

Transcript of Interview with Lt. Col. Leonard C. DeWitt Jr.

at his home in McMinnville, OR, 2011

I joined 1938 when I was an 18-year old kid in Bend. I joined I Co., 162nd Infantry. I was just a rifleman. The way I ran across the National Guard. One day I was going into town in Bend and I heard some rifle shooting. I stopped to check up on it. It was a National Guard outfit firing Springfield rifles. They asked me if I wanted to shoot a little bit. And I said, "Sure I'd love to do that". They had a firing range there with targets and they let me fire a couple of clips of ammunition. They nailed me right then and there. I promptly joined the National Guard. I had always wanted to be in the military ever since I was a little kid. When I joined the National Guard, that was like a dream come true.

We served at Bend for a year, and we went to summer camp at Ft. Vancouver the first year and we had a troop train that took us down there and back. The next year we went to Ft. Lewis for guard camp, and we maneuvered against the 3rd Division there. We outmaneuvered them. Then we were called up for one year active duty in 1940. So at the end of the one year, Hitler was making a lot of noise in Europe, and there were stories about not getting out after our year. "O-hi-O" meant "Over the Hill in October", and we would write that on the back of trucks and everywhere. So the brass got worried and started interviewing us one person at a time. The company commander would talk to us. Nobody wanted out. A lot of people in the unit were not of age. Only one guy got out. He went back home. The rest of us all stayed in.

After our year's service ended, then we were integrated into the military; the Army of the United States. We weren't in the war yet, but were getting pretty nervous about it. They sent I company up to Willingham WA to guard the P-39 Cobras aircraft. We were walking around at night along the Canadian border and freezing. We had a church that the company billeted in while in town. We'd march around for about four hours guarding those airplanes. They brought us down to Ft. Lewis again in December. Our unit was called out on December 6th 1941 on a red alert; the unit had to go out in the field and barrack. The next day the red alert was over, and we heard on the radio coming back in about Pearl Harbor.

Then in February of '42 they loaded us up, the 162nd, put us on a troop train and sent us to Ft. Dix New Jersey and we drew two bags of clothes. We had our woolens already, they gave us another barracks bag and filled it full of suntans. Then another bag for canned goods. We left Ft. Dix and got off the ferry at New York, we had to drag these two duffle bags and put it in a pile at the entrance of the harbor.

We were on the *Uruguay*, 5000 of us on there. Two other ships in the convoy. Other "Dollar Liners" they called them. They'd been converted. We took off and went out to sea, went down the east coast; we had a convoy you wouldn't believe: battle ships, aircraft carriers. Went through the Panama canal. Went out on the Pacific. The two destroyers said they sank the Japanese submarine. Forty days later we wound up in Melbourne, Australia. We stopped along the way and were down to one canteen of water

a day. The ship had two boilers; one was for running the engine, the other was for drinking. In Bora Bora we got the ship fixed.

We landed in Melbourne. The Aussies had a dock strike going, so we had to unload our own ship. We stayed at Rockhampton until we went up to Townsville where we loaded on a captured German freighter and one liberty boat and 3 PT boats (the ones that brought MacArthur out of the Philippines). So that was our escort going to New Guinea.

Our antiaircraft fire was the 3 PT boats with 20mms on them. Anything else we had to come up with ourselves. So we welded spindles to the railing of our German freighter so we could attach our machine guns and wave them around. We unloaded at Milne Bay New Guinea and there were some tents already set up, and we went up there and bivouacked in there. They told us they had signals for air raid. Two shots - yellow alert. Three shots - red alert One shot - all clear. About the first night we were there they told us don't go around barefooted in the jungle because there were worms that could get up in your feet. You had to keep under mosquito bars. The heat and humidity was something else. You could pull all your clothes off and as long as you didn't touch the mosquito bar, you were OK.

