airfield, when we were working on the airfield--and we weren't paying much attention at all to defense--they could have come down and wiped us out, and they could have got a lot of food from us, but they were ordered to stop. At the same time, the Japanese sent down a big armada, with aircraft carriers and all, to take Buna and Port Moresby. They had the date set, May 10, 1942, that they were going to take Port Moresby from us, but they couldn't. The Americans had the code book, and they knew they were coming, and when they got out there, and we lost the biggest aircraft carrier [unclear]. But the battle was pretty much a draw. The Japanese, instead of continuing on to take Moresby, turned around and went back to their main base. So we had a close one on that.

**WC:** So your job, basically, was to build airfields?

**JG:** Yes.

**WC:** What unit were you with?

**JG:** 808 Aviation Engineers. That was our job. Of course, we would also be required to defend the airfields. But mainly... we didn't even set up defense perimeters – we didn't even think of that. As time went on--it was sort of dangerous--we'd set up and almost ignore the fact that the Japs were coming there, and could come in and... We just concentrated on our work.

**WC:** What kind of equipment did you use?

**JG:** Oh, we had good equipment. We had DA caterpillar tractors, we had rock crushers, we had other GM trucks. We were pretty well equipped, our outfit.

**WC:** What was the process when you started an airstrip? How did you construct one? Could you go through the steps and explain the process?

**JG:** What we'd do in the jungle areas, there were these huge trees. Some of them were teakwood, mahogany – beautiful for lumber. We'd go to work, and in some cases we'd make kind of like a bracelet around it with nitrous starch, which is similar to dynamite, and blast them down, then we'd blast out the roots. The bulldozers were really the secret weapon where we had the advantage over the Japanese. The Japanese knew it too. So we'd lay out the field, usually a 5000 foot strip, and, almost parallel, one for bombers and one for fighters. Then we'd have all these revetments and little turnoffs where they could protect the planes from direct bomb hits. These airfields were very much needed according to the American--MacArthur's--command, because the Japanese didn't have all this equipment. That was something they were short of, was the equipment to do this.

Then there came a time after we'd been there a year or more at these airfields at Port Moresby, that the Japanese would come over from Lae and they would shoot down all the American planes. Americans had these P40s, and they were completely outmoded by the Japanese

Zeros, and they had some of the top aces, and they'd come and clean the whole field out. I think it got to a point when the Americans wanted planes they didn't have to keep on the ground, out of the way, and tried to hide them because they would almost certainly be shot at. One time, the Japs shot down all the planes, and then these Japanese Zeros come across our field, three of them, not altering their positioning, and come across our field and as one unit, they'd flip right over our airfield – in fact they'd touch the ground – and then shot up and went away, just thumbing their nose at the Americans – this is the way we do it, the Japanese Air Force. Later I read where the man who led those attacks – he turned out to be a top ace in their air force, he was nearly court martialed by their command over there in Lae. They said you're jeopardizing your planes and your men, but because of his good record he didn't get court martialed.

Anyway, after this, I guess we must have been up there in Port Moresby... I can't remember which airfield... and they sent us back down to Brisbane, Australia and then Sydney. So there we had a spell when we did some drilling and had a chance to go in the city. Then MacArthur decided he's going to start a counteroffensive and go up and capture Buna and Lae on the north coast. So they loaded our battalion on this old, decrepit freighter. It was a Dutch ship that was used in the peacetime in the Harlem trading, led by a Dutch captain and a Javanese – not Japanese, Javanese – crew. And we started off. But it was horrible! This is something I'd like to point out, because in addition to all the shooting and the planes and the war part of it, and we experienced bombing and all, I think this is something the American people ought to know, that this was absolutely horrible. If we had been on a Japanese prison ship, I don't think we'd been treated much worse. There was something like 700 of us, put in this ship that was never intended for troops. It was an old freighter. In Sydney (or Brisbane), the carpenters built, essentially, a floor halfway down in the hold. And half the troops – unfortunately for me, I was in the lower hold. Anyway, we used to have to go down a hatchway vertically down in the hold. There must have been 700 men. A couple of our troops came on the ship with a lot of our heavy equipment, so they couldn't go down there. But I

think there must have been about 700 men on that troop ship. They put us down in that hold. There was nothing but a couple of lanterns down there. You can imagine being almost on the equator, for all those men to be packed in there with no air, you would be gasping. It was horrible, unbelievable! I was so seasick, I just lay on the floor. It was horrible. You can't imagine it. Before then it was like Americans live now, with sanitary things, and we were used to that—down there we couldn't wash our hands, your uniform was all covered with feces and vomit. To get up on deck, you had to go up the vertical ladders with all those rungs. It was unbelievable for people that had experienced the life we had come from. Of course they had no toilets down there, the only thing they had in that regard, the carpenters built a platform up over the starboard side, with steps going up, and they had, like, the old [unclear], but mostly you couldn't even make it up there, you had to get permission to go up there.

