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Mr. John Munka
June 14, 2004

Interview conducted by Rose Manibusan
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508 compliant version Michael Faist

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Interviewee: Mr. John Munka

Military Rank: 27th Division 106th Infantry I Company_

Interviewer: Rose Manibusan

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Saipan

Date: June 14th 2004

00:00:00 to 00:00:20 AUDIO DESCRIPTION:

John Munka is a Caucasian American man with glasses, shell necklace and a white name tag, wearing an island print ocean blue shirt. Behind him is a yellow curtain with a white diamond overlay and a beige wall.

Q: The following oral history interview was conducted by Rose Manibusan, Chief of Interpretation at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Saipan, on 6-14-04 at 5:10 pm, to record an oral history interview with Mr. John Munka, who served with the United States Army during World War II. This interview is being made by the National Park Service and American Memorial Park. For the record, could you please state and spell your full name?

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John Munka: John A. Munka.

Q: I understand that the National Park Service has your permission to make this recording and to retain all literary and property rights deriving from it. Is that correct?

John Munka: Correct.

Q: John could you tell us where you were born and the date of your birth?

John Munka: I was born in Akron, Ohio, July 16th, 1919.

Q: Did you grow up there?

John Munka: I spent most of my life there.

Q: And went to school there?

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John Munka: Yes, went to school there.

Q: Tell me about your family.

John Munka: Well, my father and mother came from the old country. My dad came from Hungary, my mother from Austria and I think they were about 19 or 20 years old when they came here. My mother went to Davenport, Iowa, my dad settled in New York and some place in between they met and they got married in Tonawanda, New York. North Tonawanda, New York. And my oldest brother was born there, so shortly thereafter they moved to Akron, about 1918 and of course I was born 1919. I went to school in Akron, I was raised there in Akron and went through high school and went to work there after and spent a year and a half in the three C's – the Civilian Conservation Corps, which was the government funded program at that time, because the Depression was going full blast. I was raised during the Depression years. But we survived. I had four brothers and – five brothers – four brothers and two sisters. There were seven of us all together. And they all lived and resided in Akron. We were all born in Akron and most of them married. My youngest brother died about a year and a half ago.

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He was with the Ordinance in Europe during the war and as I say, he died about a year and a half ago. He was younger than I am, but my oldest brother stays – year and nine months older than I am and he's still living in the Akron area. And he's got quite a few kids. And after the war, I got married and we have three children, two girls and a boy and as of now we have 17 grandchildren and our first grandchild was married about a year and a half ago and they are expecting their first child in December, so I will be a great-great grandfather. I'm not that old, but I mean, I will be one.

Q: And your wife's name?

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John Munka: Anna Marie Munka. She was born and raised in Akron, did all her schooling in Akron, spent all her life there and uh, outside of that, things were pretty peaceful, before the war, until I was caught in the draft in 1941 and I was drafted October 16th 1941. Just a couple months prior to the war. After basic training, of course the war broke out while I was in basic training, and at that time, the 27th infantry division, which I was a part of, had released a lot of the old-timers from the National Guard that had been activated into the regular Army. They were short on man power because they released some of the married men.

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So our program was accelerated and we got trained and we joined in, in Fort Ord, California and came overseas immediately and after that, the war stories started. We went to the – we were the first – 27th infantry division was the first division sent overseas after the war started and we were sent to the Hawaiian islands as a parameter defense. So they split up the three regiments and all the islands and we spent time, oh, building beach defenses and most watching for invasions and after the battle of Midway, when the chance of invasion in the Hawaiian islands had diminished, they put us into intensive jungle training for combat and from there we started out through the Pacific and wound up here in Saipan and – shall I give the whole - ?

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Q: How old were you then?

John Munka: Well, I celebrated my 25th birthday here on Saipan. So that was in July. So I was 24 – I was 25 on July the 16th here.

Q: Before you talk about the actual battle Saipan, can we talk a little bit about basic training and what that was like for you?

John Munka: Well, went to Camp Wallace Texas, which was a new camp, just set up and of course we were all pretty much in the same boat. We get our training and most of the fellows that I came with were from the Northern part of Ohio and we all pretty much shared the same thing. We went through basic rifle training and infantry work, a lot of hiking and physical set up. Most – there were quite a few of them that were not used to a hard life and of course, I had been raised in the Depression years and I worked hard. My dad was quite a task master, so I was in fairly good physical shape when I went there.

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We did have a few moments. We would get passes occasionally to go to Fort Worth, Texas and it was kind of funny, they had a military base of some – well, they had an Air Force base and a military base at Fort Worth and when we first started going there, I mean, the population treated us civilly, but when December 7th came and it was a totally different thing, and there were quite a few rich ranchers around and it was nothing to stand on the street corner and have a large limousine pull up and say, hey, what are you doing soldier? Do you want to go to dinner? Do you want to come over to our house? It was after December 7th happened, see. But we didn't stay there too long. As I say, they accelerated our program and I joined the 27th infantry division at Fort Ord, California and we stayed there a few weeks and then we shipped out immediately when they had their full replacements.

