

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
648

Interview with
H. BRANDON PERKINS
May 4, 1984

Place of Interview: Norfolk, Virginia
Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello
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Approved: *H. Brandon Perkins*
(Signature)
Date: 5-4-84

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Oral History Collection

H. Brandon Perkins

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello Date of Interview: May 4, 1984

Place of Interview: Norfolk, Virginia

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Brandon Perkins for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 4, 1984, in Norfolk, Virginia. I'm interviewing Mr. Perkins in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was assigned to the 34th Combat Engineers at Schofield Barracks during the Japanese attack there on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Perkins, to begin this interview, just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education-- things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Perkins: I was born on January 28, 1917, in a small town in Halifax County, Virginia. If I remember the name correctly, it was Lennig, Virginia, close to South Boston. I was the youngest of sixteen children. My mother died shortly after I was born, so an aunt brought me to Richmond to keep me two or three days. Somehow, they became attached to me, and I never did go back home. Some of my brothers...well, I only have one brother

living today of the sixteen children. My father remarried, and--this is rather hard to believe--he had sixteen children by his second wife. I have only one brother living today that's older than I am. The rest of the original clan is dead. I went back to Halifax County in 1927 as a young boy, and Father didn't recognize me. I went with an uncle of mine, and he had three boys. My father asked him, "Are these all your sons?" My uncle said, "I think you should be able to claim one of them." He didn't even recognize me. Of course, I had left so early.

I grew up in Richmond. I never was able to get a lot of education due to the fact that back in those days, Depression days, when I was a young man, I went to work like most young men at that time because I came from a very poor family. My life was routine. I had a couple of years of high school. At that time jobs were very hard to get, but I did manage to go to work somewhere--at first for a florist, I think, for \$5 a week, fourteen hours a day. Later on, I went with a printing company. I sold printing for a while. Then I was in the coal business. I weighed coal when it was put on the truck to go out to customers. I'd weigh the coal and route the trucks. Well, I was getting into the age then twenty-one or twenty-two, so the draft came along, so I went into the service in 1940.

Marcello: So you were drafted in 1940?

Perkins: Later on, I became Regular Army. When the war was over, I reenlisted into the Regular Army, so I was considered Regular Army. I stayed in eleven years and had to get out due to business reasons. We owned a business, and I had to get out because of that fact. There was a family death, and I went into the business more or less to protect my interest in it.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you went into the service in 1940 as a draftee, and you seemed to indicate that you were not Regular Army at that time.

Perkins: Right. I went in in July of 1940. I'm sure it was.

Marcello: But you were not drafted into the Regular Army?

Perkins: No, I was drafted not into the Regular Army, no. I later went into the Regular Army.

Marcello: Well, when you were drafted, what did you go into at that point?

Perkins: Well, it was the Army but...it was the Regular Army, yes. But, I mean...the distinction there is that draftees just had a normal serial number. Like mine was 33095103. Later, it became RA33095103 due to the fact that RA indicated Regular Army. It was quite a distinction back in those days. The Regular Army didn't think too much of the draftees at that time (chuckle).

Marcello: Was that supposed to be a draft for one year?

Perkins: Draft for one year. The song out at that time was "Goodbye, Dear, I'll Be Back in a Year." It didn't turn out that way, of course, for most of us.

Perkins: What were your reactions to being drafted? Had you expected it, or was it unexpected?

Perkins: Well, I had expected it. Really, I volunteered before...I mean, I got a draft notice.

Marcello: You volunteered for the draft, in other words?

Perkins: Right. I went in before I should have gone. I wouldn't have had to go in. Let's put it that way.

Marcello: Where did you take your basic training?

Perkins: At Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

Marcello: And how long did basic training last at that time?

Perkins: Basic training at that time lasted three months. We left Fort Belvoir, Virginia...I can't remember the exact day, but it seemed like it was around September or October. We were put on a troop train, and if I remember, I think it took us approximately eight to ten days to cross the country. The war at that time, of course, wasn't on, so they would set us off on a siding to let other trains come through--regular passenger trains and so forth.

We didn't know where we were going. We had ideas. Some of the guys had noticed some baggage marked "Philippines," and some had seen "Schofield Barracks, Territory of Hawaii." So we were put aboard the USS Saint-Mihiel. It was a troopship captured in World War I.

Marcello: Where did you pick it up?

Perkins: In Fort Mason Docks in San Francisco. We were approximately

seven days from San Francisco to Hawaii.

Marcello: When you found out you were going to Hawaiian Island, what was your reaction?

Perkins: Well, I really don't remember. It didn't bother me. On the way to the islands, we thought that we would be going to the Philippines. Some of the fellows had noticed luggage for some of the officers was addressed to the Philippines, and some had seen luggage...and the ship could have gone from Hawaii to the Philippines. I don't know. Most of us were put off at Hawaii.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens when you dock in Honolulu? Describe what happens at that point.

