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

James G. Burton
August 22, 1996

Self-Interviewed
Transcribed by Plowshares Media
Coordinated by Dr Jennifer Craig
Reviewed by Dr. Jennifer Craig
508 compliant version by Caitlin Johnson and Michael Faist

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WAPA Collections
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Interviewee: James G. Burton
Military Rank: Captain, Corps of Engineers, Company B, 1899th Engineer Aviation Battalion from 1941 to 1946
Interviewer: None Location: Unknown
Date: August 22, 1996

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Burton: This recording is the life and times of J. G. Burton, Captain, 1899th Engineer from 1941 to 1946 at which time I was discharged from the Army at Fort Smith, Arkansas. The record begins December the 7th, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day. On this day, I was on a job for an oil company near Alice, Texas. After completing the fieldwork, I returned to the base of operations of our company, McCullough Tool Company at Corpus Christi, Texas. As I entered the headquarters, all the radios in the area were discussing the attack on Pearl Harbour by the Japanese.

At this time, I had already signed up for the draft. I signed up in Van Zandt County in East Texas. After Pearl Harbor, I contacted the Draft Board in Van Zandt County and asked when I was to be called up. They informed me to clear my job and report to Van Zandt County at my convenience. I did so and upon arriving at the Draft Board I was informed that my call-up would be some six months. Since I had given up my job and closed my residence in Corpus Christi, I had to find another job for the six months. I talked with Mr. O.J. McCullough of McCullough Tool Company and he said it would be okay for me to come back to work and he wanted me, since I had left Corpus, to go to Shreveport, Louisiana and work in that branch office taking care of people who were to be taking vacations during the six month period. I did so and stayed in Shreveport for about four months.

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Then I was transferred to Lake Charles, Louisiana branch to sit in for the people who were to take vacations in the next two months. I did so and at the end of the six months the Draft Board called me and I began the process of entering the Army. I reported to Van Zandt

County and was processed and sent to Camp Wolters, Texas near Mineral Wells, Texas. Those of us who went to Mineral Wells at the same time was transferred to Fort Leonard Wood in three days. On arrival at Fort Leonard Wood, I was placed in the officer candidate school and took my basic training for about six weeks. At the end of my time at Fort Leonard Wood, I was transferred to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, Fort Belvoir Officers Training School. I spent six months in Officer Training School and was graduated as a Second Lieutenant in late 1942 and assigned to the 854th Combat Engineers at Dyersburg, Tennessee. This unit was being formed and organized prior to departure for overseas.

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After spending some three months in Dyersburg, I was transferred to Tampa, Florida, MacDill Field to a unit being formed, the 1899th Engineer Aviation Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel A. A. Montoro. I was assigned to Headquarters and Service Company. Later assigned as Company Commander of B Company. I remained as B Company Commander throughout the war, except the last four months when I was assigned as Battalion Commander.

There was 225 soldiers in the 1899th when I reported. When I reported to the first assembly, the First Sergeant reported, "All present are accounted for." I replied, "Sergeant, I can only see about 40 men present." The Sergeant replied, "The balance are in the hospital." He was right. Those men were left behind as their units went overseas. We stayed at MacDill Field about six weeks and then were sent to Avon Park, Florida, for our contingent training and departure for overseas operation.

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After our stay in Avon Park was set up at the base, we began training operations for our overseas assignment. We built bridges and roads that would give us the training. We used the native trees for building our bridges across the small creeks and so forth. Also, we trained men in the use of bulldozers, graders, backhoes and so forth of the heavy equipment. We got our men as efficient as possible in a short time for the operations of heavy equipment. We had

the crews that were assigned to building the buildings; construct small structures to use on this base during our training and for the next group that would be at our base. We built roadways from the base to the areas where we were constructing bridges. During this period of time, somewhere in the neighborhood of a year, we had a full amount of time spent on operations that would help us in our assignment wherever we were sent. We thought we were going to the Pacific on one of the islands for construction work and sure enough, when our period of learning how to operate the equipment and so forth was ending, we boarded a train at Avon Park, Florida, and seven days later arrived at Seattle, Washington, to prepare to depart for Hawaii.

