

What is your full name and when were you born?

Mr. Coffman: Joseph Thomas Coffman, May 12, 1920.

Where were you born?

Mr. Coffman: Henderson County, Tennessee, at a little place called Wildersville; out in the country from Wildersville. It was a rural route.

Is this where you grew up?

Mr. Coffman: I grew up really in Carol County. My dad got killed in a car wreck when I was 12 years old. There were six kids in the family. We moved to west Tennessee to be with our grandparents or close by and that is where I grew up. I went to school at ____ High. I went to school in a one room school at Cedar Grove up to the 8th grade and then rode the school bus up to a town called _____ where I went to high school.

What did your parents do for a living?

Mr. Coffman: Farmer.

Just farmers? What kind of crops did they raise?

Mr. Coffman: Cropped corn and hay.

Did you like living on a farm?

Mr. Coffman: I loved it. It was the best year of my life even when I was operating a farm after I got out of the Marine Corp. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Farmers don't make a lot of money but they accumulate. The inventory increases all the time. They are poor all their life but when they die they are wealthy. I really did enjoy farming. It's a gratifying occupation.

So your schooling, you went to a one room school, did you like school?

Mr. Coffman: Oh I loved school. I had quite a few short courses. I never went to a formal college but I had night courses when I was at CCC and of course in the Marine Corp I went to Engineer School, Marine Corp Schooling in Quantico. I took quite a few short courses like that.

During the 30s, of course the Great Depression, when you were living through that did you realize the significance of the depression and the American History or was it just something you lived through?

Mr. Coffman: Yeah I kind of, you know we grew up in it and we kindly accepted the fact that this is just the way life is. We learned to deal with it. We were poor but we didn't know it because everybody else was poor too.

Was your family, did you discuss politics at home? Were you supportive of President Roosevelt?

Mr. Coffman: Well, my family was Republicans. We didn't support him as a party but some of the things he did we did support. He started a lot of jobs that gave people something to do to make money to make a living a lot of the time before like the WPA, NRA, and the CCC thing and quite a few things like that. I want say he did it but Congress was in the leadership business.

Now you mentioned you were in the CCC. Could you describe maybe what that experience was like? What did you do? Where were you at? That sort of thing.

Mr. Coffman: It was great. It gave us a job, wholesome food and clothes, and medical attention. It fed better than I had ever been fed in my life and I worked in an irrigation project in Oregon. At that time the west coast had a shortage of labor and a surplus of jobs. That is the reason that a lot of CCCs from back east were sent out there; was to do stuff like we did. They built lakes, dams, roads, parks; quite a few parks like Crater Lake Park. We worked on an irrigation project in Klamath Valley just outside of Klamath Falls. I was out there in 1990 at our 50 year reunion from the time that I was there, and some of the irrigation canals that we built were still being used. I felt pretty good about that.

What year was it that you were in the CCC?

Mr. Coffman: 1939 and 1940.

Were you in the CCC when it ended? How did you get out of it?

Mr. Coffman: I got out because the economic situation was changing because of the war; worldwide thing, because several things were happening in the United States. Everybody wants to blame the United States for this, that, and the other but it's a worldwide thing that usually caused it. After a good part of Europe got in this war thing, all the factories and everything started working. I had a chance to get a job and that is why I got out of the CCC; to make more money. We didn't make a lot of money there.

What job was that?

Mr. Coffman: I was working for a factory in the royal north called Line Medal Products. I had an uncle that lived up there and lived there for most all of his life. I went out and I stayed with him. He got me a job. I remember the first job I had; the departmental director didn't hire anybody he would just recommend you. The Superintendent of the plant called me in and I stood in front of him at attention and he said, "Coffman, I am going to start you at .52 cents an hour." I thought, "My God, .52 cents an hour, eight hours a day, 40 hours a week; what will I do with all that money?"

That was good money at the time.

Mr. Coffman: Oh it was good money, absolutely, because I had been working for .10-.15 cents an hour. When the minimum wage thing and social security came into effect back in 1935-36, I was working for .10 cents an hour before that. The man I working for came down and said he was going to have to pay us .15 cents an hour because the government said so. He said, "I will probably go broke, but we will all go broke together." This was a potato house I worked at while I was going to high school.

During this time did you kind of sense that war was on the horizon, that it was something inevitable?

Mr. Coffman: Oh yes because Great Britain had already got involved in it and of course then like now we were allies, so we knew if they got in the war we would too. Nobody got prepared for it. We were totally unprepared for war. In the back of everybody's mind they had a feeling that this thing was going to happen. Of course when the Japanese attacked that lessened it out.

Now speaking of Pearl Harbor, how did you hear about it for the first time?

Mr. Coffman: December 7th I was at my uncles; it was on a Sunday afternoon. I was sitting on the couch watching a football game between Army and Navy and they broke into the game and announced it. Of

course the President called Congress together the next morning, Monday morning, and announced to our country that "We are in a state of war with the empire of Japan."

What was the reaction where you lived at your community, what was the feeling about Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Coffman: Oh everybody, they were mad; mad at the Japanese because they had government officials in Washington talking peace while this was going on; while they were trying to get ready to attack Pearl Harbor and did attack while it was going on. Everybody got very mad. The Japanese made a mistake because they thought the United States wouldn't go to war. They were trying to get a boundary line between Australia, Indonesia, Philippines, and that part of the Pacific. They knew that the United States wasn't prepared for war and the people were coming out of a depression and didn't want war, they thought. But when they attacked Pearl Harbor 99% of the people were mad; fighting mad. Totally organized and total agreement. Everybody had a purpose; we knew what it was for. The Japanese didn't know it but if they tried they could have laid the troops on the west coast because we didn't have enough ammunition to fight them off.

