



Edmond Press Hyatt

United States Army

2nd Lieutenant

Pacific Theater

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Interviewer:

Rick Randle

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Rick: All right, we have here Edmond Press Hyatt who is not a native Utahn I guess you were born in Illinois is that right?

Edmond: That's right.

Rick: And you went to high school?

Edmond: Joliet Illinois, just outside of Chicago.

Rick: And you married a lovely Utah girl and that's what brings you to Utah. Can you tell me just where you were during the early days of the war during December 7th and what your thoughts were and some of that experience?

Edmond: Well going back a few months before December 7th I was in high school. I was a senior in high school and I had been in the ROTC. My father had had a military career of a sort and I got well acquainted with a lot of the military people at the time and in our ROTC training we had some veterans and other servicemen that had worked with us so we pretty well knew that there was a war coming because they had already called up our National Guard. Some of our buddies were already in the service in 1941, this is before the war and so we were kind of expecting and looking forward to the war which was coming.

Rick: And after the attack on Pearl Harbor what was your thoughts and attitudes and that of your friends, I guess you were in high school still.

Edmond: I was in high school and one of the things that my dad had really pushed hard to me was '*get all the training you can*'. Before I got out of high school I think there were some troops, a friend of mine in fact, that was put on board a ship, sent to North Africa and he had learned how to shoot a rifle on board ship; he hadn't even been issued a rifle before he got on board ship and he landed in North Africa and he was killed within just a few days after he landed. And that kind of shook me up and I realized '*hey, this is for real*'. And so we took what

we did in our military quite seriously. I was on a rifle team and became an expert rifleman. And I figured *'well that's one of the things we'd need to know would be in the army'*. I had an ROTC experience. I was a Cadet Lieutenant Colonel of a battalion of about 500 students and we knew this was pretty serious business.

Rick: And then tell me about your enlistment. You were the Cadet Commander in high school and as soon as you could you enlisted?

Edmond: Well as I said my father was most interested in seeing that – he knew that training was important and I had already planned for over a year to go to college and go into the ROTC in college and I went to the Missouri School of Mines – Raleigh Missouri; it was an Engineer ROTC, it was a total Engineering school at that time and that's where I was intending to go. And so I did go there right after I graduated from high school. And then immediately, knowing that I'd signed up for the draft when I was 18 and knew that I would be called up soon and most of my friends were all choosing which branch they'd go into. In other words going down to Missouri, I was really choosing to go into the Engineers because it was only an Engineer school. But I enlisted immediately so I would, the rule was that if you enlisted ahead of time you could more or less choose where you were going. So it wasn't completely true but it worked out for me and so I decided I was going to go into the Army Engineer Corp and I enlisted with that in mind. So I waited then for just a few months, three or four months before I was called up to active duty.

Rick: And then where did you take your basic training and what was that like?

Edmond: I went to basic training in Ft. Belvoir Virginia. It was an Engineer school and basic training was – we had the whole raft of training. We had I guess about as much as the infantry had and then we had all the bridge building and construction, pioneer construction and the engineer types of activities. We did that for about three months I think it was.

Rick: And when you completed your basic training then what happened after that?

Edmond: Well because of my ROTC experience I immediately had been promoted when I got into basic training and they asked me to stay on then as a trainer for the next troop that was coming in, the next group of draftees. So I stayed on in that, they called it the '*cadrey*' of training unit and I stayed there for some months. But I had the idea that in this idea of getting training, I wanted to be an Officer in the Army. An Officer in the Engineers and at Ft. Belvoir everybody in the training units wanted to be an Officer, go to OCS – Officers Candidate School. And I, being one of the youngest ones in the group, I was just barely 19, I knew that my chances of getting into OCR from Ft. Belvoir were pretty slim even though that's where the school was. I figured I better get into a place where I could be on a higher, get a higher priority and so I volunteered to go to a new camp down in Carolina and became a machine gun instructor. I was still an enlisted man, a Corporal down there and I immediately applied though for OCS and luckily I was accepted almost immediately and so by just being down there for just two or three months I was back to Ft. Belvoir in the Engineers school.

Rick: And then after completing OCS did you immediately were assigned to go over seas or was there an interval there?

