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Carl Matthews
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Interview conducted by Rose Manibusan
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Interviewee: Carl Matthews

Military Rank: 2-G-23 4th Marine Division

Interviewer: Rose Manibusan

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Saipan

Date: June-13-2004

--00:00:00 AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Narrator: Carl Matthews is a Caucasian-American man with glasses, and a shell necklace, wearing a red tropical polo shirt. Behind him is a yellow curtain with a white diamond overlay

--00:00:19

Q: The following oral history interview is being conducted by Rose Manibusan, Chief of Interpretation at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Saipan on 6-13-04 at 2:10 to record an oral history interview with Mr. Carl Matthews, who served in the 4th Marine Division during World War II. This interview is being made by the National Park Service American Memorial Park. For the record, could you please state and spell your full name?

Carl Matthews: Carl W. Matthews Jr., C-A-R-L, initial W, M-A-T-T-H-E-W-S

Q: Carl, 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?

Carl Matthews: That is indeed correct.

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

Carl Matthews: August 14, 1924, Carson County, Texas. At my grandmother's house.

Q: Did you grow up there?

Carl Matthews: No, we lived there a couple years and moved to Dawson, Texas, which was about uh, 20 miles west.

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Q: Tell me about your family.

Carl Matthews: Uh, my grandfather on my father's side was a country doctor, he graduated from Vanderbilt Medical College in 1887. Practiced for about 50 years in that area. My dad was a merchant, he had a little store in Dawson, he and his brother and eventually he bought his brother out and he owned it himself.

Q: And what was your father's name?

Carl Matthews: Carl Sr. And my mother had graduated from high school and had done very well. In those days, this was early 1920s and she could pass the test at the county courthouse and teach school. So at about 20 years of age, she begin teaching a one room school with about 50 kids and that's where she got sick. My grandfather went over to treat her, came back and told my dad that that was a good looking teacher [unintelligible] The next trip, my daddy went with his father and here I am today.

Q: And are you married?

Carl Matthews: My wife died three years ago. Three and a half years ago.

Q: And do you have any children?

Carl Matthews: I have two fine sons, both live in Dallas, Texas. And four grandchildren, by the way, you didn't ask.

Q: Four grandchildren.

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Could you tell us where you were and what you were doing when you heard Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

Carl Matthews: Uh, of course it was on Sunday and I was in the barracks at Camp Elliot,

California. I had been in the Marine Corps since the previous August. And I heard somebody yell that the – Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor and I thought they were spoofing out that just couldn't be true.

Q: So how did that make you feel?

Carl Matthews: I knew that I wouldn't be home for Christmas.

Q: When did you join the military service?

Carl Matthews: August the 12th, 1941.

Q: And how old were you?

Carl Matthews: I was supposed to have been 17.

Q: What motivated you to join?

Carl Matthews: I lived in a little country town in Texas and it was August and uh, the depression was still in force there. I had been working for ten cents an hour and I knew there was a world out there and I hadn't seen it. And this man came to town in a blue Chevrolet convertible and he had this white cap and blue pants and khaki shirt with a tie and a brass pin and shined shoes and money. And I said, I want it. And I rode away with him.

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Q: Can you please describe the basic training experience as if you were telling it to a young man that's now joining the military service?

Carl Matthews: I just – it was almost like a Boy Scout camp, it was exciting. People were griping, but I thought it was wonderful and I got three great meals a day and I got to march behind the band. Um, I fired rifles and – I enjoyed it. [smiles]

Q: What do you remember most about your basic training?

Carl Matthews: Probably the time I slapped the plate in the – the platter and the plate of a guy much larger than I. And then began to be frightened to what is he going to do with me.

Q: What happened with that?

Carl Matthews: Another thing, a guy larger than him told him to stay away from me.
[laughs]

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Q: Can you tell us what military branch, unit and regiment you were assigned to after basic training?