**MR:** How long were you on this ship?

**JG:** A number of days, how many days I don't know. The idea was, they wouldn't let us up on deck in daytime, because they didn't want to tip off Japanese observation planes that it was a troop ship. So they made us stay down below there.... To answer that, I think maybe as much as seven days---that's just a rough guess. But we went up along the coast there, we had no escort. The American Navy didn't want to go in those waters there, it was very rocky and uncharted, and the Japanese Navy was really concentrating on the mid-Pacific. They had disagreements with MacArthur, between him and Nimitz. Anyway, we had no escort. They took us up there and unloaded us at Oro Bay, just south of there, about eleven miles. On this flat plain, and that's where we built this huge airbase called Dobadura, We were over there quite a while, built lots of airstrips. It was surprising... the Japanese were dug in there, at Lae. They'd come over and they knew we were there, and once in a while they'd shoot at somebody on the bulldozer, but mostly, the surprising thing is that they could have come down there. There was something like 10,000 Japanese troops dug in right there at [unclear]. They could

have come down and wiped us out, but they didn't do it. I didn't learn until afterwards that the Japanese would let us build an airbase – we had the equipment – and then they were going to come in and take it. Well actually, as it turned out, that's exactly what they tried to do. They sent a huge armada come down from Rabaul, a lot of warships and troop transports, all these Japanese troops, with the idea of taking over that base at Dobadura. Well, luckily at that time General Kenny, he was in charge of the American Air Force, he thought of this new idea: instead of bombing from up high, which they'd miss a lot, he called it skip bombing. He'd have his planes come in at a low level and drop their bombs and take off. And this worked so well. A lot of these Japanese troop ships, a lot of warships, complete disaster from the Japanese standpoint. They were scheduled to take our base away from us, so it was a disaster from their standpoint. That was wonderful.

After that, we started getting a lot of P38s, better planes, fighter planes, and the Americans could stand up against the Japanese better in that respect. Americans were gaining superiority up the coast, so that was good. After that, after we built our airbases there, they noticed that ships out in the harbor, they took us out on an LST. Just before we took off in the harbor, the Japanese had been tipped off that we were there. So in consequence, they sent quite a few planes, about 58 planes, with bombers and all, to try and destroy our ships, and prevent us from going out of the base. There again, there was a lot of war things, there was shooting, but we didn't get hit.

The next place was Finschhafen, that's a considerable way up the coast. There they attached us to the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division – that's the veterans from Tobruk and North African fighting. They're a cocky bunch, they... were nothing but schoolboys. Which wasn't far from the truth, we weren't that well trained. But nevertheless, they went in there attacking the Japanese, and we could hear the guns and they had some artillery. But we went ahead and finished the airfield there and from there we jumped up to Saidor, on the north coast again, as we established air superiority by the airfields we built. At Saidor, Americans dropped parachute troops there and took that

pretty easily, and we went to work and built an airbase there. That was better, it was kind of out of the jungle, a more open space, a nice, fresh river going through there and we could wash our clothes. So that was not a bad place compared to the jungle, where we had jungle rot and malaria and all those things all the time. American officers had to make us take this Atabrine – in the beginning it was quinine, and later on it was called Atabrine. Turned your skin yellow. They had to see our men swallow this pill, because someone, apparently, wanted to get out of the combat areas and go back to Australia.

Things started going like, it seemed like we were making more progress. MacArthur decided that fighting things out like we did at Buna was a mistake; actually the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division did that, fighting at Buna, and was practically wiped out. MacArthur kept urging them, telling them they weren't progressing fast enough. He didn't really have an inkling of how tough things were. In fact, he had the general up there dismissed, and he appointed General Eichelberger to go up there and dismiss any officers and anyone he wanted because we want some progress fast. He told this General Eichelberger "you go up there and take Buna and take it fast, or don't come back. Tell your troops that." We were up against all these fortifications dug in. Anyway, he had no idea how tough it was. After that, apparently he learned his lesson, and from then on we used this bypass policy, where he'd bypass some of these things. We went up the coast and came to the island of Biak. That's in the Dutch East Indies. We landed at Biak. That was a lot easier. American troops took Biak mostly. There were a couple airfields the Japanese had abandoned there. Our task was to rebuild these airfields in a fast way and begin to push our airpower closer to the Philippines.