Q: What kind of ship?

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John Munka: A ship – we had um, one of the new Kaiser ships and it was kind of a funny experience, nobody wanted to be below deck, because it was always hot and we were crowded, I mean, you know the bunks were the size of this room, you had six guys stacked on bunks, one after the other. So we always stayed up on deck, so we would sit in front of the bridge and lean against it and you felt the ship bend in the middle. So we asked this one sailor what – well, the sister ship to this Kaiser ship, broke in half, right in the center

of the deck there and it sunk and they lost a lot of people. But it was the new technique of welding rather than riveting ships, so they uh, it wasn't strong enough, but what they did finally, they reinforced them, so several ships were safe. But they were putting out a couple ships a week. I don't know how they did it, but uh, we were a little apprehensive when we went over there, but coming from the mainland, United States to Hawaii, we had two luxury ships. One that I was on was the SS Lurline. It was the finest Pacific tourist ship. And another sister ship, the Aquitaine was a British possession and it was a larger ship and of course we, on the smaller ship kind of envied the regimens that were on the big ship, but then we found out our ship had just been converted and we had linen tablecloths and we had waiters.

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And then we found out that their ship had already been converted and it was strictly a military ship. They had to do their KP and do their dishes and work out of mess kits. But we had a luxury cruiser and we didn't appreciate it until we got there and found out that – but after that we always went on transport ships unto the different operations.

Q: What was your first operation?

John Munka: The 105th went to Macon and we were supposed to go to Kwajalein and we did go to Kwajalein, but the operation was so successful that they did not commit us. We anchored off of there, so then we went Eniwetok and that was our spearhead, we were the first outfit to hit the beach and so Eniwetok, after it was taken, we went back to Hawaii but while we were there, we had so many casualties that our ship, our transport ship was waiting to pick us up and take us back to Hawaii because there is nothing on an Atoll, I mean there is a very small Atoll and of course we had – they destroyed everything, the artillery, the naval gunfire, I mean, there were no trees standing, no houses, no buildings of any type. And so we were stuck there without rations and stuff. But they did manage to give us the C and the D rations and so we just lived in holes in the ground. We had a few air raids at night. So we got below the ground level and it was – we became scroungers, so to speak. They were bringing in supplies for the – they were going to put anti-aircraft defenses there and plus a naval consignment of some kind or other.

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And so they brought their supplies in and we helped ourselves to some of it every once in while. You know. But it was – what they call – I don't know, GI's have a way of scrounging things up with what we did then. See. But then finally we got back to Hawaii again, we regrouped, got replacements, went into intensive training again and then we headed for Saipan and in 1944 – in fact it was quite a long trip, because we were on the high seas coming over here, on the June the 6th, when the D-Day invasion happened. And so I don't recall how many weeks we spent onboard. So –

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Q: What was your rank at the time?

John Munka: I was PFC. First class. Private First Class at that time. But well, after Eniwetok, I mean, I was made a corporal but when we got back to Hawaii and we had a 12 hour pass, you know, after all that combat, and like I say, we kinda overstayed our leave and two days later I was a Private again, see, but the captain wanted to make me back again but I will be honest, I refused it because I didn't want the responsibility of having somebody killed. Making a decision and – but then we came to Saipan and I was PFC, but we had a lot of casualties and I was made a sergeant in the field, but that was no official until after the battle was over. So I was still a PFC when I hit Saipan here, but when we got back and the official paperwork was done, then I became a sergeant and that is where I was discharged. Of course they say I did turn down being a corporal again, but when the bullets are flying, you don't argue. Well, no position. We lost quite a few percentages of our non-coms and officers and so –

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Q: What is your first impression of the island of Saipan?

John Munka: Well, it was pretty desolate actually. I mean, because the Navy had been

shelling it quite a bit prior to the invasion and all the time we were invading, I mean, I never – no buildings left and the kind of strange part of it was that the only thing left standing was the stack at the sugar mill and it was full of holes and we stood off shore before we come in, you know, wondering what kept it standing, but I guess it eventually toppled. But I understand that there was a Japanese spotter for the artillery up in the top of it and they didn't know that for a while, but then when they found out, I mean, they kind of aimed all of their artillery at him.

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But it was sort of a – not a very good – it was a brooding look. I mean, it was dusty and dirty and there was no green vegetation and the few green things that were left, of course were covered with dust and dirt and so we moved on through. We got inland a little bit, we went up through the island towards Aslito AirField and we went through the Marine divisions who were recuperating on the beaches and – but -

Q: Can you describe your experience going through Aslito AirField?

