

DWIGHT W. CONRAD

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DWIGHT CONRAD

Hello! Today is March 1st, 1994. My name is Phyllis Gordon. I'm a volunteer with the Rockford Museum Center which is cooperating with a state wide effort to collect oral histories of Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the home of Dwight Conrad, 3404 Pioneer Drive, Rockford, Illinois. Mr. Conrad served in the army during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war. Dwight, would you please start just by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name and the place and the date of your birth.

CONRAD: This is Dwight Conrad of 3404 Pioneer Drive, Rockford, Illinois. I was born May 7th, 1919, on a farm in [Calhoun County, Iowa].

GORDON: We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

CONRAD: Wallace and Jennie Conrad.

GORDON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

CONRAD: Yes, I had a sister, Phyllis, who died the end of last April. Then I have a brother, Duane, who lives in St. Charles, Missouri, and he is still with a generating components industry near St. Charles — near St. Louis, too.

GORDON: Are there any details about your parents and your family that you would like to give at this time? Or what was life like for you before the war?

CONRAD: Well, my life started on a farm and I learned a number of things having to do with that. I was always interested in farming and farm life and then we moved into town just before I was five years old. I started — It was a town called Litton Iowa and it's on U. S. 20. I went to grade school and high school there.

GORDON: What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the process?

CONRAD: The main thing is that I was in the army. I went into the army in April of '41. April 15th, I believe it was and we were on maneuvers and we had both what it would be like to fight the Germans and what it would be like to fight the Japanese. Who knew when a war might start

as far as the United States was concerned? We practiced both of those on the maneuvers. On our way back in December — December 6th we got as far as Camp Pickett in the southern part of Virginia. Then on the 7th, we were eating lunch there before we went on to Fort Meade, Maryland. At that time then we picked up the broadcast that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. So we knew that it was going to be quite different. I was supply sergeant and I was thinking ahead, "Oh no. I'm going to have to issue ammunition and new rifles and machine guns and the whole bit. We went through Washington, D.C. the night of December the 7th. Everything was dark and we were using __?__ over the lights so that the lights shown down, just ahead of the army vehicles. It was a 6 x 6 army truck. Then when we got to Fort Meade, Maryland, everyone knew the next morning was going to be busy as could be. Well then the __?__ and I started cleaning rifles and everything else. Clean off Cosmoline which is real greasy and we had a big job ahead of us. Finally, then, we got the new weapons issued.

GORDON: That's a wonderful account of Pearl Harbor Day. What event led you to enter military service?

CONRAD: I was drafted. Now they had started the draft — I was among the first people drafted. I think I have the same number only a different area of the country as Jimmy Stewart. Jimmy Stewart ended up going to Officers' Training School. He became — I know he was at least a colonel. He mighta been a Brigadier General before he was through. But I think he had the 1548 which was my last four numbers and that represented the number of people that had been drafted at that time.

GORDON: When and where were you inducted or did we cover that already?

CONRAD: No. I was inducted in Baltimore, Maryland, where I had been working with about 15 months with the Social Security Board which had just started in 1936. I did things like checking out for the Internal Revenue Service. Some of the people who had Social Security under different names so that they couldn't be traced and things like that. All of this was with IBM machines [which advances to what] I ended up doing in the Pacific.

GORDON: How old were you when you were inducted?

CONRAD: I was 22 years old.

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

CONRAD: I took my basic training at Fort Meade, Maryland, which was with the 175th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Division.

GORDON: What were you trained to do?

CONRAD: At that time, I was training to be an infantryman. I wasn't real happy about that. I didn't like to think that I was actually going to kill people. When I was a kid, I used to go hunting but that was different. They were squirrels some things like that. Anyway I got to thinking about it and I heard that there was organizing going on for people who had experience with IBM machines and they would be using them in trailers and they would go to different divisions to keep records of those particular soldiers. So that way then, I ended up leaving my job as a supply sergeant and joined this other ___?___ as a First Machine Records Unit they called it. About the first of May of '42, we went out to California aboard a troop train. That's another interesting thing. We ended up in the cupola in the last car of the train, you know, on guard and everything else and whenever the train would stop in different places, we'd have to get out and guard. When we got out to San Francisco, we bivouacked for a few days until the troop ship was

