



## **Thomas Harrison**

United States Army

1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant

Pacific Theater

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Interviewer:  
Rick Randle

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\*\*\*Discussion in progress\*\*\*

**Tom:** He was an expert pilot, he had the '*entrée*' as you might want to call it – almost anywhere in the world where there were airplanes and military airplanes and so forth and he developed a great respect for the abilities and equipment of the Luftwaffe and he didn't make any bones about saying so; but to call him a sympathizer or a Nazi supporter was I think a very bad disservice to him and to the country.

**Rick:** That was all before our time and I always thought he was a symbol because he was so popular.

**Tom:** Well he was that and he was very realistic. He was more than just a pilot, he had a great many talents and as I say he developed a respect for what was at that time an extremely well equipped and extremely efficient air force in the German service and he said so. So naturally there were people who accused him of being a sympathizer and I think that was a mistake.

**Rick:** We're glad to have Thomas Harrison with us today. Tom was one of these gentlemen that joined the service prior to December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 and Tom what was going on in your mind? Did you realize when you signed up for the service and volunteered that you may eventually be put in harms way or tell us kind of what went on prior to your enlistment. You graduated from East High?

**Tom:** Yes

**Rick:** And then what happened after that?

**Tom:** I went to the University and acquired a reserve officer's commission through the ROTC program here. When we received our commission early in 1941 we also received orders to report for active duty at the same time and my first duty post was in California at a replacement depot there which got to be pretty boring after a while so I volunteered when the opportunity

came up to go to the Philippine Islands which sounded exotic, interesting, different and so I did that and was shipped over to the Philippines arriving there late in August of 1941.

**Rick:** What was the troop ship like? Were there a lot of men going over there and were your accommodations good or?

**Tom:** The troop ship was called the USS President Cleveland, it was a cruise ship and this was it's first trip it made as a troop ship and we had a full compliment of replacement people mostly on this ship all destined for the Philippine Islands.

**Rick:** And when you arrived in the Philippines, what did you find, what did you do and what was the equipment like?

**Tom:** Well I was assigned to the Philippine Scout Field Artillery which was based at Fort Stansberg in Panpanga Province. It was a field artillery regiment, the 88<sup>th</sup>. It was a Philippine scout outfit. Philippine scouts were Philippine troops, professional soldiers officered by American officers from second lieutenants on up. They were an extremely well trained and for that day well equipped body of soldiers. In that we had French 75's which was a World War I leftover but it was a very good gun and they had rubber tires so you could trail them over the highways at pretty good speeds, an excellent piece of equipment. Later on I was transferred from there to be an instructor for the Philippine army which was mid November being activated. They were all reserve troops, very very poorly trained equipped with field artillery weapons which dated clear back to the Spanish American war. Old, outdated, wooden wheeled, iron tires, you couldn't transport them across highways at any kind of speeds without just tearing them apart. It wasn't a very good gun but it was there and we had to use it.

**Rick:** Did you have any inkling when you went to the Philippines that there was an imminent war coming with Japan or was there any rumors that there might be?

**Tom:** No however if you look back at the record you'll find that during the fourth quarter of 1941 they were doing as much as they could to beef up the garrison in the Philippine Islands.

They transferred the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division down from China, they had been in Shanghai. They transferred a couple of tank battalions from National Guard outfits across the country. The 200<sup>th</sup> Coast Guard was transferred in, they moved in some airplanes – B17's, P40's and based them at Clark Field, Nichols Field and other places around the Island of Luzon. So it was clear that something was happening and the reason that everyone knew this was because Japan was frankly expanding not only in to China but on down to Singapore and in to Malaysia and Indonesia and it was pretty evident that to consolidate their winnings they had to have the Philippines. Their goal as we found out later was to take control of the entire Western Pacific rim from China Manchuria clear down to Australia and they almost made it. We managed more by good luck than good management I guess to delay the Japanese army long enough in the Philippines that their time table for taking Australia was stretched allowing us to establish the base we needed in Australia which would serve as a jumping off point for the ultimate retaking of the Pacific Rim.