Carl Matthews: Uhhh, My first assignment was to a, B Company, 8th Marines, that was in 1941. And when Pearl Harbor occurred between – this was the 7th of January, the 6th – the 2nd Marine brigade was formed at San Diego, California and I was just reading the other day that the man in charge of procuring supplies was giving \$200,000, free money, to just spend for whatever. That would last about two seconds today. But we left January the 6th, 1942, we were the first contingent of troops to leave the United States and we went to Pago Pago, Samoa and we arrived there January the 20th.

On January the 11th, the Japanese had shelled Pago Pago, so we sailed in there, unloaded our ships, and uh, were expecting an attack any minute, but it never came. And I stayed in Samoa until August and became very seriously ill. Uhh, So ill that they sent me back to the States.

Q: And then what happened after that?

Carl Matthews: After I got out of the hospital, I was in the hospital a long long time and I got out of bed, I weighed 98 pounds. And uh, I went to work in Base Headquarters

Company as a type clerk typist and my weight got up to about 145 and then they said they needed more troops and I went to combat training school at Camp Elliot and then reassigned to the 4th Marine Division.

Q: Did your unit have any particular personality or identity?

Carl Matthews: Uh... I don't know if we were any different – any outstanding personalities there. There are many people that come to mind that I recall very vividly and I have written about a lot of those. The most exciting person that I met was James Stanley Leary Jr. from Ahoskie, North Carolina. And uh, he had just gotten out of OCS in Quantico and came directly to Camp Pendleton. And I was already in G Company and he took over command of the [unintelligible] 2nd platoon. And I became his runner and I was with him until he died on the hillside here in Saipan on June 8th.

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Q: Can I take you back a little bit and can you describe for me in detail what it was like for you as you prepared for the invasion of Saipan?

Carl Matthews: Well, we had hit the Marshall's first, after we – we left San Diego and, and hit the Marshall's. Our... group hit the island of Roy and the 24th Marines hit Namur, which was connected by a causeway. We had one person killed out of our company in that little battle. It lasted eight hours and then we secured it.

After the Marshall's, we went back to Hawaii and trained for a number of months and then loaded onto LSTs and moved for a time over to Pearl Harbor. LSTs were all lined up... at the entrance to Pearl Harbor. And one day they started blowing up. Three of them blew up and 160 men died, at Pearl Harbor.

Q: [quietly] Pearl Harbor?

Carl Matthews: Now that was not known or not made known until after the war. And it just basically became well-known. Uhh, the other LSTs were....were repaired and we got

underway and went to the Marshall's where we gathered with a large, large convoy – said to be the largest convoy ever in history.

Q: And what happened with the LSTs that blew up?

Carl Matthews: Oh, we had been on maneuvers and I understand that they had a lot... of mortars and other ammunition stored and I think there was some civilians supposed to be unloading, and they had warned them about using – smoking cigarettes or matches for anything and evidently, somebody touched something off and three of them blew.

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Q: So what was it like being in the LSTs on the way to Saipan, which I understand at that time you didn't know...

Carl Matthews: [interrupting] We didn't know where we were going, no, but we rendezvoused in the Marshall's and that is when, one day I looked out and I didn't believe that there were that many ships in the world. Everywhere I looked, there were ship. Some big, some large, battleships, cruisers, destroyers, uhhh, flattops, and lots of LSTs. And we were on an LST, which is not the most comfortable thing in the world.

Q: What was that like, being on the LST?

Carl Matthews: It was crowded. They had an LCT sitting on top of the LST. And they were held up with uh, wooden beams, or just big wooden logs, and it had the thing sitting on it. And uh, I looked at it and they had cots on under there and we were supposed to sleep on that. I thought, what if that thing moves, we might get squashed. So I had a friend by the name of Wendell Nightingale, from Skowhegan Maine, so we scouted around to see if we could find a better place and we found some 100-octane gasoline up in the front that had enough space for two bunks and we were very well hidden and so – but we didn't have any bunk. But they had some downstairs, but that night there were two sailors that didn't have bunks and we had bunks. And they wired to the chains that held that 100-octane gasoline.

Q: And you felt safer there?

Carl Matthews: We felt safer there. [Laughs]. But anyway, that is where we rode all the way through.

