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Interviewer

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Q: Tell me about your early life before the army, where were you born and where did you grow up?

RG: I was born in the Bronx. 10 years I lived in the Bronx, then we moved to Long Island, and from there we moved to Mountain Lodge Park, and from there we moved to Dutchess County. My family had a farm while I was still in the service. I'd come out and join them on the farm which I wasn't too tickled with.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

RG: I went to Xavier for two years and then I went to a high school in Brooklyn.

Q: What did you study there?

RG: General subjects.

Q: Was it while you were in high school that you first heard about the war starting and Pearl Harbor?

RG: I was in high school when the war broke out and we were scheduled to go to the Air Corps and we never got there. Somebody decided that they needed us in the infantry. So I ended up in the Dixie Division.

Q: Do you remember where you were when you first heard about Pearl Harbor?

RG: I was in the kitchen in Long Island, I heard about it and I told my mother about it and she didn't even know where it was. Most people didn't.

Q: What were you thinking when you first heard about it?

RG: I wasn't thinking too much about war, that's for sure. But when it broke out, hey, I went. I was afraid I wasn't going to get drafted.

Q: So you were due to go to the Air Corps but then it got changed to the infantry, and the first place you reported for duty was Camp Upton, Long Island?

RG: That's right.

Q: What was Camp Upton like?

RG: It was just a gathering of civilians put in the uniform. They'd look sloppy, none of them fit. So we ended up being trained out of there to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. That's where I got my basic training. From there we went to the Navy station in Norfolk. We were stationed outside there, and from there we went overseas, we went to Camp Pickett.

Q: Did you know where you were going when you went overseas?

RG: No, not really. We knew when we went down through the canal that we were heading for the Pacific. But, whereabouts in the Pacific, we didn't know.

Q: Was there any rumors or scuttlebutt?

RG: Oh there's all kinds of stuff that floats around but you couldn't believe any of it. At least I didn't. Then we got close to New Guinea, then we knew where we were going, they told us. They told us where we were going to land and stuff.

Q: What did you think about going to New Guinea when you found it was going to be New Guinea?

RG: Well, I didn't like it. It was not the best place in the world to go. We had to put up with it. We weren't there very long before we got into a firefight. Took us right into it, put us right into combat.

Q: Where was that?

RG: That was Aitape, A-I-T-A-P-E.

Q: What unit were you with, was that when you were with the 124th Infantry?

RG: We were originally the 154th but we had no combat experience so they changed us to the 124th which had experience.

Q: So take me through it when you first got to New Guinea, what happened when you first got there?

RG: When we first got there we landed on Lae. Then we landed on Finschhafen. Then we went into Aitape. That's where we really got our baptism of fire.

Q: Could you tell me about that?

RG: Well, there were a lot of Japs there, that's all I can say. We fought them every which way.

Q: Were you a rifleman or were you a BAR man?

RG: I was originally rifle, they broke out the M1's. I shot sharpshooter with that. Then they said they wanted me to carry a BAR. That was my orders, I carried it. I [unclear] with the BAR.

Q: The guys you were with, were they the same guys you had been in Camp Shelby with?

RG: Yeah .

Q: What did you feel about them?

RG: I liked them, they were good buddies. It was tough to lose some of them. Lost nearly all of them before I came back.

Q: When you first went into combat, what were you thinking?

RG: I didn't think much of anything. I didn't think about living or dying or anything like that. I just took it one day at a time.

Q: What was it like? Were you in the jungles?

RG: Yeah, we went through some pretty rough jungles, New Guineas got them.

Q: That must have made life difficult for you in addition to fighting, just living in the jungle must have been very hard.

RG: It was. Really sloppy living. I can't remember some of the days that I was completely dry, everything was soaking wet, muddy. It was a mess.

Q: How was it for food and supply?

RG: Food was terrible. C-rations, K-rations.

Q: How long would you have to go on C-rations?

RG: One month at a time. We weren't fighting all that time, but you'd go until you ran into a firefight, and if you survived that you went on to the next bout with them. Had some pretty rough times through that, my lieutenant got killed. He was a nice guy, he came from New Mexico. We shipped out of there after a few months of fighting in New Guinea to Morotai. We were there for six months but that was nothing compared to what we were headed for in the Philippines.

Q: What did you learn about fighting the Japanese while you were in New Guinea?

RG: They were sneaky, you couldn't trust them.

Q: Was it anything you had been trained at Camp Shelby?

RG: We were trained by some of them who had already been in combat. They knew how the Japs operated. Some of them were in Guadalcanal, places like that. They ended up training us. We pretty much knew what to expect from the Japs. They didn't fool us either, we came through it pretty good.

Q: What was it like actually being in a jungle? Must've been very hard to see, how did you know where they were and where you were?

RG: Well I used to listen to the birds and the local animals and stuff. If you couldn't hear them, I fear the Japs were around. They got there before us though. I figured, hey, there's something here that we shouldn't know about and most of the time I was right.