**Rick:** Going back to December 7<sup>th</sup>, when the news came that they had attacked Pearl Harbor, tell me what was going through your mind and the mind through the others at that time. Did you feel that the attacking of the Philippines was eminent?

**Tom:** Well it was pretty clear that their attack on Pearl Harbor essentially crippled the Pacific fleet which had to be used as escort for replacements for the Philippines and other places of both troops and supplies. By knocking out Pearl Harbor, at least the heavy ships in Pearl Harbor they pretty well crippled that effort and the result was that we got no reinforcements after the war started and as things progressed it was quite clear that unless we did get some replacements of people and supplies that ultimately we were going to have to lose that battle.

**Rick:** So you were faced with World War I and before equipment and shortly after December 7<sup>th</sup> the Japanese then attacked the Philippines and you were there to defend it with a small group of men and old equipment?

**Tom:** Yes, they attacked the Philippines by air the same day – later in the day as Pearl Harbor. We were on the other side of the international dateline so for us it was the 8<sup>th</sup> of December instead of the 7<sup>th</sup>, but it was the same day. In any event they bombed Clark Field, they bombed

Nichols field and a couple of other areas and in doing so pretty well wiped out our air force so during the rest of the battle, a series of battles we had no air support and that proved to be a very very big drawback.

**Rick:** So as I understand it you kept withdrawing further and further back into the Batan Peninsula.

**Tom:** That's right. We started out, our particular field artillery regiment started out as beach defense on Lingan Gulf in the Province of Penguasan and we were there for a couple of weeks during which the Japanese landed troops at the northern end of Luzon at a place called Apari Vegon and also they landed on the east coast, southeast of Manila and the resistance in both places was not sufficient to stop them so we knew that we'd have to fall back to the original defense plan for Luzon which was to beef up Corregidor as a naval gun base and Batan. Having those two places you could...as long as you lasted pretty well to avoid entry into Manila Bay.

**Rick:** Tom when they felt that it was hopeless – you guys were outnumbered I guess greatly by the Japanese forces, was there resentment when MacArthur left and went to Australia?

**Tom:** Well at first there was until it became clear that he was being wasted in the Philippines on what amounted to a static campaign that he had talents which were needed in what we intended (we as a country) to be a return campaign starting from Australia. So when you thought about that your attitude toward MacArthur and his departure changed dramatically.

**Rick:** Tell me about the last days around Batan and Corregidor just before the Japanese caused the surrender and what the rations were like.

**Tom:** When we first arrived in Batan which would have been close to the first of the year in 1942 our rations were cut in half and they were mostly because food stuffs, ammunition, fuel were already in short supply. But in addition to that we had the Philippine Army remnants, we had all of our Philippine Scouts, our American troops and we had thousands of refugees – civilian refugees all packed into really a very small area. So shortly after that rations were cut

again and again and again to the point where they were almost non-existent. Under those conditions it was a matter of time only before you had to throw in the towel simply because you had nothing more to fight with.

**Rick:** And when the Japanese came in and took over initially, were they very brutal or? I guess it varies with who is telling the story maybe.

**Tom:** That was the beginning of what has been called *'The Death March'*. We were collected at a place on the east coast of Batan called *'Camp Cabin'* and the Japanese troops were there. They ran a very quick strip search of everybody and confiscated anything that happened to take their fancy, then they started us north – walking. The trip ultimately entailed about 63 miles and it seemed much longer because there was only one road and that was the one we took out. It was also the same road the Japanese were using to bring in their materials for the ultimate bombardment of Corrigador. So there was a constant turmoil, constant confusion on this road and we had to stop, wait, stand in the sun for hours on end while troops went by. People fainted, Japanese didn't know I guess what to do so there was a lot of brutality. People were bayoneted, people were shot, clubbed whatever to do what the Japanese considered to just maintain order. And this happened all the way north through this 10 to 14 day trek, I don't recall exactly how many days. By the time we got to San Fernando LaUnion the end of the Death March, we had lost oh I think 2 or 3,000 people. Mostly through brutality, some through illness and that sort of thing.