Edmond: Well let me just back up just a little because our training was – most of our officers and even the enlisted men that we had as training people in OCS were veterans of the Army debacle in North Africa – Kasserine pass was a very famous battle and it had been – the Kasserine pass had been defended by the Engineers and they suffered tremendous losses and some of the veterans that did live became our teachers, our instructors. So we were trained to be combat engineers and that's what I expected that I'd be assigned to. But there were some that had to be trained, that had to go into training units and because of my previous training experience I was assigned again to an Engineer Replacement Training Center. This time it was in Oregon. So I didn't go over seas. Some of them did, some of my buddies did but I went to Oregon and I was there for several months and then finally up to Ft. Louis Washington again in Engineer Training Unit.

Rick: And then after Ft. Louis, that's when you got your orders to go over seas?

Edmond: This was a replacement center and I was assigned to a regiment after some months there that had already had some experience on the Al-Can Highway and they were coming back to be re-equipped. They hadn't seen the M1 rifles for instance and some of the other equipment because they had been up there on the Al-Can Highway where they didn't need the rifles. So we went through all the really basic training all over again for these men and replacements and I was a replacement officer and after some months of that we shipped out over to India.

Rick: And tell me about the troop ship that you were going on over to India, what kind of accommodations did you have? Of course you were an Officer, you had it a little better than the enlisted men I guess.

Edmond: Yes, my bunk was, I don't know that we had a porthole in our state room but there were about 18 of us crowded in four bunks high and the worst thing about that was that my bunk was right next to the exhaust of the room and almost everybody in the room smoked and that was really a headache for me. But we had a lot of duty, we had to, of course we were only on the ship about a month. Three weeks I guess to a month, something like that. We went alone, we weren't in a convoy. We went around to Melbourne Australia and that was our first stop. The Army couldn't get off the ship. The Navy personnel could get off and took a day or two while they were re-fueling but none of the Army people could get off. From then on we went around the south end of Australia and we were under very tight submarine watch all the time. I don't know that at any time we actually had a submarine scare but we were under, we had to wear our lifebelts and no lights of course were shown and it was considered pretty hazardous that we were going – but going alone we were going a pretty good clip, faster than the convoys usually would go. Then we had to go straight up through the ocean up to Calcutta.

Rick: So you knew beforehand that you were going to India?

tape interruption

Edmond: Several people asked me “*what was the Army doing in India*”? But we had...

Rick: Okay – lets go back to, you were on the ship and you had no idea after you left Australia where you were going? When did they finally tell you?

Edmond: I don't know that we knew until we actually sighted land that this was India. I think by the time we got to Melbourne we figured we weren't going to go to Burma where the Japanese still were but we figured we might go to India. But I don't think it was ever announced. We knew when we crossed the Equator until we got to Melbourne that's about the only landmarks we had of any kind. They just didn't tell us.

Rick: And then you pulled into and landed at Calcutta India?

Edmond: Yeah, Calcutta is inland about 70 miles from the ocean. It's on a river, a distributary like New Orleans is on the Mississippi, it's inland a ways. And we got into Calcutta, got off the boat, got on a train and went right up country. Calcutta is in Bengal and we went up to Assam which is the next province northeast of Calcutta. Assam now borders on Bangladesh. Bangladesh didn't exist then it was part of India. But we went by train on a fairly large scale train, a large gauge train I should say and then we got the Brahmaputra river, a very large river and got on boats and went for a ways on that and then got off on the other side of the river, the north side and we traveled on at least two different gauge railroads from then on. We'd go up a ways and then get off and get on to another track where the train was a different size, a different gauge. But we finally ended up at Ledo which is up in Assam, way up in the hills. Actually my camp that I was stationed at then, we took our company of labor troops up to near the Burma border, we were at 30 miles; our area went from 30 miles on either side of the Burma border.

Rick: And as I recall the significance of that Ledo road and the road you were working on was to bring supplies to the Chinese armies that were fighting the Japanese and the Japanese had taken over most of Burma and they needed to open that Ledo and Burma Road to get supplies where they were.

