

National Park Service (NPS)

Mariana Islands Wartime Experience through Oral Histories Fellowship
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Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program



Jay Magee
November 11, 1995

Interview conducted by Al Miller
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Interviewee: Jay Magee

Military Rank: 1st Marine Division, D Company

Interviewer: Al Miller

Date: November 11, 1995

--00:00:00 AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Narrator: Jay Magee is a Caucasian-American man wearing a white T-shirt with a white nametag. Behind him is a white wall with a green plant.

[Camera shot is cut and sequences into a black screen, which a message that says "Our Veterans REMEMBER"]

[Jay Magee is resumed back in shot with the message still in the foreground]

[Message is removed as shot is now focused solely on Jay Magee again]

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Q: My name is Al Miller and I represent the National Park Service. Our purpose today, November 11th, 1995 is to capture your World War II experiences on video tape. Would you please state your name and spell your last name?

Magee: My name is Jay Magee, spelled M-A-G double EE, and I am from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Q: Would you tell us your date of birth, sir?

Magee: Well, today is my birthday – 11-11-23, I was born. So I am 72 years old.

Q: When did you join the military?

Magee: The day after Pearl Harbor.

Q: December 8th, 1941?

Magee: Uh yes, but I didn't get my papers until December the 28th, I think it was. They couldn't take me in when there was no place to put you so they had to wait until there was room down at Parris Island, that's where I did some of my boot training.

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Q: What branch of the service were you in?

Magee: The US Marines, the Jarheads.

Q: How long did you stay in the Marines?

Magee: Four years and three weeks I think it was, something like that.

Q: What experiences would you like to share with us today?

Magee: Well, a lot of experiences, but I can't remember them all, but I will share a few. Like I said, I enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor; I was just barely 18 years old and I was not doing too much at the time because of the fact that I was just 18 years old and it was a real experience because this was probably the first time I was ever away from home when I went in the Marines.

And I was the youngest in the family and my parents didn't like it too well, but they didn't hold me up so I enlisted and the first trip was down to Parris Island on the train and, we got down there and it was New Years Day – no, New Years Eve, we arrived at Parris Island. If my memory was correct. It took us two days to get down there because Parris Island is in the boonies and you have to switch trains out in the boonies and when we got there, there wasn't room for us, so they put us out in tents. And I spent six weeks at Parris Island. We had a hurried up experience there and they gave us no tests, all they did was say, what did you do before? I said I caddied, so they said, well, we will make you a rifleman or a machine gunner in a rifle company, because I had no experiences. So that's what they did and from Parris Island we went up to New River (MCAS) and there wasn't any up at New

River either. And we built a camp up there and we walked around in the mud for two or three months up there up to our knees, making a camp up there and doing some training.

Q: Where was New River?

Magee: North Carolina. That's where Camp Lejeune is now, but they called it New River in those days, because there wasn't a Camp Lejeune there. But New River was a, in the boonies and you got – you were lucky you got liberty on the weekends, but there wasn't any place to go, except New River and there wasn't any at New River. [smiling]

And there wasn't any transportation to any place else, so you were stuck in a, New River. We all had fun there though, the squad that I was in, we a, on Saturdays and Sunday we played cards, we went down to PX with a machine gun cart and filled it up with beer and crackers and came back and we had a good time Saturday night and Sunday we played cards and drank beer and ate crackers and told wild tales about all the girls we knew and – which were lies, and so – we had a good time there, it was great. We had good fellowship, the kids were good and we learned a lot. And we made a landing up in Chesapeake Bay on a boat to see what it would look like to try to land out on cargo nets on little Higgins Boats and after that we uh, got ready to go overseas, I guess it was. But they didn't have any place for us to go because... you know, we weren't prepared for what we were doing. So we waited around until – I think it was in July or some time like that. They loaded us up on Pullman cars and we went from North Carolina to San Francisco, on Pullman cars and we had Pullman service and that, that, was great. Boy, we had guys who came and made our beds for us, that was a real trip over there. We got to San Francisco...and they gave us liberty and we got aboard the ship and it was the USS Barnett and it was a converted, a luxury liner and we were way down in the hole and they had these bunks that were eight tiers high.

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They built these little slots, in the wall that you could just barely slide, and your sea bags were down below on the deck and these guys would go out on liberty and they would come back all barreled up and they would try to get in these bunks and they would get sick and

they would throw up and they would go down and on your sea bag and oh, it was bad. And it took us about four days, I guess, to load up the ship and there we went. We were supposed to go to Fiji, they told us that we were going to pull maneuvers on Fiji, but we got out there in the ocean and things were happening over here on Guadalcanal, they were starting to build Henderson Air Field, I guess it was, and the way I understand it, that we didn't put any landings on Fiji, we went straight to New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand and we unloaded the ship and loaded it back up combat and we spent about six or seven days in New Zealand and we worked eight hours on and eight hours off and the eight hours on you were loading ship and the eight hours off you were hiking up in the hills and trying to get some sleep and I-I-I don't think we had too much liberty in New Zealand.