It was just that disorganized then?

Mr. Coffman: Well we just had been at peace for a long time and coming out of a depression the country didn't have any need for thinking about war material. Everybody was still thinking about World War I and thinking about how bad it was and they never wanted to think about having to do it again and that sort of thing. The war machine went to work overnight and things started happening.

So between Pearl Harbor and when you actually joined up to the service what did you do?

Mr. Coffman: I was still working at this factory in Aurora. That was December 7th and then in November the next year I joined up. I was in the process of quitting this shelving plant that I was working at and going to work at an arsenal in Joliet, Illinois, really a defense plant. Of course everybody was trying to get into defense work and wanted to; for one thing to make some money and they were afraid to fight the Japs. We knew that we had a war on our hands and we had a purpose to fight. It's not like this thing we got now like we had in Vietnam where we had people going, "Why am I here, what am I doing" that sort of thing. We knew what we were doing.

So there wasn't any distention at home; there wasn't anyone against the war?

Mr. Coffman: No, you didn't hear of anybody going to Canada or Mexico to dodge the draft or anything like that. When they announced that there would be a draft, people lined up. They didn't have to call them. They would be lined up two or three city blocks ready to sign up. Our young people just as soon as they got out of high school, a lot of them were getting out of high school lying about their age just to get in.

Now immediately after Pearl Harbor did you have any desire to join the military then or were you just going to kind of wait?

Mr. Coffman: I knew I was going to. I had a little proposition; my mother was a widow woman and had several young kids at home. I was the oldest and I had this sense of having to support her; in fact I was doing it. I knew I had to get things situated at home before I joined up but I knew I was going to eventually. Of course I had a younger brother at home too and I thought that maybe if I went he might not have to if he didn't want to. Of course he enlisted in anyway. My mother and the rest of the family all started working at the defense plant anyway.

Did you have a lot of friends and relatives that joined up the services as well?

Mr. Coffman: Yes. In the initial draft or initial invitation they didn't even have to draft people, they were volunteering as fast as they could take them. Of course they finally got down to where they were drafting people after a year or two.

Now you decided to go into the Marines. How did you come to that decision?

Mr. Coffman: Well I saw the movie "Wake Island" and I had known one or two or three Marines and I knew a little bit about them. I knew what kind of training you went through. I knew you had to be a good specimen or they wouldn't even take you. I wanted to try it. Like I said, I wanted to be part of the best; which I couldn't say that around sailors and Army people.

When was it, did you say, you officially went into the Marines?

Mr. Coffman: November of 1942.

Where did you do your basic training at?

Mr. Coffman: Paris Island. There are only two places in the country where you get Marine Corp basic training; Paris Island and Camp Pendleton, California.

Was this the first time you had been a pretty great distance from home.

Mr. Coffman: Yes, it is the farthest I had ever been away from home. I take that back, in the CCC I had been away from home. I went to Fort Oglethorpe being doctrine in the CCC and then spent this year in Oregon.

Did you feel homesickness about being away from home?

Mr. Coffman: I can't remember being homesick. I missed people and the place, home and all like that. But as far as being homesick I really wasn't. Things at home hadn't been too good for a few years for anybody in our part of the country; in fact, all over the country. We had people on the street in New York selling pencils or apples trying to make a nickel and soup lines around two or three blocks waiting to get in to a soup kitchen to get a bowl of soup and stuff like that. So anything almost was better than that.

What was your basic training like?

Mr. Coffman: As tough as it can be. You learned things that you could do that you never thought you could do. You learned to think and act faster than you ever thought you could. You learned that your body will react to any kind of situation if you are trained for it. It's tough and you just got tougher and tougher every day until after 13 weeks. They make you believe that you could lift the world and you want to try it. That's the truth. What they do, they tear you down to nothing. They make you think you are nothing. You are so ashamed of yourself you don't know what to do, you don't know why. But then they start building you up and make a man out of you. They want you to be what you are supposed to be and what you can do. They find out what you can do.

What were the conditions at the camp like during your training? Was the food good?

Mr. Coffman: The food was fantastic. Back in the CCC I had better food than I had ever had in my life and the Marine Corp was the same thing. The food was fantastic, good. They gave you a certain number of calories a day. They knew exactly how many you were going to burn and they just replaced them.

If you could, describe for me what a typical day was like during your training. What time did you get up and what kind of activities did you do?

Mr. Coffman: Reveling went, if I am not mistaken, at 5 o'clock. It might have been 5:30. You had one minute and 40 seconds to hit the deck after the bugle blew; hit the deck, be dressed, and be standing in ranks in front of the barracks in one minute and 40 seconds. A lot of these old country boys.....excuse me just a second.

You were telling me about waking up in the morning.....

Mr. Coffman: Oh, well you see even after all these years these things make an impression in your mind you don't forget. Like for instance, I can remember my rifle number. The first rifle I was issued in 19__, I can remember my serial number like it was yesterday. They instill these things in your mind so explicitly that it is burned in there. Like I said we had that one minute 40 seconds to be in ranks on the outside. I never knew before that 11 men at a time could go through a three foot door; but they can. We were in ranks on the outside and we start doing the exercise thing. We did a double-time for about 2 ½ - 3 miles, and then we came back and did calisthenics until chow time; I think at 7 o'clock the best I can remember. But we worked and exercised in the meantime. After chow time we started doing a series of training. We would go to probably three, let's see these classes would usually last about an hour and some of them two hours; different classes during the morning, had chow at noon and then in the afternoon the same thing up until 5 o'clock, classes. Especially in the engineers we had all kinds of classes. Then you got into the calisthenics thing again. You would do that until chow time which I believed was 6. After that you went to school; you went to school at night. You had about an hour between the last class and when you got ready for sack out. Taps was at 10 o'clock. After a day of training like we went through, you didn't have to encourage anybody to go to bed. We were ready.