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John Munka: Well, it was reasonably light, I mean we went up into the mountains and we went on the far side of Tapochau and we got to the entrance of what is termed Death Valley and our colonel at that time, we were under the Marine command, and our colonel noticed our objective for the following day was a couple of miles out into open countryside and of course the enemy had the hills on both sides of us and they were well fortified and we would be walking out through an open field. So our colonel radioed back that the situation was militarily unattainable. That is an impossible place, we can't do that, you know. Of course, that is when the controversy between Holland M. Smith, the Marine Corps general and our general, Ralph Smith, came into focus, that our colonel had told Holland M. Smith of the situation and the orders came back, forget it. And of course the Marine general had no use for the Army general, I mean, a lot of people know that. And so he says, you take that position the next day. So unfortunately I was one of the two companies that was ordered to start into the valley. I was with the 3rd Battalion, 106th infantry and I Company and K

Company were ordered to move out into the valley with L Company in reserve and of course the M Company, where the heavy weapons, which were still at the back anyway. You had the heavy mortars and the heavy machine guns.

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And so on the morning, the – well, on the evening of the 23rd, while we were there, we uh, were sort of digging in, you know, for the night and this Jap tank – Japanese tank came roaring down the street right between us – street, it was a little road. And firing machine gun and stuff, but he set an ammunition dump on fire. One of their ammunition dumps on fire, which is about 50 feet away from us and of course it started exploding and we had shrapnel all over, so we had to hug the ground and dig deep. In fact, one very good friend of mine, he and I were digging in together and a piece of shrapnel came in from of us and threw dirt up on our face and he said to these - he said, I'm hit, I'm hit, I'm going back to the medic! And I looked and he had a lot of dirt on his face. I said no, you are alright. I said, just stay down, stay down, there was shrapnel all over. He said, no – so he got up to leave and of course the next morning after we woke up, another one of my buddies come over and he says, well, he says it looks like George got it last night. I said, no, I said, he didn't get hit, I said just had a little dirt on his face, he went back to the medics. He says, well who is that? I turn around and about 20 feet behind me, a piece of shrapnel had gone through the top of his head.

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Gruesome thing to talk about it. I think maybe if he had stayed down. But I don't know, the next day was so bad. We moved into the valley and we were spread out and moved into open terrain.

Q: Into Death Valley?

John Munka: Into Death Valley and all the while holding our breath because we knew what was going to happen. And then both companies get up, they are almost entirely And then they let loose with everything but the kitchen sink. I mean, it was terrible. And of

course it was like, once in a while you have an open spot and you see maybe some lava rock up there and there were a few spots like that scattered around the valley that everybody would get behind and try to hide.

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But our colonel and the one captain, they were almost the first ones killed. Our Colonel Hy Mazone [sp?], he was a wonderful guy and he wouldn't send us, he said, where he wouldn't go himself and he was one of the first ones killed out there. So anyway, we were kind of pinned down and we had a lot of casualties and I was just next to my buddy and were laying there with protection from a little cropping of rock and I guess we weren't protected enough, the sniper put a bullet right between us and we had that much space between us, you know. And we both got up to find new shelter and fortunate for me, the sniper picked him next and killed him with a bullet through the heart and I moved over and there was a couple of badly wounded men there and one them I treated and his leg was torn and he went into shock and died on me. But it was kind of – we didn't have that much protection and every time I tried to put a splint on his leg, I mean, a bullet would fly too close to me and of course, being human, I would flinch back again.

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I thought, no, I better go back and fix his leg again, but unfortunately he died and the other fellow was badly wounded and so – but the – most of the soldiers out there that were left, tried to – they would get tired after a while and get panicked and hope they could make a run for it and get out of there, but we were there about four or five hours, pinned down in the heat of the day and – they – some of them would finally get up and start to run, but none of them made it. So – well, with the good position that the enemy had with the machine guns and rifles and – nobody stood a chance in that area.

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But my other buddy, he was badly wounded and – I say “buddy” because I will be honest with you, we are all buddies in the service. I mean, you form an alliance with each other

that precedes family feelings or anything. You get a tie that is really close to you. I mean, you can't explain it if it happen. I mean, like I had one good buddy that is still alive in Arizona there, and he's not very demonstrative and I'm not either, but we hug and I think a few tears come every once in a while. Anyway, this buddy, he was badly wounded, shrapnel had torn his shoulder, he was bleeding, and we stopped the bleeding and we were pinned down there for a quite a while and he turned to me and he say, John, he says, I can't take it much longer, he said, he said we have to do something.

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I said, well, what do you want to do? It was still early in the afternoon, I said, if you want to try it Earl, I says, I will help you. So I took off all my gear and stuff and left my helmet on, I knew it was going to protect me, you know, but – and I grabbed a hold of him and we took off and I was very fortunate, I was the only one that ever made it out of the valley then. I mean a few of them were still left alive the next day, they came out, but that night, after dark. Anyway, they came out. And I – you think you are quite stable, you know, and you can handle things, and I was in good physical shape at that time, but the medics came with a stretcher and this friend of mine, he had shrapnel in his back and his shoulders and I knew he was hurting and they would pick him up and I wouldn't let them touch him. I said, I would leave them down. The medic wanted to grab the cot – I said, no, no, no!

