

Donald W. Owens

4 ½ years in the Army
Mostly in Pacific Jungles

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Interviewer: Charles Nelson
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My name is Charles Nelson and I am a volunteer at Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperation with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the home of Mr. Owens in Roscoe, Illinois. Mr. Owens served in the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

NELSON: Would you please start this interview by introducing yourself to us?

OWEN: My name is Don Owens.

NELSON: Okay. Please give us your full name and date of birth.

OWEN: My full name is Donald Owens. I was born in Beloit, Wisconsin, on the 4th of February 1919.

NELSON: We would also like to have the names of each of your parents. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

OWEN: Yes. My dad was Ward Owens and my mother was Gertrude Owens. I have one brother, Stanley Owens, and two sisters Kay Lockwood and Marion Heady.

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents and your family that you would like to give us?

OWEN: No, other than my brother was in World War II He was with the 104th Timber

Wolves over in Europe in the Battle of the Bulge and some of those. So we both went through the war.

NELSON: What was life like before the war specifically during 1941?

OWEN: During 1941, I was assistant manager of a shoe store in Beloit and then they started the draft thing and selective service so rather than wait to be drafted, I was going to be one of these heroes and sign up. So I volunteered. I didn't wait to get selected. So I went into the army on April 14th, 1941.

NELSON: Okay. What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

OWEN: Well, I wasn't too sure what was going to happen like everybody else but then I knew that if it did happen why I was going to do my part. So that's exactly why I signed up.

NELSON: How did you hear of December 7th, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japs? If so, where were you and what were you doing at the time? What was your reaction to it?

OWEN: I distinctly remember that and I was "teed" off because where I was at—I was in the train station in Alexandria, Louisiana, with my furlough; waiting to go on furlough. All I was doing down there at the depot was waiting for my train to come back home. That's when the news came on that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. So the MPs came in the depot and said, "Soldier, where are you from?" I said, Camp Livingston, Louisiana, and he said, "Well, that's where you're going back to right now" So I got a

refund on my railroad ticket. So that's why I knew exactly where I was when that happened.

NELSON: Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what had been taking place in Europe or Asia?

OWEN: No, I hadn't.

NELSON: Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe?

OWEN: Yes, I do.

NELSON: Did you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

OWEN: From what I read, somewhat, yes.

NELSON: What events led to your entry in the military service? Were you already in the service, drafted or did you volunteer?

OWEN: I was already in the service when the war started. Like I said, just a few minutes ago, I was ready to come home on furlough on Pearl Harbor Day so I had been in for quite some time, April of that year, in fact.

NELSON: Was your response to entering military service influenced by family and friends attitudes toward the war, the threat to national security or any other consideration?

OWEN: Well, I think probably the threat to national security. Like I said, I was willing to do my part. That was probably the biggest thing, along with the fact that the Selective Service going and I didn't wasn't to wait for that. I was going to volunteer. So I would say, yes, that national security was probably the biggest reason.

NELSON: Did you mention when and

where you were inducted?

OWEN: I was inducted in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 14th of 1941. That night we came back by train through Beloit and I got put in Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, and the next day I got out of there and they put us on a train and went Camp Livingston, Louisiana.

NELSON: Do you have any special memories of this event?

OWEN: Yeah, probably. All the guys got into Camp Grant and after our first meal full of saltpeter, as you well know, I don't have to explain to anybody that has been in the military the results of getting a dose of saltpeter. That's what I remember about Camp Grant.

NELSON: How old were you?

OWEN: I was twenty-two.

NELSON: What happened after you were inducted? Where were you sent and where did you take your basic military training?

OWEN: After I was inducted I was sent to Camp Livingston, Louisiana, and that's where we took our basic training. Our basic training was followed by the, I suppose you could say, famous Louisiana maneuvering which was participated in so that was well to be remembered, too.

NELSON: What were you trained to do?

OWEN: We were trained to — I went into the Field Artillery Unit and then they formed us into an anti-tank battalion which we eventually became a tank destroyer battalion.

NELSON: Was this by choice or ...