So we loaded up and we didn't know where we were going or what we were going to do, but we all loaded up and we got aboard ship, combat and we went north and we finally go to our destination, which we never heard of and didn't know where we were. They said, we are going to Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal, and where is the Solomon Islands, and where is Guadalcanal? And we didn't know anything about it and they said, well, they showed us a map and they said, okay. So...we got there and I guess the Navy had shelled it pretty good, but that doesn't help – the Navy never solved the problem for anybody by shelling a beach because they couldn't hit anything if they had to. So let's face it [unintelligible]. So we got there in the early morning and we got up and we climbed down the cargo nets into the little Higgins Boats and we are flopping up and down in the water and we loaded up and we went to shore and boy, we barreled in there and there wasn't anything in there. [Hearty Laugh]

We hit the beach and there wasn't – we went inland and we went through all these coconut trees and, and swamps and we never did see any enemy, I don't know, for two or three days, I guess it was. We were wandering around in the swamps, it was all fouled up so – but we finally got in there and that time all the fighting was done over in Tulagi, on the island Tulagi and by that time the Japs on Henderson Field had figured out what was happening and they were prepared for us so we did some, some fighting getting there and it wasn't much though. We a... We recaptured the air field and built a perimeter around it and that's about the most you can say. They did try to – one night they brought in 800 imperial marines off a couple submarines and they tried to break through the lines at the battle of the Tenaru, which they claimed we killed 800 Japs that night, which our company was

pretty much involved in.

Well, it was a pretty good battle, and we killed 800. The next morning, they went in with a bulldozer and dug a big hole and shoved it all in. They were hanging up in the trees – up the palm trees and everything else. They, they... We just tore ‘em with mortars and

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Q: Were you in the 1st Marine Division the entire time you were in the Pacific?

Magee: The entire time – I was in the same company, I was in B Company, but we were – our squad was assigned to the rifle company C Company, which, I was with C Company most of the time, but I was in B Company, which was the weapons company. We had mortars and machine guns in B Company, but they broke you off and put you in rifle companies.

But I spent all my time over there in the same company and you never – you kept getting replacements in, replacements in and I went. there as a PFC and came out as a corporal and I had been over there 30-something months. Every time you came up for a rank, they would ship these sergeants and things over from the States that had never seen any service. And they... but that was the way it worked.

You... you... you’d form a fellowship or a buddyship with a guy and the next day you knew [inaudible] wasn’t there and you would have to start over again. It was, it was pretty tough. But I had – there we had- there we got – our squad was – we had a gun emplacement back at the airport, machine gun emplacement back there and we uh, usually uh, built crossing firing lines out there and you had to go out there and chop the trees down and chop the field out so that you would hang barbed wire out there, put the tin cans on it with rocks in it, so if they hit the line, you could hear them out there at night

And [brief pause], one day, the the fighter – they’d bomb you twice a day and one day the bombers were coming over and the fighters – our fighters – got up there and were playing with them up there and they dropped their load and they missed the airport and they hit

our gun emplacement and I got buried in the gun emplacement and got a concussion, so, I don't remember too much of much anything any more but I can tell good tales anyway, so - but uh - but I never went to the hospital. All you did was sit out there and heal yourself because the hospital was worse than where we were. In the hospital - we were down at the beach one time, dug in down there, and that is when the battle wagon was out in the bay out there, they controlled all the shipping lanes and everything out there.

You would look out there and these destroyers would be patrolling up and down the beach and they were the Jap destroyers and one day they were - actually it was at night, and the battle wagon came and they were firing up at the airport and we were down on the beach dug in and I - said - there was a 22-inch shell coming in there, but it sounded like a railroad car coming right over your head. - It, it, was weird how the sound of a shell coming over your head was. But they never hit us, they hit the hospital, which was back by the airport and they hit the airport, tore it up pretty good. But, - that's - about all I remember of Guadalcanal, I guess.

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Q: Were there any supply problems on Guadalcanal?

Magee: We never had any supplies, so it wasn't any problem. You had to get your own. You ate coconuts and they had lime trees and they - you go out in the villages, they had a few villages there and you could go out there and what few natives, there- there wasn't anything there. Lets face it, the natives had all moved out and there really wasn't anything out there. And where the natives had moved out, they had some gardens there and there was some, somemelons and stuff in the gardens but you go on patrol and you would run into these villages and you could get something to eat there, but finally the Army came in and they relieved uh, some of the troops.

And they brought all these good supplies in, these good M-1s. We had O-3s and old water cooled machine guns and they had M-1s and we got down and started trading them our O-3s because we told them the M-1s wouldn't work in the jungle and um, one night we went down to their supply dump down there with our machine gun carts and relieved the guard

down there and stole all of their... good stuff. Their cereal and their juices and things that we didn't have. [smiling] So, we did- we did a job on them. Those are some of the good things I can remember. The fellowship there and the comradeship that we had over there was great. You- you couldn't ask for anything better.

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Q: You mentioned you got hit by the Japanese bombers, how often did they come in?

Magee: Well, they came in twice a day, right around lunch time and then around the evening and then Washing Machine Charlie would fly around at night and drop one every now and then to keep you awake. But nobody paid attention to him, because he was just up there - to keep you awake.

Q: And they were primarily up at the airfield?