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I said, I will take it up and I bent over and the next thing I knew I was in the base hospital at the air field, where they were set up. I look around and I'm in a cot and I thought, geez, the last thing I remember, I was just outside of Death Valley there. The doctor came and said, how are feeling? I said, I feel pretty good, I said what happened? He said, battle fatigue. I said, battle fatigue? People had gone crazy or something like that and he says, no, he says, all of the tensions today, he can't explain, but I thought, man I got it back here now. And he says, he says, don't rush, don't worry about. He says, if you want to stay here, you stay here. But the next day I got up and I was pacing like a caged lion and I told him, I says, I must be a section 8, which was crazy. And he – the doctor kind of grinned and he said, why is that? I said, well, I says, I want to go back up there. I said, my buddies are up

there. Didn't have many of them left, most of them had – and he kind of grinned and he said, that's about part. He said, but just remember one thing, he says, if I were you, you are not coming back here. I said, well okay.

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But I thought, well, I would go up there, but when that first bullet went by me again, I thought, you dummy, what are doing up here? Why didn't you stay back there in the hospital? But anyway, we went through, we had casualties every day. We would go into the hill and instead of going through Death Valley, this time they let us go through the hill to the right. I mean, there is hills and then the valley and then Tapochau. I mean, I don't know what they call the hills and what they refer to them as, but we went through the hills, slowly, one at a time and flushed the Japanese out one at a time. And of course we weren't exposed to that heavy fire from on top, they were hitting. But we had casualties and lost a lot of friends day by day, till we got near the end of the island. When we got near the northern end of the island, I mean, they – the divisions on the side were sort of congested in there and we were in the middle so they stopped us and brought us back.

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So we were a day or so short of the end of the island where the suicide cliffs were and – had to come back, but that was another experience. We were walking back and you are supposed to be in the military and everything, when you are walking on the roads, one here, one there, staggered out so if an artillery shells comes, or a machine gun gets out, it doesn't get you all, you know, but you look at them and they are two or three hundred feet apart, two or three guys dragging and then a couple more, you know, but not seeing anything, but just looking at that. And this happened in 1944 and to this day, I can remember the looks in their eyes. I mean, they – I don't know what – it's a combat look at I thought it was just unique in me to notice this, but not too long ago in a VFW magazine, I noticed what they call that syndrome, you know, that blank look. And we were just – rehashing and you are actually thinking, how come I'm still alive and you remember all the others that got killed. Why me? Why them instead of me? I think that lived with us. And then finally after a couple days, we stopped to sit and regroup and do nothing and we dug fox holes and just

pretty much quiet. Everybody was sitting at the end of their foxholes and not saying much.

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But it started wearing off after a while. And so we stayed and then we finally, I don't know how many days – well, when the island was secure, they still had quite a few of the enemy in the hills, they bypassed a lot of them in the cliffs and the caves. And we had to go back and start up, put a line across and mop 'em up again. But we didn't have – we had an occasional casualty, you know? And one thing that happened to me in the mop up, was I said previously I didn't want to be a non-com, because I didn't want the responsibility. But anyway, this time they had a squad and we had flushed a couple of the enemy from the hill and went down through sort of sugar cane and brush, so I told this Bernie, I mean he was a just a private, I told him, I says, you take half of the squad and go down through the top and I will have half and move it down to the bottom, which is the logical place for the enemy to come. You know, I thought it was the most dangerous. But unfortunately he was the only one that got shot in through that and to this day; I felt it was my fault.

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I find a lot of them felt the same way too. They order somebody to do something and then it's not the wrong thing to do, it's your decision, but it turned out wrong so – but it will still haunt you for all your life. I mean, 60 years ago and I still remember it very well and we don't – just like, they were the enemy, but I have been asked a lot since I've been here how I feel towards the Japanese, and I have no ill feelings whatsoever towards 'em. In fact, I never had ill feelings towards 'em during the war. Because I mean I – my mother was a very devout Catholic and that is the reason why I'm still here today, because I'm sure she prayed me home. But she – she never had a bad word to say about anybody and when us kids would always complain when we were growing up, she would say – and we would complain about somebody and she says, now, you don't know what their problem is. She said, you don't know if they have something – you don't understand, so just cool it, so to speak. So of course she didn't say "cool it" but it was in terms of that way. We always thought she was a foreigner who wouldn't understand about us American kids, but she was a pretty wise lady, I will tell you, you know?

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But as I say, in fact, the few soldiers that I did actually know I killed, I mean, it stills with me. [crying] I mean it's something – you don't kill a human being that it doesn't affect you. But anyway. But coming back to it, we went past all support troops, especially artillery, which was back and out of harms way and we come past this artillery unit and they says, hey, come on over here, we will give you a shower. Of course it had been about four weeks, we hadn't shaved, we hadn't washed and we looked – if any of the natives were to surrender, they would say, we are not going to surrender to these animals. Probably that's what we looked like. So we did and they went out of their way, they had this tub set up and I took a bath with clothes and all on, and washed my face and stuff like that. But it was – it was quite an experience. But then we came back and finally they put us on a transport ship and they took us to the New Hibrides islands and we went to the – Espirtu Santo island. And that was to regroup and get our replacements and stuff. Of course we were pretty well dissented.