ready to go and it turned out it was a Matsonia and there 12 ships in the convoy. We left there around the 5th of May of '42. We started out. There was a couple of ships that were going to go to the Philippines but they didn't. They changed their mind. They had a last minute check and found out that the town had fallen and Corregidor probably would be next. Meanwhile, I guess MacArthur was leaving the Philippines. We went between North and South Islands of New Zealand through Cook Strait. We landed outside of Melbourne, Australia, at a place called Williamstown. Then we bivouacked in a park called Royal Park. They had a zoo there and early in the morning, about five o'clock, you'd hear the lions roaring and you hear sheep bleating ...

GORDON: I don't want to hear this, I don't think.

CONRAD: They were sending the sheep to market and the lions would roar because they could hear the sheep bleating. Then we left Melbourne by truck convoy and there were a couple of cars, too, and went up to Sydney. We bivouacked outside of Sydney at a place that is now a race track, believe it or not. It was there to see when we went back in '88. We trained there and I was — I kind of led — I had been also involved with chemical warfare — being a non-com from that. We had different little samples of things that would decide whether it was mustard gas or different — I can't think of the others at the moment. Anyway we went on up to Brisbane. We did some training there and got acquainted with some of the people that were going to be up in New Guinea. By that time we knew we were going to New Guinea. We went to New Guinea later on in '42 and on the way we got a message that we should pull into Townsville Harbor which is on the northern part of Australia, that they were bombing Port Moresby where we were headed. So then we had to wait for that. Then we finally crossed the — what's the name of the sea — I can't think of it now — and landed in Port Moresby. The first night we put up tents. We didn't realize we were on a hillside by the time we got through pitching the tents. It rained and all the water run down

through some of our belongings were down the hill. Then we found out that we were going to keep records for what was called the Fifth Army Air Corps, General George Kinney. We had to get acquainted with that and they were setting up an airfield there outside of Port Moresby. It turned out we were right next to — I can't think of the word now — where they shoot down planes. Anyway, that was a lot of loud noise, too. One of the things I remember about that was that we got out into the countryside — out in the out — really out back of us. There was [coony grass] which is about 6 or 8 feet tall sometime. You could hide in it even. We went on up to a place called ___?__. That was the start of the people going over the Owen Stanley Range to Buna and ___?__ which were the two places where they were trying to drive out the Japanese. Well, they didn't do that. I remember being under that mosquito netting and then I seen this mosquito on my arm. Its head was down and standing up. I said, "Oh, oh. A mosquito. Then I got malaria. I spent 15 days back in Sydney at a army hospital and then came back again. I didn't know what was going to happen next. I rejoined the same machine records unit and later on we got plane loaded along with the trailers that had all this IBM equipment and we went on up to Hollandia. We went over the Owen Stanley Range which is probably somewhere around 15 or 18 thousand feet. We landed at Hollandia which is now called [Sakarn], I think. It's part of the Netherland East Indies. We went 20 miles up onto a plateau which is about 8400 feet up. One of the first things that happened up there was we met Lanny Ross and Lanny Ross was trying to get people to practice for the Easter of '45. As it turned out, we were also — it was just before Christmas — we were also practicing some Christmas music so that he could move us around to make us blend better. This was in ___?__. Some of the Japanese up in the mountains and up as high as 15,000 feet heard all of the singing and I would guess as many as 50, before it was over, came down and surrendered to us as we were in what we call a chow line.

GORDON: So your singing caused them to surrender.