Edmond: The Japanese of course had also taken over a good part of China, the eastern part of China. So Chung King and some of the places towards the middle of China where the Chinese

Nationals Army was fighting and the Burma road went from Rangoon at the south all the way straight up the what's called "*Miramar*" I think its called now, went straight up into China. But the Japanese controlled most of that and there had been some pretty heavy fighting at the north end of that up at a place called "*Mackinaw*" at the north end of Burma. And after the British and Americans had defeated the Japanese at that point they needed supplies to come over from India, by land, and we went from there east over on what we called the "*Ledo Road*". We at the town of Ledo "*L-E-D-O*" and that road went over to Mackinaw and joined the Burma Road and from there on the trucks would go on into China.

Rick: Now was your first assignment to be in charge of this 93rd regiment?

Edmond: I was a Company Officer in the 93rd Engineer General Service Regiment – Corp of Engineers.

Rick: And the 93rd regiment consisted all of African American soldiers.

Edmond: All the enlisted men were Afro-Americans, all the officers were Caucasian.

Rick: So they had a little bit of, segregation was still in even though they had entire regiments of African Americans and caucasian white officers and so tell us about working on the road and did the natives help you? Did they use elephants and that kind of stuff?

Edmond: Well, I didn't have any elephants under my control although when I had to ship out freight as we moved from there to another location we had elephants that actually did pushing the cars in the marshaling yards. But on the road itself, we were up in Indian country *the "Nauga Land"* it's sometimes called now – Nauga People. There were a couple of British units of "*gurkhas*". They were a special group of Indians that were labor people and we had maybe 50 of those assigned to our regiment, our company and I think at one time we had about 30 rock crushers. We were in an area where it was interesting geology because the rocks were all mostly shale. And shale is just mostly hardened clay and during a heavy rain, we were there during the monsoon, and heavy rain and the trucks driving over it just made mud out of this shale. But the

only rocks we had available that we could use were shale. So we would go into the mountains along the side of the road and had little rock crushers and we would mine the rock and put it through the rock crushers and take this then dry shale and stick it in the mud holes and then the next rain or next convoy would go by we'd have to repeat the process. It was kind of a discouraging way to build roads and maintain roads but that is what we did.

Rick: This was in 1944 is that right?

Edmond: 1945

Rick: 1945 towards the end and most of the fighting of Merrells, Marauders, and Vinegar Joe Stillwell and all of that happened before you arrived I guess?

Edmond: Yes the part in Burma. They were already, who was it that had the "*Chenault*" had his '*Flying Tigers*' and other groups of Americans up into China. We had, we were supporting what was called "*flying the hump*". The air forces, the US had big air operations carrying supplies over the hump, over the Himalayas into China. And they couldn't take everything up there and we had several convoys a day would get on the road and carrying supplies. And we never saw those trucks again, they just kept on going and they were used in China after they got there.

Rick: They never came back.

Edmond: They wasn't a shuttle they just, we just kept feeding in new trucks. They were actually assembled in Calcutta and they'd bring them up there the same way we'd gotten up there by train and boat and more trains and finally they'd bring in the Chinese "*coolies*" – little short fellows off of the coolie areas in China and having no mechanical experience whatsoever. They had never seen a truck in many cases and they were taught to be drivers. We had a Chinese drivers school near where I was located and there was only one road, the Ledo Road and I was on that road and these trucks of training convoys of the Chinese soldiers, Chinese coolies would be trained to driving those trucks, the first time they'd ever seen them. And they were such small

fellows that they usually had, they'd assign three of them to a truck and I saw cases where one would kneel down and run the pedals and another one would sit up on his knees and operate the large steering wheel and the third one would be able to operate the gear shift.

Rick: That's interesting. Well were there any Japanese snipers around that area or had they all been cleared out?

Edmond: We didn't see anything near that. We were strictly a non-combat unit even though we had been trained with rifles and all the other gear. I think we had one rifle, one carbine and one pistol in our whole company.

Rick: And so where were you when VE day occurred? Where you there in Ledo?

Edmond: Yes, I was in Ledo at the time. It didn't make much of an impression on us. We thought "*okay, the war's over in Europe*".

Rick: Obviously you were there when the Atomic Bomb was dropped?