It seemed that was a pretty easy sort of thing, but one thing happened there. Intelligence didn't have it figured out right, and they thought all the resistance had ceased and there was hardly any Japs there. But actually they were all down in the caves, these limestone caves, they had the size of rooms down there. The Japanese officers would set up a command there, and their troops would come



out at night and sometimes ambush for food and water. One time, one moonlit night, because of the coral, everything reflected off, and it was almost as easy to see as daylight. To show how desperate the Japanese were, when they got short of water--and I can appreciate that from my running out of water--one time they come out, about ten of them. They come over and we had this tank around a little trailer with faucets around the sides where we could fill our canteens. It seems they come out with the idea that they were going to get the water from that canteen. One of them was fooling with the hitch, it was hitched there to a truck. Showing how desperate a person could be, one of these Japanese, at the time they were trying to get the water, he had his mouth under the faucet with his rifle hand on the ground to get water. Just as sure as anything – they were shooting at him and everything – and he knew as sure as anything he was going to be killed, and he was so desperate he at least wanted to get water; and that's what happened, he got shot and of course he didn't get it.

Eventually we took that. After that, the Japanese High Command decided that Biak was too far advanced, it was threatening them, and so they had the [unclear] plan. They decided to send a whole battle fleet, and they had two of the largest warships ever built, far bigger than anything the Americans or Germans or British had. They had 18-point-some inches guns on them, they were tremendous warships. With those two warships and the big fleet coming from... they got their oil from Borneo. That oil was so pure and clear they could put that right in their ships without refining it. So they started out and they had this plan whereby they were going to... No, I'm ahead of my time...

They decided that we were going to go to the Philippines – at least High Command did, MacArthur wanted to go to the Philippines; Nimitz, he wanted to keep going straight across, and he figured landing on Formosa, maybe landing on Japan, and he kind of looked down on MacArthur and thought this was a useless thing. Anyway, they had a meeting with Roosevelt, MacArthur and Nimitz, in which Roosevelt agreed with MacArthur that we should go back to the Philippines. So this one night, we loaded up our ships at Biak, and

we headed up the coast to a big, huge harbor, Hollandia. We didn't get off the ship, we just stayed there. All the time we could see more and more ships coming in to the harbor at Hollandia, a tremendous number of ships. And then one day, all the ships started pulling up anchor, ours did, and we started heading out. Nobody knew where we were going again, but I had a compass that I had rescued from a Japanese bomber that got shot down. I had this compass and I decided we were going to the Philippines. Well I was right in one respect, but I didn't pick the right island. I thought we were going to Mindinao, the southernmost, biggest island, but we didn't go there. They picked Leyte; that's where we were going. At any rate, President Roosevelt ordered Nimitz to cooperate, for once, with MacArthur, and there were 150,000 of us that were going to make a landing there. So at the back of that, was the entire American fleet that had been built up over the years. They had all these aircraft carriers, and they were to back us up as we landed.

On October 20, 1944, we entered the harbor there at Leyte. They woke us up early in the morning, it was still dark, and they said we're going through heavily mined waters, prepare to land on hostile shores. So we went into the harbor, and in there, we saw the American fleet, some of the resurrected ships, like the Pennsylvania, bombarding the shore, actually a tremendous bombardment. The Japanese saw this tremendous fleet there, this American fleet, so they got out of there. They abandoned the shoreline and went over to Ormoc, on the other side.

Anyway, we made a landing, and we had no real opposition. We went in and immediately started building an airfield at Clover [?]. We were working on that, and two days after that, the Japanese had decided this plan whereby they were going to come into Leyte Gulf and destroy our outfit that landed. Destroy all the ships in the harbor, the supply ships, all the ships in the harbor, and knock us out of the beachhead. So the ships came up there, and Halsey saw this fleet coming in the Sibuyan sea, and they sunk a number of ships, and they hit one of these huge Japanese battleships. The Japanese claimed that battleship was unsinkable; it took 19 torpedo hits, a

tremendous number of bomb blasts and it still didn't sink. The Japanese captain decided to ground it, send it aground, but before that, he decided he had to, with all these American planes attacking, they had huge cannons on the ship, 18inch cannons, he lowered them down so that and as planes came in, he thought he'd shoot at them, in a sense like buckshot. It didn't turn out as he thought, because it ruined the rifling. But he tried, and the Japanese lost a huge number of men there.