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And at that time, we had trouble getting a little bit of decent food. I mean, we were supposed to be on good rations, we would get food from New Zealand, but I remember our commanding officer, after Smith had been relieved, they had a Navy aircraft carrier come in there for minor repairs or something like that, and so our commanding officer went onboard ship and he begged for one egg for each man who was still left. And of course we were eating powdered and didn't have much. New Zealand butter, which tasted like sheep dip – pardon me. And so we did, but when the bugle would blow for mess call in the morning for breakfast, a couple of guys would scraggle up there, but this one day, we each had one egg coming. I mean, they lined up a half hour before that bugle saying, hey, I will give you five dollars for your egg! And I said, no you won't. And nobody sold an egg, I don't think. So we had a little bit of Army humor there.

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Anyway, we stayed there and regrouped and didn't get our replacements yet, but at that

time, most of us had been overseas for almost three years and after a battle operation, they said we were going to get furloughs and go home. Well, I had been gone for about three and a half years from the day I left home. And we thought, great. But then when the orders came through that it was a – would be a bad military mistake to take all the veterans, the combat veterans, and just have them all – all new rookies to start again, so they gave us three furloughs for the company. And so the captain put all the names in the hat and gonna draw ‘em out and we had been about three or four months without any mail.

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Of course from Saipan and the battle operations and all the time we spent on the ship. And so we had our mail and the good Lord was on my side again, because the captain pulled two names out of the hat at once, and he says, should I read them both, or put them both back again? And everybody said, put ‘em back! No, read ‘em off! And of course I’d get all the mail from home, and I says, captain, I says, read ‘em and we can go back to our mail. So the first name he read was mine. So I got one of the three furloughs and got to come back. Got my furlough. Went back to Adderbury to come back overseas again. The shipping orders weren’t cut, so I had three or four days there and in that interim, the war in Europe was winding down, the government instigated the point system for discharge and 85 points. And so they said, well, any veterans, like myself, who were scheduled to go overseas, they were going to count the points. If we had it, we wouldn’t have to go back again, see? But anyway, this went on for about two weeks and the commander at the post at Adderbury didn’t know what to do. So finally he said, the heck with it, you guys are going out of here. So the quad rang him on the opposite side, they left the day before on a train and this particular morning, they got us out of the barracks, we turned in all our bedding and stuff, had our packs with us and we were getting ready to get on the trucks and I will always remember this, corporal came out and talked to the commander there and he threw up his hands and the sergeant says, go back and get your gear back out and get your bedding because you are not going back overseas, you are going to stay here.

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So we stayed there until the point system was counted. A good friend of mine, I came home

with, when the point system was counted I had – we needed 85 and I had 97, because – but he only had 83, so he had to stay in Adderbury for two months. I felt sorry for him and I communicated with him afterwards and told him. But they didn't know what to do with us there either, in the interim. They put us on KP regardless of your rank, you know. Ten guys were on KP, twenty guys clean up the yard and so forth. But we kinda were gun ho when it had come. Okay, we met in the barracks and waited for an assignment, and my buddy and I were real dedicated soldiers so we were in there first, but as soon as they piled in behind, we went out the back door. Not that we were lazy, we just didn't want to do anything. But anyways, as I say, it was very fortunate that I was able to be discharged, but because the division after – from Espirtu Santo they went to the invasion of Okinawa and a lot of the 50 something that were still left, I mean, were killed. I found out later. But – all nice guys. So that is basically –

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Then I got to go home and discharge, got married, raised a family. Went to college on the GI Bill. Went to work and that's – about sums it up. I'm fortunate enough to live this long and I'm still in fairly good health. I mean, if you notice, a lot of the veterans that come with me, they have trouble walking and have different problems, you know. As I say, a lot of them – the few that were left, I mean, I think there were four or five guys from my Company and as I say, my Company was decimated at Death Valley, but these few that are alive had been wounded in the previous operations, so they weren't in combat on Saipan here, see – so. I'm one of the few survivors I think, from my company here. As I say, I am very fortunate. I had a very holy mother than prayed me home.

Q: You mentioned that one of your buddies, Earl, had come out with you. Do you recall his last name?

John Munka: Mills. Yeah, he lives in Westerville, Ohio. In fact, they gave me the silver star for carrying him out of there, you know. And I had to laugh when I got home and my wife met him for the first time and she looked at me and I was a scrawny – about 150 pounds and he weighed about 180 pounds and she said, you carried him? I said, I don't know, I did. I mean, I had super strength. Maybe that's why when I got out, I – when I put

him on the stretcher, is why I passed out from battle fatigue. I mean, I think I was just exhausted.

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But unless somebody has been in combat, it's hard to describe a lot of the ways that you feel. There were times when I was disassociated from myself. I'm standing on the sideline watching me do all these things and I'm thinking to myself, you dummy, what are you doing out there, you are gonna get shot. You know? But it's a weird sorta feeling, but you adjust. You have that apprehensive feeling, like sickness in the pit of your stomach and after – if for a few hours you go along and nothing happened, you are fine and then the first explosion and artillery shell or bullet whistles past and its right back again. And it kind of lives with you, maybe that's why, as I say, on the – I call it the road back. I mean, when the battle is over and we came back, I mean, you get that blank look in your eyes and you just want to shut everything. I think your mind just shuts everything off. I mean, you know, maybe it makes you a little psycho, huh? Like they say, one in three people are crazy, you know? I'm one of the other two, I guess.