Well, we had just gotten down and got to sleep and two shots. So we all woke up, and there were some trenches down below for us to go to. I didn't know what to grab first, so I got my boots on, got a helmet on and a field jacket and headed for the trenches. We all got down there pretty quick. And then here come these Australians. They were using the same trenches we were. They were all in a column marching, and then they were told to fall out into the trenches. Well when the air raid was over, they fired the all clear shot, we all got back in the bunks. About two hours later it happened again. Same thing. Tried to find helmet, boots, scramble. Here come the Aussies, hup twop three. Well, the third time the same night they fired the yellow alert, we said heck, we're just staying put. Then comes the three shot Red alert. Then BLAM. Never heard such a concussion in your life. Tremendous blast going on, right next door. Finally got my boots, etc., and piled down into the trench. Another guy fell down in the garbage pit. Had to pull him out. Anyway, we all went back to our tents, shaking like leaves. The next morning we started looking around the area, and found it wasn't bombs at all, it was our 90mm anti-aircraft guns. When the Japs got in too close, they started firing those big guns. So, we figured that was our first taste of combat.

They got us in the same ships and we went up to Oro Bay, and the 32nd Div had already come over the mountain pass, and they had already fought with the Japs and run them out of Buna. We came in there and we pulled up to the makeshift dock, and we unloaded our ship and they brought in our artillery ship and they tried to unload it and the Japs came over and started bombing us and hit the artillery ship. We were walking across the tarmac with some P39s on it. We were walking across to the airdrome and we saw a whole bunch of airplanes in formation coming over. We looked up. We were on a road they made in the jungle there. We said, They must be ours or there would be bombs falling". Just about then we hear this whooshing overhead, and we started diving into holes. They were bombing the airport behind. These were the propellers falling off the

bombs noses that were falling down on us and scaring the daylights out of us. We were learning all kinds of things about fighting a war. The SSgt was working on an airplane there and the bomb hit it and killed him. We were sorry to hear that.

We got to Buna and we did several maneuverings in New Guinea. We stayed at Buna a little bit and we had a Lt. named Dolman who was a wild character. He would come and get me and my buddy Dale Gibson and a couple of other guys, and we would go out and see what we could do to harass the Japs. We always thought he had permission to do these things. We were always wondering what kind of trouble this guy was going to get us in this time. We went out and went quite a ways farther than we were supposed to because we didn't know exactly where the Japs were located. We found one of their ammunition dumps. We managed to set that thing on fire and blew it all up. We came back, and found we had caused a Red Alert with our outfit because they saw all this ammunition going up in the distance and didn't know what was happening. I suppose Dolman explained that away.

We went up farther north on a little Australian wooden cutter and another small ship; got our company way up north somewhere on the Menbarri river. An we unloaded there and spent a little time there making forts. The Japs were supposed to be coming in from the Bismarck sea with a couple of divisions. They would have had us outnumbered. We were up there and we stayed there quite a while - a month or so - and they weren't getting us supplies very often. We were getting kind of hungry. So we'd go out in the ocean. There's a certain kind of fish that you would see little fins sticking out. So we'd throw some Mills bombs out there and stun the fish; they'd float ashore and we'd cook that. We ran out of grub for six days in a row. They finally sent a little Aussie boat up to get us with a steel barge. Most of our company got on the barge. The barge couldn't go out in the ocean, so we stayed close to shore. The boat towed the barge and the guys all had to get down inside the steel barge. We went into a place called Douglas Harbor. One night a Japanese plane dropped a bomb on us; it went under the barge but didn't go off. We couldn't shoot at him; the harbor master wouldn't let us fire at him.

We got back down south and then they sent us up the coast again to a little place called Boisi. There was a big ridge there and out around the ridge came the ocean and a little bay in there. We went walking up through the beach; sometimes we had to walk on the edge of the beach because of the swamp out there. We got up there, and that's where we ran into the real Jap force. On the other side of this ridge was the Salamaua naval base that we wanted. They had about two battalions up on this ridge. At first, there was only the 162nd up there. They started sending units up, but they couldn't get too far, the Japs really that had that thing fortified. We lost our first casualty there; there was a guy named Chitwood who was actually our cook. We had an airburst from one of our own artillery shells that hit the trees, and we looked over and Chitwood was laying there dead. We looked him all over and finally found a little piece of his helmet where shrapnel had come down and killed him. And so we had a little brush with the Japanese there. We got as far forward as we could get and they stopped us. There were several other units trying to get up the side of this ridge. Finally they pulled I Company back and we went over and went up the ridge. When we went over there we got in a firefight with some Japs

coming down over the ridge, and ran them back, and lost another guy there. So then our company stopped right there. There was a little bit of confusion as to who was running this thing.

