



**Bill Johnson**

United States Army

Staff Sergeant

Pacific Theater

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Interviewer:

Rick Randle

**THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY**

**Rick:** Can you tell us about your early life, where you were born and growing up, up until where you first heard of the Second World War?

**Bill:** I was born in Sunnyside Utah, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1919 and I was the youngest of 11 children. My dad and four brothers were coalminers and I was the youngest of the family. I was educated in Carbon and Emory Counties – Elementary School. Graduated from Carbon High School in 1937. I met my wife at a dance and we planned to get married December 20<sup>th</sup> 1941, that was when she was out of school for the Christmas Holiday. And we did go through with the marriage after Pearl Harbor and we lived together five months and I was....

**Rick:** So when Pearl Harbor, tell me what was going on around in Carbon County.

**Bill:** I was working on tipple in Consumers – that’s where they prepare coal for shipment and I worked five years in the coalmines before the...we were just emerging from the depression and it was a difficult time. After high school, I went to work on the tipple at Waddas, Utah. That’s where they prepare the coal for shipment, picking the impurities out of the coal and they call it a ‘*bony picker*.’ I worked for five years in Waddas and Consumers, Utah. They’re both ghost towns now. Let’s see, we married in December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1941, just a few days after Pearl Harbor.

**Rick:** Was there a lot of patriotic fervor going on?

**Bill:** I’ve never seen so much anger. I’ve never seen so many people angry at the same time.

**Rick:** And did the young miners, young guys like yourself all want to join up?

**Bill:** Absolutely, they rushed to the recruitment offices and I had a best buddy that I grew up with, his name was Earl Purdy and he was drafted a week before I was. He went to Europe in the Air Force and he made 20 missions over Germany in a B17. He was a Rear Gunner in a B17.

**Rick:** So you were drafted 5 months after you were married, so it was early ’42?

**Bill:** It was May of ’42, May the 2<sup>nd</sup>, ’42 – into Ft. Douglas. I spent basic training at Camp Crowder, Missouri and while in basic training, they gave me a ‘*code aptitude test*.’ I guess all the GI’s got it at the time and I must have did pretty good on the test because they sent me to Telegraph School – Dodge Radio and Telegraph Institute in Valparaiso, Indiana. I was there for four months in a crash course in International Morse Code. After the, oh we also got training in maintenance of radios. I joined the 288 Signal Company – part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Amphibious Engineers and Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. That’s where a lot of training was going on – mock landings. We must have made hundreds of landings.

**Rick:** Up there you realized then, you were going to be leading these invasion forces in on certain islands?

**Bill:** That’s true. Training in the Higgins Landing Craft. That’s what my outfit was, it completely...all of it was on the water in landing barges, Higgins Landing Craft, all types. We

went to Florida for the winter for more landings and while at Florida we were having night maneuvers on a rainy night, black as pitch. And the LCM that had some of the infantry that was to make the landing, they struck a sandbar several hundred yards from the beach and 13<sup>th</sup> of the infantry unloaded from the craft and were drowned. That was my first experience with casualties.

**Rick:** That was in training in Florida?

**Bill:** Yes. We made so many landings I couldn't recall all of them. But from Camp Gordon Johnston, it was Camp Carabel to start with, we went to Ft. Ord, California and we had just been there a few days and they sent a detachment of us back to Florida for Radar Training. That was when radar was first coming in to reality. We stayed in Ft. Ord until our 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary and I left her on the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary – that was December of 1943.

**Rick:** So she was following you around?

**Bill:** Yes. She was with me. We had a little apartment in Salinas, California. From Ft. Ord, they took us to Pittsburgh where we loaded onto a fairy boat, went to Oakland Bay and then we boarded the USAT – US Army Transport – '*Cape Perpetual*.' It was a converted Liberty Ship. I don't know how many hundreds of men that were on it, several thousand I'm sure. About five days out we felt a rumble in the ship – the propeller shaft was bent and we sat dead in the water for two days and night while they changed the propeller shaft.

**Rick:** What were the accommodations like on that ship? How many bunks deep and where did you sleep?

**Bill:** In the hold that I was on, it was bunks from the bilge to the deck. You had about six inches from you to the fellow right above you. We were on that USAT Cape Perpetual for 32 days. And we landed at Good Enough Island the first time. There was no resistance except from the weather.

**Rick:** You took that converted Liberty Ship all the way over to Good Enough Island?

**Bill:** Yes, we was on it for 32 days and was landing at Good Enough Island. Climbing down the cargo net into a landing craft, I...the swells were about 8 or 10 feet high and the barge was lifting that high and dropping down in the swells and the deck of the LCM that I was loading on was about 10 inches wide and of course I missed my footing and tumbled into the well of the landing craft. My shoulder on a 30-caliber water-cool machine gun. A Navy Corpman attended to me – he gave me a sling and two aspirins and I made the landing with the team. The team consisted of at least two Radio Operations – two Message Center Men, a couple of Century's and a Runner. So we set up our radio on the beach, dug in of course.