Q: [unclear]

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John Munka: Yeah, it was tragic unfortunately. And like I said, most of it shouldn't have happened and we shouldn't have been out there in the valley, it's – it's just like you go out in the middle of the street and you have mountains and hills on both sides and there is somebody shooting at you – you wouldn't walk out in the middle of the street. I mean, shooting ducks in a pond, as they say.

Q: Have you been back to Mt. Tapochau since then?

John Munka: I just went on a tour here. I had never been back to Saipan since we left in 1944.

Q: This is your first time back?

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John Munka: Yeah, yeah. So as I say, we took a military tour, that is the idea on it. We didn't – on the tour there, it is completely overgrown now and it's – it's a jungle up there and I thought, when I come here I would recognize – and there is only way to – road kind of wound there on the hill on both sides so I thought, well, they can't change it that much, but I couldn't find the exact spots and right at the entrance way, the ammunition dump was right there and when we stopped the first night right on the edge of the fringe of the trees – but the tour bus took us up into the hill and there was a house up there and the uh, the fellow that lived there, very gracious and on that same vein, most of the people are very gracious. They stopped and talked me and they talked to everybody and he says, oh, he says, we had a crew here last year and he says, they went up on the roofs so they could get a better – he said, do you want to go up on the roof?

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I wasn't in the mood – he had a beautiful balcony and you see could out over the valley. But very gracious and most people have been tremendous since we have been here, you know? And even the little ones. I love the little kids. I went – we went to the church service Sunday and it's a memorial service to the Chamorros and the Carolinians and they had the listing of all the civilians that had gotten killed during the war from June 15th till July the 9th or 10th and they had their ages in there and I started through, but I – I saw so many at one and two years old and infants and stuff like that, I didn't go too far in the pages, I think they had 1,000 civilians or something like that killed. But you know – and it's the tragedy of war. But as I say, that war is a justifiable war I think, because we were attacked, but I mean, I have been asked and some other people that asked me how I feel about the Iraq war, but I couldn't say for sure unless – unless you are there in that spot and our war was a just war because the allies were on the side and we were doing the right thing. But over there when you don't have the UN support, you don't have the problem with France and Germany and Russia – of course their motives were – Iraq owed them a lot of money, so they didn't support it, but with that, you are all by yourself and you are the only country,

UN doesn't want you here and a lot of the countries don't want you there.

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I don't know. I don't know how I would feel with that thing. Oh, I would probably – just like they are doing, they are doing their duty and they are hoping they won't get killed.

Q: Can I ask you about the controversy between the Army and Smith? How did that affect the moral of the troops?

John Munka: There was always a rivalry between the Marines and the Army of course, we are always saying. But in the operations, we were there and maybe we were a little bit reluctant to be in the battle, but they were pretty much trained to be gung ho and they loved it. They go on a lot of operations, they were on and they would go in there and overrun the enemy in a hurry with their aggressiveness and but then they get to a position like what happened here on Saipan.

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They cut the island in half; they had the enemy down in Nafatan [sp?] Point. Nafatan is the south point. But anyway, then they had taken this lead of Air Force, airfield, but then the Japs counterattacked and pushed them back onto the beaches. So then that is why they had to commit us, which were floating reserve. We were supposed to go to Guam, as I say, and so they had to commit us. But we went through their lines and then they – well, we were all kids. I mean, I was an old man at that time, I was 24. But they were all young kids, 19, 20 years old and we went through their lines and they were appreciative to see us and we didn't mind because we think, okay, we kidded them – we've got to rescue you Marine again, you know. But anyway I think that is why we had the big problem. When the troops – when we regrouped and the Marines were moving up on the one side – our 105th regiment was on the left flank, going up through the open lands and along with the Marines and the Marines were on the right, but the bulk of our 27th division went through the mountain. Well, when you are on the flat terrain and open spaces, I mean, you know, you can move.

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Well, we had that when we moved up through Isolito, I mean the Japanese had backed off, so we had it fairly easy until we got to just past Isolito airfield before we really ran into problems. And then when we got up to Death Valley and we couldn't take it and General Holland M. Smith, I keep wanting to call him Mad Smith, because that is what everybody called him, he resented the fact that he had to call on the Army for help. And so I think that is where the big friction was and then it was a – he said there's a big U in our lines. He says, you Army are holding back, and he said, get out there and fight. The two side things are up there, you – having you and the Japs can break through the weak sides of the lines there. And of course that is why we went out into Death Valley and got slaughtered and we still backed off and it was a day or two later before we could slowly work our way through the hills, but we never could get near the lower part of Tapochau, that is where we bypassed a lot of the Japanese, went up around and went to the end of the valley and cut across and they were between troops and our troops in there. And we kind of resented when he relieved our general, but as I say and subsequent investigations in Washington, the General Holland M. Smith was relieved of his command and our general was reinstated, given another division to command.