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About two days after reaching Seattle, we were loaded onto a troop ship, a small one, and got ready to leave. We had been assigned 1,500 soldiers going into the warzone. They were attached to us for rations and transportation only. When they arrived in Hawaii, we were sent to—they were sent to the different assignments, which they were supposed to take care of and left our battalion. We left the city of Seattle and almost immediately the waves and motion of the ship caused nearly all the soldiers on board to become seasick. They were seasick for about three days and there was quite a mess in the sleeping quarters.

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During this time of seasickness, someone dropped a roll of toilet tissue into the latrine, which exited into the ocean. The roll of toilet water stopped up the exit and the water continued to run. Before anybody was notified that they were having trouble there on that end of the ship, there were quite a few barrels of water accumulated in the area. We had to shut off the water, unplug the outlet of the latrine and the ship's crew had to open some plugs on the side of the ship to allow this excess water to go into the ocean. It took some time for this to be accomplished. When the ship was rolling to port, all the water rolled to that side and when it rolled to the other side, all the water turned to that side and it was just a heck of a mess in the quarters there. Everything was wet. Everything was scattered all over the place in the rolling—by the rolling of the waves back and forth before the ship's crew could get all the

water out of that compartment. After this episode, we attempted to dry all the equipment out, clothing and so forth.

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We arrived at Oahu about three days later and were immediately put aboard a freight train that was designed to carry sugar cane from the fields to the place where they processed it. It took us about four to five hours before we arrived at Wheeler Field. We were immediately assigned to quarters. The officers had regular apartment duplexes to stay in and the personnel were in tents over the areas surrounding Wheeler Field. Wheeler Field, as you know, is the airfield that was bombed straight and put out of commission immediately before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. We stayed at Wheeler Field about six weeks drawing equipment, boxing it all up and loading it aboard a ship that was to take us to Guam.

This ship arrived at Guam five or six days later and had to circle the island for three days before the Army and Island Command declared the island was secure. The island was secure at this time. They later stated during our time on Guam that more Japanese was killed after the island was declared secure than killed in the battle to secure the island. After the island was declared secure, we unloaded in the harbor at Agana and were transported to an area immediately north of Harmon Field. This field had been built and expanded on by the Japanese when they were in charge of the island.

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We spent our first night on Guam in tents at the end of the runway. At approximately 2:00 on the morning we were awakened by the B29 planes taken off for Japan and vicinity. We were quite concerned because the noise and being in direct line with the runway, and our colored troops were very apprehensive of the noise that took place. During the early part of our first night on Guam, we posted guards around the area and these guards were afraid, scared to death of what was going to happen, what could happen.

During the night, one of the guards thought he heard something and began firing his rifle. He

fired several rounds in the area where he thought the noise originated. That alarmed the camp. All of us were thinking about the possibility some Japanese were infiltrating our camp. Nobody got much sleep. The next morning we found it was one of the native oxen that had caused the noise and had been killed by the guard firing so-called protective rounds at the noise.

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A couple of nights later some of the troops in our battalion decided they needed something to drink and proceeded to manufacture what they called Pulque, an alcohol prepared with raisins, sugar and other fruits and allowed to ferment for a day or two, and some of the personnel were very drunk from this mixture. In fact, one of the soldiers in our Company became so inebriated that he didn't know what he was doing and he started causing a disturbance at which time the troops notified me and told me the problem, as I had to go get him calmed down.

As I entered the tent where he was located, he went out the backside of the tent carrying a gun. I didn't know whether he was going to start shooting at me or what he was going—what was going to happen. But I had, in the best interest of the Company, to go after him and calm him down. I went out the back of the tent and he was about 30 or 40 feet away. I shined my flashlight on him and he immediately stopped. We had no trouble convincing him that he needed to sleep off that Pulque. So he did and we had no further problems with this soldier in the period of time that I was on Guam.

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We stayed at the end of Harmon Field for about a week or 10 days while the heavy equipment was knocking down the jungle and leveling the area we were going to place our permanent camp. During the process of leveling and clearing, preparing a place for our tents and our headquarters, we were taken to an area nearby where about four or five Japs had been killed just prior to the island being declared secure. Their bodies were mangled by the animals on the island and they were quite odiferous because the place being destroyed by the time and by

the heat of the island. They made us very cognizant of the fact that there were Japanese on the island and our personnel took it seriously when they went of guard duty to see that nothing happened that would be detrimental to us.