So you didn't have a lot of free time I take it?

Mr. Coffman: No, not free time we didn't. There was a certain time during the day some days of the week you would have a couple of hours off to wash your clothes and do personal chores and stuff like that. Other than that our time was completely filled with classroom work and of course we had the rifle range thing and we were in school on the machine guns and 45 automatics. Of course we didn't have the M1 then but the M1s came a little later on. We was in classes all the time one way or the other and you got this calisthenics thing constantly; morning and late in the afternoon. They turned a boy into a man in 13 weeks. That is what they did and they still do.

When you finished after 13 weeks, what was the feeling, that you had accomplished something?

Mr. Coffman: Well like I told you a minute ago, they build you back into the man they want you to be and all of a sudden you believe it. You feel a couple of inches taller than you used to be and a lot stronger and you were. I was the strongest that I have ever been at any time in my life. It made you feel a lot better. You walked taller, you walked straighter and with your chest out ready to fight the enemy. They teach you to hate the enemy. When you get out you are totally involved in hating the enemy.

How did you become a combat engineer? How were you picked for that, did you choose it or did someone choose that for you as far as your role?

Mr. Coffman: Well, I had spent about a year and a half in Quantico and had gained two ranks. I was a buck sergeant. They were forming the 6th Division and the Marine Corp only had five divisions up to then. They were forming the 6th Division to help out with this island hopping in the invasion of Japan. They sent a whole bunch of us guys to Camp Lejune and were getting ready to, I was getting in a line company, an infantry line company. There was a man that came around asking us of certain jobs that they needed engineers for. Some of the little jobs, I knew something about them being a farm boy and growing up working with my hands a lot. They took me out of the line company and put me in an engineering company. At first I was going to be in radar. Of course the communications was a lot different back then than what it is now. A lot of our communication in the field would strain your wire. Of course we didn't have these cell phones and stuff like that. That was one thing we did. Radar was just coming into its own. You were just hearing a little bit about it. They sent me to radar school also. Of course I had a little bit of electro background with the power company that I worked for. But then after I got in there I became what they call a platoon chief. You were head of a platoon and they teach you to do all these things: demolition was a big thing, building bridges-we built a lot of Bailey Bridges. Have you ever heard of a Bailey bridge?

It sounds familiar but what exactly is it?

Mr. Coffman: It's a prefab kind of thing, steel. You put it together a section at a time and push it over the river or whatever. Sometimes we got so sore we couldn't push by hand, we would have to have a tank with a dozer blade on it to push it across. A lot of times we would have the enemy on one side and we had our troops on the other side and we were trying to get them across. We built, at that time, the longest Bailey bridge that had ever been built, 104 feet long. The piers were still left from an old Japanese bridge that had been blown out before so we would build a bridge and push it out of the way. Of course they were sitting back up in the hills zeroed in on this old bridge anyway and every time we would get it built they would blow it up with artillery. We built that thing a total of seven times before we ever got any tanks across. We finally got a little L5 cub to circle up there and saw the guy throw an artillery piece on some tracks on the side of the hill. He would throw it out to a certain part, turn around and just laid artillery shells all on that thing. We lost several men on that tank. We had men still working on it. They hit that thing and would blow it up and we had a whole bunch of men up there.

Where was this at?

Mr. Coffman: Okinawa. That was the Osato River just south of Nam.

After you had finished your training and before you went overseas what were some of the things you did?

Mr. Coffman: I was shipped to Quantico Recoil Schools for some schooling and also worked for the reserves officers class mess. I was in charge of the store room that stored food for three different mess barracks and quite a few other supplies of different kinds.

What was the relationship like between the officers and the enlisted men in the Marine Corp? Was it a good relationship?

Mr. Coffman: Good. I never had but one officer in my life that I didn't like and I don't think I had known anybody like him. They were good. We were taught that a request was the same as a command and that is the way it was. When an officer gave you a job you never questioned it, you did it. The officers respected the men too. They would all tell you even right today, "A good officer if you look closely, has got good NCOs" because they are the ones that make officers, good NCOs.

When did your unit travel overseas?

Mr. Coffman: Let's see it was, I'm having a hard time remembering that. It was formed in 1943; the fall of 1943. It was formed at Camp Lejune and we shipped out right away to San Diego to board the ship. At this time we were the first Provisional Marine Brigade. We were shipped to Guadalcanal. That is where the division was formed, in Guadalcanal. The first provisional brigade became the 29th Regiment.

What was the trip over there like on the seas? Did you get seasick?

Mr. Coffman: Seasick as a bird dog. After about two days out I got seasick and that lasted about two or three days. It was an adventurous thing. It was kind of an adventure. Something was going to happen and we were going to be a part of it. We could hardly wait to get into it. Of course, we knew we had all been trained well and knew what to do. It was just the idea of getting there and getting at it. Of course after we got to Guadalcanal and we had some mopping up to do. That was one of the first big battles we had. The 1st Marine Division had almost become annihilated on Guadalcanal because we couldn't get replacements and supplies to them. The Japanese were controlling the water around there at that time up until the Battle of Midway. In fact they were reorganized and became part of the 4th Regiment. The 1st, 2nd and 6th always operated together. After they were reorganizing we did our training in Guadalcanal for six months.