They sent a buddy of mine, Dale Gibson, who was also sergeant of a squad. They sent him up on the ridge and told him to spend the night up there and see what was going on, and report back to the rest of the unit. Being communications sergeant, I decided to go up there where my buddy was. So I strung some wire up there, and took a Soundpower phone up there where Gib was and spent the night with him. He was pretty nervous; one little squad up there on this pretty good sized knob, and a whole bunch of Japs on the other side. We spent the night up there, and the next morning the rest of the company started moving up and started digging in. When the japs caught sight of that - they were probably 5-600 yards from us up on up this higher ridge. All we could see was a bunch of brush. That's where the DSC thing happened.

We had a guy who was a forward observer for the 105mm cannon we had down below in Boisi village. So there was one decent sized tree left on this little perimeter thing; this knob, and the Japs had an artillery piece that they would shoot at us. They kept blowing off our shrubbery. Every time they would shoot, we'd dive down in our holes. Pretty soon we didn't have much shrubbery left, but we had this tree. So this observer named Turner came up. He had more nerve than an Government mule. He climbed up in this tree to an outpost up there where he could see the Japanese position. I always thought some sniper would get him, but he didn't care; he was up there merrily shooting his 105s into the Jap outfit. That was pretty good. There was a big Jap outfit up there, and there were not that many of us, but we had them out-cannoned. They had one cannon; we had four. So. We had a lot of ammunition. Because after Turner had been up there about two weeks, they phoned up and told him he had just fired his millionth dollar round of ammunition. So we called him "Million Dollar Turner" from then on. They blew off all the leaves off the tree, and he was up there in this big stump with a crotch in it where he had all his positioning stuff in, and he'd shoot at anything they showed up over there during the day. He blew off all their camouflage too so we could see their bunkers and all that. We would send patrols up there in the daytime and harass them, and they would come down in and try to run us off at night. This went on for 38 [he later corrected this to 76] days and nights.

Oh, one thing this Turner did that was totally amazing. There was a Jap plane come over one day. We used to call them Washing Machine Charlies. They would come over at night and wake you up and get you in a hole. This guy was a two-seat airplane. We thought it was a Nakajima 97. He flew over our headquarters, and they had two 40 mm Bofurs down there, which was bad news for that guy. They cut loose on him and they hit him. So he turned and went out to sea off the point of this thing and by the naval base there was an air strip; he was landing on the airstrip. So Turner called for one round of "Willie Peter", code for white phosphorus, a sensing round, and they said "What's the target?", and he said "The plane landing on the airstrip". He had all this stuff plotted in so he could call for fire just about anywhere you wanted it in a hurry. So they got the sensing round on the way. And, lo and behold, it hits the danged airplane, and the white

phosphorus 105 just blows up everything in sight and burned it all to heck. So he says cease fire, end of mission. And they said what about the airplane. And he says you hit it with the sensing round. Unheard of. We thought that was pretty cool. That Turner was something else.

I found out later by reading the history -- we thought we ran the Japs off this big perimeter just ahead of us, because finally we realized "no Japs". We found that [70mm] cannon that was in a cave, that's why we couldn't get it. When they would shoot at us, that's when Turner would cut loose with the 105's, and yet they seemed to survive. They had a cave they would run it in and out of. Anyway, we took the Salamaua naval base. We went down there and they had evacuated the thing. But we found out later that there was an Aussie outfit that had come down from Wau and were threatening these Japs from the other side; so they eventually gave it up. I know we killed a lot of Japs on that ridge. Maybe we just wore them out. In the process they tried to run us off one night, and I got tangled up with them and run them back, and ended up getting a DSC out of it.