OWEN: No, this wasn't by choice. They just assigned us there. We were — they just put us there. I was a fill in—one of the fill ins. As a selectee they filled us into the Wisconsin-Michigan famous 32nd Red Arrow Division which was all National Guards. So they put us in and we were trained by Wisconsin National Guard people in our basic training.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

OWEN: It was good training. It wasn't the best conditions in the world but it was good training. The weather was bad—hot and humid all the time and ___?___ tents with seashells for sidewalks and that type of thing. So we weren't in the worst place in the world but it wasn't the best either. You don't forget anyway.

NELSON: Can you remember anything special that happened there?

OWEN: Yes, I can remember one thing. I never forgot because after our basic training, you know, we were scared if these high ranking officers. I remember one of our guys in our outfit, his name was Russ Rinesmith. He worked in the Beloit Iron Works in Beloit and also the commanding general of the 57th Field Artillery Brigade was General Bill Woods who was Vice President of Beloit Corporation in peacetime. So we were going down the street one night to the movies and we saw this General up there and so we were getting ready to throw him the best salute we had, you know. Break your arm off if you had to. Russ Rinesmith saw the general and he recognized him as Bill Woods so Russ says, "Hi, Bill." Geez, I thought we were both going to get court martialed. What happened? The general says "Hi, Les" and he invited him into his quarters there and sat and drank for a while. I

went to the movies by myself.

NELSON: That's interesting. Tell us about any other training camps you attended.

OWEN: Well we went by convoy, moved all of our equipment, all our trucks, everything, from Camp Livingston, Louisiana, to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. I was one of the drivers. I drove all the way and we got there and, of course, we thought we were going to the European Theater winding up in Massachusetts. We were there a short time and one-day we started loading up all our heavy equipment on railroad flat cars which we thought was very funny. Jeez, we drive all the way from Louisiana and then they're going to put us on railroad flat cars to take us over to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and ship us out to Europe. That seemed crazy. Well, where we wound up was in San Francisco. We shipped out of Frisco to the South Pacific, to New Guinea or Australia. That's where we went.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

OWEN: I had passes, yeah. The leave, that furlough I had cancelled on Pearl Harbor Day; I never did get that back. I got paid eventually for it when I was discharged. I got a good chunk of "dough" because we never got any furlough time to speak of.

NELSON: You didn't get enough time to come home?

OWEN: Oh we had enough time but they wouldn't let us come home. I don't remember. Remember they had rotation points, something like, what was it 84 points or something like that. I had something like 128 or something like that when I finally got to rotate. But that was up in Hollandia, New Guinea. A year or two later after this ___?___.

NELSON: What do you recall about this period about the places you were stationed, the friend you made and your association with civilians?

OWEN: You mean stateside, in the United States?

NELSON: Yeah.

OWEN: I don't think we made any friends outside of the military area. We went to some of those big cities. We went to Boston, Massachusetts, and some of those cities around, Worcester and some of those cities just for a weekend. We'd go to a dance or something like that. But we never made any fast friends. Actually we didn't have that much time there to make any friends. By the time they got done deciding to ship us elsewhere, that didn't last long. Of course, we got to the West Coast we went right to Angel Island so we never saw anybody.

NELSON: You were with an anti-tank unit?

OWEN: Yeah. When we left it was called the 32nd Division Anti-Tank Battalion and then later on it was formed into the 632nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. It stayed like that all through the war.

NELSON: What was your job with this unit?

OWEN: I was reconnaissance sergeant.

NELSON: Where did you go after you completed your basic military training? This is the training that you had in the United States. You said you were shipped out of the West Coast?

OWEN: Yeah. Okay. We went on a ship for a 22-day boat ride and we landed at Fort Adelaide, Australia. That's where we land-

ed. We went out in the woods to a camp out there called Sandy Creek.

NELSON: Do you remember the ship that you went on?

OWEN: Yes. Hugh L. Scott was the name of the ship. That ship got sunk in the African Campaign later on and then when I did get to come home, to rotate. I came home, and sure enough, I got on the brand new Hugh L. Scott, same named ship 2 ½ years later.