Edmond: No, the monsoon season ended, I guess late summer. It was maybe July, I don't remember the exact season but after the monsoon season where it rained almost every day, they decided that they needed us in a different location. So we reversed the trip. Went back through Calcutta, the same we'd gone up there and we were sent to an airfield about, I guess about 30 or 40 miles southwest of Calcutta and there our assignment was to build hangars. Hangars large enough for maintenance purposes for the largest of the American air force. And I don't remember what they were, I guess B29 bomber and the transports that went with them. And these fields that we were working on were called the "*VLR*" fields – the "*very long range*" fields. They were designed to accommodate the airplanes coming from Europe which were being released from the war when the war in Europe ended and they were bringing those airplanes over to get ready to provide bombers and so on for the battle in Japan. And our fields were called the "*VLR*" fields to accommodate these very long-range airplanes. And they were the biggest hangars for the biggest planes.

Rick: And that's where you were when they dropped the atomic bomb?

Edmond: Yes, the days when the war ended, I don't remember the sequence. Our communication was not as good as it is today. We didn't have good radio communication and none of us in our unit had any radios and we'd get the information filtering down from the top. But we heard about the two bombs and then the Japanese surrender. My job, I was an Administrative Officer in the company and I worked in the office, but I was the only one in the regiment besides the Colonel that knew how to operate a transit and do any engineering and so I had to do – part of my daytime work out on the area was the surveying instruments and besides that I had a line platoon. We were understaffed and I had a platoon of servicemen and I had that shift from 6:00 at night until 4:00 in the morning and I'd get a few hours of sleep and a little bit of office work and go back out again 6:00 the next night. But one morning my company commander came in and said *"the wars over, you don't have to go out again but some much work has piled up in our office, you've gotta come over there as soon as you can – break your sleep and come on over"*. So I went over at the office and at evening though, at 6:00 the colonel had called an officers meeting and he looked at me and said *"Hyatt what are you doing here?"* and I turned to my company commander and I said...the company commander spoke up *said "well the war is over colonel, we wont have this night shift anymore"*. And the colonel said *"well I haven't got any orders to stop it and you get your men back out on that airfield"*. And so that lasted just a day or two and we did, finally did quit and turned over all we had to the British.

Rick: Then did you stay right there after the war for a few months or?

Edmond: During the war, all during the enlistment time after the war started service people would accumulate points towards their discharge. The more points you got the quicker you could be discharged and a simple duty like I had on training in the United States I think I got, I think it was one point a month. When I went over seas why I think they gave us two points a month and maybe those in combat got more than that. So when the war ended I just had a very few points compared to even my own regiment which I had just been a replacement. And so they were shipped home as a regiment and I was shipped out...I had to stay in India. But my

assignments then dealt in manning the bases and helping load ships and that sort of thing to expedite the other travel. We didn't, I don't think anybody was flying from India to the United States, I don't know that there was any....I never heard of any evacuation going that way. And there weren't enough boats, they were still bringing troops in from Europe to the United States and all the pacific people were going and very few ships were allocated to pick up troops in India. So it was several months before we were able to get out of India and come home.

Rick: Tell me about the caste system in India, what it was like in those days.

Edmond: Well, actually it probably hasn't changed a lot because I've been over there more recently but every trade was almost like a tribe. Every trade of, in the whole economic structure (social structure) was a separate caste. Meaning that they stayed together. And they couldn't communicate, they couldn't socialize very well with the castes above them or castes below them. When we were building these hangars the British army had made contracts I guess, I don't know how they arranged it, but they had one pool of laborers. These were drawn from the '*untouchables*', the lowest caste in the Indian Social Hierarchy. They were assigned, they had no special training and they were just laborers. They did all the heavy lifting and so on. In addition to that we had a caste, one group of '*steelworkers*' building our hangars. We needed more skilled people and they indeed were a little better disciplined and could handle a little bit more skilled activities. So we had a group of them, maybe I guess 30 of them and about 100 of the '*coolies*' and then my own platoon of about, I think we took out about everyday about 30 to 40 of the Afro-Americans and they had some training. We had some carpenter specialists and some electrician specialists and all kinds of specialists in our group. They weren't highly trained but they served as my first line of division of responsibility and then the '*steelworkers*' were given part of it and then the real labor then was under.....we had to build concrete piers to hold the supports of the metal hangars and so we did everything from pick and shovel work to pouring concrete to....did a little bit of welding but not much, most of it was pre-fab so we used bolts and nuts to bolt these parts together. We had to provide special transportation for these Indians and also for my own troops, and I also had responsibility for the motor pool and one night on a long shift I found out that our 2 ½ ton truck that carried the '*steelworkers*' needed repairs and had to go back to the motor pool and they couldn't use it anymore. So the main group of these Indians,

