

Wayne Carringer

Today is Monday, May 12, 2003. This is the beginning of an interview with Wayne Carringer of 220 Ford Street, Robbinsville, North Carolina. Mr. Carringer is 82 years old, having been born June 16, 1920. I'm Nancy Potts Coward, conducting the interview. I was asked by Talmage Walter Middleton to request filming Mr. Carringer. The two of them are the only North Carolina survivors west of Raleigh of the Bataan Death March. Doing the film are Morris and Pam Carringer Moody, his son-in-law and daughter.

Interviewer: Mr. Carringer, set the stage for us. Where you born and what were was life like as you grew up?

Carringer: I was born about six miles north of Robbinsville during the depression years of 1920. Life was tough here in the mountains - farming, which I had no affection for. I didn't like to farm and at an early age I began to think about what I was going to do with my life and what not, and as there was nothing here in the mountains for a younger person, and I lacked something like three years finishing high school, and I volunteered for the Army in -- September 8, 1939. I believe that was the day England declared war on Germany. And I was taken over to Fort Benning, Georgia, to where I was sworn in and taken to Fort Benning, Georgia where I took basic training for probably 8-10 weeks, and it was tough, but it was good that I did. And I stayed at Fort Benning till I finished my training, and the first sergeant called me in one morning and said that if I would finish high school, I could go in the Army Air Corps. Well, that sounded good because I didn't like what I was doing at Fort Benning, and I was transferred to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana, where I satisfied my promise to them that I would go to school and finish high school.

I: And I think we need to put in here that it was three courses you lacked, not three years. So go ahead.

C: Three courses, yeah. Whatever it was, I finished. I rode the back of a truck there to Shreveport. We went to school there in Shreveport where I satisfied my commitment to them. And I liked the air corps - air corps it was then - and I got good assignments, and I made ratings fast. The pay at that time was \$21 a month, and \$3 was the next rating, and I got those pretty often, which was a whole lot of money in addition to the 21, [laughs] but then I made - during that time I made buck sergeant, which was a little more money. And at Barksdale I got to go to quite a few places, in San Antonio, Texas, and other towns in East Texas and North Louisiana and places that I had never been before or hadn't, coming out of the mountains, and I learned a lot of new names. I learned different names that were in the mountains. It was interesting, and I began to get a lot of bashfulness out of me by meeting new people. And from Barksdale - I always got good assignments, and I was transferred - our whole bomb group - the Twenty-Seventh bomb group - was transferred to Savannah, Georgia, and I liked Savannah, and I got to make several trips there, including New York and various other places that I wouldn't have got to go, and I liked it. I would have made a career of it if things hadn't shaped up the way they did. In

Savannah we moved out to maneuvers in Louisiana. That was in '41, I guess, and I liked the maneuvers. They were different and in different places. And I was a section leader there, by the way. And from there we got our orders to go to Plum, which was Philippines, Luzon and Manila, we learned. But we weren't for sure. The rumor was that we might go to Cairo, Egypt, but instead we went to the Philippines. And we went back to the base at Savannah and began to pack our things to go to the Philippines. We packed our stuff, foot lockers and what not. And there we boarded the train to San Francisco, and we stayed out at Angel Island, which is pretty close to San Francisco, a couple of weeks or three weeks or something, and November 1 of '41 we sailed for the Philippines, and it was there that I wanted to see the Golden Gate Bridge, so I'd know what it was when I came back. But I was very seasick. That was the first time I'd ever been on a boat. It was a luxury liner - the President Coolidge - and so I was seasick until we got to Honolulu, and I didn't know Pearl Harbor, and there we stopped and with the leave and recreation and refreshments and what not, I became alive again. And from there we went on to the Philippines, which we landed there the twentieth - I believe around the twentieth of November '41.

I: Your duty in the Philippines began only 16 days before Pearl Harbor was bombed, December 7, 1941, and America was at war. Four months later - April 9, 1942 - the Americans and Filipino forces on Bataan surrendered to the Japanese. Will you describe for us that slow retreat, a means of buying time for the U.S. military, down the Bataan peninsula? Tell about supplies - or lack of them, promises unfulfilled, hopes abandoned, but purpose accomplished in this period.