Q: Do you remember how many days that was?

Carl Matthews: Oh – seemed like it was about 14 days.

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Q: When did you learn that you were headed for Saipan?

Carl Matthews: Maybe three or four days after we left the Marshall's.

Q: Can you describe your first impression of seeing uh, Saipan? What did it look like to you?

Carl Matthews: Oh it was smoking, because the battleships, uh, had been laying siege to it for several days and the airplanes had been bombing and striking and we watched – we got here that night so that we could see it before we went in the next morning, we could see where we were going. And I... remember that night before quite vividly because I had met this sailor down inside the LST, and he was playing guitar. And I had played fiddle when I was in high school in a little country band. I couldn't read music, but I could play. And we had played several nights inside the LST and several of the guys started going down, we had maybe 14 guys who would sit around and listen to us play.

But this night – that last night, they said, well why don't we go up onboard, it's cooler up there. So we went up and they pulled out one of those bunks from underneath the LCT and we sat down and started playing and we were playing just a lot of old country and hillbilly tunes. And I never will forget, somebody said, do you know any hymns? And of course I had grown up in southern churches and I knew all – lots of hymns, and he did too. And it just seemed like somebody would say, would you know, "What a Friend we have in Jesus?"

Yes, we would play that.

Then somebody would say, play “Sweet Hour Prayer”.

Whatever, and we would respond and pretty soon they began to sing and we must have played religious hymns for maybe an hour. And we finished and one guy came up and he said, you know, I feel like I have been to church. And I thought later, that if that had been a church, then it was the last that some of those boys ever went to.

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Q: You knew that that was the evening before - ?

Carl Matthews: We knew we were going in the next morning.

Q: Before W-Day. How were you feeling, personally? You had just had a gathering with your buddies and like you said, it was a like a mass and you knew the next day you were going out there.

Carl Matthews: We didn't think too much about it, we just tried to make light of it and talk and laugh and – but there was some seriousness too. And then we tried to get some sleep, which we didn't get a whole lot of sleep, we woke about, maybe 4:00 and they always gave us steak and eggs for breakfast. They would ask us, or instruct us to wear clean underwear and put on fresh dungarees because in the event that we did get hit, that the – we would have, uh, clean clothes and infection wouldn't be quite so bad if we got hit. So we did that and I, we got all of our gear and finally after breakfast we went down and got in the, the... amphibious tractor that we had been assigned to.

And I remember that my lieutenant went about and just checked every man's gear to make sure he had this, this, this, this and he was right where he was supposed to be, we were. Finally, they lumbered out – the LSTs lowered the big front, uh, and it splashed down in the water and then we rolled out that and got in the water. And for a while, we just kinda rendezvoused out there and then finally formed a line.

Q: And how many were in the [unintelligible]?

Carl Matthews: Oh, probably – maybe 20 guys.

Q: And so you were...

Carl Matthews: We were milling around, finally they formed a line and that was just before 8:00 and then we started – everybody started for the shore at the same time.

[Motions both hands towards the camera like a swimming motion]

And that is when the Japanese artillery again to really pound us. And they had us zeroed in. In fact, I looked up once and saw one get a direct hit. I just know, it was a chance, but it happened and I understand that several others were hit by the artillery before they got to shore. And my lieutenant and I had been standing up front and I looked over and I could see the tall smokestack at Garapan, but that was one of the landmarks that we had. But we were supposed to land just south of the um, sugar... wharf and we did, we hit exactly where we were supposed to be. But we spent very little time on the beach, I mean, we moved right on out. Although we had losses right on the beach. John Winigan died almost immediately. I remember another [unintelligible] from Brooklyn, New York. He didn't move quick enough and an amphibious tractor ran over his legs. And then we moved inland, and there were a lot more trees then than there are now in that area, because they made a park there.