**Rick:** Was there...you were already emaciated before you started this march, did they let you stop for drinking water and any kind of nourishment at all?

**Tom:** Well we...mostly no. There weren't very many supplies. There were a few small barrios on the way and we were pretty well pushed through them. Some people managed to get a drink out of a caracal wallow here and there which proved to be a poor choice because of the contamination of those puddles. The result was that in addition to all of our other troubles there was a great deal of dysentery and that sort of thing.

**Rick:** In reading about it they said the Japanese – if you fell by the wayside they would just club you or bayonet you rather than get you up again.

**Tom:** That happened.

**Rick:** According to the reading that I've done – 75,000 started counting British troops, American troops and Philipino's – 54,000 arrived at the camp. So that was unbelievable, tell us how you got up finally to Camp O'Donnell.

**Tom:** Well San Fernando was a railroad point. They had a narrow gauge railroad that went from there and I don't know where it ended but it took us to a town called Capass and we went in freight cars which...well we had packed nearly 100 of us in each car and we were packed so densely that nobody could sit down or lie down. There was no fresh air, fortunately I was close to a door and I could get a little air from a crack. But there were people in our car who died and couldn't fall down. It was a very very traumatic situation which lasted for oh I don't know – several hours.

**Rick:** And it was all in this hot humid Philipino weather.

**Tom:** Oh yes, these are the tropics.

**Rick:** And then you finally arrived at Camp O'Donnell and what was your experience there?

**Tom:** Bleak! Camp O'Donnell had been built as an induction center for the Philippine Army. Barracks made out of bamboo and nepa fibers and so forth, very little water. You waited at a spigot for hours to get a drink of water for example. People were already sick as I said with dysentery, malaria, tropical diseases of various kinds and there was nothing to do. There were no medications available at all. We had doctors who could do nothing because they had nothing to give. Anyway we began to lose large numbers of people everyday – as many as 100 to 150 at a time and this continued for the three or four months we were there. And we buried people in

open pits and there were people of course who were on the burial detail one day who was buried the next day. It was very, well it was to me a worse experience than the death march had been.

**Rick:** The records show that there were...of the 54,000 that arrived there 40% were lost during the next 45 days or however long it was that you were there but it remains as one of the biggest tragedies during the entire war.

**Tom:** Well the Philippine army people plus some of the civilians were in a separate part of the same camp and they said our side of the camp which was restricted to Americans – we lost 150 odd people a day. The Philipino's – I've seen burial details of 500 on any given day going out of their camp so I'd have no way to verify to figures you just quoted but the rate was higher than anything I ever want to remember.

**Rick:** Tom, I know you've been asked this question before – what was the secret of your survival?

**Tom:** Well my wife said it was probably stubbornness. It was pretty clear that if you began to dwell on what lay ahead for a year or two, three, five, whatever – if you began to think about that you began to give up. So I made up my own mind to make my goals short – one day at a time. Make it through today and tomorrow will take care of itself, that sort of thing and that served me well.

**Rick:** So how long were you at Camp O'Donnell?

**Tom:** We got there towards the 20<sup>th</sup> or so of April and we were there until probably June, early July or something like that.

**Rick:** Then they decided to ship the able bodied prisoners to Japan?

**Tom:** Well no, they broke up Camp O'Donnell entirely. I think they began to realize that if they were going to make any headway in the Philippines they had to let the Philippine part of that

camp go and they sent us to a place called (another camp) called Cabana One and we stayed there...well I left there in the very early part of November in 1942 so I was there for several months. Then they began to ship the more able bodied out to various work programs building airfields and things like that in the Philippines and then we were among the first to be shipped to Japan. Our shipload that arrived in Japan was scattered between – well we worked in a steel factory and there were people who worked on a Stiva during concern at the port – I don't know where they all went. There were several ships later that were scattered people in small details almost all over the main island of Japan.

**Rick:** When you arrived there you were on a ship and it arrived at a port and then did they march you? Did you get on a truck? Or how did you get?