C: That's a good question. We - our planes - did not arrive, and MacArthur or somebody in authority put the air force people on the front lines, and we were on the front lines for 106 days without proper food or equipment, but orders kept coming through that help was on the way signed by General MacArthur - said help was on the way with thousands of men and hundreds of planes on the way to the Philippines - "hold out," and we did. We held out, and I think our purpose - real purpose - was to hold out until we could get forces into Australia. Our planes - as I understand it - were diverted into Australia. We had 54 dive bombers - we were in a dive-bomber group - and they were diverted into Australia. But the forces on Bataan began to hold out, and the food was very scarce. Probably 1000 or 1500 calories a day if they could scarp them up, rake up the food. MacArthur had goofed. He allowed the food in the North to not be taken to the South, due to some order, as I understand it, that the Filipinos had you couldn't move food out of one province to another. As a result food didn't get into Bataan like it should have, and as a result we had to eat monkeys or whatever we could to survive on. It was anything we could rake up to eat, we would do it. We were scavengers.

I: Describe for us as best you can the indescribable - that Bataan Death March.

C: Bataan fell. I think of it as a fall, rather than a surrender, because we did not run out and throw up our hands like that. It was a fall, and we were surrendered by General Edward P. King was in command of the forces on Bataan. And the poor fellow had taken orders by no means to surrender and food was ample if we would get it from the Japanese, which was impossible. And

General King had gone out to meet the Japanese and offered them vehicles and trucks to transport us up to where they were going to take us. But the Japs would not hear to that, but many of the Filipinos came down into the Bataan peninsula, thinking we could protect them, literally thousands of them. The Japanese were getting ready to open up on Corregidor, which was three or four miles across from the Bataan peninsula. And so they began - there were so many people - they began to move us out of the way, take us north to a camp known as O'Donnell in O'Donnell the Northern part from where we were. It was a cruel ordeal. It was hard to explain because people won't believe it. But actually they were dead people all along the road, and it's my honest opinion that probably 20,000 Filipino civilians and American GI's were killed along the road. There was no food. The Japanese wouldn't give us food or water, and water was available with those artesian wells along the road, and if people would break for those, they'd kill 'em. If some fellow fell out along the road, you had buzzard squads bringing up the rear, and if some fellow straggled along the road, they'd kill him. It was -- it's almost indescribable, the cruelty of the Japanese along the road. The Filipinos loved the Americans at that time, and if they came out to give us food or anything, they would kill 'em. And also they would take babies and slam 'em against a tree and kill 'em, or they'd have pregnant women, gang-rape young girls, and they had no respect for the vision for what they were doing. And it was just that way all the way up to O'Donnell. And it - when we got in there, we were real weak, and a lot of the fellows had malaria, and even on the route, a lot of fellows couldn't make it and were killed along the way for no reason.

I: Tell us about the train ride from San Fernando, which you reached at the end of the Death March, to Camp O'Donnell and the year you spent there in what you call "a death factory."

C: The train ride was box cars packed full of men with standing room only, and if one fell, there wasn't no way to help him, and it was a terrible ordeal riding those trains out to O'Donnell. There, at O'Donnell, men began to die real fast because they were weak when they got in there, and there were forty, fifty, seventy-five that died a day, but a lot of Filipinos were interned in that camp too, a lot of Filipino men - no women - just men and the Filipinos were dying at a high rate, too, but we hadn't been there but ~ I don't know for how long - maybe three months or something until they turned the Filipinos loose. But it was amazing; before they turned them loose, they cut all their hair off; they shaved their heads, as I remember. And, of course, they let it grow back out when they got out and went with the guerrillas, part of them did. But Camp O'Donnell was a death factory because we were burying a lot of our fellows there a day, and most of us were too weak. We had to bury our own dead. They were buried in mass graves, just barely covered over. And even we could see some water before they were covered up maybe. And of course I got out of O'Donnell as quick as I could. I went out on a detail to salvage American equipment. I got out as quick as I could and went out on a detail because I saw I couldn't stay there long without - when I had a chance to get out. When we went out, we had a chance to get bananas and a few extra things like food that we didn't have. We had a lot of equipment that we had left like trucks and equipment that they wanted, and of course we had to begin to salvage that for them and move those trucks out, and they were cruel again on that. If a truck wouldn't start, they thought it would be our fault, and they'd beat us up. From there, from

salvaging those trucks and other equipment, we went back - at that time they had moved us to another camp known as Cabanatuan I, which was north of - I don't know how many miles, but north of O'Donnell. Cabanatuan I was a little better camp ~ the conditions were a little better...