Which regiment were you in?

Mr. Coffman: I was in the 29th Regiment, 6th Division.

Is that where you saw your first combat in Guadalcanal?

Mr. Coffman: Yeah, that wasn't a real fierce combat. We were mopping up things. When the Japanese surrendered, well they didn't have to surrender they just had to give up because they would just wipe them out. The Japs on the left took off to the jungle. They never believed that their country was winning. They kept coming out periodically and we had to take care of them and chase them around and try to find more of them and stuff like that. We knew we were getting into something big. The equipment that they were bringing in like the jeeps, recons, and all kinds of artillery; air support was coming into Henderson Field. Of course nobody knew we were all guessing, we thought at first that we were going to hit Formosa.

Taiwan.

Mr. Coffman: Taiwan but it was Formosa at that time. We knew this island hopping thing; you see the 29th Regiment while it was the provisional brigade it had been in Taiyan and Saipan before it became part of the 6th. So we had some pretty well seasoned veterans. We watched this island hopping thing and we kind of figured out that we were getting pretty close to this Japan thing. Of course we knew it was Formosa or Okinawa; one of the two.

Prior to actually getting into heavy combat, what were your opinions or impressions of the Japanese? What did you think about them?

Mr. Coffman: Skunks. We called them gooks. They fought dirty, as dirty as they could, and they had treated the Chinese so mean. They had occupied China in 1937 and they had killed those people wholesale. They poisoned them. Like for instance I don't know if you ever read "The Rape of Dan King."

I know what you are talking about, yeah.

Mr. Coffman: It was written by a Japanese reporter because he thought he had to tell the story. Like killing little babies, picking them up and throwing them in pots of boiling oil; taking men and operating on them without any anti sedatives or anything to see how much pain a man could take before he passed out. They did all kinds of stuff like that. If there was any good thing about them we didn't hear about that. They made sure you didn't hear of anything good. They still do that. The Army will tell you that they are taught that when they go to combat they in doctrine in them to hate the enemy. That is part of war. The enemies are taught to hate you too.

After Guadalcanal where did you end up?

Mr. Coffman: We were training and of course the engineers would train doing their kind of work, but we were also training on machine guns, anti-tank weapons, bazookas, and all this kind of stuff. We knew we were going into some heavy combat zone and actually everybody felt like we were kindly trained real well. We felt like we were ready for it; anticipating it really. We boarded the ship and got in a convoy. I think there were probably 3,000 ships in this convoy altogether, zigzagging across the Pacific heading in that general direction leaving the Solomon Islands. Like I said before, the 1st Division was operating with us. They were part of the convoy too. On April 1, 1945, we landed on Okinawa.

What was that like being on the ships off of Okinawa and the naval bombardment and everything; what were your thoughts knowing you were going to have to go into that?

Mr. Coffman: Well I tell you, it's a funny thing. Of course there was a very good chance that you could get killed or get hit. But you didn't worry about it you just did what job you had to do and you just did it. It's a kind of a mechanical thing. You trained to do certain things under certain conditions and you just do them. I remember going over the side and heading into the landing craft. We knew that between there and the beach we were going to run into an awful lot of fire. We got fooled and would you believe that there weren't maybe one or two machine guns fired on us so we landed without any trouble and was landing our equipment. There little old General _____, he thought he had figured out a way to beat a Marine. They had just got through with this Iwo Jima thing and killed about 25 men. He said he was going to figure out a way to beat them. He was going to let them land and then he was going to come in behind them and hit them from two fronts; the rear and the front. It didn't work. They never did get in behind us. They tried to but it didn't work. Of course after we got the beach head well they had done waited too late. They couldn't get it off at that time.

What were some of the jobs as a combat engineer in Okinawa? What were some of the things that you did?

Mr. Coffman: Well one of the first things, the beach was very sandy. We had this steel roadbed type stuff that you lay down, six feet long and two feet wide, it makes tracks to keep vehicles from getting bogged down in the sand. That was one of the first things we did. We got water purification units ashore. Of course we had people on guard duty with us in front while the other people were working. We got the bridging equipment unloaded and a lot of gasoline stacked up in 5-gallon drums and a lot of explosives. We had already been told by reconnaissance that we had a lot of explosives and that it was going to have to be used there because the Japanese had made caves all over the mountain, honeycomb caves. That was the only way to get them out because they had blasted them with bombs and artillery shells for two weeks and couldn't get them out. They were buried too deep. They had young cities under those mountains; hospitals, operating rooms, and all that stuff. One of the big things the engineers did was blow them caves in or blow them up where the men had to get out. We sealed a lot of them up. We finally found out one way to get them out. You see they are pretty smart. They had the entry to these caves where you couldn't throw a t_____ pack in there. If you did they would throw it back out. They would go in this cave here about four feet and they would make a right angle turn, go about five or six more feet and turn back left