**Tom:** Railroad.

**Rick:** Were you packed in anywhere near like that first?

**Tom:** No, no as a matter of fact this was quite luxurious – we had seats. Of course they had blanked all the windows off so you couldn't see out, you didn't know exactly where you were going but you were at least reasonably comfortable and the trip didn't take very long anyway.

**Rick:** You had no idea where you were in Japan?

\*\*\*Tape Interrupt\*\*\*

**Tom:** We didn't get rice balls, they cooked their rice wet as sort of a mush which they called '*Luga*' and that was about all we had and that wasn't very much of that. So the longer you were involved in this kind of a situation, the worse shape you were in.

**Rick:** What did they do with the bodies when they were bringing them out – so many a day? Did they burn them?

**Tom:** Oh no, they were buried in as I said in open graves, pits really. And they're still there – well I guess not.

**Rick:** All right after you arrived in Japan and we had you on these railroad cars with seats and somewhere near Osaka – tell us that experience and how you got set out to work details and that kind of thing.

**Tom:** Well we got into a place called '*Yotogawa*' which is the Yoto River and this steel plant was located on that river. They had remodeled one of the buildings in the plant as a barracks for the 400 prisoners who were sent there. And it wasn't so bad because the first thing that happened – we'd been on this ship for 20 days or so, we're filthy and hadn't had a chance to wash or bathe or much of anything else so they sent us in details down to a communal bath in the same building. If you've never experienced a Japanese bath, you have something coming. The first thing you did was take a basin of water and carefully soap yourself, clean yourself up, then you got into this pool which was roughly the size of this room and hot – so hot you could hardly stand it. But it just soaked all the tension and so forth out of you and I still remember that with pleasure. Anyway – that bath was not made available to us for too many times for the balance of the time we were there. They assigned people to work as porters and laborers of various kinds. This steel plant was an old fashioned one and they made seal castings for engine housings and all kinds of small items. It was not a very high quality production. They always thought that we were sabotaging their efforts but it wasn't necessary to do that because their reject rate was much over 50% to start with.

**Rick:** When you got to Japan were your rations better and did you have plenty of water?

**Tom:** Oh yes, we had plenty of water. The rations were somewhat better and there was even a small amount of medicine available.

**Rick:** And over there when you were in there was there any thought of trying to escape?

**Tom:** Where would you go? You'd stand out like a sore thumb anywhere in Japan. The same thing in the Philippines.

**Rick:** Right, so there was just no hope for that.

**Tom:** Well no, you couldn't blend in anywhere and besides that there weren't very many people who had the strength to do that.

**Rick:** What was your specific job in the steel plant?

**Tom:** Well I started out helping to carry iron ore to the feed port of this blast furnace and then I...

**Rick:** Were you pushing carts with it in?

**Tom:** Oh no, no, no – you carried them in baskets. You put them on a carrying pole and carried them that way. It was a very primitive operation. Anyway the camp commander who was a Japanese Lieutenant who came to me one day in the office and sat down and gave me a cigarette which was not just their ordinary issue it was a special one and a glass of sake and he told me that he had just learned that my city – Salt Lake had been shelled by Japanese submarines which was a pretty good deal. Anyway he talked a little bit and then he gave me a dictionary – a Japanese English dictionary which I still have and advised me to learn how to read it or to speak Japanese because he wanted me to go out and kind of settle arguments and misunderstandings between Japanese workmen and the American prisoners, so I ended up doing that.

**Rick:** So you got to where you could speak a little Japanese then?

**Tom:** Just enough to get in trouble.

**Rick:** Were the guards humane or were they better than Camp O'Donnell?

**Tom:** Well, they were not combat troops. They were better, they were not quite so brutally minded I guess is a good word. There was some brutality but not very much. The work itself was hard enough.

**Rick:** And you spent roughly 3 ½ years?

**Tom:** Well not in that particular place. I was there about six or eight months, then we were transferred to ultimately two other different camps.

**Rick:** Tell us about those.

**Tom:** Well, one was on the island of Shikoku which is south of the main island, a place called Sansugi. We were there for a year, a year and a half then we went up to another one not far from Kyoto called Rokuroshi and we were there when the war ended.