**Rick:** There were Japanese on the island then?

**Bill:** Yes, on the beachhead due at Good Enough Island. We fortunately had the radio installed in a jeep and we didn't have the portable radio there. We set up the radio with the message

center and all of the traffic that went from the island or beachhead to headquarters and whoever was concerned – we sent the International Morse Code coded by the message center – five letter code groups. On Good Enough Island we were there for oh, approximately 30 days. Like I say there was no resistance and from there we went to Finch Common, New Guinea. That's a peninsula up the coast of New Guinea.

**Rick:** So your job was to just go in, set up communications and then the invasion force would come in first and establish the beachhead?

**Bill:** Yes, I was on the second or third wave most usually.

**Rick:** Okay and then the communications would be set up so the troops could talk to each other and...

**Bill:** Right. Also in our team was a telephone crew that installed a telephone to the perimeter, the outskirts of the perimeter back to the beachhead and to the radio communications. On every landing we worked as a team, but just as communicators. We did receive fire – shellfire, mortar fire. In fact, I had two radios destroyed by mortars.

**Rick:** So even on the third wave you were still taking mortar fire and whatever from the Japanese?

**Bill:** Yes, high artillery fire most of the time.

**Rick:** Okay, now where was the second island?

**Bill:** The second was the coast of New Guinea – Finch Haven and that was in the Australian portion of New Guinea. At that time, the southeast portion was Australian and the northwest portion of New Guinea was Dutch plus the island off the coast of New Guinea. At Finch Haven we didn't have very little resistance. There were remnants of the Japanese Army that fled into the jungle and the Owen or Stanley range of mountains and they would infiltrate at night because they were hungry more than anything else. They were a rag-tag bunch of soldiers; but they did cause us a lot of headache. With the company, I was also sometimes assigned to the '*crash boat*.' The crash boat was made to rescue downed flyers. It had two 12-cylinder Hall-Scott motors on it. I swear just the propellers would wind the water at top speed. It had a radio and blinker lights on the bridge; about forty feet long. That was a utility boat; we delivered mail to the different islands, different outposts to members of our outfit and we also delivered some provisions. My first landing where there was very high resistance was...we walked the island that is just off the coast of New Guinea in the Dutch portion. I had a good buddy, his name is Elton Lyles the Tech Sergeant, a peanut farmer from South Carolina and he was assigned to guard the telephone linemen that were installing insulators and wire to the perimeter. Three Japanese soldiers had passed over and they came out and tried to get him to surrender. He had his rifle on his shoulder with two field telephones on top of it and struggling to get his rifle, he didn't want to alarm the rest of the force that was on the island and they bayoneted him; killed him of course. He was my very dear friend in fact he wrote several times to my wife. From walking the island we went to Beyack island. That's in the...you notice New Guinea looks like a

dinosaur. In the back of his neck there are several islands – Neuenfor, Beyack, and Japan. The resistance was very high, lots of Japanese. On Beyack, we had a difficult landing. There were cliffs on the shoreline about 30 or 40 feet high and it was difficult to get up from the beach on to the main part of the island.

**Rick:** How many pounds were you carrying when you'd make these landings?

**Bill:** I had a full pack – an M1 rifle (30-caliber gas operated clip fed), I had that, the full pack, K-rations lasting about two weeks, plus a... usually a 284, SCR284 field set radio that had a hand turned generator. One radio operator would turn the generator if you were transmitting messages.

**Rick:** So they had to land you close enough to land where you could walk. If you hit the water with all that, you'd have gone right under.

**Bill:** They would float by the way. The SCR284 was in a case and if you turned it on the down side, you could push it ahead of you if you were in water.

**Rick:** Okay, so if you're...these high cliffs, did they land you in deep water right there?

**Bill:** No, it was a beach landing; we didn't have to wade in. Beyak Island is honeycombed with caves and where the remnants of the Japanese army went were into these caves. It was a difficult time getting them out, they wouldn't surrender. The 158 Taskforce was a regimental combat team and they devised a method for getting the Japanese out of the coral caves by 55-gallon drums of high-octane gasoline. They'd pick a hole in each end, roll it down the incline of the cave and toss a grenade after it. Effective.

