National Park Service (NPS)

Mariana Islands Wartime Experience through Oral Histories Fellowship
(WAPA 4170)
Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program

Arthur Armstrong
March 23, 1986

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This digitization was made possible through the National Park Service by a grant from the National Park Foundation through generous support from the Mellon Foundation.

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Interviewee: Arthur Armstrong
Military Rank: Second Battalion Ninth Marines – General Labor
Interviewer: Rose Manibusan, National Parks Service Guam
Date: March 23, 1986

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Q: This is Rose Manibusan from The War in the Pacific National Historical Park and I'm doing an interview with Arthur Armstrong and his involvement during World War II. Can you give me your full name?

Armstrong: Arthur Alvin Armstrong Senior.

Q: And your place of residence?

Armstrong: 1240 Valley Drive, Laurel, Montana, 59044.

Q: Okay. Also your occupation or your profession now?

Armstrong: I am retired.

Q: Okay. I'd like to go back to the period of December 7, 1941. If you could tell me where you were and we'll start from there.

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Armstrong: Well, I was visiting a buddy of mine who lived out south of my hometown and so we drove into town to get some cigarettes and we found out the Japs had attacked Pearl Harbor. And this buddy of mine he had been after me for oh, several months to join the Marine Corps and I said, "I going to finish high school." Well, I said, "If anything happens," I says, "count on me to be with you." So when we found out, we shook hands and the next day we were—went into the recruiting office and took our brief physical, such as it was, and then

went over the doctor's office for his examination. And as we're passing through the—out the door of the Northern Hotel, I heard President Roosevelt making an announcement, a declaration of war against Japan.

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That evening at oh, about 11:30 we boarded a train at Billings and proceeded to Butte, Montana for our first good physical. While there, I found out that I was probably the youngest recruit that has ever enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Q: And how old were you?

Armstrong: The doctor—or the corpsman called me in the office and asked me how old I was and I told him I was 19. They asked me when my date of birth was. I said, "Well, 13 November 1922." He said, "Not according to your records." I said, "What do they say?" He said, "1941." So I figured from then I was officially the youngest recruit that ever enlisted in the Marine Corps. But we got that straightened out and I was able to go onto being sworn in and sent to San Diego with the Marine Corps base where I really got the torture.

Then through the first few days, it was just touch and go, drawing equipment, getting that nice GI haircut and then we went on the training schedule, which was three weeks, and it was a fast three weeks. I grew from—

Q: Well, where was your training?

Armstrong: Pardon?

Q: Where was the training at?

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Armstrong: San Diego Marine Corps base.

Q: Oh, you were still at San Diego then.

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Armstrong: Yes. And following boot camp training, I was with the Rifle Range Detachment at Army Base of San Luis Obispo for about three-and-a-half months. Then from San Luis Obispo, returned to Marine Corps Base the Casual Company waiting orders to which in three or four days I was at Camp Elliott north of San Diego trying to get in the Second Raider Battalion. I just didn't have what they wanted so I was then assigned to K Company Third Battalion Ninth Marines, which I served with for—well, from the 21st of March till 15 July '42 I was transferred to Company S Second Battalion Ninth Marines where I served with the Second Battalion Ninth Marines from 15 July to 3 May 1945 where I returned to San Francisco and San Diego in 17 May 1945 when I reached—got back to the States.

But going back, telling you my tour of duty with Company S Second Battalion, I'll go back to the time we were overseas, went overseas, the 24th day of January, left San Diego for Auckland, New Zealand. Went down there for five-and-a-half months and from New Zealand then we went to Guadalcanal, which was our advanced jungle warfare training in preparation for the Bougainville operation on 1 November 1943 and we were there well, till the 27th of December.

At the present time, I am with two very dear friends of mine, Jack Eddy and Joe Bell. That's probably my—our reason—really reason to be here again after 43 years on Guam. I'll probably get a little head of my sorry. But anyhow.

Q: That's okay. [Laughs.]