again. You couldn't throw anything in there. If you did it would just blow right up in the hole in front; usually they would throw it back out. We found out that these caves all had a ventilated shaft made out of wood most of the time about four to six inches square. It went up to the top where they could get air. Of course they had it camouflaged with bushes and brush and everything. We found out that every one of them had one of those things and if we could get a man past the cave entrance. Of course they had slits above where they could fire machine guns and whatever out front. It was an unusual thing; you couldn't get close to it without losing men unless you came in from two or three different directions. If we could ever get a man past the entrance of that cave with a five-gallon can of gasoline, get up there at that ventilating shaft and pour that can of gasoline down through that thing and drop a phosphorous grenade down it and run like hell. It would just lift that whole mountainside up. We had to build roads. The little old roads that they had were little dinky things. They weren't wide enough for our jeeps, recons, and tanks. We got some dozers unloaded and started building some roads. We had to get some recon trucks in there to haul some ammunition. One of the main things was generally getting enough equipment ashore so we could do our work. We moved north on that island and we moved so fast that it was hard to keep the supply up there. After the northern part of the island was secured we headed back south; the 1st Division was headed back south along with the 10th Army. They ran into tough resistance because that is where they had their main line of defense; about the middle of the island. Of course it got to where it was only about two miles wide and they had that fortified real good. When we started moving south we had to help the 1st Division and the 10th Army. Things got tough and really slow to them.

After you had been in combat for awhile had your impression of the Japanese changed at all from what your pre-combat impressions were?

Mr. Coffman: No, just an enemy; kill it before it kills you. All the people like the Okinawans were glad that we landed. The Japanese treated them terrible. They made slaves out of them. They abused the women.

So the Okinawa people basically welcomed you with open arms.

Mr. Coffman: They did but all we did was put them in stockades to keep them from getting killed. In fact some of them did get killed that tried to keep from getting to the stockade because they all kept wanting to go back home. Of course when they would get out and travel at night they always got shot. They were glad the Marines were there.

When you study history they always say the Japanese fight to the last man. Was that true in your experience?

Mr. Coffman: No, I would say up to 90% but I've got pictures back there of them surrendering on the south end of Okinawa. They have been taught that if you surrender they go to kill you anyway, but there was a bunch of these people that changed their mind on the tail end. In fact I got a picture back there I could show you if you wanted to of the Japanese surrendering on the southern end of that island because they had found out by word of mouth that somebody was escaping back and forth that the Marines weren't all that bad. We had quite a few surrender but now 90% of them did go the last man. As a matter of fact there was a big cliff on the south end of that island, those people went down and jumped off that thing wholesale; piles of them just piled up dead at the bottom of that cliff. There was also a bunch of them that surrendered too.

In Okinawa the Army and the Marines worked together; what was your experience, was their like rivalry between the Marines and the Army?

Mr. Coffman: It wasn't necessarily a rivalry; it was a difference in the way they fought. The 10th Army commander, Simon Bolivar Buckner you may have heard of him, he was killed there. He got killed by a ricochet bullet, a piece of rock ricochet off the edge of the cliff. Our commanding general was L_____ Shepherd. Simon Bolivar Buckner was a Lieutenant General in charge of the 10th Army and he was a ranking officer so he called the shots or he started out doing it. The trouble that they had, if we started moving; like for instance we moved in on the Shuri Castle, the Army would move down the center with 1st Division one side and the 6th division on the other side. We moved a lot faster than they did. We would get so far ahead and we would get our flank. We ran into that problem two or three different times. It finally got to the point where they didn't let us fight side by side because we had that big problem. The Army, they operate different. They had big equipment, big stuff and moved slowly. When we were given an objective we took it. Shuri Castle they told us to take that thing. L_____ Shepherd and Dale V_____, he was a General in the 1st Division, decided, "Let's take that thing tomorrow!" The Army would have used two or three days. A lot of times and this could have been a problem that the Army always thought and they might be right too; a lot of times we moved fast enough that we bypass troops and had to fight them in later. So L_____ tried to escape.

Were you ever wounded?

Mr. Coffman: I had a sprained ankle is the only thing I ever got. My machine gunner got me trapped on the edge of a rice patty. I knew where it was at and two more guys couldn't exactly see him. We found out later that he was buried in a cave with a little slit about so wide and was firing out of that a machine gun. He started firing and couldn't see him so I jumped in a big hole and rolled. I didn't want to get blown up by a land mine or artillery shell. I stayed there for a while and I couldn't hear it. There were two more guys with me. I decided that I had to get out of there so I jumped over the edge of this little road bed and hit a pile of rocks and sprained my ankle but didn't know it until I got out of there. I zigzagged in for a couple hundred yards and got away. That was the only wound I had. I didn't even apply for a Purple Heart.

In the particular unit that you were in did you suffer a lot of casualties during Okinawa?

Mr. Coffman: Well the engineers didn't suffer a big percentage of casualties but the 29th Marines suffered a bunch of them. On Sugar Loaf Hill one or two companies lost over half of their men. There was one platoon part of the 29th Marines that went up with 16 men and got back with two. We took that hill 11 times and lost it 10 times. One of the big things the engineers had to do in front of that hill was take out landmines. They had that saturated with landmines. You couldn't get any tanks anywhere close to it. They had that hill and had trenches that were so wide and deep enough that if you stooped over a little bit they couldn't see your head. If you rose up enough you could see over the top or they could. What made it so hard is there were three hills together. There was Sugar Loaf Hill, Horseshoe Hill on this side, and Half Moon Hill on this side so they had interlocking fire. On this side we were right next to the beach. On this side and on the back of it was Shuri Castle; which we hadn't taken that yet. We had to take Sugar Loaf Hill before we could get to it. That is how we lost so many men. We just couldn't get to them. The old general had said that nobody could ever take it. He had told his people that, "Nobody could ever take it!" He was almost right.

So taking out land mines, how do you do that? What is the process?