Q: When you got into an engagement with them, how would it normally go? What would an engagement be like?

RG: Well, were you ever shot at? Then you would know.

Q: But I have never been shot at in the jungle and the thing that comes to my mind is how do you know where the shots are coming from? Must be very hard to tell.

RG: You can't tell really. They're all around you so you really don't know where they're coming from. I got hit from behind, right through the arm.

Q: Did you turn to your squad leaders or your platoon sergeants, who actually kind of took charge in a situation like that?

RG: My sergeant and I were the only two left in the squad, we outlasted the rest of the squad. We both got hit the same day, about the same time. Got hit in what they call Colgan Woods. Colgan was a priest and he was a brave one. Boy, he had guts.

Q: Tell me about him.

RG: He used to call me when he wanted to go up to the platoon headquarters or something, he'd call for me to escort him up there with the BAR. So I felt pretty good, every time I got him, I got him up there safely. And the one day I wasn't with him, he got killed.

Q: Do you remember anything else about him?

RG: He was an ordinary man, went along with the men, just let them do what they wanted to do.

Q: Kind of relaxed because of the situation you were in?

RG: He was a very relaxing influence on them, they hated to see him get killed.

Q: Was that on Mindanao?

RG: That was in the Philippines, Mindanao, yeah.

Q: Tell me about Mindanao, where did you first come ashore?

RG: We came ashore, I forget that river, it was a river we came up and came ashore in about the middle part of the Philippines, of Mindanao. They were walking us down, it seemed like we were walking forever, we were headed for the Davao Penal Colony, we didn't know it at the time. I never got to it, I got wounded before that. Had some pretty rough firefights and an awful lot of Japs there. Not only that, we had to fight the Moros, they didn't have much use for American soldiers. We took them both on.

Q: This was when you were hit?

RG: Yeah, I got hit in what they call Colgan Woods.

Q: You had been in combat about 18 months when you were hit, how were you feeling at that point?

RG: I didn't think anything about getting hit until maybe a split second before I got hit. I said 'Geez I could get hit here' and bam, I got hit. Up until then I never even thought about it.

Q: What happened after that?

RG: Well I was on the ground for a couple of days, one of the guys patched me up with sulfanilamide powder and bandaged up my wound. Tree branches to hold the arm in place. They wanted to give me blood plasma, and they couldn't get it, so they didn't know anything about it. They tried to give me plasma and they couldn't get that into me. So I had to wait until they got me back to, I guess they call them mass units now, it was a field unit. They cleaned it up and put me in a regular plaster. Then they shipped us out by plane to another spot in the Philippines, and from there they shipped us to Guam, Easter Island, Hawaii, and back to San Francisco. From there we came back to Atlantic City, and that's where I spent 8 months in the hospital, it was a hotel at one time. In fact, it was three hotels. Haddon Hall, Shallfont, and the Traymore. They converted them to hospital units for the men. It was more or less an amputee hospital, there was an awful lot of amputees there. I didn't know whether I was going to lose my arm or not, but I came through it. I still can't use it.

Q: After that you went down to Walter Reed?

RG: No, I went to Fort Dix. Spent about 6 months in Fort Dix in the hospital there. From Fort Dix I was sent to Walter Reed. After I don't know how many operations, and this and that, they finally decided they couldn't do any more for me, so they discharged me.

Q: Then you came back to New York?

RG: Then I came back to the city, they still had the place in Long Island. We moved up from there. I was still in the service when they bought a farm. So for 10 years I was on that farm working out with them. I didn't like it, I was not cut out to be a farmer. But, I put up with it. From there I got married, went to work as a corrections officer in [unclear] hospital. I went to work in [unclear] for 25 years and when I got out I retired from [unclear]. From there on I lived a life of leisure until I ended up with cancer, colon cancer. They pulled me through that. I don't know how many times I've been in and out of the hospital since then, up until the present day.

Q: Looking back now on your experiences, what's the most memorable thing that comes to mind about when you were serving in New Guinea, Morotai, and Mindanao?

RG: I liked the way the men handled themselves. I didn't see too many cowards, most of them were brave men. There were one or two that I wouldn't even talk about. But, Uncle Sam handled them. We went on from one engagement to another and they were all scared, don't think they weren't, that was no pleasant time. Talk about heroes and stuff, I think most of the guys that were heroes, they just fell upon them. Most of them were heroes as far as I'm concerned. They were all dependent on another. I think they were a tighter group in those days, I don't know than they are today. I don't know what the Army is like, I imagine they're a tight group today. But the civilians, they went all over the place.

Q: [Unclear] Southwest Pacific?

RG: Yeah, I was well supported at home, the same when I got wounded, they came and saw me, they wrote to me every other day. They wrote me [unclear] when I was in the service. So I had no problems there.

Q: What did you think about General MacArthur?