NELSON: That's unusual.

OWEN: It sure is. Difference in the ships, too, I'll tell you!

NELSON: I'll bet. Well, what were you assigned to do after arriving overseas?

OWEN: Overseas? I was assigned to help, go out and locate and set up camps. I went out with the captain and the exec officer. We had to go out into the wood and find an area which was suitable and then we would have to plan where all our equipment would go and that sort of thing. Reconnaissance nothing to do with the enemy at that time but just set up. Then after we got set up, of course, then we trained for reconnaissance, amphibious training and all that stuff because we were going to make a lot of landings. So we went into that later on.

NELSON: What did you think of our nation's war efforts up to this point?

OWEN: Very good, very good.

NELSON: If you did not immediately enter a combat zone . . . I think we answered that question.

OWEN: Yeah. We went to jungle training and amphibious training because the Japa-

nese were experts in the jungle and we didn't know beans about it and the amphibious training. We went down in South Hampton in Australia and we made landing after landing, you know, with the amphibious ships. We'd come up and hit the beach and all that stuff. We did that over and over and over so we got quite proficient at it finally.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience of entering your first combat zone.

OWEN: The first combat. We went up to New Guinea, landed in Milne Bay and then after that we went around to ___?___ Island to a staging area. Then we got ready and then on New Year's Day of '43, we made an amphibious landing and we landed at Saidor, New Guinea. This was Douglas MacArthur's Hedge Hopping. In other words, we went up the coast to make a landing and pin them in between us, the Japanese. Then we'd go up the coast to make another amphibious landing and put the squeeze on them. We went all the way up the coast of New Guinea that way. We made landings at Saidor, [Galhall(?), Mod(?) River] and Aitape and Hollandia right up the coast like that.

NELSON: I would suppose, during this time you would have casualties? Can you tell us the number and types of casualties, how they occurred and how they were treated?

OWEN: I remember our first guy that got killed. His name was Jimmy [Heason]. He was on the third platoon and they were out setting up a gun because we expected counter attacks. They were setting up guns along the coast and all of a sudden out of nowhere came a whole bunch of Japanese bombers and they started ___?___. We could see the bombs coming down. Of course, we all hit

the dirt. Jimmy got hit and he got killed and a couple of other guys. One guy had his leg taken off and a couple others badly hurt. I was fortunate because I had laid in one of the tracks that the trucks had made. All I got out of it was my butt was sticking up in the air and the old army saying about having sand pointed up your ass, well that's what happened to me. I got peppered and later they took me to the doctor. He put me over his knee and he was picking the sand out of my butt with a needle. Then he covered me with that purple stuff you know. Remember that purple stuff that they used to use? I forget the name of it. God, they put that on everything so there was a little humor to it too but it wasn't very funny when we got hit because when you lose your first buddy, why it's devastating; you just never forget, never.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

OWEN: Yeah. I think so. It made you all the madder and more determined that we were going to wipe those suckers out of there and you knew you had something to fight for then. You were really "teed" off. That's what happened. It made me very, very much more determined to win this thing.

NELSON: What did you think of the war so far?

OWEN: I like civilian life a lot better. The living conditions were terrible because it got up to about 130° and when you've got to fight a war besides that and then you're fighting the elements and fighting disease as well as the enemy, it's quite miserable. We lived in foxholes. You dig a hole where it's so near the beach the darn thing would fill up with water. So you stay there all night on your knees in a foxhole with your chin

above water with the leeches sucking on to you. Those type of things. The living conditions weren't good.

NELSON: Did anyone have tents to sleep in?

OWEN: Not there. No. Well they did back in the rest areas. They put up tents. Every once in a while they'd rotate you back to the rest area. Let you rest up because my outfit had the longest combat record ever of any United States military outfit. We had 654 days of combat. That's the greatest total of any outfit in the military service in the United States.

NELSON: Did you receive many letters and or packages, if so, how often? What type of things did you get in these packets?