Mr. Coffman: One of the things they teach you in this demolition thing, they teach you how to disarm a land mine. I can't remember now exactly how it is. The Japanese land mine, they had three or four different kinds and most of them had an explosive called p____ acid. It was yellow and looked like sulfur. The fuse of that thing was a little silver about that big around and about so long sticking right in the top of it. Most of the time if you looked real close you could see if the earth had been disturbed at all. If it had

you took kind of a pole, a wooden pole, until you found it and you would sift the dirt back until you would get to that fuse and screw it out. There was a certain way you would unscrew it; right way one turn pull up on it left a turn and a half, stuff like that about three times and just lift it out. We had one whole unit, one platoon that were experts in disarming land mines and artillery shells. The Japanese had a lot of artillery shells that didn't go off. Of course those things were like a ticking time bomb. We had one man by the name of Arthur Reading, he was from Pennsylvania, and he died just about a year ago. He got the Silver Star for stuff that he did on disarming those land mines. He would take those big artillery shells about that long and five or six inches in diameter and just straddle that thing. He would just get up there and click that thing and it was just like opening up a safe. He would click one way awhile and click another way awhile and pull it out and throw it aside. That and riding on the front of a tank looking for landmines were two of the toughest jobs that we had. A lot of times we would get in there and you couldn't get out and clear a mine field; if we could get to it, if it wasn't cold and machine gun fire, we could take primer cord and lace it back and forth and set it off and most of the time it would explode those land mines. But if you couldn't get to do that, they had to get tanks in there. A lot of times tanks were the only things that could get through to these people. We would put a man on each side of the track of them tanks walking out in front trying to make sure you didn't hit a land mine. If you seen something suspicious, you would tap on the edge of the turret. That was tough because these Japs were watching.

While you were on Okinawa did you write a lot of letters home? Did you ever get mail and that sort of thing?

Mr. Coffman: I got mail; my wife wrote everyday but we didn't get to mail but about once a week. During severe combat it is sometimes 10 days before you will get a letter. You wanted to be in a place where you could get it. It would be back behind Headquarters Company. There was an old man on Okinawa working for Red Cross. Of course we had a lot of rain in Okinawa. One time it rained 16 days in a row. This old man would go around to the troops on the front line and he had a pack on his back with writing paper. Of course we didn't have to have a stamp. He would have writing paper and envelopes. He would stop and give you the paper and wait for you to write a note and address the envelope and he would take it with him. I don't know how many he would take back at a time but he would do that all day long. I don't know whatever happened to the man if he got killed or what. He wasn't real old. He was old to us then. I would say probably 40 years old or something like that. That and once in awhile we would get a little R&R occasionally. They would move one bunch up and another bunch back. You couldn't hardly stay on the front line more than a couple days at a time without some relief because it would drive you crazy. We would have people jumping up and grabbing three or four hand grenades and charging into enemy lines constantly throwing hand grenades. It would just wear your brain out. When we would go back other troops would come up. When you got back they would feed you good and give you some warm chow. You had a chance to write a letter and get you some mail. I can't remember it seems like that's happened about once a week. I know my wife's letters would come in big bundles. I would separate them according to the post marks on them so I would be reading them in rotation.

While you were on Okinawa I guess President Roosevelt would have died and then Germany would have surrendered during that time. What were your reactions? Did you hear about him and think....?

Mr. Coffman: Well, I remember the day that President Roosevelt died. We had taken Yomiton Airfield. We were moving on north and bivouacked outside of this little old village. Headquarters had radio contact and when they found out that he had died they passed the word on down by chain of command and down to the field to the troops. It didn't really affect me all that much. We got people that die here all the time too. It's too bad. Of course he was a pretty old man. It didn't really affect me all that much because I knew our war was being run by the Pentagon. As far as the Marine Corp was concerned our Commandant was our chief wheel. Admiral _____, you have heard of him I am sure, was in charge of the Fleet Marine

Corp Pacific. So he was really the man that was in charge of our whole outfit at that time. The Marines were operating under him the whole bit; the Marines, Army, Navy and everybody.

How did the battle of Okinawa end? Did enemy resistance eventually just kind of teeter out?

Mr. Coffman: They kept backing south. That is where they had most of their fortification. After we took Naha and Shuri Castle it started getting a little bit easier because there was more open terrain. There wasn't near as many caves and hills and stuff like that as there had been before. It made it awful tough because it is hard to get a man out of a cave or in a hill where you got two or three hills looking at each other. After we got south of Naha it started getting better and that is when we started putting bridges across these rivers and getting tanks across. We started seeing a lot more dead Japanese. Of course we knew they were headed toward the south end for the last big stance. We moved on south though. We got word that they committed suicide by jumping off the cliff. There was quite a few of them that surrendered when we got down close. They came out with no clothes on except just shorts waving a flag, something white. We always took them. Of course I heard there were a lot of people that didn't but we did. If they wanted to surrender well we did. Our intelligence was glad to get a hold of them too because we could interrogate them to get some information. We knew what our next stop was, Japan.

Speaking of that after Okinawa where did your unit go?