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Eventually, we moved to the new area and set up our tents in an orderly manner. Built our buildings to house our food and our cook stoves and everything and got about the business of doing our assignment for the war effort. That assignment was partially to build a north-south island road from Agana to North West Field. Our battalion built a portion of this road. Incidentally, there were three other battalions of engineers brought into the island at the time we were brought in and/or immediately thereafter. These units had their own assignment, part of which was the main road from Agana to North West Field and they were an all Black troop with mixed White and Black also. Our battalion was all Black troops and all White officers.

We started the operations for clearing for the bomb storage area in that vicinity. The bomb storage buildings were 40-foot by 100-foot, approximately, and designed so the bombs would be easily put under the shelter of these buildings and easily pushed out of the building onto the trucks that would deliver them to the hard span for loading onto the bomb base of the B-29s.

During the early time we were on the island, North Field was being constructed. North Field was a mirror image of the field we were to construct at North West Field. This North Field operation was completed several months before we got North West Field completed and was operational in addition to the planes that flew across on Harmon Field.

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In the clearing of these bomb storage areas, the jungle was pushed back about 100 yards in all sides with the building in the center. We built somewhere in the vicinity of 50 of these bomb storage houses, each of which were surrounded by very dense jungle for approximately a

quarter of a mile to the next clearing for another storage area. A bomb storage area was completed—or nearly completed—when one day we were at our headquarters building some five miles away from the bomb storage area. We believe that some Japanese set off a time bomb in this bomb storage building. Two of our personnel were sitting on the front porch of this building the last time they were seen. Our cook was delivering—had delivered their lunch and had driven away from the building leaving them sitting on the porch eating their lunch. Then, in some way, the Japanese detonated a bomb in this fully equipped and loaded bomb storage house and we heard this big explosion and the screen door of our office building actually blew open from the force of this explosion. None of the body parts of these two soldiers was ever found. The bomb storage house was completely destroyed and the jungle surrounding this bomb house was flattened for two or three hundred yards, which we think kept any of the adjacent houses from being destroyed by setting off their bombs prior to the explosion.

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While we were clearing these areas, we worked on two eight-hour shifts. A crew would leave our housing area in a truck and travel to the bomb storage area where they were working. The crew that went off at this time would take the truck back to the area. One day during this time when there was no personnel in the area, I drove through the clearing that was being leveled out and the jungle pushed back and there was a Japanese on a bulldozer we had used in the operation, driving it up and down and all around. When we saw my jeep coming into the area, of course he just jumped off the bulldozer and faded into the jungle. I had no opportunity to fire at him or anything. I didn't know it was a Japanese until that time. Of course the bulldozer was still in gear and was travelling at a slow rate of speed in the surrounding area. I drove as close as I could and jumped into the back of it and pulled the throttle back and threw it out of gear so it would stop.

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They were curious about the size of our equipment. We found several Japanese bulldozers in the jungle that they had used in building and whatever and these bulldozers were slightly

bigger than a motorized lawnmower that we use today. I don't see how they could move much dirt or make much progress in building an airport with equipment that size. But as far as we know that was the maximum size of the Japanese heavy equipment.

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The area between the bomb storage area and our headquarters' area was cleared to make space available for the incoming Air Force personnel. I would say the area they used was probably 50 acres that had to be cleared of the jungle. We cleared this area during the operation of our other duties and built our trains at different places for the first mile. It was cleared and leveled and ready to build whatever buildings they needed or wanted. The Air Force was very prima Dona-like. They wanted everything set up before they could just come off the island command post at Agana, come up and move right into quarters already set up assigned to them. They were difficult to talk to and to explain to them that our assignment—what our assignment was for them. We were to clear the area, level the area and build a latrine at specific points where they wanted them. But they were not happy about that.

Once of the advanced Colonels of the Air Force personnel stopped me on the way—on the day they arrived on the island and decided to scold me for not having their stuff ready. During the conversation, discussions [unclear] he allowed me the time to explain to him what our mission was in getting what we had ready for him then he kind of calmed down.