CONRAD: Yah. They wanted to hear beautiful music and they came into surrender. That's funny. They had their weaponry with them. They had their gun loaded. Then finally, we get the word that they have taken enough of Leyte to prepare to go up to the Philippines. They were starting to — well, just ahead of us ... the First Calvary Division to land and we got on board a Liberty ship where everybody was in a hammock. When we got up into the South China Sea, we hit part of a typhoon. It was pretty serious ... they were banging their head on the bulkhead and saying, "Oh, no And things like that. Then we finally got to the Philippines and we got into Manila right after the First Calvary Division. Temporarily, until they could get Clark Field cleared of some of the bombed out American planes ... about three years before that. We stayed bivouacked in the tents at Jose Rizal Stadium. That was interesting, too, because that area was for the 1940 Olympics. They had an auditorium; they had a baseball field; a track field and they had all of those different things. Another thing I remember about that was that these poor people, the Filipinos — when we had a chow line they were just in there with a tin can and maybe a spoon or something they had got from somewhere and we shared our meals with them. Things started changing after an army truck was blown up on a bridge over the Las Cruces River. Then the Japanese were driven out of Manila and up into the mountains. Well, it turned out they were there [Novaliches] Dam but we didn't have to worry about that for a while. [Novaliches] Dam is a water reservoir for Manila. We started putting up lister bags because the water mains were all blown up. We put up lister bags which hold water. They're canvas bags. Then the next thing, MacArthur got there and he was making a speech welcoming everybody and saying, "It's good to be back. Thanks, fellows, for putting up the lister bags around. Nobody's going to get thirsty anyway. By the way, speaking of thirsty, we've opened the brewery and we're going to reopen the distillery in three days."

GORDON: First things, first.

CONRAD: Later on they had Walter Cronkite

with one of these things with public broadcasting, there was MacArthur saying the same things again over here on MacArthur's right, there I was with a ___?___ carbine across my shoulder, you know.

GORDON: You saw yourself.

CONRAD: Yah. I couldn't believe it. I said, "It can't be me. It is." That is where I was standing. So that was a surprise. In Manila there is what they called Los Muros that is the old walled city. We went in there and cleared it out. There was a place where there was a bank. Inside that bank, there was a big vault with Japanese occupational money. That's another thing. He was kind of surprised. We got in on a number of things. One of the things that I remember about New Guinea was there was a Japanese pilot with a little zero and he come flying over and we called him Russian Machine Charlie because he didn't do anything. He just flew over. Nobody shot at him or anything. They said, "Here comes Russian Machine Charlie. Don't anybody shoot." ... I think he was all by himself somewhere. Where he was getting gasoline to keep that flight going, I don't know. We saw him for over a year. In New Guinea, also, we had a short wave radio. We would listen to Tokyo Rose and she would say, "Hello, you Yankees down in New Guinea. Do you know what your wives and girlfriends are doing while you're out there sweating?"

GORDON: Did this change your mental attitude?

CONRAD: No, it didn't bother us. We thought it was funny. There was another thing, too. We ran across Lew Ayres. He had been a conscientious objector and he was working in grave registration with a chaplain, as a chaplain assistant. The chaplain's name, if I remember correctly was Father Albert. Another interesting thing that we ran across somebody, people like Lew Ayres, Lanny Ross and MacArthur, of course. We had real close contact with him. Just outside of Port Moresby where this airfield was, Charles Lindbergh,—everybody was saying, well, he's probably gone to Germany to become a Nazi, but he wasn't. He was down there in the Pacific and he was taking up these P38 Lightnings and testing

them for different distances because they wanted to fly the P38s as escort for the bombers. They finally got to where they got the gas tanks all set and everything so that they could carry extra gas to fly further than they had before. And Lindbergh, from what we learned because we were close to the airfield itself, shot down something like five Japanese planes while he was there. That was interesting, too, because they were saying he was a spy and a traitor and everything else. It turned out that this was a war secret and they weren't going to say anything about it. It came out in 1946 it was the best kept secret of World War II. It wasn't because when I got home May 17th of 1942, I was telling everybody in this little town of Litton about watching Lindbergh just about every day I was in New Guinea and then a year later have them say it was the best kept secret.

GORDON: It's something I didn't know. What did you think of the war so far?

CONRAD: You mean observing it—everything that went on? It was frightening. I got to the point where didn't care about or I couldn't see the reason for all the killing. There was a lot of that. I mean where some of us got the other side of the picture was when the Japanese surrendered outside of Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea. As it turned out, we got acquainted with them and out of about 45 to 50, I'm not sure exactly, there was about ten of them who spoke English. That was surprising.

GORDON: Sure is.