And I remember that on my left, three of the men from supply had a direct hit and they just disappeared. And then a young man from Desdemona, Texas, his name was Frank Whitty, was hit in the head with a sniper and he just – he was gone, right then. We hadn't gone maybe – hadn't been on the beach maybe five minutes when Frank Whitty got hit. And then we pushed on just to the edge of Chalan Kanoa, that is as far as we got the first day and we stopped. And all through the night, the Japanese uh, pounded us. But fortunately, we just didn't get hit, I don't know why. Then later some artillery came up, south behind us. Uh,

The next morning we were given the order to go east and we went across the Susupe

swamp, it was dry, it was that season, and we went up, I believe, to the second tier of hills, uh, to the east and dug in for the night, after some skirmishes up there. We had some snipers after us... However the night before in Chalan Kanoa, our right flank had been involved in a banzai, but our particular platoon was not hit, but the one on our right flank was. They had some hand to hand fighting. So the second night, we were up on that second tier of hills, dug in, and uhh, I don't think we lost anybody in that fight. But I remember how frightened I was that night when the Japanese bomber came over. Single bomber. And we could tell the way it was running it wasn't of ours. And I thought, what in the world are we doing to do if that bomb hits? But they weren't concerned with it – they were after the Airport, they unloaded some bombs over there and then they flew on . But they came back almost every night to be this one bomber. We called him Midnight Charlie and he would come pretty much on schedule, about midnight.

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Q: So that was the second day. Can you describe your personal battle experience up until the island was secured?

Carl Matthews: What?

Q: So that was the second day. .

Carl Matthews: Yes.

Q: [again] Can you describe your personal battle experience up until the island was secured?

Carl Matthews: [Big Sigh] Uhhh, from that moment on, it was just one day after another and one day just went into another and of course there were guys that were dying. One of the first things that happened after, maybe on that second or third day, we were ordered to check out a gun emplacement over on the bay, to the east. Which at that time was called Magacini Bay, but today it's called Lao Lao Beach... And so we went over there and I remember it was very rocky and finally we got to a point where they had a lot of

undergrowth and it was so heavy, we had to walk on top of the undergrowth, it was just – it was real high. But it was so thick, we could still walk on top of it. So we finally got to where we were supposed to go, on the map, and sure enough, there was a gun emplacement there, a huge 16 inch wooden gun, that had been made by the Japanese to fool us. It was a dummy.

And had camouflage all over it, it had been painted gray, had everything just like a regular gun emplacement. After that, we came back and started the push to the north. We were originally supposed to take out the airport – air field – Alicia something like that,

Q: Aslito...Isely Field?

Carl Matthews: Aslito, yeah, and for some reason they changed that command and put somebody else with that responsibility and we turned north and began to push up through, I used to call it the “Devil’s backbone”, it’s just a string of mountains that went up through there. And it just seemed like every day somebody in our company got killed. Guys got wounded. I remember the first – not the first, but one of the most impressive deaths was a young kid from New York, his name was Bob Howard.

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He was 19 and he had been hit bad and, my lieutenant and I, I was a runner and I stayed with the lieutenant all the time. And I remember him telling the lieutenant, Mr. Leary I’m just too young to die. And he said, well Howard, you are going to be okay, hang in there. And we were calling for the corpsman, but by the time the corpsman got there, Howard was dead. And then not too long after that, another memorable death was Wendell Nightingale friend that I mentioned earlier. And we had been in this ravine for maybe 20-30 minutes, just resting, no activity. And then they gave the command to move out and we moved out in a big long line, started for this... area that had an awful lot of coconut palms. And we crossed a bare field, maybe 250 yards and we got maybe two thirds across, maybe three quarters of the way and the enemy just really opened up on us. Guys fell everywhere. And the lieutenant said, get back to the ravine. Because there was no place to hide there.

And when we got back to the ravine, we looked up and Nightingale was trying to crawl, he had been hit. And he and Freeby, and several other guys, we had all shared the same tent in Hawaii and we were very close. Freeby threw down his rifle and ran out there in the midst of all that fire and grabbed Nightingale and started back with him and Nightingale was hit again and he – was gone. And Freeby raced back to that ravine and threw himself into that and was crying and his pack was almost shot off. He got a silver star for that, later. Although it took a long time, because the lieutenant that was planning to write him up for the silver star, died before he could do that.