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Armstrong: We were—we left Guadalcanal on the 2nd of June '44 by way of Kwajalein, Saipan and Eniwetok and then about 21 July we were sitting out here 13 miles at sea for the

invasion. I always wanted to see an invasion softening up process and lo and behold, I saw it. It was a sight I'll never forget, no matter how—

Q: Can you describe it?

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Armstrong: Pardon?

Q: Can you describe how it looked to you?

Armstrong: Well, I was with four marines and four sailors and two naval officers assigned to shore—landing parties, a beach party for ship to shore equipment, [unclear] equipment. So we moved our equipment down in the tank ladder we were to work off of during the unloading. So the first big shells that whistled overhead, I was out of my blanket roll and standing aboard a ship watching the fireworks. And god it was like most combats, you just about got to see it—be there to see it. It was a great fireworks, that's about as near as I can say. It makes you wonder how anything or anyone could survive after a shelling and dive bombing straight through—the beach received during the initial invasion. We were—our first trip to the beach we went up to—

Q: Can I stop this for a minute—

Armstrong: Pardon?

Q: —to be quiet.

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Armstrong: Our first trip to the beach was to be a halftrack from Regimental Weapons and a load of troops. We were about 13 miles out at sea and we went to the—President Adams to pick up the troops and head to the beach. Well, we had quite a little stretch of time getting

from the transport to the beach travelling over fairly smooth water and we had—we were almost to the beach when the Japanese up in the hills opened up with artillery and let us have it. We sustained two cas—it didn't hit the craft or the troops, but lit close to us and we had three casualties our first trip and we hadn't reached the beach or the reef. And one of my fellows got a piece of shrapnel in his hip, another through the top of his foot and one of the sailors got a piece of shrapnel that went through the steel liner—the steel jacket of his helmet and just barely through the fiber liner. It didn't go through but he had an awful headache.

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So when we did get into the reef and unloaded our cargo we went back to our mother ship, which had moved in considerably closer to the beach, and we got—we unloaded our casualties. Then I went aboard the ship and got replacements. Then we took a bulldozer and operator in with other ammunition and supplies and the closer we got, oh probably 300 yards from the beach, they opened up on us again. We had to swing out from the beach and waited until we got a chance to go into the beach and we had the ramp down and the [unclear] told the driver, "Warm that baby up and get 'er movin'."

So as soon as he got off, well, we backed up and wham right where we had been sitting on the reef a round went off. Thank god that we were back far enough that we never received any casualties. It so happened the catches on the ramp, on the tank ladder, would not go down, could not release them, so we had to go one on each side of the boat, go down and flip the catch and then the ramp would go down, and which is pretty hairy. But we—well, I guess we're hired on as tough hands so we figured we could do it.

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The first day we had—we made five trips into the beach with jeeps and various other pieces of equipment, heavy equipment, and rations of all makes and size and form. And our last trip, while we were at the beach, we had to wait for another bombardment on the beach, started back to our mother ship and the convoy had pulled out to seas. So we were out there orphans. We picked out a certain ship there that was in the harbor and go over and kind of tie up

alongside and possibly get to go aboard a ship for the evening. But they wouldn't let us so we just had to float around out there by ourself [sic] and our first night we were on the water, which wasn't the most comfortable place because the bottom of the landing craft had about four or five inches of water in it and didn't want to lay down in that. So we all hovered around a coxswain stand hoping to be there when the sun come up the next morning, without rolling off into water.

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So the next morning we went aboard the merchant ship and had breakfast and got to clean up a little bit and then back to our job of ship to shore, which lasted till the afternoon of the 25th of July when we came aboard on the beach and located our Second Battalion Ninth Marine supply section to whom we were to work with. So we had no more than got ashore when we loaded up with everything—all the ammunition and everything that we could possibly carry, water cans and rations for about 12, 14 of us, and up over the Chonito Ridge over to Fonte [Plateau] to Company F and was there long enough to resupply what we had and was ordered off the ridge, because the skipper said all hell was going to break loose.