the 'coolies', the laborers were transported in open-bed, steel-bodied trucks like semi-trucks with steel-bodies instead of big cab types, vans. And one night particularly I remember the truck had gone back, the smaller truck for the 'steelworkers' and I told the steelworker boss that he had to ride in the other truck that night and he said "*no way. We're not going to ride with those coolies they're untouchable, that's not what we're going to do*". But I didn't have any other choice and I told him that I said "*you either go that way or you walk your five miles back to your camp*". And at our airfield, at our work area we had four large portable generators, one at each corner of the square and the last thing I did, I get in my jeep, I go around and turn off the lights and I told the driver of the big truck "*as soon as I get to the last light, you put your truck in gear (and the laborers were already on the truck) you put your truck in gear and don't go fast but you're on your way*". And by the time I turned off the last light all the 'steelworkers' were now on the truck and so I figured well I did something to maybe break down some of the caste system.

Rick: After this time, tell me about your discharge and going home.

Edmond: Well, after my regiment went, came to the states I said I helped load the ships and we managed...we had to have.....the troops, most of our American troops in India were these Air Corp service people, backup people and so they were coming in from the airfields which are up in northern India and they couldn't bring them all at once, there was another geographic thing, the ships could only stay in the harbor for just a few hours because they had to be in there under the high-tide and the neath-tide once a month (or spring-tide rather) but only at the high-tide seasons. So the window of their being in the port was very short. So we had to have all the people going on ship – 4 or 5 thousand at a time all had to be pretty close to the ship so they could get on very quickly. We couldn't bring them in from up-country (we didn't have enough trucks for one thing), so I had a camp that I was in charge of right near the....I was in center of the Royal Calcutta Race Track, where our camp was and we'd bring these troops in there and then we'd take them right over to the boat. So when my points finally came up and the number in India was reduced quite a bit, there weren't very many left – I got on one of those ships and came home. We went down to what is now Sri Lanka at the Salon – Colombo Salon then – and we had to get water. The ship could not take on enough water to get out of the Hooghly River

because it's drafted too short and so we had to go down there to get water. But there was a dock strike and we sat there in that hot Colombo harbor for hours...for days. Finally we got water off from an Australian aircraft carrier. They had enough water to let us go on. And then we came around the tip of India and up through the Suez Canal and through the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and landed in New York. We landed in New York and we weren't welcomed except by hearing that there was a railroad strike...and so we, there was no bands playing when we got there. And we took the train to Chicago and there I was let out.

Rick: Well that's interesting. The China, Burma, India war zone was a very important part of the war and your contribution was immense, so thanks Edmond for being with us today we appreciate it very much and is there any advice that you'd like to give the young people of our country that may be listening to this down the road?

Edmond: Well, let me say that when I got out of the army, even though my father had had a lot of experience in the military, I decided I didn't want to stay in the reserve even. Being married, I figured we'd have a family and we weren't thinking about the Korean War or any war – the war was over. So I decided...one experience I had during the earlier part of my career there was seeing men who had no military experience being given direct commissions and at one time I was told, as a second lieutenant, I had to teach this captain how to run a company because he didn't know anything about it. He'd only been in the army two weeks. And I figures well if that's that the army works then I'll be ready, if they need me, I'll be ready to go but I can probably do better by going ahead and getting my college training and not be impeded by anymore military at the moment. So I did not stay in the reserve. And yet I would say today, I admire these people over in Iraq doing their war service; and a good part of them, I think they say that half of all our military forces now are either in National Guard or in reserves and that's great and certainly the United States benefits by having such a well trained reserve force. The rest of us should get all the training we have and if time ever comes, we hope it never does, but if it ever came and we'd all have to get all the rest of our militia together, we'd all be prepared to go into the militia and take our time and go on the front lines.