Perkins: Well, it was late in the afternoon when we got off at the Aloha Tower, which was quite a sight for us. We were put aboard a little train. We called it the "Pineapple Express." The Hawaiian pineapple people or Dole Pineapple--whoever owned the pineapple fields at that time--had very narrow gauge railroad tracks--very small cars that they used to haul cane, and they had a few passenger cars. We got aboard that. I can't remember the exact number of men we had. I'll say it was three or four hundred possibly. They put us on that to take us to Schofield Barracks. About halfway up to Schofield, we had to get off and push the train. There were so many on the train that the engine wasn't powerful enough to pull it (chuckle). So we had to get off and give the train a shove.

Then we'd all jump back on until we got to Schofield.

Marcello: Now I do know that the selection of men into the various units and to the various posts was a rather haphazard affair on many occasions. I've heard people tell me that as soon as they got off the ship there at Honolulu, somebody would meet the ship and simply arbitrarily assign people to this unit and that unit and this post and that post. In your particular case, was that done, or did you go directly to Schofield Barracks and then assigned to whatever unit you were going to go to?

Perkins: I think that our unit had been very well-planned. We were taken to Schofield Barracks. Our barracks were waiting for us. They were new. I don't think they had been completed too long. There we activated the 34th Engineer Combat Regiment, which is two battalions. Each battalion consisted of 571 men. Later on, like, I left in 1943 and cadreed back to the States to train more engineer combat soldiers. It was our belief that at that time, engineer soldiers were chosen by their IQ's and abilities because we engineer soldiers definitely had missions --building bridges, building airfields--and a majority of the men had experiences of that type. The way the Army chose them at the time was by IQ and their past experience. They didn't take a man out of the ranks and say, "You'll be a cook." They did at times. I know they did it in some outfits, so I've heard. But I do believe that our regiment was planned at the

Pentagon and was activated in Hawaii. The regiment later went into the Pacific in lots of battles. I can't name them because I wasn't there, but I do know they were in eight or ten battles. They merged with some other engineer company. The 34th Engineers were activated in Hawaii and never were in the States. They were deactivated in Hawaii or on the ocean somewhere. No, concerning the question you asked, I've heard the same thing, but I don't believe that our outfit was brought up that way. I think it was very well-planned.

Marcello: From what you've said, then, I gather that you were probably assigned to the 34th Combat Engineers because of your IQ tests and so on rather than your work background because your work background didn't seem to indicate that you had any engineering experience.

Perkins: That's right. That feeds my ego (chuckle). I would say possibly. I was made a non-commissioned officer several weeks after we had arrived. Evidently, all of our officers at that time were West Pointers. There were very few officer candidates at that time. These men came out of West Point, and they were Army officers, and I mean every bit Army officers. They recognized the ability, I guess, of men that could lead, and I was chosen, I guess. I was made corporal, and very shortly I was a sergeant.

Well, it goes on. I came back to the States. I was cadreed back as a platoon sergeant, and then within a couple of

months, I was a tech sergeant and master sergeant. Then I became the sergeant-major of our battalion. I went from staff platoon sergeant to master sergeant, and at that time General Patton would not let a man jump two grades. We were on Louisiana maneuvers when my commanding officer promoted me from staff to master sergeant, which is a grade...you skipped a grade. So a directive was sent down that I would have to be reduced in grade to a staff sergeant--promoted to tech sergeant and remain in tech sergeant for one month, and then he could promote me to master sergeant. This is the way Patton did things, or one of the ways Patton did things (chuckle).

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the physical layout of Schofield Barracks. Am I to assume that your quarters were in one of the quadrangles?

Perkins: No, we were not. The 3rd Engineers, 19th Infantry, 25th Infantry, and several others were in the quadrangles, but we were not. We were north of Schofield, up near Kole Kole Pass. We weren't too far from Kole Kole Pass.

Marcello: Describe what your quarters were like up there.

Perkins: Our quarters were temporary barracks buildings. They were called temporary barracks buildings. They were all-wood. I would say that each barracks held maybe 150 men. It had non-commissioned officers' quarters upstairs--small rooms at the end of the barracks where the platoon sergeants would stay. That separated them from the men. It gave them a little prestige

for their rank and whatnot. Of course, it wasn't necessary for heat in those barracks. It was just an ordinary temporary barracks building. Today they're gone. It's housing there now--non-commissioned officers' housing.

Marcello: All in all, did you find the barracks to be rather comfortable and livable?

Perkins: Oh, very much so. Very much so, for an Army barracks. I'm taking into consideration that they were thrown up fast. It was very comfortable. It was regulation that each bed had to be so many feet apart. We had plenty of room.

Marcello: Describe what the Army chow was like there at this temporary barracks. Is that where you took your chow?

Perkins: Yes. Unfortunately, the chow wasn't too good. One of the reasons for this is that before the war started, mess sergeants were assigned a ration per man, and this came out...I don't know how it worked as far as dollars and cents were concerned, but if he could feed you...well, I'll say beans instead of steak, he could build up a big ration bank account. This is dollars and cents, I'm speaking of. The clothing allowance was the same at that time. We ate Navy beans more than we should. We ate a lot of food that...it was good. It'd stick by you for workingmen. But on Thanksgiving, he went all-out. We had turkey and all the trimmings--everything that you would have. Then comes December 7, and all this is changed. The money that he had saved, two or three or four thousand

dollars that he was trying to build a mess account so that eventually he would be able to level off and feed us great meals, never did come about--not from his ration account. When I say this, with the Japanese attack, these type of things changed. We used to have a clothing allowance, and all of this changed. So for several months there, we didn't eat too well. But after that...the engineers do a lot of manual labor, especially the soldier in the field. He works mighty, mighty hard. So the engineers was the only branch of the service I know that was designated a ration-and-a-half of food each day.