I: Can you spell that for me?

C: C-a-b-a-n-a-t-u-a-n - Cabanatuan I was a little better camp, but sleeping conditions were straw mats we slept on, and, as I remember, they were up above - off the floor, above the ground level, and they were grass buildings or some kind of weed or something made out of - the roof and all was. And from there -they had a big farm there, and we worked on the farm quite a bit, and we didn't work any harder than we had to.. Ever chance we had, we'd gold brick. And another thing - every time we could salvage [sabotage?] equipment some way, we'd do it. If a bolt had to be tightened up on machinery or something that we were working on, we would not tighten that bolt up tight. We'd fix it where it would work loose, and it would mess 'em up. Or I didn't know anything about electricity, but the boys who did wiring for them, knew how to short a box out, and when a Japanese would throw the switch, it would kill him. So they were sabotaged, and things that we did that we really haven't given ourselves credit for that was causing them to get killed in various ways or their equipment to get torn up.

I: What about malaria?

C: Yeah. I had a lot of malaria. I almost died of malaria, and probably would have if they hadn't took me out to Japan. I had a lot of malaria, and malaria killed a lot of our fellows. There was one more fellow from Graham County that had malaria that killed him, I'm sure. Jacob Cornsilk, a full-bloodied Cherokee Indian from out at Snowbird. He was buried in a mass grave over there, and they could not bring his body back. But malaria was very - they were unable to give us any medicine. Medicine didn't exist. But some of the chaplains some way did get some medicine somehow, and we had one chaplain over there who was chief of the chaplains. They broke his neck. He had contact with the Philippines, and the poor fellow lived with a broken neck as long as he lived. And his name was Chaplain Oliver. And I think we had about twenty-four chaplains over there. I seen the roster. But they would not let them hold religious services or anything. But they would have if they could.

I: You have not commented on food except to talk about the bananas. How much food were you normally given in a day?

C: The food was very little, and we were just barely given The food was so small we were going downhill in weight. There wasn't enough to keep our weight up, and it was very, very poor. The food was. Many a person died because he didn't get enough food to eat of what they had even. On the farm we grew vegetables and things out there, but they would get the vegetables. We got very little.

I: I heard about the Zero Ward. What was the Zero Ward?

C: The Zero Ward was a building where they put the people who they thought wouldn't make it. The Zero Ward was the death ward where they put them over there to die.

I: Did you know anybody in the death ward?

C: Well, I don't remember anybody except myself. I was in there for a little while, but I got out. But I don't remember anybody in particular, but there were a lot of boys in there.

I: Was this when you had malaria?

C: Yeah, malaria. Most of the sick people in there had malaria.

I: I assume that it was in 1943 that you were taken by ship to Omuta, Japan, to work in the Mitsubishi coal mines. What was the trip there like and what about that period of your captivity?

C: O.K. in the summer of '43 -I don't remember the date, but in '43 the Japs took 500 of the American people along with four or five officers to a detail. We didn't know where we were going, but they moved us up the China coast. I was seasick until we got to Formosa (or Taiwan). I really didn't know much about what happened, but we were in the hold of the ship, and there I got a banana or something, and I began to come to, to come to myself, and that was closer to Japan, Formosa was, or Taiwan, and I don't know how many days that took -I believe the whole thing took about forty or forty-five days. And they took us over to Moji, which is somewhere close to Omuta, and I was able to get off the ship there and walk, and they walked us down to - best I remember - down to Omuta, and on the way down the Japs - women and children - threw rocks at us and spit at us. They were very cruel. But in Omuta conditions were a little bit... we did have plenty of water, which we didn't have in the Philippines. We weren't allowed to get water there much, and doing without water is worse than being hungry. But we did have plenty of water and plenty of stuff -- plenty of... warm tea, maybe, once or twice a day. And they worked us in this Japanese coal mine, 500 of us, but they kept bringing more in, and that became the largest camp in Japan -I guess we had 1700 or 1800 people there, but they were not all Americans. We had people there who had been in -- on the road down in the bridge on the river Kwai -- they brought some of those boys up there - and some of those boys had been at Dunkirk and the Dutch East Indies - we had people down there - two ships had been sunk down there, and they had about 500 Americans down there and were on the way up to the Philippines but they could not go any further. A regiment, I understand, and there were 500 of them, known as the "Lost Battalion" that didn't make it back to Australia. But that's as far as they got, and they became prisoners down in the Dutch East Indies. Some of those boys came up to Camp 17, where we were there in Japan. The work and all in Japan was tough, but out of that 500, we only lost 22 men. The conditions were a little better, but the food was still scarce. We didn't get enough food to eat, let alone work on, to do work with. And the total time we spent there were a couple of years.