OWEN: Well, we would receive them like everybody else. I suppose in bunches. We wouldn't get any for a long time and all of a sudden we'd get a mail call and we'd get a whole bunch of dated letters, a whole bunch of papers and some boxes. I remember we got boxes of food and we'd open the things up. I especially remember things like Baby Ruth candy bars. They were so green with mold, you know. They looked like the grass out in front so we'd scrape that mold off and ate them and we'd thought they were great. Back home they'd throw the damn things in the garbage. But, boy, over there that was a treat. We just scraped off the mold and ate them.

NELSON: About the rest of the men. Did they write and receive letters?

OWEN: Yeah. I think most of them did. Then when we did get a box we'd share it. You shared whether you wanted to or not. They came in and put the grabs on it. But everybody was real about it.

NELSON: Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many or some of you combat companions?

OWEN: Oh, yeah. To this day we are still very close. In fact next month I'm the host for the reunion of Company C 632nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. This will be our 49th consecutive meeting that we've had with Company C ever since 1945. We get together every year without fail.

NELSON: That's great. Did you ever have to help retrieve a wounded buddy from the field of combat?

OWEN: Yes.

NELSON: Would you tell us about that? What you can remember.

OWEN: Well, I like to pass on that one.

NELSON: Okay, fine. During your combat duties did you ever catch any enemy prisoners? If so, please describe the circumstances.

OWEN: Well, the first two that we captured were a couple of Japanese ____? ____ you know before you go in on a landing you get the bombardment from the ships. You get the bombing from the Air Force. Then you get the strafing with the fighter planes. After all that you hit the beach and in fact as we hit the beach, why the liberator bombers, B26, I guess they call them B24. They were still dropping and the whole ground was shaking when we hit the beach. We stayed in there the first night and nothing happened. We had expected a counter attack by sea but the gosh darn white phosphorous you know on the ocean out there, it makes you imagine things. You think it's a ship coming in, you can imagine this and that and all it is, is the gosh darn foam on the ocean. The phosphorus is bright at night. In the morning we had

put in a machine gun at the base of this coconut tree. We were taking a break and one of the guys just happened to roll over on his back and was going to take a break and he looked up and up to the top of that tree and he says, "I think there's some guys up there." Sure enough, there were two Japanese up there, crawled up that tree, survived all that Navy blasting and they were so scared that they defecated all over their legs. It was running down their legs. They come down and, of course, it was real tricky. So the first thing we made them do was strip. We had them strip butt naked because they'd hide stuff on them like grenades or whatever. So we stripped them down and then we took them over to the headquarters and they had an American who was a Japanese interpreter. He started questioning them and when he got done, he started laughing at one point and says, "Well, one of the things he told me, "They told us you might get Texas back but you'll never get California." They had those guys buffaloed into thinking that those Japs thought they were in California.

NELSON: You were never involved in any type of concentration camps? Did you know if they existed?

OWEN: No, not in the area I was in. They didn't have any such things.

NELSON: What was the highlight occurrence of combat experience or any other experience you remember?

OWEN: The highlight?

NELSON: Yes. I suppose the thing that had the most tension to it.

OWEN: I suppose your first landing. When you make your first landing you're going to hit the beach, you know. You're a

wide-open target. You're not ready to check out, of course, and I remember when we hit the beach this Major says to me. I don't know where we came from—he wasn't our guys. I shouldn't say that because a lot of times being the "recon" sergeant I went with the first wave of the infantry. Then I'd have to shop around to find places to bring in the heavy tank because we had these 30-ton tank destroyers and you just couldn't bring them in anywhere. They'd go any place where a man could walk because of the buoyancy. But this one Major hit the beach just about the time we hit the beach, the machine guns opened up and boy, you know, we hit the deck needless to say. This one Major says to me, "Sergeant, you go in and silence that machine gun." And I said, "The hell with you, Major, after you." He said, "God damn it, I'll have you court martialed. I said, "You go ahead, but I'm not going in there right now." And I never heard any more from the guy but I thought that was a ridiculous command.