He started going up toward San Bernardino strait, and that way they would come down and drive us out of Leyte Gulf. He told his men "It's a shame that we should lose our empire and still keep our fleet intact. We're going ahead anyway." And he did. Now they had a plan whereby Nimitz was supposed to be protecting [unclear] Straits in case the Japanese did go through there. The Japanese used a decoy method. They used four aircraft carriers they were willing to sacrifice, coming from Japan; they figured that would lure Nimitz and he'd pull away from defending us on the beachhead. It worked. He went up there chasing them. As a consequence, the day before when Nimitz's planes had seen this fleet turn around as if they're going back, and he turned around. But during the night they came back, came through the San Bernardino straits – and this is where it affected us. We were on the airfield, building the airfield, and all of a sudden we saw this American fighter plane come over as if it's going to land, and we were waving him off. The guy landed anyway – we had great big piles of gravel and everything on the runway – he couldn't possibly land, you would think. Somehow, through skill or luck he lands and he gets out of his plane and says the whole Japanese battle fleet is about ten miles off the coast, and they're heading straight for here. "Where's Admiral Nimitz?" "We don't know." And Nimitz was out chasing these Japanese decoy ships.

Right in the midst of it, they sent a telegram to Nimitz asking "Where is Task Force 58? (that was his task force) The whole world wants to know." It was right out in English – it wasn't meant to be that way. But they claimed Halsey was so mad, he threw his cap on the floor. At any rate, [the pilot who landed] said, "Do you have any bombs?"

I'm going to take off and see what I can do." Of course, that was beyond any possibility. The Japanese escaped and came back. They never really used those four ships, and after that they got back down to Borneo.

We built the airbase, and we fixed the airbase at Tacloban. We got hit in a hurricane—a typhoon they call it there. It was right on top of us. We were too tired and went to sleep. Everything went a lot easier then. They put up tents and gave us food. This was getting into 1945.

**WC:** So you were in the Philippines the remainder of your time?

**JG:** Yes.

**WC:** What things did you do there, yourself, with your unit?

**JG:** At that time, I was in the mechanical part of it, working on trucks, and I didn't like it. I made a lot of mistakes. Actually, I always considered that the officers were the ones that were not on my side, I was just one of the soldiers—a wrong attitude, I'm sure—

**MR:** That's an attitude all GIs had, I think.

**JG:** I think so. So I got nowhere much. I only got to be a T5, and I think that was part of it. Afterwards, at the GE R&D Center, I worked with PhDs, who highly appreciated what I did. I never went back and got a college education, but they considered my work very useful. They hated to see me retire when I did.

Anyway, the rest of the time in the Philippines... It came to the point when Hitler was pretty well defeated, and at that point, and the Americans became more liberal about sending people back, and I was slated to go back, luckily. So I was loaded on a ship and on my way back to the United States, so I got on there, and they had these tiers of bunks, and I was up on the upper one. Gee, I went through all these years, from those narrow railroad cars to a steel deck.... So I

got back to San Francisco, and I come into there about April. It should have been pretty warm, but I was shivering on deck there because I was not acclimated to that climate. Then loaded on a train and sent back to Fort Dix. I was discharged from Fort Dix and from there I went back to civilian life. In some respects, I was very disappointed, although...

Actually, before I went to the war, I was going with a girl who was going to Albany State, and she ended up, during the war, she got a PhD from Columbia University. She invited me down; she told my sisters she thought I was going to marry her. And to tell you the truth, because of the life I'd lived in the jungle, I felt so inadequate, that I broke up with her. I guess that was a mistake. Then I met another girl that I'm now married to, Lorena. Actually, life hasn't been particularly good to me since then, and it was somewhat disappointing. But I won't go into that.

**WC:** So you said you never used the GI Bill at all?

**JG:** No, never did. At the time they gave the option; they said I could have got the GI Bill and finished college. I was on the Dean's List at Clarkson before I went in, and I should have but I didn't. I built my own house when I first got back, all by myself, thought I didn't really have skill at that. I guess I made a lot of mistakes, looking back at it. That's the way it is.