As the story goes I was carrying some ammunition and grenades to an outfit that I thought was in trouble because I could hear this racket going on. According to witnesses, there were some people who had gotten wounded and were evacuated from positions I now found vacant. So, I took over those four positions and there was a Japanese who was exhorting his troops to attack us. So I had some grenades and found a Browning Automatic rifle that had been left there and was loaded. No other clips unfortunately. Down in the ravine in front of me in the trees there was a Japanese who was in charge of the assault. I could hear him yelling. So I took a Mills Bomb, an Australian hand grenade, and I wound up and threw it up as far as I could to try to get an airburst down on this guy. I could hear him telling them to "look out" because he could hear it coming down through the trees. He knew what was coming. I wanted to outsmart him. So I got two of them. I threw one up in the air as high as I could, and again he was telling them to "look out". And I threw the other one, timing it with the blast of the first one, so he wouldn't hear the handle going off, and it might get him. And it's possible I did get him. I don't remember hearing him doing any yelling after that. Then I went up and got the BAR and got up to where I could look down. It was dark, so I couldn't see much of anything but the tree line in front of me. So I started shooting down below with the BAR, and went over to the foxhole where people had been evacuated from, and couldn't find any more BAR ammunition, so I took my Tommy Gun; I had brought one clip with me. So I got as close as I could, and shot down there with it, and knew I was having some effect as I could hear people yelling down there. Pretty quick, one of them threw a grenade up at me. I could see the spark. The Japanese grenade, they would whack them against their helmet, and then it would sparkle as it came through the air. Here came this sparkling thing toward me, so I dove for the ground and I slid down this ravine. The grenade went off and didn't bother me. But then I realized I'm tangled up with a couple of Japs coming up the hill. I got rid of one of them by poking him [*he later changed this word to "stuck"*] with the bayonet I had on my scabbard. And I got rid of the other one by hitting him with my helmet, but he was still trying to get up alongside me. The one I poked [*stuck*] with the bayonet was hollering, and the one I whapped with my helmet was screeching and yelling and fell back down the ravine. So then I took my helmet and

slung it around by the strap and tossed it down the hill in case there were any more coming. 'Cause I was out of everything. I didn't have any more grenades, and my Tommy Gun was laying up on the ground where I dropped it. So then after that quieted down, I went up and down the line and told people that there wasn't anybody in the holes behind *[to the left and right of]* them, so they had to be careful. I thought I'd run all these Japs off, but I wasn't sure. There were two positions on either side. So then I went and found the Lieutenant that was in charge of this outfit, and told him that he didn't have anybody in the other positions and that I had had to take over. So he went and got some people to fill in.

Later on, they found my helmet, and about 18 or so Japs that had been hurt down there. I had gone down the hill to where they had the showers set up. You could get supplies there too. When I was coming back on the boat, I heard these guys talking about this guy who was fighting Japs by throwing his helmet, and I realized it was me. They had sent some reporter up, and he had interviewed the people on the perimeter while I was down getting a shower and had written a story in the paper about it. People kept getting interviewed while I was gone. They were people who were witnesses to the event, because they testified before these investigators. That's kind of the way it went.

After we got to Salamaua naval base, they sent us back to Rockhampton. All of our Christmas stuff was there in a tent all piled up and you had to go in. I remember that my buddy Dale Gibson and his brother Darrell, that their folks had sent them wristwatches and we found them just laying on the ground. We spent Christmas up there doing that hill thing I guess. We went back down to Australia and we got two weeks leave. We would always go down to Melbourne. Guys on leave had low priority on the trains. So the way we'd work it is we'd get off at every train station and check with the military police to see if he'd let us back on. Even a civilian that wanted to go somewhere had more priority than us. So we'd have to spend a couple of nights in this town. We were one two weeks leave, but our leave didn't start until we got to Melbourne. So we stalled our way down to Melbourne. Came back up, went back up to the unit, and then we were sent down to Toorbul point where we did our amphibious training.