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I got ready to go over to the bomb storage area where my men were still working on clearing and adding the buildings. As I got ready to leave, I told him that it would be advisable that he had the men get their pup tents, put them up and get in there where they could get out of the rain that was going to—that we were going to have in a little while. He looked at the sky and very hardily said, "What do you mean rain? It can't rain if you don't have clouds."

I went onto the bomb storage area to check on my personnel, to see how they were doing, if they needed anything. Then I returned to our area of the camp. As I reached the area of the

Air Force advance party it began to rain and it rained in torrents, as hard of rain as I believe I've ever seen. It was about 5:00 when the rain started and at 5:00 every afternoon and 5:00 every morning the people who were clearing the area for the building of the North West Field set off a huge dynamite charge to break up the coral needed to be removed and pushed down where the airfield could be leveled out. This bomb went off during the major part of the rain. As it went off, all the Air Force personnel in and around their pup tent jumped and ran thinking they were being bombed and knocked down most of the pup tents they had put up. All of the equipment they had taken out of their duffle bags was open and got wet. Then the Colonel did get mad. He came over to our area, stormed into my tent headquarters and proceeded to give me hell for not letting him know that there was going to be an explosion and that it was for the breaking of the coral so we can move it into position where we wanted to put it.

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He got so mad and so upset that he said, and he did, report me to the General in charge of the Air Force personnel. I had to spend a day in the semi-court marshal procedure in front of the General explaining to him what our mission was, what we were doing and why we exploded that huge dynamite charge and what I had said to the Colonel who had reported me. After the discussion, the General advised me that there was no need for my being reported by the Colonel and that I was to forget about that.

During and before these occurrences, we had been building an asphalt plant, assembling it that is. An asphalt plant designed to make needed asphalt to cover the runways of North West Field, the hardstands of North West Field, our portion of, and the roads to deliver this asphalt to the field. We were all ignorant of the construction of an asphalt plant and it took us a lot more time to put it together and get it into operation than it would have had we been knowledgeable about the plant. My Company, Company B, was assigned the assembly and operation of the asphalt plant.

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When it became assembled and useable, we had to learn how to operate the plant. During this period of learning how to operate the plant, and trial and error on the mixture of coral and asphalt, we made many truckloads that were not up to specification. Many of these truckloads were close to specification and every unit of the vicinity that wants some of this abnormal asphalt, we would deliver it to them, spread it out and compact it around the camp in all walkways and areas where we wanted to have asphalt areas to work on in all around.

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The asphalt plant became operational and efficient after a portion of time, a time in which North West Field was to Agana main road was built and was ready for the asphalt topping. We topped probably half of this road, probably about 12 to 15 miles, and one of the other engineer battalions, who also had an asphalt plant, completed the topping of the other portion of the north-south road. By that time the runway had been leveled, compacted and shaped and was ready to receive its asphalt to stabilize this coral base and to hold up the planes when they were taking off for their destination near or on Japan.

This asphalt base that we put on the north part of the runway that we were assigned to was about 100 yards wide and 10,000 foot long sitting on this northwest area of Guam. The design of the airfield that was on the end that they would take off from, the airstrip tilted down probably 15 foot in the first 5,000 feet. The remaining 5,000 was tilted up and the end of the runway was a sheer cliff so that when the airplane got off the runway if you were standing in the middle, or 5,000 foot down the runway, the planes would disappear from sight.

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My first thought after seeing this was that the plane had something happen to it and gone into the ocean. Some 15 minutes later, the plane came into sight way out over the ocean. This design put into effect both at North Field and Northwest Field was for the purpose of getting speed up in the early part of the takeoff, as the plane would be going downhill for one half of the runway and then would be going uphill after it had reached its maximum speed possible. When it got to the end of the runway, it just went off the runway and the downdraft would

force the plane and the weight of the bombs on the plane down to where it almost reached the ocean. I believe the sheer bluff was about 150 feet above the water level at this end of the runway.

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The people who were working on the runway, working and building the Quonset huts for warehousing and keeping equipment and all were, at that time, pretty well at the end of their service on Guam. Except for the repair work on the roads and hardstand and the connecting road to the hardstand, we were more or less marking time on Guam wondering where we were going to go next, whether we were going to another island base on which to do some more work.