I: Was the mine modern, or were the working conditions pretty bad?

C: The conditions were bad. It was an old mine, and most of what we were doing were probably robbing the mine. It was well on the bay, and it was wet down there, and we didn't have the proper clothing or the proper food to do the type of work we were doing down there. And we were paid well - we got ten sen a day, sen, not cents. And so we toughed it out, but things began to look up because we began to see a lot of airplanes come over and bomb the various places, and we knew enough Japanese to know the numbers - we were pretty alert on that because we lost our names; we went by numbers. And we knew that the 29's were huge planes, and we could see those coming over, and they had developed a system of coming in at low altitudes, to avoid radar, and they were fire-bombing, and they fire-bombed this camp, and we lost some buildings and that and maybe a few Americans were killed, but we saw a lot of fires in towns and what-not, and those bombardiers were real good. They could burn a building out and leave a chimney stack doming and in the end they'd drop a bomb right down the chimney, they were so perfected.

I: And then on the map, and I'm saying O' mu' ta, and you're pronouncing it differently, but you were there and I'm just looking at the spelling, Omuta looks very close in distance to Nagasaki. Certainly it was close enough for you to hear the blast and see the mushroom cloud on August 9, 1945. Describe what you prisoners saw and what you believed it meant.

C: Well, that's a good question. We had been seeing a lot of planes flying over, but that day they - when we were out - there weren't many flying. There wasn't much air activity, and the ground shook, and we saw the mushroom in the air, and we knew there was a big bombing raid going over there. We probably thought it was fire raids because we hadn't heard anything about a big bomb, but we knew that they were bombing and it covered the whole - the fallout covered the whole - it was on the ocean between us - the fallout - it was on the ocean as far as your vision could see, the mushroom rolling, so we knew they were getting paid back. It was an extremely exciting time to see them getting what we thought they deserved.

I: How concerned were you when you found out about the atom bomb, about nuclear fallout, and how concerned was your government about you Americans who were that close to it?

C: Well, it was some time before we knew really what it was, but our government showed no interest in it; they showed no interest in us being in the fallout area or our condition whatsoever, but we were fortunate to see it and it's been a pleasant memory knowing that I did see it fall or the effects of it.

I: When were you freed and when and how did you get back to North Carolina?

C: In August, 1945, when Truman declared the war over, and I was in this camp for 1256 days, all together in all the camps, but prisoner-of-war for 1256 days, and I left the camp. I didn't wait for them to come to pick me up. Five of us took off, and we boarded a Jap train and rode to Nigora [?] - I believe was the name of the place - and from there we took a plane over to Okinawa

and from Okinawa we took another plane - a B-24 - to Manila where we stayed about - oh, I don't know -three or four weeks or something, getting food or anything we wanted - if it could be got, they'd get it for us. And most of us began to maybe eat too much there and get - too soon - and probably, maybe, did damage to us, eating too much.

I: Well, you're still a long way from North Carolina. So take us from there.

C: From there I stayed in - they kept ganging up large groups and sending them home, and I believe it was about 12-1300 of us that were on the USS Joseph T. Dickman, which was a coast guard ship, and they brought us home on that ship, and I arrived in San Francisco -I believe I lacked seventeen days being gone four years from the Golden Gate Bridge, which was somewhere around October -middle of October, somewhere, and from there I stayed in San Francisco at Litterman General Hospital two or three weeks, and then all the people from North Carolina, they put them on a special car ~ special car on a train, and it was a passenger car, by the way, too. And we had an orderly, and what not, to get everything we wanted that they could on that train, they'd give us. And from there we came to Moore General Hospital in Swannanoa, which was an army hospital, which was a wooden type structure, and we stayed there ~ I stayed there from the time the war was over till I was discharged, I believe it was about nine months all together, getting back to North Carolina - and at Moore General, I don't know how long I was there before I got to come home. But my welcome home was a guy met me in a pickup truck. My brother-in-law by marriage met me, and his son in a pickup truck over at the bus station in Tipton, so I did get home that way.