So we got back to our supply area at dark, found where we could find to crawl in a hole and call it a night. That was our job after we got to the beach and into the operation. We were working with the supply section, being a cook that was one of our jobs. Either a supply personnel behind the lines or a stretcher bearer and I got in on both, stretcher bearer and also pack mule for ammunition and everything to the troops in the frontlines.

Q: Pack mule, what do you mean?

Armstrong: Well, we call ourselves pack mules.

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Q: Can you explain it, I'm not familiar with the phrase [laughs].

Armstrong: Well, yes, a pack mule is a mule that's used, especially for the forest service, for packing supplies back into mountains. You always consider any ground pounder that's got to do a lot of packing you called yourself a pack mule.

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Q: Oh, I see [laughs].

Armstrong: In other words, it's just a kind of slang for whatever opportunity you wanted to use it for. So we put everything, battle ears and ammunition around our necks and grenades in our pockets and a water can in one hand and help somebody with a case of hand grenades and machine gun ammunition and take off up the trail to either battalion or wherever we had to go with the equipment, and sea rations the same way. Just a human chain more or less taking off over the hump. So we did get up—took supplies up to Fonte [Plateau] Ridge the morning after the big battle.

Q: What did it look to you like then?

Armstrong: Very grisly. Gruesome to see the—it looked like there must have been thousands of bodies piled up laying out there, all Japanese.

Q: This was below Fonte [Plateau] Ridge?

Armstrong: This is on the evasive side where the Japs came up to take the ridge. I never seen so many dead people before and I don't think I've seen any since, as they were piled up there. It was very gruesome. But that's the rigors of war whether it be us or somebody else, the enemy especially.

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So we eventually, in a few days, moved to the high ground after the troops had jumped off in the advance to secure the island. Every two or three days or four days we'd move up behind

the troops with our supplies and keep them in dire need of ammunition, food and water. And when we reached the northern end of the island, we moved back to I think where the present airport is here in Agana. Then from there we went down to a new training area between Ylig and Talofofo Bay, where we cleared the area and set up a nice camp. Had a nice view of the ocean, a big reef there where we'd go out and look for cat eyes and whatever else. We were there till the—I think the 10th—the 9th of February and then we went down to Sumay and boarded a transport to Iwo Jima.

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Q: Did you meet any locals during that time?

Armstrong: The Natives [CHamoru]?

Q: Yes.

Armstrong: Well, I saw—I never met any of them personally that I could call by name, but I saw a lot of them. Real nice to them and they were real nice to me and probably the finest people I've ever met and I still think so, as I have gone through the years, and since I've come back, I find that they are—they haven't change much. They're still very friendly and I'm sure they appreciated the job of what we did and bringing them back to us.

So then well, we got to Iwo till after the operation, came back to Guam the 10th of April. And from the 10th of April till the 3rd of May we—I was back home again. I called it back home. Then I took off for the States and I was stationed at Marine Corps Base in San Diego till the remainder of my enlistment and on 15 December '45 I was discharged from the Marine Corps.

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But I always—in the back of my mind I always thought I might want to come back, come back to Guam, and some day I will get back. I know it will probably be a long struggle unless I re-enlisted in the Marine Corps and came back over here as personnel, which on active duty I

never got back here until Sunday morning, my first trip back to—back home. I call it my second home. It's been a dream that's—for 40 years that I finally got to fulfill and [unclear].

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Well, I wanted to—oh, I kept saying that I liked the Marine Corps, it was good to me and I saw a lot of country I'd never seen otherwise. And some people hated it, hated every minute they've spent in the military and me it's just the opposite. I just think I loved every minute that I've spent with the Corps and I put in 19 ½ years with the active reserve in my hometown and retired as a career Reservist in 1 May 1972. And in 19—13 November o the 60th birthday I was officially retired in a proper ceremony at the Marine Corps Birthday Ball with the total of 39 years, eight months and seven days of satisfactory service. It was a long haul down the road but I knew each day I was getting a day older and each month and year. I didn't think I'd last 10 years it ever get to me, but it came and I don't regret one day that I spent. If I had to do over, I'd do the same thing.