During that period, we actually drew equipment indicating that it was going to be somewhere that we would move and have brand new equipment for the coming operation. The scuttlebutt was that we were going to the islands north of the big island of Japan, the Kuril Islands. We didn't have an opportunity to know for sure where we were going to go because before our term on Guam was ended, President Truman dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima. A few days later, he dropped a bomb on Nagasaki. Shortly thereafter, the Japanese surrendered and the war was over.

Although the war was over, we were not sent home. We had some kind of procedure to earn the points necessary for being returned to the States. For my part, I waited several weeks for the necessary points after I only needed one-half point. Finally, I was ready for my return to the U.S.A. Those who were scheduled for departure, boarded a troop ship at Agana for Saipan. That afternoon, we arrived at Saipan. We were transported to the staging area and were advised that we would be here for at least one week.

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About one hour from the time I arrived at the staging area, the loud speaker was calling for me to report to headquarters for a staging area. I was to get my gear and be processed for

departure. I was assigned to be in charge of the Army personnel aboard the troop ship. Shortly after boarding the troop ship, and setting up my office, I fell down a ladder and severely damaged my ankle. A new officer in charge of personnel had to be appointed. Unfortunately, for him, I had already been assigned to quarters. They left me there and the officer in charge had to bunk with all the Army personnel.

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About two weeks later, we arrived in San Diego. We spent three or four days processing our papers before we boarded a train, 22 cars, bound to Fort Smith, Arkansas by way of San Antonio, Texas. I was assigned to deliver the papers of the men dropped off en route. The men were excited about their discharge and to some extent unruly. I only had to tell them that I was in charge of their papers and if they messed up or missed the train, their papers would wind up at Fort Smith and they would have to be held in the Army until they were reunited with their papers. Needless to say there was no trouble on the train ride.

After arriving at Fort Smith, Arkansas, we had four or five days of Army red tape before being discharged. Finally, we were discharged, freedom at last.

Submitted by James G. Burton, ASN01108525, Captain Corps of Engineer, Company B, 1899th Engineer Aviation Battalion, the date 08/22/96.

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[THE FOLLOWING ARE CORRECTIONS/ADJUSTMENTS TO PORTIONS OF THE TEXT RELATED ABOVE]

Jump, run thinking that they were being bombed and knocked down all of our, or most of the, pup tents that they had put up. All the equipment that they had taken out of their duffle bags was open and got wet. Then the Colonel [clears throat] did get mad. [Coughing.] He came over to our area, stormed in my tent headquarters and proceeded to give me hell for not letting him know that that wouldn't be a bomb raid explosion that it was for breaking up the coral before we could move it into the position that we wanted to put it. He got so mad and so upset that he said, and he did, report me to the General in charge of the Air Force personnel. I had to spend the day at a semi-court marshal procedure in front of the General explaining to him what our mission was, what we were doing, why we exploded that huge dynamite charge and what I had said to the Colonel who had reported me. After the time that we were in this discussion the General advised me that there was no need for being reported by the Colonel and that I was to forget about this happening.

During and before these occurrences, we had been building an asphalt plant, assembling that is, an asphalt plant to cover the runway of the North West Field, the hard span of North West Field, our portion, and the roads to deliver this asphalt to the people. We were all ignorant of the construction part of the asphalt plant and it took us a lot more time to put it together and get it into operation than had we been knowledgeable about how the plant operated, not only tarps that had to be assembled that were packaged and brought into the area. Our Company, Company B, was assigned the assembly and the operation of the asphalt plant [clears throat] when there becomes a useable place to put the asphalt.

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the coral and the asphalt, we made many truckloads that wasn't up to specifications. Many of these truckloads were close to specifications and then every unit in that vicinity that wanted some of this abnormal asphalt, we would deliver it to them, spread it out and compact it around the camp and walkways and in areas where we wanted to have asphalt areas to work at in our realm.

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I talked with Mr. O. J. McCullough of McCullough Tool Company and he said it would be okay for me to come back to work and he wanted me, since I had left Corpus, to go to Shreveport, Louisiana and work in that branch office taking care of the people who were to be taking vacations during that six month period. I did so and stayed in Shreveport for about four

months. Then I was transferred to Lake Charles, Louisiana branch to sit in for the people who were to take vacations in the next two months. I did so and at the end of six months the Draft Board called me and I began the process of entering the Army.

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