Mr. Coffman: We went to Guam. The 6th Division went to Guam. I'm not sure where the first went. It could have been Guam too but a different place. We had some R&R there for about a couple of weeks. We just kind of sacked out and rested because remember they had a bunch of this 3.2 beer. They had ship loads of that stuff. They had it stacked up there; stacked bigger than this house. They aloud each man I think it was a can a day. We had been in combat 82 days so we had a can of beer for every day that we were in combat. We sat around there and drank that 3.2 beer. You could hardly drink it though, you would get drunk. So about two weeks and after that we started loading ship. What we did, we resupplied. We got new clothes, new ammunition, and if our weapon was messed up we got it fixed. We just got resupplied and we started loading ship. We knew and nobody told us but we knew we were about to invade Japan because this was the last place between us and them. We had already taken Iwo Jima which stopped them from shooting down our bombers when they flew over. We kept loading ships there and I guess we did that for about two weeks before we got the word one morning there. It seems to me like it was a Sunday morning. I had a little old radio setting out on a little old ledge under a coconut palm that they announced that the atom bombed had been dropped. We got an idea that maybe this thing was going to end; that we may not even invade Japan. We kept loading ships for two weeks until we quit. Of course they had to wait to get the surrender thing official. MacArthur went over there on the big mode that they were surrendering. We were loading ships even after the Japanese surrendered waiting on orders from headquarters. Two years ago I saw a battle plan. My son's father-in-law was part of the 1st Infantry that was also labeled the invasion of Japan. Somehow he had gotten a hold of a copy of the battle plan and this was many, many years later. The plan was that the 1st, 2nd, & the 6th Marine Divisions would go form a beachhead at I believe it was near Nagasaki. The 3rd, 4th, & 5th was going to a beachhead just off of Tokyo. Of course that was when the beachhead was made by the Army. The Navy they were always bombarded; everything we always asked them too. They were our artillery. They would have been bombing the place far and wide. Of course after they surrendered we didn't do that. According to this battle plan the last paragraph states "Casualty prediction, 100%." I think it would have. I think President Truman, he was the one that made the final decision but I think he saved a lot of lives by dropping those two atom bombs; not only Americans lives but a lot Japanese lives too because there wouldn't have been much left of Japan if we invaded them. They had taught those people; men, women, and kids to fight and if they didn't have a weapon, make them a spear, booby traps, anything they could do.

After Japan had surrendered what did your unit do?

Mr. Coffman: Well like I said, we kept loading ships for about two weeks and finally got orders to stop that. Then we got orders there to be ready to go in 24 hours for destination unknown. We went aboard ship and they shipped us to Sengi China. The 1st Division went to Peking; of course it is Beijing right now. The reason for that was part of the surrender deal was that the Japanese wouldn't have to surrender to the Chinese that they would surrender to somebody else. We went there and accepted their surrender because the Chinese would have killed them; every one of them and they knew that. We set up camp there at ____ which was the northern part of China, not too far from the Russian border. Of course the hierarchy was doing their negotiating and making plans on how they were going to do all these things. We were marched out to a fairground, a parade field outside of this little town. I'm thinking it was a fairground of maybe a 100 to 200 acres; at least 100 acres. We marched out in formation and stood at ease. They had built a little platform I would say it was about 20 feet long and 10 feet wide from front to back with a long desk on top of it. It had a walkway in front of it with chairs behind it. That is where our commanding general sat with his support staff and so forth. They marched the Japanese, I don't know how big the division was it might have been two or three but a whole bunch of them, 100 acres or 200 acres were full of Japanese soldiers. The old general marched up on this one side of this platform about three or four steps and marched down to the table in front of our commanding officer, did a right face, took his saber out and handed it to him and saluted. Of course he saluted him back and took his saber. I guess he was supposed to. That was probably part of protocol. They had a place for him to sit so they let him sit on the platform. The Japanese soldiers started marching by us throwing their weapons up on piles. They had a pile of rifles there .25 caliber rifles bigger than this house. They would throw them up on their march on and get back in formation. After that we put them Japanese, most of them, aboard ship and sent them to Japan. I never understood exactly why, maybe it was to take care of the remainder of what the Japanese had left there that they were going to take home with them. I never understood exactly why. We worked them in detail quite a little bit. I will remember this, we could take a working detail and of course the combat engineers had charge of most of the working details; you could take five Japanese soldiers and you would get as much work out of them as you would 10 Chinese. All you had to do was make them know and understand what you wanted him to do and he would do it. The Chinese, you had to keep prodding him to get him to work.

What was your impression of the Chinese people?

Mr. Coffman: Backward; at that time I would say they were backward. Disorganized. You've heard of everything being as fouled up as a Chinese fire drill? That is a true thing. I saw in ____ the Japanese fighting a fire one time. They would run like mad in every direction. A lot of the things they did they did carpenter work; they had some pretty good craftsmen but they were disorganized. They would put up a building, small building big building or whatever. I'm sure the big buildings they must have made plans for it better but some of these smaller ones I believe they don't plan for it. They just start working and just kept adding to it and figure it out as they went along. We got mixed up with that ____ day. They were starting this invasion thing; that insurrection. We took a lot of tanks and artillery and set up around the airport to protect the reconnaissance because the incumbents would very much likely have captured what we had if they could have. We had to protect it. I told you the 6th Division was formed at Guadalcanal it was also disbanded in China. It never served in the United States at all. Before they were disbanded I had enough points to come home but we were doing a lot of work for the Chinese around that time. Talking about disorganized, I don't know what kind of; the Japanese having them occupied may have been a cause of all this. I'm not sure about that. We had a recon truck that would go around up down the street every morning and pick up the dead; people who died during the night. He would back up between buildings and stuff like that; like we used to call street people today.

How long were you in China before you were able to come home?

Mr. Coffman: 6 months.

You say you had enough points to be able to come home then?

Mr. Coffman: Yes.

When you came home how long had you been away? What was your impression of being home?