So we had a bivouac area all set up on the promontory overlooking the beach down there. Then we would gang up every once and a while and get in our landing craft, go out, and then land on shore. Then they would take us out to sea for a week. Every four hours we'd go over the side, storm or whatever; we'd go over the nets and get in our landing craft and then go out and rendezvous. You had to get practice going down the landing nets because the sides of the ship curve in, and the landing nets curve in and you're hanging on with a load of equipment on. We'd have our weapons, ammunition and all our gear in our packs, but with the buckle undone; so if you fell in the water you could get rid of 50 lbs. worth of stuff. As you go down the nets, there was another load of mortar ammunition etc., on top of that. So if you fell while going down the landing net, you would just clean the net of all the other guys because of all the weight. That happened a few times when we first started out. That's why we practiced. It was a really dangerous maneuver. The guys in the boat would hang onto the net, but the waves from the sea would come up and down and the ship would tilt one way and another. And the

landing net was going up and down. So it took a lot of practice to do it so none of the guys got hurt or we didn't lose any equipment. We got so we could do it pretty expertly. Then we'd just lay around the ship deck and we ate really well. We liked being out on the Navy ships because they fed you really well, and you didn't have to do anything but go over the side of the ship every four hours.

We came back, and that 's when they told me that the commanding general had heard about my exploit and that he awarded me a trip to OCS to the school of my choice. So that's when they gathered me up and we went down to OCS and while I was down there all this investigation took place. I thought they were going to throw me out. There was an instructor who didn't like me, and I didn't like him. I heard later that he had sworn to the other instructors that he didn't think I had what it took and he was going to get rid of me. He'd come down and get in my face and try to rattle me. When they call your name at OCS, you're supposed to run to the orderly room. You did everything on the double. So they called my name and I thought Uh-Oh, this boy's done it. So I'm walking. I just took my time and strolled up to the orderly room. And they were sitting there just looking at me. This captain says here's the notice from your unit. I'm looking at it, and said what the heck is a medal of honor? I didn't know what a medal of honor was. Oh. He said what you'd do to get that? I said I just got in trouble and got out. So I just walked back to my tent. And the guys are all in there asking me if I was going to get kicked out. And I said no; they're giving me a medal of honor. Oh, wow. The poor instructor who wanted to boot me out got booted out himself. Never saw him again. Guess they figured out he wasn't too good a judge of character. But it saved my bacon, too at OCS. Anyway, when I graduated and got to be a 2nd Lieutenant. I went up to the 32nd Division and joined a battalion that had a lieutenant colonel named Munk Meyers. he was an all American quarterback from 1937 and he knew Bob Hope. Bob Hope came *[omitted some text here because not 41st related]* Went to the 2nd Battalion as a communications officer. I didn't like that. I complained to Meyers. Joined them at Aitape on the Durmon(?) river. Had the Japs in a pincer a..... *[again not 41st material]*

Born in Cherokee, Kansas, my dad was wound up being an efficiency expert for General Motors, so he had to go around teaching how to replace parts to the various parts. My dad did a lot of traveling around, and we lived in several states; the first year in CA, and then went back to Oklahoma and then the dust bowl came and everybody left Oklahoma. The town we lived in , Hominy, just closed up. I was in the seventh grade when we left and went down to Phoenix. And then went back to Long Beach just after the earthquake shook it down. Dad moved to Klamath Falls, and about a year later when my mother died in Salem. I left home and went to work on a farm. I thought I'd be a farmer, but people were in hard times then. 1936 or 37. Then worked one winter breaking horses on a ranch, and then at a lumber company. Then joined the National Guard. I've lived a lot of places. I loved the Army. I'd been wanting to get in the Army since I was a little kid. I'd go up on Signal Hill. Knew all the airplanes.

[In Oregon] I had a high school teacher who was a company commander named Shute. He let a lot of kids get in that weren't quite of age. "Aw, just change his birthday". So then we went in and signed up. My brother was with me overseas. He was sick and in

the hospital during the first campaign. He rejoined the 41st when they were going to Hollandia. He was sent in the Hospital from Biak and sent home, so he didn't have much of a career.