**Rick:** What did you do at those camps? You didn't do steel work anymore.

**Tom:** No, we mostly farmed.

**Rick:** Just farmed? Did you get to keep the vegetables that you were raising or?

**Tom:** No we always moved – we got one going and we always moved to a new plot.

**Rick:** A new place huh?

**Tom:** No we didn't. We didn't live off our own production.

**Rick:** Tell me about the end of the war, what went on and how you found out about it and what it was like afterwards.

**Tom:** Well we were not aware that the atomic bomb had been dropped on either Nagasaki or Hiroshima and that was dropped in mid August of 1945 and around the 1<sup>st</sup> of September the Japanese officer who commanded the camp made a special trip up to our barracks – we were all in one building and wanted to speak to our senior officer who was a colonel. This was very rare because most of the time he stepped outside his office and shouted and you went down there. Anyway he informed the colonel that the war was over, that they were about to sign a peace treaty, that we would stay in this camp for a few days until our own troops came in to get us and it's hard to describe the pandemonium that took place when the colonel let the rest of us know what he had been told. We tore down bars and tore down fences, wandered around the countryside – pretty aimlessly but it was the first time you'd been free in years.

**Rick:** Well did all the guards just disappear then or evacuate?

**Tom:** They disappeared.

**Rick:** So you woke up the next morning and they were all gone?

**Tom:** They were all gone. They said they were going to try to keep us supplied and about the only thing they did furnish was a barrel of sake which is rice wine. Our own people bombed us with parachute delivered food packages dropped from B29's and that kept us going for the week or two that we waited for our own people.

**Rick:** Well did they come close to hitting those camps? Did they know right where to drop those parachutes?

**Tom:** We had to mark the camp with a big white cross over the roof.

**Rick:** And that's how they....

**Tom:** Well they had been informed that there was a camp in this area. The B29's came out of Okinawa I believe.

**Rick:** How long after that were you rescued by American forces?

**Tom:** Oh it seems to me it was somewhere around the middle of September and we had a team of registration people come up. They took all of our vital data – names, serial numbers and that sort of thing and arranged for us to get to Kyoto and from there by train to Yokohama and they put us immediately on a ship in Yokohama and we left for the Philippines the next morning. So it didn't take very long once they got started.

**Rick:** Were you happy to be going back to the Philippines or would you have rather gone somewhere else?

**Tom:** At that point I didn't care. It turned out to be a good thing. We had a week or so on the ship where we were able to stuff ourselves. We got to the Philippines and got re-outfitted in uniforms and decorations and that sort of thing and more good rations, good food and we were put on a ship there in much better shape than we had when we arrived. So it turned out for me to have been a good thing.

**Rick:** Did you ever have to go into a hospital and spend a few days to get check out?

**Tom:** No.

**Rick:** You didn't over on the boat or anything like that?

**Tom:** No, no, when we got to San Francisco we had a little – a few short visits at the Presidio Hospital then we were shipped to Burlingame California which was another hospital but the examinations were cursory, short, mostly we were there to take medications if we needed to and then from there we came home.

**Rick:** To you, when was the biggest jubilation? Was it when you first found out the war was over or was it coming into San Francisco Bay? Maybe that's a hard question to answer.

**Tom:** Well you were on an emotional high between both of those times – all the time. We were met at the entrance to San Francisco Bay by the submarine which was of course surfaced and they escorted us through the mine field which was still very much in place and it took – I don't know how many hours of zigzagging through this mine field and we got into San Francisco with a small boat escort all the way from the Golden Gate Bridge to the pier. So I guess that was a peak.

**Rick:** Well Tom, thank you so much for sharing these stories with us. We appreciate you coming and it's a great honor to have you here.

**Rick:** What was your thinking of your comrades – I guess you had friends that had passed away at O'Donnell that you knew and others.

**Tom:** There were maybe a dozen people from Utah that I knew of who were there and there were two of us that came home.

**Rick:** Well once again – thanks so much for sharing. You've been so gracious to speak wherever we asked you to and I appreciate that personally and I appreciate the sacrifice that you made.