Magee: They were at the airfield. That is all that was there, there wasn't anything else to bomb but the airfield and that was the only reason we went there, was the airfield. They were building it to go down in Australia so, we stopped them there and that was the first that they had been hit that, that way.

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Q: Being in the rifle company in the Marines, you had to be involved in other invasions besides Guadalcanal?

Magee: Well, I was involved in... the one on New- New Britain, which was Cape Gloucester. Was the place that we hit was Cape Gloucester. But, New Britain was a crescent shaped like island and it [Cough] – Rabaul was up in the northern tip of it, so that was an important island I guess, that, that cut off the supplies coming down, so that they couldn't get onto New Guinea any more. And, that was another landing where our company never ran into any opposition on the beach, but we were way up on the right side of the island, I guess, that we landed on. We were trying -we were going to circle around and cut them off and we got this swamp out there and I guess we were on this swamp for five days and

that...we.. we wanted – that was horrible. Walking around in the swamp. To sleep at night you would like have to chop down a tree and get in the tree to sleep and it – it was bad. Big old bugs crawling on you. Leeches all over you. [Laughs]

Guadalcanal – it wasn't too bad a place. It was a big coconut plantation there. I think Lever Brothers had – [unintelligible] they got oh, miles and miles of coconut trees there. The only trouble was that they hadn't harvested them and all the coconuts had these big rats running around there and these big old land crabs were eating on them. Oh it was – but New Britain was different. There wasn't too much on New Britain either. I don't know why we got there, but I guess there was the airfield there too, that we tried to stop. And, uh, what do I want to try tell ah – our outfit eventually went up about the middle of the island and our company, C Company, we uh, built a perimeter around the – they had a PT tender up there that they claim that JFK was – patrol boat was coming off of, so we had this perimeter around there, and we also had a blockade on the road that was going from the southern end up to the northern end. And we captured all these sick Japs that came by and we had a stockade there and we put 'em in a stockade. And one of them that came in was – had gone to Stanford University with our captain and he was a superior private, and the captain knew him. I assume that he knew him. So – but... that was where I had my greatest experience, was up there.

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I got orders to go down – I was to go down and take a test to see if I was qualified to be an officer. They had never given me a test before and I don't know why they gave me this one, but I guess I had done my duty and was okay doing on what I was doing. So they flew a little grasshopper plane up and it landed on the beach and I got on the plane and they loaded up, they had a drum of gas up there and they refilled the thing. We got halfway down there, it was a crescent shaped island and we got halfway down there and it was right out in the middle of the bay there and the thing conked out, and we go down in it and the pilot couldn't swim, so I told him, I put my gear on the lifeguard cushion, which was life raft like, and I strapped it on there and I put my rifle and all my – everything I owned was on there except my suit of dungarees and my knife.

I kept my knife because I didn't know what was out in the ocean there. You could see the land there and I told him I would swim in there and see if I could get a boat or something to come out there and pick him up because he said he couldn't swim. So I swam all day that day and got in there in the evening, and I was all pooped out. There wasn't anything in there, no boats, there was a native hut there and a guy and his wife were there. I finally talked to him and I told him what I needed and he said he didn't have a boat, but there was some oil drums there and he took an oil drum and went out and brought the pilot in. The dumb guy left my gear out there and it's still floating around there in the ocean. All my souvenirs, all my gold teeth I had and – gosh. But the next day somebody sent a boat up and picked us up and we went back down there and I sat around down there for a week waiting for some gear to get back up to the company.

I took a test and they said I could be an officer or go back to B-12 and I – well, that came later though. That came later, that's right. That came later. That came after we were on Pavuvu, which was this nice little island that Macarthur gave us to stay on after all these nice things we did out there. Macarthur gave us this nice little island with nothing on it. There wasn't anything at all on the darn thing and they took the Seabees, took them and they built roads and they built us places where we could put our tents and oh, that was great. [brief pause] But Pavuvu was a great island. And from there, we were going to Peleliu and I was on board the boat there and we were all loaded up ready to go to Peleliu and they told me I had to get off. They said, you are rated to go back to the States. So, I didn't get to make Peleliu and I hated to miss that because that was a good one. So I, didn't get a chance to see all my buddies. And our company was a pretty good – we had three Congressional Medals in our company, which was – that was pretty good for one company to have three out of it. And we saw a lot of action and- we lost a lot of men, but it was great. The greatest experience of my life. [smiling]

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Q: Did they ever make you an officer?

Magee: Nope, I went to B-12 and the war ended and I was a – they wouldn't guarantee you a commission and my time was up and I said, well, I might as well get out then. But it was

great. It was – I didn't regret a day or a minute of my time in the Marines. That was, the best experience of my life.

I thought it was great. I would recommend it for anybody, I don't care who they are. At least a year in the service -it- would straighten out half the people we got in this country.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Magee: Well, not that I know of. I have done enough talking I guess.

Q: I want to thank you for taking your time to be with us today.

Magee: Well, thank you, it's a pleasure. [smiling with a brief fit of laughter]

[Cut away from Magee as a title shows, "Our Veterans REMEMBER"]

[END OF SESSION]

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