**Rick:** And then the can would blow up and spread fire wherever it was going?

**Bill:** Yes, it was a...they would come out on fire. Those that would refuse to surrender at times they would commit suicide '*Hare Kare*', perhaps you've heard of that. It was usually a slit open their intestine area, several times I witnessed the Japanese officers that had committed '*Hare Kare*'. From Beyak we went to Neuenfor that's about 60 miles. I was on the crash boat at the time. The resistance on Neuenfor, there must have been two divisions of infantry, Japanese infantry in the two islands – difficult landings because of the barrier reef. All of the islands of the Pacific – the Atolls are rimmed by a barrier reef, shallow water up into get to the beach. About the most effective boat that was able to get over the reef was '*flat bottom LCM's*' – light craft, Higgins craft. On Neuenfor, we could hear the Japanese up on a hillside and it sounded like they were having a big party but they were getting drunk on Sake wine – rice wine and we thought maybe they were going to attack us like some of their fanatical charges had been. They did charge down the mountain but there was enough soldiers and firepower, American made, that they didn't make it all the way down the mountain or the hillside. They were slaughtered. About the worst thing that my company had to contend with was infiltrators. They'd come into the company area at night, more than anything else to find food. Their weapons were uncared for, they were rusty, some of them wouldn't work, so they couldn't do much damage except with their bayonet and had a lot of grenades. But we contended with the infiltrators almost every

landing. The 288 Signal Company would follow the landing force by several days. After we'd made the beachhead we'd finish communicating with the 4<sup>th</sup>, we'd go back to our company and that's when we lived good.

**Rick:** How did you get off the island? Would you take these Higgins Boats, they'd come and pick you up walk you on and go back to the main ship?

**Bill:** Higgins Landing Craft, right. Climbed back up on the cargo-net to an APA or Transport Ship. From Beyak and Neuenfor Islands the next island was in Leyte Gulf in the Philippines.

**Rick:** How long would you stay on these islands?

**Bill:** 24 hours is the maximum. I was relieved by another radio operator.

**Rick:** Just a short period of time after you'd set things up and you were back on.

**Bill:** Yes. They would take us back to the transport ships for a rest and to eat some decent food rather than K-rations. From Beyak and Neuenfor, my outfit made several landings in Mindenow. But I wasn't part of that. The first landing I made was Leyte Gulf. That's where MacArthur famously said, "*I have returned.*" The whole Pacific venture was supposed to have been a '*hold action*' until the war in Europe was over but MacArthur and General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz thought that it would be better if they leapfrogged the Japanese resistance, the worst Japanese resistance and cut off their lines of supply and communication. That was the program for the whole South Pacific. It worked well; it was brilliant strategy I think. The bypass Japanese they'd wipe out later. Regimental combat team more than anything else would go back in and clean it up. The last landing was in the Lugayan Gulf in Luzon, that's the northernmost Island in the Philippines. We staged that Hollandia, New Guinea. It was a 500-ship armada and that's when we first came in contact with the '*Kamikaze*', the Jap airplanes that crash-landed into many boats, American ships. The one that came closer to our ship went over the bow and hit the one next to it.

**Rick:** Hit another ship right next to yours?

**Bill:** Yes, it went over our bow and hit the adjoining ship. It killed 300 GI's in the forward hold. Kamikaze's, they didn't always make their target, they were shot down before they ever reached their target, although they did much damage. That's when the point system came into effect in Luzon.

\*\*\* Tape error – interview proceeds with some footage missing\*\*\*

**Rick:** All right Bill, we were talking about when the US Forces invaded Manila to retake it and you just rescued this family that were living in '*Intro Muris*' (Intro Muris – the '*Walled City*' they called it) and I understand the Japanese were very, very brutal to the Philippines.

**Bill:** They killed everyone they could find on their retreat. There were Philipinos lying dead in the entire city. Just alongside the streets. It was brutal! We met up with the Philippine Guerillas

in Manila. They assisted us greatly in the 'clean up' of dead bodies. Graves, registration – had a horrible job. My experiences just with radio communication, I mean, I was supposed to be a non-combatant but they neglected to tell the Japanese Army that.

**Rick:** You saw your share didn't you?

**Bill:** Yes. We first went overseas, I had done very well on the rifle range and they assigned my arm to a 1903 Infield Bolt Action Gun with a grenade launcher. The grenade launcher fit over the barrel of the gun and the impelling force was the bullets with no lead, I mean a blank with an excess amount of powder. It would toss that grenade about 100 yards. You couldn't hold it against your shoulder; you had to put it into a sandbag that had been in your back. I fired that several times until the headspace got too great and then I was issued an M1, 30-caliber gas operated clip bed rifle. And then they came out with a carbine and that was, that was 30-caliber carbine and that was much easier to carry, it was lighter. It had just as great of firepower. I was glad to get rid of the M1.

**Rick:** How long were you in the Philippines?

**Bill:** From the landing at Lengayen and then the trip to Manila – that's when the point system went into effect. I had 81 points. That was 10 points for being married, 10 points for each landing you had made, 10 points for each 6-months service you had on your wrist – I had four. I didn't get any farther than Manila. I didn't engage in Okinawa or Iwo Jima, had enough points to come home before that.