CONRAD: In May of '45 they let me go home on furlough—at least I thought it was. I went out to what they called the troop carrier command where they had the planes that were the C54s that were flying back to the States with some of the people that served three years or so overseas. We flew to Tacloban and Leyte. We were outside the city itself—up in the mountains. The next morning, I woke up, there was the traveling troop of Oklahoma and we could hear somebody yelling down the road. They had a microphone apparently and it was Joe E. Brown.

GORDON: Oh my.

CONRAD: So there was things like that. A day or two later we got clearance to fly to Guam. We flew to Guam and then after evening meal and seeing the first B29s, we flew on to Kwajalein and that was really spot because there was all —what is that stuff that starts with a “C” (Coral). Anyway this is an island that is just about like rock.

GORDON: Atolls or whatever.

CONRAD: Yah. It was an atoll. Then from Kwajalein—we just landed there and gassed up and then we flew on to Johnstown Island, which is south of Hawaii and stayed all night there. No, we just stayed and evening there and then we flew on to Hickam Field in Hawaii just outside of Honolulu. We went to bed and along about 10—we got there about 5:00 in the morning—went to bed and woke up about 10 because people was talking. That, of course, is an air force base and so they said, “Hey, they’re going down into Honolulu. Let’s go, too.” Then we find out, “You guys are on orders, you can’t go.” We got the fly out orders, well, we waited the whole day drinking a lot of pineapple juice and that evening, we took off for San Francisco area. Trying to think of that famous market in that area. It starts with “H”.

GORDON: Oh. I should know that, too. We’ll think of it later on as we go along.

CONRAD: We flew there and landed and then I had to go to Presidio where they checked for my malaria and they said, “You’re okay to go home on furlough.” I waited another day and took off by train for the St. Louis area. We got into Jefferson Barracks outside of St. Louis. They were working on the first people who could get out on the point system. I had 105 points from—that’s just regular service and overseas service and some combat service, too. They said, “Well, we’ll get you out.” I was in the second group to be discharged. I signed up for reserve.

GORDON: We are continuing our conversation with Dwight Conrad. He’s remembering his time

in the Pacific and especially some thoughts about combat and General MacArthur.

CONRAD: When we were in New Guinea—the 150th, I’m not sure of the number now—they were the early parachute troopers. They were all engineers and they were dropped near [Lae] Peninsula in a place called __?__. They were building airstrips to move the Air Force on up and MacArthur flew in his own B17. When they got over to where they were supposed to jump and their machinery and everything had been parachuted down first. Then they found out they were only 500 feet up and MacArthur told them to jump. There was a couple of dozen of the fellows that were kind of banged up after that. Some of them had broken legs. That was about the time I went into the field hospital for the first time with malaria. I got to talk with all of them. They were all very upset with MacArthur for making them jump at that low altitude.

GORDON: They couldn’t have time to get their parachute out.

CONRAD: No. Speaking of combat, though, we were bombed a number of times and that is scary. If you were on the beach which I was one time, you just kept hoping they didn’t spot you or anything.

GORDON: No protection.

CONRAD: There were machine gun bullets flying around, too. Anyway, I didn’t get hit. I was very lucky.

GORDON: Did you write very many letters home?

CONRAD: Yah. I have some of them upstairs but, of course, there’s a lot of it was censored, too, because you couldn’t tell about any of the war.

GORDON: Did you receive many letters or packages? What kind of things did you like to get in the packets?

CONRAD: Everybody would always ask when anybody opened the packages, “Oh, you got cookies? Maybe they’re good yet.” You know and all that. It didn’t take too long. They flew in a lot of that. Of course, then the Navy was moving around and the Navy brought in some of the packages, too. When we got to New Guinea for the first time, we ate with a Navy 52nd Bombardment Squadron I guess it was called. They had all these PBYs which were real slow, 109 miles an hour plane. I got a ride one time when they were testing out some of them that had got shot up a bit. We flew on up to Rabaul. I could look down and see this little town. Rabaul is in New Britain and it’s north of New Guinea. When I got back though the company commander says, “Don’t ever do that again. I’m going to put you on probation. I’m not going to take your sergeant stripes from you. Just going to put you on probation.” Anytime I had to go anywhere for anything at all, I had to go to him to get permission to do it.