**WC:** Did you ever use that 52-20 Club?

**JG:** 52-20? Is that where they--?

**WC:** It was like unemployment; when you got back, you could get \$20 a week for 52 weeks.

**JG:** I never did, and I'll tell you the story. My father, he was cutting the hedge when I came back there. (And I saw my brother who went from 9 to 13, so I wouldn't have recognized him if he hadn't been with my mother at the Schenectady station.) Anyway, I got back

there and my father never asked me what I did in the war, never asked me anything about it. He said "Dick Charles (no, not Charles, his name was Darden [?] He's the fellow I worked for, the manager.) Darden wants you to come down there to GE; he's got so many women working for him, they go in the women's room and they plot against him." He wanted a man there. My father said, "So you go down to GE." So, without taking a rest, which I certainly needed and was entitled to, I went right down to work for the GE. And almost within 9 months, the GE union went on strike. I was on hourly, punching a clock, so I was out with the union, without any pay. I could have benefited from that 52-20 program. I went right there, and my manager in GE told me, "Come on, try to get in if you can." And I was so used to the Army life.... I'd go out at night. As a consequence, they cooked up a scheme whereby we went through the back way and got cars and they took us home.

**WC:** Did you join any veterans' organizations?

**JG:** Never did. I guess I felt I'd had enough of war, and I wanted nothing much to do with it.

**WC:** Did you stay in contact with anyone who served with you?

**JG:** You know, that's a funny thing. When I was in Sydney, the man who rescued me, at the mine, said "If you ever get to Sydney, look me up." I never did do that, but I got there and I looked up a relative of mine. My mother was born in England, she was English, and my father, the paternal side, was Norwegian and Danish. But visited these people at Botany Bay, a beautiful place, and they said the daughter worked over in the main part of the city and they said "Go see her." Well, the conditions at the time weren't such that we had the time to do it.

What was the question again?

**WC:** Just if you had ever stayed in contact with anyone —

**JG:** Oh, yes! One of my buddies, Max Storley [?], was a good friend from Kentucky. I got cards from him a couple times after that; he was living in New York City. Before that, he was raised in a place in Kentucky, the same town... At one time I tried to. My eldest daughter had a computer, and she looked up some people. One of them was Fosdick [?] – we knew everybody by their last name. There were a number of Fosdicks in Wisconsin, where he came from. It seems the ones by this name were either sons or grandsons of the man I knew in the service, so I didn't get anywhere. I finally gave up. I got to where, maybe if I looked them up they'd be dead now, which they probably would be, most of my contemporaries. I guess they figure that 1300 more World War veterans are gone each day. And that's what I thought when I saw these memoirs, and that's why I mentioned to your author that time is less. My health is pretty bad now, but I figured I better get this done if I ever do.

**MR to WC:** You didn't ask him where he was when they dropped the bombs?

**WC:** Ok. Where were you when the atomic bombs were dropped, do you remember?

**JG:** Oh yes. When I was on the ship going back they notified us that FDR had died. No, I guess I was actually back home when they went over and bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**MR:** What was the reaction on the ship when they told you about FDR?

**JG:** I don't know. I don't recall anybody talking about it. That brings up a point, though. In the service all these things that happened to us, you would think that between us, the men would talk about the things that happened. Just as soon as something happened, we forgot. It wasn't until I got back and recalled this, by writing this, that mostly we didn't talk about it. And this brings up another point, that a lot of times-now I had a good friend, Hanken [?]. He was from New York City, a Jewish boy. I went in the city with

him. And he rode a bike through Europe, and would stop off at hostels – anyway, a good friend. He had a sense of humor, and we'd pretend. Sometimes he'd say something like, "Oh, Mr. Geertsen, how are you today? You seem to be tanning your back?" Trying to ignore the reality that we were in the jungle. They told us that all the men in the military were going to have turkey for Thanksgiving, but we still had our canned beans. So we heard that, and maybe all over the world, maybe in Europe, they got their turkey or better food. We got terrible food, though, always the same thing. He'd say, "Oh Mr. Geertsen, how was your turkey today?" "Oh, fine." You see, it was kind of a denial. We wanted to think of things that could be pleasant. As a consequence, we were ignoring the reality of it. And I think that was a help that we were able to have humor, and that was the way he was. I just thought I'd mention that.

**WC:** Ok, well, thank you very much for your interview.