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The facts proved that the Marine general was wrong. But – but we always had a friendly rivalry and we used to go and find - when we did get some place to civilization and Marines were there, we would take all our ribbons off – you had to wear all your ribbons, if you didn't, you had a little card that showed what ribbons you had and why you just had the strips. If you didn't have on, they would revoke your pass and so some of them got a pass of any kind so they would take them off. And I didn't drink at that time, I didn't drink or smoke and they would go into the bar and I would go in and have a soda pop or something, you know and they would admire the good conduct ribbons and the ribbon that you are in the service and that's all you know, and of course these young fellas would buy them drinks. And go home and laugh like mad, half drunk.

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Little Army humor here and there. There was this fellow that got out of Death Valley, which gave me a silver star and it was worth five points when it came to discharge, that's why I was glad to get it. But I remember a couple days before that, he was kind of a comedian and he came out and he had this helmet on and – man, he says, you think I didn't have a close one. A bullet hole right through the middle of the helmet. He says, look where it went out, it went out the back. He had taken it off of one of our dead soldiers and put it on. And that time it was funny. I mean, it was a gruesome thing, but we had to have humor or else you would go crazy. Make fun out of gruesome tales. It was an experience, put it that way.

Q: And you won the silver medal of honor for -

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John Munka: Yes, I won the silver star, I mean I just –

Q: [unclear]

John Munka: Carrying Earl Mills out of there, saving his life, supposedly, you know and he says, he says, John you saved my life, he says, I appreciate that. And I said, no, Earl, you got it wrong. I said, I was too scared to run out of there by myself. I said, I wanted company. This is why I got out of here! He's a nice guy. He's not too good of shape, I go down to see him near Columbus about 100 miles from where I live in Akron, Ohio. I go down to see him every once in a while.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you had saw [unclear] jumping from the cliffs?

John Munka: No, no. We were pulled back before that. As I said, but the two side groups going in there, it was pretty congested and the resistance was down pretty low. Well, on July 6th – 6th and 7th, the Japanese forces that were still left, counter attacked through the left side down near – above Tanapag Harbor and our 105th regimen was there and they took an awful beating that night, but it sort of decimated the Japs. I don't know how many

thousand – five or six thousand of them, virtually wiped them all out.

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So the resistance was almost non-existent, but then we went – then we – they pulled us back because we had a lot of casualties and we were actually in full strength enough to support each other. You know, you've got heavier – your riflemen, your machine guns, and your BAR men and mortar men and we didn't have enough men of all that type. And I know because I – after I had the battle fatigue and went back again, we were so short handed, that I picked a BAR rifle up. It's an automatic weapon. And they have 20 shot clips and they were about twice as much as the M-1 garrand that we were using and I carried that for one day and every time I moved, like in the movies, I was spraying the hills and any brush and stuff like that. After one day, I mean, I was in good physical shape, I mean, that was too much even for me. I threw it away and got a rifle. But as I say, that is why were dissented with firepower, so they brought us back.

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But I heard quite a bit about the jumping off and there were a lot of pictures afterwards, especially the civilians and the babies and kids and stuff.

Q: Did you have any encounters with any of the civilians?

John Munka: No, none at all. The only ones we saw actually, when we were all pretty much grouped and then coming back, they – the Army of course took a lot of the civilians, took them down to internment camps and fed them and took care of them. But never talked to any of them, so I mean.

Q: Where were you when the war ended?

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John Munka: I was at home at that time. I was discharged in May and I think about the

time the war in Europe ended and then in August I was home at that time.

Q: Can you explain how you felt when you heard it had finally come to an end?

John Munka: Yeah, oh, I was grateful. But I always felt like Okinawa was the last big battle. They were scheduled to – the 27th division after Okinawa was scheduled to go into Japan at that time. Of course I had my points and the war in Europe was over, they had a surplus of soldiers so they didn't need any – they didn't need us old-timers over there any more, so – as I say, I watched the reports, I was home when the report came on with the casualties on Okinawa and I was shocked. I mean, how many of my buddies that were still left? I say "buddies", I mean, everybody is a buddy and they are friends and – in Death Valley over there I lost practically all the fellas I had come over with.

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I mean, when we joined the 27th division, they kind of – the group – it was a strange coincidence, we had a commander that did not believe in the buddy system and if you had your good buddy with you, he split you up. You are in one platoon and one is in another platoon. But prior to going to Saipan, we got a new commander, first lieutenant Johnson. What a wonderful person, and he had been in combat before us and he says, if you have a buddy, it doesn't conflict with what you are – we have scouts and we have automatic rifleman, we have machine gunners, but you can say, put all the machine gunners in one platoon or something like that, or one squad. So we all got together and we got in this one platoon. So all of my friends that I came over with from Ohio were out in the I Company and that is the ones that went into Death Valley and most of them got killed at that time, so – it was pretty lonesome after that.