RG: I liked him. I thought he was a good man. He knew what he was doing. There were a couple generals I didn't have too much love for.

Q: Who would they be?

RG: One was Eichelberger. I wouldn't call him my best friend. He was tough, he was a good general, I'm not taking that away from him. But I didn't like him. There were a few others that didn't like him either.

Q: What did you think of your own officers?

RG: My own officers were good. I couldn't squawk about any of them, they were all good men. The captain was a graduate from across the river here, West Point. He was the only officer that graduated from West Point. He was good. He got wounded too.

Q: How did you feel about the training, the weapons, and the uniforms you had?

RG: When we first started training we were training with broom handles, that's what's called a rifle. I said 'What's the matter, they get us in the service and don't trust us with rifles?'. It wasn't

long though until we got rifles, not too long after that we got ammunition for them. But the first ammunition we carried was on guard duty, they put us on guard duty, the damn Army prisons. Then we had the training on the range where they fired live ammunition over your head. Things like that, that get you used to it. It got you used to it too. Then we learned how to throw grenades and all that kind of stuff.

Q: How do you feel your weapons stacked up against the Japanese?

RG: Well, at that time the weapons weren't bad. If they were any good, it's because they knew how to handle them. The Japs were pretty good shooters. They had guts, they would stand up and fight you.

Q: You didn't see too many of them surrendering did you?

RG: I didn't see any. They were tough fighters. They stood there and they fought to the end. A lot of cases we gave them the end.

Q: Any special tactics or procedures you had to learn when you were in the jungle or make up on the spot?

RG: You pretty much followed your officers. We had a little jungle training in the states, it wasn't much. But it was enough to carry into the real thing. Hey, if you got good officers, you can get through nearly anything.

Q: How was it you came to be a part of the Dixie Division?

RG: We were headed for the Air Corps, that's what they told me, we were going across the top of the country towards California when somebody decided they needed to fill in the Dixie Division. They needed men, and they sent us down to fill in the division. Which we did, and we did admirably.

Q: Did anyone ever give you a hard time about being a New Yorker?

RG: Oh they all did, that was a rebel [unclear]. Oh boy, oh boy, I think they hated New Yorkers more than any of them anywhere. But we got along, I got along with them.

Q: What was your opinion of them as southerners?

RG: I wasn't too happy with them. Not the way they carried on, I couldn't understand their draw at first, then I got to learn that. Once we got in combat you forgot all of that stuff. All that minor league stuff was just forgotten.

Q: I understand you met some famous people while you were in the hospital.

RG: Oh yeah. I met General Eisenhower. We went to one of his lawn parties, they had a lawn party, he was there. Then you meet these screen idols, Horace McMahon, he was an actor, he had lunch with us. He enjoyed it, I said 'I don't know how you can enjoy this mess', but he did, he said he had worse. Then there was Martha Raye. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, met them in the hospital, they came through the hospital. Helen Gahagan Douglas, the congresswoman. People like that. Oh, I was in the service within the hospital with Joe DiMaggio. He was a quiet man, stayed much to himself.

Q: He was in the hospital too?

RG: Yeah, he was in Atlantic City. He had trouble with his heel. I guess they corrected it so he could get back to his ball playing.

Q: When you look back on it all now, was it worth it?

RG: We saved the country, didn't we? That makes it worth it. I don't take credit myself but put us all together and we did it.

Q: Anything else that stands out in your memory now about when you were in the service? Good times, bad times, funny times?

RG: The bad times I like to forget if I can. Can't always forget them. The day I got wounded, I'll always remember that, it's as clear today as the day I got hit. And I lost some good friends, you don't forget that either.

Q: Any particular friends that come back to mind?

RG: Most of them I met in the service, wasn't anybody I knew in civilian life. I got to know them and we got to like each other. In fact, there was one fellow, he told me months later, he said 'you know when we were on the firing range, I didn't like you', I said 'You know, I didn't like you either'. Then we became the best of friends.

Q: Was there something closer about the friendships you made in the service?

RG: I think so. Well this fellow I met on the range, he got killed from our own mortar fire, short round. You really feel bad about that. Other than that I can't think of anything that's different from ordinary friendships.

Q: Any particular humorous things that happened to you in the service that you remember?

RG: They were always playing practical jokes and stuff, some of them. You take it. The only thing I didn't like was if they gave you a hot foot. That's where they light a match and stick it in your shoe. That wasn't funny.

Q: When you got off the front line, what did you do to relax?

RG: We were stationed in paraminal tents. There was no place you could go, just go swimming maybe. New Guinea you had to worry about sharks. We used to watch the sea, if there was any porpoise around, if you could see them break water, you knew the sharks weren't there. So you go and swim a little bit, didn't go too far from the land.

Q: Anything else you'd like to bring up that we maybe didn't discuss?

RG: I can't think of anything right now, 6 months from now I'll probably think about it.