New Guinea. I loved New Guinea. New Guinea was nice and humid and hot. They gave us ponchos, but we learned that it was better to just let it rain on you. I read a book called "Gold Dust and Ashes", so I learned how to speak Pidgin English out of that book, and when I got to New Guinea I could talk to the natives. And Colonel MacKechnie who was battalion commander at the time and we got to Buna and we were going to be moving up farther north and we needed bearers. There were no roads. We dubbed the New Guinea natives "Bongs". So we needed bearers. They were scared to death of military people because of the brutality of the Japanese. So they were hiding out. One day he called me in a buddy of mine and said "Would you want to take a trip up the river and try to talk these people into becoming bearers for us?" We're going to need them for this campaign for the naval base. They carry your wounded out and your supplies in. They're indispensable. Hot dog. That's good for me. The planning was up to me and Dale Gibson, because I was going to be the guy doing the talking for us. I asked if we could bring a doctor along. I had read about these natives, and they have different chiefs in the village; they have metoltol(?), kind of a first aid guy appointed by the government; then a totot(?), an Australian-appointed chief, and then a lului(?), a hereditary chief. So they got three guys running the village. So I told the guys who were going with me to round up all the Sunday newspapers and comics, and anything that had pictures of any kind and some trade tobacco, and I told this doctor to bring all of the sugar pills and aspirin that you can afford to get rid of, because once I let these natives know you're a doctor, they're going to come to you with all these illnesses. Well, it worked out pretty good. We went up and found a village that was vacant; not a soul in sight. But you could tell that there had been people living there because they had nice big gardens. So we got into this village, and I knew they were in hiding in the woods. So I told the guys, sit around and start reading the funny papers and start laughing and talking, making out like we're nice guys and we're not going to hurt anybody. And so, sure enough pretty soon the little kids started coming up, and you know, the American soldier, he's right at home with little kids. So the little kids start looking at the pictures, and they are astounded. So when they saw we weren't bothering the kids. So pretty soon this medical metoltol, he rushed out and wasn't going to get upstaged. He put this little cap on his head, and said "Metoltol". So I played my Ace. I pointed to the doctor and said "Him Doctor". This guy was a businessmen. He wanted the pills. So the whole village came out.

So the next day I wanted to do something to prove to these people that we weren't weak. They had been told that foreigners could only walk six miles. From the book I had read, it said that when a white man is walking with a native and he asks how far it is, the native always says "one hour". And then when he gets to about six miles, he says "one day" to get you to stop. So there was a lake called Solace lake. We had seen it on the map. So I knew that from the village there was a path that went to this lake and it was roughly six miles. So I went over and talked to the Lului, and told him that my buddy and I wanted to go to Solace Lake and that we wanted somebody to show us how to get there. He was

a little nervous, because when the Japs would make these people be bearers, they would kill a lot of them. So they were scared of the military.

So in addition to being up against that, I wanted to convince these people that we were tough guys. So we went over to Solace Lake, and we got there about noon. The Aussies would never eat with natives. So we sat down and had lunch with them. Told one native a joke, and he laughed. So when we started to go back, they were amazed. So, I told my buddy, we're going to run off and leave those guys. So we did. We got back to the village and were exhausted from going so fast. The Lului came up and asked where are the bearers. So the bearers came up, and they were tired. They were grumbling to him. "You strong fella walkabout too much". That was a compliment. They were some pretty powerful people.

I would always carry a Springfield rifle out on patrol. I liked the lighter weight gun. We had some stargazers left in the supply room. After we were issued the M-1 garrands, it was heavier and you had to carry clips of ammunition. I trusted the Springfield. The guys were carrying our packs for us. Going out we had lunch for us in it. So Dale pulled his Thompson machine gun apart and weighted the packs down.

I talked to the chief and told him we wanted bearers. So the next day they got us some canoes and got some guys to row us up the river, and they got some drums roaring, and they can actually talk with those drums. So when we got to the next village, there were a whole bunch of people waiting to see us. I asked one of these people "how come?", and they said "Drums say you come". So the word got passed along the line. We spent about four days. Went back down to the village where we first started and walked back down.

When we got back, Col MacKechnie says "What the hell did you do up there? We're overrun with people wanting to be bearers." The Americans are nice guys.

We always made sure the trains went back down in the daytime to protect the natives. We didn't want them inside the perimeter at night when all the firing started. If they got spooked and ran out, they might get shot by our men guarding the perimeter. If you moved at night you had to identify yourself.