As did happen a lot. So we moved on up, there was a ridge that I recall very vividly. And we had really been slugging it out for several days. And we got on this ridge and we could hear the Japanese on the other side of the ridge and they were shooting at us and – but we were deployed all along the south side of the ridge and they were on the north side. Uh....

Q: Was that Purple Heart Ridge?

Carl Matthews: I have no idea. These names came afterwards. I didn't know – it was just a ridge. And – but there quite a concentration of Japanese. We could hear the vehicles, their motors running and they were yelling and screaming and we knew they were there. And plus the fact that they were shooting at us. So we deployed up there to keep the ridge and we spent the night and I thought that we would – that would be our last night. I really did. I thought, we will never make it through this night. But the next morning came and a artillery observer came up and they were planning to shell the area on the other side of the ridge.

And I remember that I was making coffee, we had soluble coffee and we would heat water in our canteen cup and build a fire and make coffee and I was trying to do that. I had a five gallon can sitting between me and the lieutenant and the artillery, when they fire, they fire way over and then come back. And it just kept coming back and coming back and the observer was right there with us, I... we were talking with him and he was telling how far to go and then that last one almost made it over that ridge but didn't and hit right in the middle of us. And it hit the lieutenant in the side and blew a whole in the can about the

size of my fist and didn't hit me at all. And it really slashed up the observer and killed a kid on the left flank up on the ridge. He didn't move.

I don't know what happened. It seemed like after that, my mind began to kind of – my memory kind of shut – it would shut down and come back on. And I continued to function, but I don't remember. I just remember bits and pieces after that.

--00:27:48

Q: So you were hit at that time as well?

Carl Matthews: Yes, but it was just a concussion and it blew my ear drum open and the doctor told me that I had damage to the vessels in my head and the blood had begun to leak out and that was what was creating the memory problem. And finally, we got to the ridge north of Tanapag, but south of where the last command cave was. And we were high on that ridge and on the seventh and eighth of July, about 4,000 Japanese had gathered and made an attack in the area of Tanapag and they over ran the Army and then they over ran the Marines and then they were about to over run – I think they did over run an artillery group.

And they were firing artillery at a quarter per second. They were setting their fuses at a quarter per second. Well, on the 2nd and the 8th, they were repelled and the stragglers began to go north toward the last command cave and also to the cliffs, where we were. Over the mountains a ways. And that is ,... I think that is the reason they pulled us out of where we were and had us to come over to the top of that ridge. We were lined up and then they urged us to go down the ridge and we got about uhh probably 15-20 feet down the ridge and got the easiest place to go down and they told us to stop till the others caught up with us and.... [brief pause] we sat there maybe 20, 30 minutes and when we stood up, this machine gun opened up and killed the lieutenant. And of course I dropped, just like he did, but I just – I knew he was dead and then when I reached over and touched him, I knew he was dead. That's when my light went out completely and I woke up eight days later on a hospital ship.

-00:30:00

Q: What hospital ship was that?

Carl Matthews: The USS Samaritan.

Q: And where did that take you?

Carl Matthews: Uhh, the hospital rooms in Pearl Harbor and in the Marshall's and Guadalcanal were all full and the closest hospital was New Caledonia, so that is where we went.

Q: How long did you stay there?

Carl Matthews: Probably a month and then they put me on a ship and I went to San Francisco and stayed three days, bumped into the young boy from Brooklyn, who had been run over. And he was in the hospital. He was doing okay. And later was able to walk and I was so shocked because I just knew his legs would never make it. And then they sent me to San Diego Hospital, Balboa Hospital, and I was there for about a month.

Q: Did you participate in any other Pacific campaigns?

Carl Matthews: That was it.

Q: That was it, just Saipan?

Carl Matthews: That was the war for me.

Q: Did you encounter any direct experiences with Japanese soldiers? Any face to face combat with Japanese soldiers?

Carl Matthews: Not that – no. I fired at some, but I didn't have any hand to hand or

anything like that.