**Rick:** So you were home when they dropped the Atomic bomb then?

**Bill:** No, I was tied up at the fuel dock at Leyte Gulf at the time.

**Rick:** Tell me about that. You had enough points to go home....

**Bill:** We were tied up for refueling at the boat dock at Leyte Gulf. We had come back from Manila to Batangas and to Leyte. I could pipe the radio into the company area and receive a radio broadcast and that's when we found out the Atom Bomb had been dropped. Of course it was a big thrill because we thought it would be over then.

**Rick:** Did you have any inkling of the US having a secret weapon? (None whatsoever) So it was a big surprise to you?

**Bill:** Very much so. We listened a lot to Tokyo Rose all over the Pacific. She was a morale booster.

**Rick:** She played American jazz music but nobody else listened to the propaganda.

**Bill:** That's true, didn't pay much attention to her except we enjoyed the music. But she would name our outfit; for instance '*wouldn't you rather be home with your girlfriend than here in the islands*' and stuff like that you know. But the music was great and that's what we enjoyed more

than anything else. Radio communication was all by 5 letter code groups. In fact I never read anything that I ever transmitted, it was all in code.

**Rick:** And you didn't...you'd put it in English and somebody else would translate it into the code word.

**Bill:** Right, the message center would encode it on a ME209. That was a signal core encoder and decoder. They, the message center, would get the message from the perimeters and encode it and bring it to the operator who would transmit it by radio to whoever was concerned. Headquarters, company, the command boats. It was a radio net over the entire area. The SER284 was a field set with a range of about 50 miles maximum. We did have radios that would cover the entire Pacific like the 277. That was base radio. It could copy traffic from anyplace in the Pacific. At night we would copy news press releases from the Associated and United Press come via international morse code and the news releases that we copied would go to the base newspapers, our company newspaper – *'The Ramp'*. That was adequately named for the ramp that opened when the landing craft hit the beach.

**Rick:** Let me ask you this, now you're in the Philippines when the USS Indianapolis was sunk and they were headed there and there was supposed to be some SOS signals or some radio signals – do you know anything about that?

**Bill:** No, I didn't receive that transmission, however we did receive traffic from the Navy Corvettes mostly and some battleships, airplane carriers.

**Rick:** But you didn't hear of any signals coming from the Indianapolis?

**Bill:** No, no, I certainly didn't. We were witness to *'The Battle of the Coral Sea'*, the Navy battle. Maybe you've heard of *'Iron Bottom Bay'*. That's in the Solomon chain. But with Japanese and American ships were sunk into the Bay and they named it *'Iron Bottom Bay'*.

**Rick:** Well now, it was the middle of August when VJ Day occurred, were you still....

**Bill:** August the 6<sup>th</sup>. Yeah, I didn't leave the Philippines until October. We landed back in the United States in Washington on November the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945.

**Rick:** Did you go back on a Liberty Ship again?

**Bill:** No, it was a, it was the *'HMS Clip Fontaine'*. It crossed from Manila to Seattle in 16 days. That was (it was a different story going back), right.

**Rick:** And then you landed in what city? And was your wife there to meet you?

**Bill:** Seattle, Puget Sound at Ft. Lauten. No, she was in Salt Lake at the time. (Tell me about your meeting), I staged it – Ft. Lauten, that's in Seattle and on the UP Railroad to Salt Lake and we had a six hour pass from the time we landed at depot to when we were supposed to be left out

on the Army. So I met her outside of the UP Depot in Salt Lake. She was my landing party. We have been married 63 years next month.

**Rick:** You had been married just over 2 years when you got reunited?

**Bill:** Yes, well it was actually four years. I was two years in the South Pacific and the Philippines. One interesting thing that happened; we were delivering mail to a unit that was at LeGaspe. That's in the southern part of Luzon, in the foot of Mt. Mayon. That's the active volcano that they have on their monetary pesos and going back from LeGaspe to Batangus in the crash boat, we were in a typhoon. The swells were at least 50 – 60 feet high and that crash boat was a marine plywood manufactured with two heavy motors – 12 cylinder Hall-Scotts.

**Rick:** And all open?

**Bill:** Yes, in the Cerulean Sea – that's in the midst of the Philippine Islands. The only thing that saved us was a British Aircraft Carrier came by and I asked him for permission on the blinker light to follow him in his wake and consequently the crash boat stayed together that long. I was never seriously – never wounded. I took a slug into my backpack and it ruined a bunch of K-rations and shellfire and mortar fire was about the most that we had. I've never forgotten the assault forces. I got to know many of them.

**Rick:** And they lost an awful lot didn't they?

**Bill:** Yes they did. They faced so many hardships.

**Rick:** Well, we appreciate very much you sharing those experiences with us.