I: Having been freed, you were nevertheless given the name "ghost soldier" - here in Robbinsville, and actually you were given that name for two reasons. Will you explain the title?

C: Yes, that was a -- they had a - I understand they had a - naturally I wasn't here -but they had a ceremony for me here in Robbinsville, and they had declared me deceased, and incidentally my folks did not collect the \$10,000 that they should have because I had \$10,000 insurance with the government. They declared me deceased. I understand they had quite a ceremony here at the court house. The Congressman came in and presented my parents with a flag, as an emblem of me being deceased.

I: And I think the other reason they thought you might be ghostly was your weight, although you say you had gained by then. But why did you make them think of a ghost, even though you were alive?

C: Well, I guess being declared deceased, and my folks didn't know anything about where I was, and the government declared me deceased and then me showing up would probably resemble a ghost coming out of somewhere, nowhere, and being seen again.

I: Now you said by this time you had regained some weight.

C: I had-

I: But how much did you weigh when you came out of the prison camp? Do you have any idea?

C: Yeah. I weighed somewhere around 79 or 80 pounds - somewhere along in there - maybe 85. I was well under my weight.

I: But by the time you came home, you had a little bit of flesh?

C: Oh, yeah, by the time I'd gone through Manila and with my time there and all, I had put on a considerable amount of weight, close to my normal weight probably, but my hair hadn't grown back because I kept my hair short all the time.

I: Your homecoming was not altogether a happy one because there were family members no longer here to greet you. Name them, please.

C: I lost two brothers while I was over there. One was Porter, and the other was Andy. Porter was about 26 years old, and Andy was probably 27-28. Porter was killed during the construction of Fontana Dam, and Andy died with an appendix rupture, and they were both in their mid-to-upper twenties. Neither one of them was thirty, and my mother also was gone when I came home. She died about -I think she was somewhere around seventy, and no doubt worried herself to death about me being gone all that time.

I: In her sense she had three sons lost - dead - because she believed that you were dead.

C: Yeah.

I: Your government was not exactly generous in its remuneration for what you had endured. In fact, I think it gave you exactly the army pay required. Tell us about "getting rich" on your back pay, and what you did with all that money.

C: (Laughs) I had made my folks out an allotment and seem like my pay was - I was a staff sergeant - my base pay was \$99. And I think I must have had somewhere around \$2500 when I came out. And then later the government came along and out of Japanese frozen assets, so they said, they gave us a dollar a day for the food that they didn't give us and then they later gave us a dollar-and-a-half a day for work we performed for them. Our government did that for us. And then I ~ I didn't waste my money. I took it and bought four acres of ground ~ of land -down there in town and Wendy's is over there now and then there's another building on the other side over there. And I gave it to my kids about ten or twelve years ago, and ~ but what I'd earned and what not was very small in proportion to what they get now.

I: And let me say - you say it was four acres?

C: About 4 1/2 acres.

I: Right in downtown Robbinsville!

C: Downtown Robbinsville.

I: What was the price of that now? After all the government did you pretty well if they gave you enough to buy 4 1/2 acres in downtown Robbinsville.

C: But the land was very cheap at that time. Land was very cheap. You could buy most any land around here for \$10 - \$20 - \$30 - \$40 - \$50 an acre, and that land cost me about somewhere around 35-36 hundred dollars.

I: I hate to think about what it would cost now.

C: That was the price forty years ago - or sixty years ago.

I: I'm interested in the annual reunion that survivors of Bataan and Corregidor and other former POW's of the Far East, along with their families and friends, have at Fontana Village. I think the fourth annual one is coming up. I understand you initiated this event and you're the one that keeps it going. Tell us a little bit about it.

C: Well, that's been very interesting. You said four - I believe you said "four," and it was forty. I thought you said "four." It was forty.

I: I did, and I understood you to say "four," so "forty." Mercy!