Q: What was it like being a runner?

Carl Matthews: I enjoyed it because I had an association with a very fine man. I respected him and he respected me and we counted on each other. And after I had been with him for a while, he began to take me to the meetings. When we would have briefings, he would take me, because he wanted me to know everything he was exposed to. And that made me feel important. I was a [unintelligible] 19 year old kid and I felt, this is really an honor to do this. And I liked him, I worshipped him, he was such a nice guy. I felt I had a lot of confidence in him, I guess that was it.

Q: What were some of the duties as a runner?

Carl Matthews: Well, I carried a radio, it always worked in maneuvers, but when we hit here, it wouldn't work at all. And I carried semaphore flags and I always had a notebook and paper and – whatever he wanted me to do. I mean, that's pretty much what I did.

-00:32:39

Q: What did the battle of Saipan mean to you?

Carl Matthews: I don't think it really – I really appreciated it until later when I realized what a pivotal battle this was for the history and had we not taken this real estate, then Tibbets would not have flown the Enola Gay and had the Enola Gay not flown, we would have lost another million lives out of American homes and no telling how many millions of Japanese would have had to die.

Q: Where were you when the war ended?

Carl Matthews: I had returned home, I got a medical discharge in March of '45 and I had taken correspondence courses in the hospital and got home about the first of April and went back to high school and finished high school on Friday night and started at Baylor

University and I was a student at Baylor University when the war ended.

Q: Can you explain how you felt when you heard that the war was over?

Carl Matthews: Oh, just like everybody else, I was thrilled. I went to church.

-00:33:55

Q: It is now 60 years later and you are returning here for the 60 anniversary of the battle of Saipan, is this your first trip back?

Carl Matthews: My first trip.

Q: Hmm, 60 years ago, a lot has changed on this island and today the majority of the visitors originate from Japan. How do you feel about the Japanese tourists or the Japanese today?

Carl Matthews: I was on Tinian a few days ago and met a Japanese and we shook hands and laughed. Uhh, I had no animosity toward him and he had none to me. That was a war and it was 60 years ago and I was just a young man doing what I was supposed to do with my country and those boys that were fighting on their side, they were doing what they felt their country wanted them to do.

Q: If you could talk to youths today about World War II, what would be the one thing you would tell them?

Carl Matthews: Well, first of all, I hope we would have no more, but I kind of have the feeling we will. Uh, I was proud to fight for my country, but that is what my parents and all my school teachers had instilled in me and I felt that I was fighting for the honor of my country and I would say that young people today need to have a sense of real patriotism, more than just waving the flag and saying the Pledge of Allegiance. Just having something down in your heart that says, I love my country and I'm willing to fight for it. And I know that people have died for it and I think they will continue to die for it. I think it's sad.

Perhaps the best thing would be if we could find these young people to become leaders, who could change the direction of the world, and... and try to achieve peace in all nations.

-00:36:18

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview, that we haven't discussed?

Carl Matthews: Well, I have been here eight days and in the eight days I have been here, I been, spent about eight hours in the jungle, attempting to go back to that place where that lieutenant died. And I think I'm almost to the point where we can find it and make one more trip, maybe two. And then I would like to go down that cliff and see if I can find any artifacts. I know the body is gone and the clothes are gone, but maybe there is a dog tag, maybe there is a rifle, maybe there is a canteen cup or whatever. Maybe that is foolish, but that is something I felt I had to do.

Q: How do you feel being back after 60 years?

Carl Matthews: This has been a great time, because these people have been so wonderful. I mean, every day has been a beautiful experience for me. I have met so many wonderful people, they have been so kind. People I don't know just come up and say, give me a big hug and say, we love you, thank you. I don't feel like a hero, I think the man out there on that cliff, those were the heroes. I was a lucky guy. I was blessed.

Q: Thank you Carl for sharing your experiences with us and for helping us to document this oral history.

Carl Matthews: My pleasure, Rose.

Q: Thank you.

Carl Matthews: Phew...

[END OF SESSION]

-00:38:04.