NELSON: Sounds resolved right there. Tell us what you and the other men did to celebrate America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

OWEN: Well, even up there that's about the only good meals we had. It seems that no matter where you were, the American troops always managed to get some turkey and trimmings and stuff for Christmas and I'll be darned if they didn't figure out a way to do that. And that's what we had. We had turkey a couple times and then we got the Christmas presents from back home. Some of these stores ___?___ funny. We had our cigarette rations. We got them for nothing, of course. We got them for nothing so this one time, this was at Christmas time, too. I got my cigarette ration which was a carton of Old Gold cigarette and I opened up the carton, took the wrapping off of it and it said

inside “Compliments of McNeeny’s Department Store, Beloit, Wisconsin.” This was a store that was (interruption) born and raised, and they were sending, you know, giving money to get these things for the troops but I thought it was quite coincidental. Here I am, a guy from Beloit and I get a present from the store in Beloit.

NELSON: That’s great. How did you return to the United States after the end of the war?

OWEN: I got the word to rotate because my turn had come so they gave us a half an hour. They said, “You’ve got one half hour to get down to the ___?___ airdrome which is an airport, another area field in New Guinea, to get down there and get on that ship. I said, “Okay. Goodbye.” The old man tried to talk me [into] a 1st Lieutenant Field commission. I said, “No thanks, Captain. I got this far and no thank you. Thanks, but no thanks.” So I dropped everything and the supply Sergeant said, “Hey, you’re charged for all that stuff.” I said, “Send me the bill, Boss, because I’m gone.” I didn’t stop for nothing. So we went down there and we got in this old C-47 and the guys, the Air Force guys, they didn’t put a big door on the side—big open door. They took it and threw it in on the floor. We took off and away we went. The damn door was flopping because of the wind coming in there. We got to Hollandia and landed and they took us with the boat and we got on that boat and I’ll be darned that boat sat there for 30 days. It never moved. They took us off the boat and put us to work every day. First they gave us a half an hour to get there and then we sat for 30 days.

NELSON: Maybe they were waiting for a convoy or something?

OWEN: No we came home all by ourselves.

NELSON: Is that right?

OWEN: Nobody. Just us.

NELSON: Well, now when you arrived in the United States what happened?

OWEN: We came back to the same place we left from, Angel Island. We got in there and boy, talk about the royal service. Everybody was hopping and waiting on you and they’re measuring you up for clothes. “Here you want this? You want that?” God, they were treating us like kings. I’ll tell you. So they measured us all up, issued this stuff. Got everything, put us on a ship and went across the bay. They put us on a train. They put us on the car so and so and said, “Now when the car that you’re in gets to Chicago, the train is just going to drop that car off, just let it set there. That train is going all the way to the East Coast. They drop them off and pretty soon a switch engine hooked on to us and took us down to Fort Sheridan. They processed us there and it wasn’t but a couple of hours. Man, we were on our way. I mean we really got the treatment. They side-tracked—they even side tracked passenger trains for us coming home. We just breezed us right on through. I think it was 39 hours from the West Coast to Chicago. That’s better than the fastest passenger train.

NELSON: When was this? Do you remember what month?

OWEN: I sure do, Yessiree. I got home in November ’44. I got married in December of ’44 and got discharged in July of ’45. It took me that long to get out of the system.

NELSON: Please tell us about your military rank and your decorations especially your campaign decorations.

OWEN: Well, I didn’t get any Congressional Medals or anything like that. I just got the usual ones, combat, the Asiatic, South

Pacific campaign, American Defense Medal, three bronze battle stars on it and that is about it. Usual one, you know.

NELSON: Expert medal?

OWEN: Yeah. I got all those. I had the highest score in the entire division. I was top man in the division and I wound up eventually as a—in the reserves—I wound up as 1st Sergeant. That is about it.

NELSON: Can you remember some of the islands that you landed on during the invasion?

OWEN: Well, mostly in New Guinea and Good Enough Island. See New Guinea is the 2nd biggest in the world. New Guinea is 1500 miles long and is 12,000

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