C: "Forty." This is forty coming up. And I've had some very distinguished people there. It's been very interesting. We started out with about 750 people. Every room over there was full, but now we've come down to - this year - we'll be doing good, I figure, if we have a hundred, families and all. There're so many of our fellows have passed on, with their age and health and all, that we don't have the numbers much anymore. But it's been very interesting. We've had great speakers. It's been rewarding because I've met so many people I didn't know. I did not know Walter [Walter Middleton] at that time, but I have since learned Walter, and he's a prince of a guy.

I: Where do the farthest come from? Do they come from the West, or are they mainly from North Carolina?

C: No. I've had them from every state in the union except one or two states. I don't think anybody's been there from Utah or South Dakota. I've had them from North Dakota, but only one or two states that there hadn't been somebody from.

I: Do you send letters or is this just - how is this advertised?

C: We sent letters at first, but now we've got a magazine that comes out of former prisoners-of-war, and I put it in that, and I don't send out any letters any more. They just know about it and know about the dates, and if they don't know, they call. They can call Fontana or write me or something.

I: Do you have the speaker chosen for this year?

C: Yes, I do. Cleve McClary. Now I don't know whether you know Cleve or not. Do you know Cleve?

I: No. You just tell me about him.

C: Cleve McClary is a distinguished veteran from Vietnam. He didn't have to go. He was from a wealthy family, and he had an eye put out. He had lost an arm. But he's nationally known. He's on various Christian programs, and he's just a distinguished American. He's been on national television on some minister's program like - comes out of Coral Gables, Florida. He's been on his program a lot. I don't remember the name of the preacher right off.

I: Is there anything else that you can think of that we have missed that you would like to comment on?

C: Yeah, I would. I'd like to comment on the treatment the Veteran's Administration gave us when we first got out. They were not kind to us. They treated us, in my opinion, like we were deserters. And they didn't want to give us any compensation. And later, when they put so much emphasis on getting these boys out of Vietnam, they became generous with us, and most of our boys now have 100% service-related disability, which they should have when they came out. None of us were well enough to do work. But the VA, with the boys I've been in contact with, is generous with them now, pretty generous. Course they have to ask for what they get, but they don't have to fight for it, like they did at first.

I: Can you evaluate how the experiences you endured have shaped your life, either for the good or for the bad or both?

C: Well, since it happened, I've tried to make the best of it and become a good citizen, and I have a great respect for my country and my Lord. There's no way in the world I could have made it without God. And it made me appreciate my fellow man more, have more faith in myself, my country. My fellow man, and I think since this happened, it caused me to be a more interested person in my fellow man and my country and all.

I: I see on this wall a framed display of medals and citations and ribbons. I wonder if you would walk over there and describe those for us.

C: Yes, I'll be glad to. This ~ I was in - took my basic training in the Thirty-first Infantry, and I have their insignias there. Those two are of the Thirty-first Infantry. This here is an air force crew member's badge, and course that's my rating, and that's - when I took my basic training, I think I was a sharp-shooter. This is the Presidential unit citation with two oak leaf clusters, and these two here are Philippine medals, their citations, and come down here, this was my Twenty-seventh bomb group insignias. This is a Purple Heart. I was wounded on Bataan. This is a prisoner-of-war medal. This one is an air force commendation medal, and this one is the Philippine liberation. This one is the Pacific Theater, and this one is the Bataan - Corregidor medal, and one is a good-conduct medal, which all the boys got. Most of them were pretty good boys. This other one is also a Pacific Theater ribbon.

I: While you're standing there, will you point out anything else that would be of interest to us. From my viewpoint I can't see them well enough to know, so just comment on anything else that is of significance.

C: Well, yeah, I have friends from other areas, and this is one that was handmade in India for the people who were with Chenault, the Tigers, and it's a special ribbon, and course these other plaques were given to me over the years by groups I was associated with. This one here is one of the first bullets that was supposed to be fired in the Philippines on a special plaque, and these others are just plaques that groups have given me over the years.

I: Mr. Carringer, we thank you for sharing these experiences with us and with the many others who will view this tape.

(Followed by pictures, newspaper articles, etc.)

Ed. Note: Near the end of the interview (51:00), videographer closes in on several related documents, newspaper articles, photographs, signed paintings, etc. Interview ends at 56:52.