GORDON: Did you ever have to help retrieve a wounded buddy from a field of combat? Did you ever have to capture any enemy prisoners?

CONRAD: No, only the Japanese that gave up. That was an interesting thing on that plateau though. Any movement at all that we made, we moved at night and we would have these lights and everything. I sat on the front, one of the front fenders and looked down and I could see nothing down there but what you could see at the bottom ... and then down the mountain. I don’t recall ever helping take care of prisoners although I saw some of that.

GORDON: You told us how you were ready for music for Easter. Were you in a combat area? Do you remember anything about traditional holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas?

CONRAD: Christmas is the only one that we really celebrated. Usually some of us would get packages by that time depending upon when they were sent out. APO 29 was something else because they could get all jammed up. Quite a few had the same address—postal number.

GORDON: Have you remained in contact with any of your World War II companions?

CONRAD: There was one in Chicago the last I knew, John Rex Fry, and I went in to see him one time, he and his— she was a New Zealander. He met her in Australia and did get to go to the wedding before we went up to New Guinea. I went in to see him. She was working for the telephone company then. She was a telephone operator but I can’t remember what Rex was doing.

GORDON: You told us about your military rank about being a sergeant. Is there anything else about your military rank or decorations?

CONRAD: We got a bronze star medal. I guess that would be the main thing. The usual things for different places you served, trying to think of the name.

GORDON: Campaign decorations?

CONRAD: Yah. We got some of those, too.

GORDON: Do you remember those campaigns?

CONRAD: Mostly it was a case of just being at the right place at the right time. I remember gunfire and that. There was some of that in Manila yet.

GORDON: You told us how you were sent home on furlough and then you had enough points to stay home so now you’re back in civilian life. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact when you were in the army?

CONRAD: I got along fine. As soon as I got home and out of the service, I wrote back to the company and told them what the whole situation is, how you get out and all that sort of thing. The company commander then wrote and said, "This is crazy. I wish I had known that you were going to get out, I would have made you a Staff Sergeant." So I was thinking maybe I should go back.

GORDON: Is there anything that you would do differently if you could do it over again.

CONRAD: I don't think so. I'll tell you about the infantry was Company C of the 175th Infantry Division which landed at Normandy Beachhead, at Omaha Beachhead I guess it was. When the war was over I ran into this one fellow who said there was 21 of them out of the 189 that was in the company that we're alive including me he says. He says, "I'm very lucky to be back." He got wounded. He went through the Normandy landing and then the Battle of the Bulge, too, so I was thinking how lucky can you get. And the fellow that was our Staff Sergeant, in fact, I remember when he was corporal, ended up as the company commander. You could see how things changed going to Europe.

GORDON: Very much.

CONRAD: I was thinking I was very, very lucky.

GORDON: Yes, you were.

CONRAD: The one thing I felt kind of bad about at the time, the girlfriend that I had, we were engaged and she broke the engagement. I don't know why and married this fellow who was in the Merchant Marine—she was about to have a baby. That didn't make me feel good either but that's the way it was. Then I thought—I was staying in Washington D. C. for a while. I knew a fellow that was in the Navy. He was as-

signed to office duty or something you call it—headquarters duty, I guess you call it. I visited with him a while and then I decided maybe I should go to college. I didn't have a chance to go to college. I went to business college and took accounting and that's probably how I got into Social Security Board. My sister and brother-in-law were expecting their first child in '45 in Columbus, Ohio, so I went to Ohio State. While I was studying, I would have this little girl who was Diane giving her her bottle and everything—they went out—and studying at the same time. Diane became a special person. She lives in Fort Dodge, Iowa, now because she had gone to high school there. My sister and brother-in-law lived all over. They lived in—besides Columbus—they lived in Des Moines, Iowa, Columbus, went down to Springdale, Arkansas. She worked there. My sister did all the IBM work—computer work—for Tyson and then they went to a couple places in Texas and then they come back to Fort Dodge, Cedar Rapids and then they went out to the Denver area, Golden, Colorado.

GORDON: They did move around.

CONRAD: Yes, they did.

GORDON: How did you learn about VE Day or VJ Day and what was your reaction? Do you remember those instances?