Mr. Coffman: It had been 22 months since I left the west coast and got back home two years. Everybody who has been in combat, their insides are so keyed up that the letdown after peace had declared; the let down from being in combat had keyed up almost just to let you fall apart. It's painful, really. You get to this point where you operate mechanically because of the way you were trained. When that is all gone you got to start thinking what am I going to do myself? What am I going to do? What do I want to do? Transition is a little bit tough. People; the Marine Corp is very organized. You would see people on the streets running hell here and there. Some would work and some not working. It was just almost a letdown. We knew just about every hour of the day what we were going to be doing.

How long after you had been back in the states until you were like discharged from the Marines?

Mr. Coffman: We came back to San Diego and they put us on a troop train. It took five days to go across to Camp Lejune. After we got there the ones that wanted to be discharged, they mustered us out according to numerical order the way that you came in there; or chronological order. I was a little bit tempted to stay for at least one more rank, possibly two. They needed NCOs because everybody was getting out and they lost so many of them too. I thought, "No I am going to get out of this thing. I've had this noise for so long I wanted it where it was quiet." I think that was one of the big reasons why I wanted out. I wanted the quiet.

Were you able to stay in contact with some of the friends you had made in the Marines over the years?

Mr. Coffman: Oh yeah; in fact, the 6th Division has a reunion every year now. This one is going to be in Nashville next year. Last year it was in St. Petersburg.

In the long run how would you say that World War II affected you? Did it affect the way that you think about things or the way you see things?

Mr. Coffman: Yeah, it makes you wonder. When I see people and some of the things that they do now and they reasons that they do them; most of it is for no reason. It makes me a little disappointed when I see the way society has turned. It doesn't seem to have any direction. It's just like a chunk floating in the pond; whichever way the wind blows it drifts with it. I think probably a lot of that might be caused by Marine Corp training that we had. Everything has a reason and a purpose. I see so many things now that don't have that. I will tell you, once you train like that as a Marine you never lose it. Once a Marine always a Marine. It may be the same thing with the Army or the Navy. I'm not sure. I don't think that they had the camaraderie that the Marines do because of the tough training that they go through.

Is this something you still think about often, even today, World War II?

Mr. Coffman: Yeah. There were some things that happened that I guess affected me as much or more than anything else was what I saw happen to kids. In Guadalcanal a patrol went up this _____ River one day searching for Japs in the jungle. There were all kinds of columns and right in the top where the corn was at there was a lake. Most people wondered how in the world you could have a lake on top of the mountain. The thing was, it rained there every day just about. The clouds came in so low that the top of

the thing was right in the rain. This little river ran down through there and they called it the ___ River; just a creek was all it was. Before we got up there we kept hearing a funny noise and it sounded like kids. The thing that impressed me was we hadn't seen any kids in a year at that time. Kids everywhere are the same. We got up close there and there was about half of dozen little native kids with an old man watching them; guarding them in this creek splashing, yelling, laughing and having fun. We all sat down there and just watched them for awhile it just made us remember of when we were young and the kids back home. We hadn't seen any kids lately. There was another time on Okinawa when we bivouacked close to the beach. Of course the Japs were always trying to land in behind us. We always set up and parked on the beach to guard the beach. Our machine gun, we first heard the guy yell halt and ask him the password. Nothing happened so he opened up the machine gun and after that a couple of stray rifle fire. Being the 1st Sergeant I went down to take a look and there was a young woman and a little baby. It looked about four or five months old; lying in the sand dead. They were trying to get back home probably; probably to keep from going to the stockade. They put them in the stockade to keep them from getting killed, fed them and took care of them but those people didn't want to do it. They wanted to go home. Of course the guard, he had no choice. When he saw someone moving in he called for them to halt and they didn't do it. So he opened up and killed them and it was a little old baby. It had nothing at all to do with the war. On Naha they did a lot of bombing there. When we went through that town there was a little girl that looked about 10 years old laying on the side walk. I can see her today. That one arm was broke bent back behind her and the bone sticking out about that far. Her right leg was broke and turned back up to the other side and she didn't have hardly any clothes on and ants crawling in and out of her body cavity. People like that that suffer from war and have nothing to do with it at all. There was another time in China that I thought about all the food that we have in this country and those people over there couldn't feed their selves. We had a bivouac area set up there right at the edge of this town. We tried to take care of our scraps and stuff and try to keep things sanitary. We would go out with a bulldozer and dig a hole as wide as the dozer blade about 20 feet long. Every day we would haul scraps from the galley and a dump truck would back up to it and dump it off in there. Of course when the thing got full, we usually kept somebody guarding it or tried to. When it got full they would take it back out there and cover it up and dig another hole. I went there one day and there was a bunch of these Chinese kids and I'm saying probably seven or eight. By our size I would say they were 8 or 9 years old but they were probably 12 or 15 years old. They were in that garbage dump down in there feeling around trying to grab a piece of bread or potato pealing and stuff like that. Those four things that happened to kids that I guess stick with me as much as anything that has happened. I never saw a dead Jap yet that bothered me but I never saw a dead Marine that I didn't think could just as well have been me. When the war is going on and this combat thing is going on you don't have time to think about that. You don't stop to think about it. You are just doing what you are trained to do. I don't know when I got home and discharged, like I said, I had such a letdown because everything was so disorganized and it still is.

Well is there anything you would like to add or clarify or anything like that?

Mr. Coffman: I think that just about covered it unless there is something else that you want to ask.

I don't think so. I think I pretty much covered everything.

(End of Tape)