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I mean, I kinda pulled myself in and I was kind of a loner. But I'm not a quiet person, my honky ancestry. I mean, my dad, he used to like talking and I don't know when to shut up either, to tell you the truth. But I was quite quiet; I didn't have anybody to talk to. And when I did get that furlough and got to come home, maybe that is why they wanted to get

rid of me. Say, John, you don't talk enough, go on home.

Q: How did you feel about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

John Munka: Uh, actually it was quite an appalling thing when you realize how many people were killed, but in sort of evaluating the situation, and fresh in my mind was Tapochau here with the mountains and how rocky and hilly Japan is and I thought how many tens of thousands, both civilians and military personnel would have got killed. I thought that was a small casualty price to pay – pay for the dropping of the bomb. I mean, I don't anybody should ever drop an atomic bomb again, because it's just too far – it's not the immediate death, because when you die, it's quick, but it's the aftereffects from the radiation and thing, I think would be terrible on people.

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Similar to what Russia is going through after that disaster they had at Chernobyl. Thousands and thousands of people are still being affected, so – I don't think all the wars are prolonged by other ways, I don't think the atomic bomb is the answer to them.

Q: Its now 60 years later since the battle for Saipan. I can understand why the community is welcoming the veterans that are here – why did you feel that it was important to return?

John Munka: Well, you know, that's a funny thing, I thought about that myself and – and I think it's kind of weird that – I wanted to come back and sort of apologize to the ghosts of all those that are killed by – you died here and I didn't and I went back home. And I don't understand this. And everybody does that. Why am I safe and he's not? That is a question that's answered millions of times a day and it's a question that has no answer except in the eyes of the good Lord, he knows why, but nobody else does. But it is still upper most. So many great friends and guys that were a lot nicer people than I am. I mean, why they got killed.

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One of my best friends - a little side story, after Eniwetok, we had a lot of casualties and he was the youngest kid in our Company and they called him "the kid". Real wonderful, but he was always sensitive about being the kid, the kid, you know? And so we were – after Eniwetok, we had gone to Honolulu and we passed this photography place and I says, hey Johnny, we are pretty lucky – his name was John also, and I said, we are pretty lucky, lets get our pictures taken and take them home. Send them home, in case something should happen. So we did and I sent 8X10 portraits back and the guy painted them up and made us all look like movie stars, to be honest with you. I looked at it and I thought, that doesn't look like me. Anyway, we went back and when we got our replacements, before we went to Saipan, he came in, like a young kid and says, John, John guess what?

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And I said, I'm in the military, I say, sure you got a furlough, we are going home. He says, no. He says, we've got a guy in here that is a couple months younger than I am now. I'm not the kid anymore, I'm not the kid anymore! I said, John, you will always be the kid to us. Unfortunately he was one of those that got killed in Death Valley on me and I always remember that. But now he had three or four brothers, he was from St. Louis, his dad had died at an early age and his mother was raising the kids and he was the oldest and got drafted and he got killed. I thought heck, I wouldn't have been any loss, my mom and dad were still both alive and I have brothers and sisters at home, you know, I wouldn't have missed. It's never one of those questions, you know? Why did he get it and not me? I will ask him when I get up there. Before I get sentenced to up or down, I will have to ask a few questions. Like all of us shall.

Q: If you could talk to young people today about World War II, what would you say to them?

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John Munka: Oh, I don't – I don't think war is the answer to anything and it got to not think of people as enemies, or people you don't like, I mean, regardless of race, creed, color or nationality, I mean, start with just yourself, not hating anybody or anything. You may

hate some of the things that people do, but not the people themselves and don't condemn a whole race. I mean like we are going in Iraq and the people there are human beings just like you. I mean, they don't – don't hate is the important thing.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview or - ?

John Munka: Only that I'm glad to be here and I'm amazed at the hospitality and the friendliness of the people and I really appreciate the way they have treated us and went out of their way to be nice and it's a real pleasure to be back. I mean, it's got the haunting memories, I mean, you know, which I still have at night. My wife says, what are you howling and moaning about? I says, you don't want to know.

Q: You still have nightmares.

John Munka: Yeah, oh yeah. And the nightmares are mostly, like I said, a couple of decisions that I made that – well, the one in particular I told, where the fellow got killed and – that's still there. I keep hollering at him to get out of there. It goes with age maybe. Maybe I'm getting Alzheimer's in my old age, I don't know. No, it's pretty vivid. You don't forget much. Even after 60 years.

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As I say, I get up in the valley and I didn't recognize a lot of it, but I recognize 60 years ago. I mean, the same positions. And if the condition were the same, if the roads hadn't changed and the fields were exactly there, I think I could point right, within a few feet of every spot that some of my friends got killed or some place where I was at, but – it's – I mean, I don't remember what I did yesterday, but I remember that. I guess the mind is a funny thing, as they say. But like I said, when I had the battle fatigue, the doctor says, your mind just turns you off. Just shuts it down. Like turning off a light switch. They should have left me back there. But – so any how.

Q: Thank you for sharing your experiences with us and for helping us to preserve history.

John Munka: Well thank you, I hope I didn't talk too much, as I said my honky ancestors -

[END OF SESSION]