Q: How do you feel about World War II, how do you feel it affected your life or yourself personally?

Armstrong: Well, I've always been what you might call a patriot. I was always proud of my country and I always read everything on history that I could especially the expansion of the nation from 19—or 1775, '76 through to the present day. I've always been an advocate of a strong military force and I think I'll probably die with the same thoughts. I figure when the flag goes up and they same, "Come," I went before and I can always go again. I was fortunate that I spent one year during the Korean War on active duty. The rest of the time was Reserve. Like I've said before, I never went to Vietnam but had we been mobilized, the Reserve been mobilized where I'd had to go, I wouldn't have no qualms about it, I'd a gone and did what I could like I did before.

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See I'm very—like I say, I am very much an advocate of a strong nation and not be second,

third but number one. We've come from behind to be number one in two or three wars, but she's still the greatest country in the world, it is worth fighting for.

Q: Well, can I ask you what is your reason for returning to Guam now today?

Armstrong: Well, like you said it's been a 40-year dream to come back and see the changes in the period from my last visit here, last tour of duty here, and to try to retrace my footsteps on the island in the invasion and occupation of Guam. And my good friend Jack Eddy has invited me over for the last three, four years and we finally got to fulfill this dream and now we're here to attempt, as close as we can, to do what we did 43 years ago. Only this time see it without somebody shooting at me and looking through most of the territory and ground here through the sites of a rifle.

It's really been great. I couldn't begin to visualize how modern the city of Agana and the island itself compared to what it was when I was here. It just wasn't. And of course you forget that time marches on and nothing stays the same and it's been a great improvement for, I'm sure for everyone and it's very good to be back. And I have many things to tell other friends that were here during the war and what they wouldn't know as the same place and walk down the street or drive down the street it's no different than being in the city of Sayle back on the mainland. So that's—like I say, my main reason is that it's something that I've been wanting to do for all these years and planned on it and I'm here.

Q: The Park here was established to commemorate the brave sacrifices of all people from all nations who participated in World War II. What, if anything, would you like to see here at the Park?

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Armstrong: Anything that is possibly—is possible to get to. Just here for about 12 days and, like I told my wife, I said there probably won't be any stone unturned that we haven't seen. Of course that's kind of exaggerating things. But Jack has shown us a lot of our places that we were and it seems to be a little more brush and trees than there was and it's kind of hard to

locate everything, but we're doing a good job of it and looking forward to seeing everything that there is to be seen.

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Q: Is there anything that you would like to add personally to the oral history; is there anything else that you would like to add?

Armstrong: Well, it's been kind of a—if I'd a sure what I was going to say, I could have had a regular story I could have written. But like I say this is a hit and miss deal. I jumped around from one time—one period to another and then got back to the other—what I started out with and I hope it'll make some sense to you.

Q: Okay. On behalf of the National Parks Service, I would like to thank you for your contribution to our oral history studies.

Armstrong: One thing I will say, I was not on the frontlines too much other than in and out with the supplies. Well, if I'd a been needed on the frontlines, then I'd a been there. But primarily my job was in supply and when we were able we'd set our field kitchens up and serve hot chowder to the troops on the frontlines. When you're in the commissary department, you're everything. Like I say you get back to the pack mule, you're packing ammunition and anything that the troops need you can help get to them. And when we set up our field mess and start cooking beans or what have you to give to the troops, we do that, too. In other words, you're just kind of like a general laborer. We take orders from whoever is in charge of this and that's it. Just do your job. Like I say, this time here on the frontlines as a frontline man, you have to do your killing just like anybody else.

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Yeah, I'd probably think of a lot of things I could have said later, but I guess that's going to be it and I hope that's—there's some information for you.
Q: Yeah, it does help. When I—we have a lot of documents and—I'm going to stop

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