CONRAD: I was in Baltimore on VJ Day and we already knew that they dropped the atomic bombs in a couple of places in Japan. They had a rally down town and I was in on that rally. They really hooped it up for a while. I had one drink. My malaria started coming back and I had to go over to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington to get that taken care of.

GORDON: What was your opinion of our use of the atomic bomb when it was used against the Japanese in August of '45?

CONRAD: I think at that time it was mostly just a celebration that the war was over. I didn't really—well, some Japanese I hated mostly of the way they treated the Filipinos. The Filipi-

nos—I've never seen anybody so poor living in—they just set up a board and got in behind it. That board would be against a building or something and they got in behind it and wrapped a blanket around them and things like that.

GORDON: They had terrible living conditions.

CONRAD: They did have. And some of the things I saw during the Marcos deal, when they were focusing on Marcos and everything, just hadn't improved that much.

GORDON: We would like to know when and where you were officially discharged from the service.

CONRAD: At Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, on the south side of St. Louis.

GORDON: Do you have a disability rating or a pension?

CONRAD: No, except the only thing that the government did pay for one-half—I got from malaria I had this stomach disease and that caused cataracts. When I had the cataract operations in 1959, at the VA research hospital in Chicago, the government paid half of it and my insurance paid the other half.

GORDON: What's your opinion of the care you received in the VA Hospital?

CONRAD: I thought it was very good. I had a chance to go to a chapel and talk things over and pray talked to a lot of people who were wounded and everything was—a lot of things were happening to them similar to what had happened to me. One fellow had a plate in his head from going over a bomb that was buried.

GORDON: The mines?

CONRAD: The mines, yah, in Europe. I met a lot of people and it was very good just to talk over some of the things because it cleared my mind of a lot of deals.

GORDON: So that was one good thing about

the VA Hospital. Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration now?

CONRAD: No except for when somebody—I'm the Commander of Daniel American Legion Post #864 and we've had a few people trying to seek help I recommended contact the VA for that.

GORDON: Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your military life? Did their letters keep your spirits up?

CONRAD: My mother's letters did. She was the one that wrote most of the time. My father just once in a great while because he was busy. He went from farming and he started a radio shop—battery radios in those days. Later on I think he was ready to get into television because television was really coming to here and he was blown off a ladder putting up a second story storm window for the winter. He was blown off a ladder and broke ribs and ruptured spleen. That was in 1957. It was on Thanksgiving Day. That was a sad thing.

GORDON: Is there anything else you would like to tell us.

CONRAD: Let's see.

GORDON: Thank you, Dwight. This concludes our interview with Dwight Conrad unless he thinks of something more he would like to say. Is there any highlight of your service that we haven't mentioned?

CONRAD: I can't think of anything at the moment. I might remember later. I do remember coming in behind the First Cavalry Division and seeing some of that and seeing the mortars were shooting the Japanese out of the—That's when I decided war is not for me. People were jumping out of windows and everything else and they were shooting up those beautiful buildings. Ma-

nila was a beautiful place before the war.

GORDON: I'll bet it was. Would you like to go back and see it?

CONRAD: I might some day although I don't know how soon. I talked to—there's a woman who married a former priest here in Rockford and he was—I think he probably still works in the library, I'm not sure now. She and I have talked about some of the things in the Philippines. She didn't come from Manila. She came from somewhere else—Luzon, I believe. The people that were at Santa Thomas, that was a very sad situation because they didn't half feed them. What was surprising is that this one fellow in Columbus that lived next door to my sister and brother-in law were living, He says, "I remember you from somewhere. Were you in the war?" I says, "Yah" And he said, "Were you in the Philippines?" And I said, "Yes." "Did you

see us at Santa Thomas?" and I says, "Well, I saw some of you." All I thought of at that time was what a terrible shame and it turns out he was one of them.

GORDON: He was a prisoner of war there?

CONRAD: Yah. He had got down to about 60 pounds and he had weighed about 150. He had put on quite a bit of weight. I think he weighed 135 at that time, by the time I had met him again.

GORDON: Pretty severe conditions.

CONRAD: I should say. That's why everything about war kind of turns me off any more ...

GORDON: This has been a very interesting interview. This concludes our interview with Dwight Conrad.