Marcello: Describe the training that you received there at Schofield prior to the war in the 34th Combat Engineers.

Perkins: Well, we really didn't do too much training. We had had our basic training. We knew basically what the soldier was supposed to do. Most of ours...we were assigned jobs--certain types of jobs. One of the main functions of my particular company at the time...we were beginning to lay wide gauge railroad track in Hawaii. This was going from Honolulu to the North Shore. It had a two-fold purpose. The main purpose was to haul big guns, railroad guns, to the North Shore in case of attack. Now this was my unit. Other units built barracks--temporary barracks--because soldiers were beginning to come over. My particular job as a sergeant--my particular squad--was to haul the heavy rails--the iron rails--from

Honolulu to all along through the cane fields to build this railroad to the North Shore. We were scattered, especially after the war started. After the Japanese attack, we might have a company here, a company in Honolulu, a company over on the North Shore, on the windward side of the island. We never were together after the war started.

Marcello: So basically then, if I may summarize, the 34th Combat Engineers were really in the process of physically expanding that base to meet the needs of all of the incoming troops and so on.

Perkins: Absolutely. Absolutely. You're right.

Marcello: So in one sense, you were helping to accommodate those people, but at the same time, you were getting the experience that you could put to use later on if war did come.

Perkins: That's right. Schofield Barracks wasn't our home for very long after the war started. We were, like I say, all over the island building things. One particular job I had was to build an air raid shelter at the Pearl City School. This was to accommodate approximately four hundred students underground. It had a six-foot roof after you went underground. The worst part about it was that there wasn't any material around to do these types of things. Your captain would assign you a job, but he couldn't tell you where you could get the materials to do these things because it wasn't on the island. In other words, if you were a good soldier, you found it. That's what you had to do. On this particular

occasion I located a farmhouse that had--I don't know how many--hundreds of feet of 2 x 4's and 2x 6's and 1 x 6's. After the war started, we could commandeer this type of thing, so I commandeered it and gave the lady a receipt for it. They raised chickens. I assume that later on she got paid--the Army paid her for it.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you in your position detect any change in your day-to-day activities?

Perkins: Well, we knew what we were building for. We knew that we were gearing for a possible war. As a matter of fact, when we boarded ship in San Francisco, the headlines on the San Francisco Chronicle or whatever it was said that war with Japan was imminent. The paper quoted Roosevelt as saying this. I don't think we actually thought we'd ever be attacked in the manner that we were.

Marcello: To get more specific, did you notice that they seemed to be pushing you, speeding you up, as one gets closer and closer to December 7?

Perkins: Well, I would have to say "yes" there. We had some night classes. After working twelve hours in the field, we had night classes on weapons and other military subjects that we didn't get into during the day.

Marcello: Also, I do know that many of the units there were on what

was called as a tropical work schedule. In other words, they only worked until noon.

Perkins: Before the war started?

Marcello: Yes. How about the 34th Combat Engineers?

Perkins: I don't think that we ever was on a work schedule of that type. I understand that some of the old units--3rd, 19th, 25th Infantry, some of those--had that type of schedule sometimes. I don't think it was everyday. I think it was maybe Wednesday afternoons or some type of schedule like that. I really can't remember that particular intance. We had very little time off before the war started and none after the war started.

Marcello: Again, as one gets closer and closer to December 7, and as relations between the United States and Japan continued to get worse, were there ever any alerts or maneuvers or things of that nature in which you participated?

Perkins: We had alerts. As a matter of fact, we were on the alert when the Japanese attacked. We were on the alert, I think, Wednesday. The big guns were taken to the fields--the artillery pieces. The field artillery pieces were taken to the field. The alert was called off, I think, on Saturday night at midnight.

Marcello: How did that alert affect the 34th Engineers?

Perkins: At the time my company was up just above Haleiwa. We were on the ocean, and we were in...well, we called it "Tent City." All the tents were pyramidal tents. It was an emergency airfield just to the left of us. We were in a grove of trees.

The airfield was to the left. This airfield was strictly for an emergency basis at the time before the war started. In case any of the planes from Hickam Field or Wheeler Field would have any problems, they could land there or practice landings and takeoffs. It wasn't maintained very well, but it was a field there.

Marcello: Was it a grass field as opposed to paved?

Perkins: Grass, right. We were in "Tent City"--camped in "Tent City"--but we were still working on the railroad. That was our base. I guess Haleiwa must be ten or fifteen miles from Schofield Barracks. After the war started, the only time I would ever see Schofield Barracks, my home base, was to ride by it. We did later on move back.

Marcello: What did you do during that alert?

Perkins: Well, as far as the engineers were concerned, the alert was mainly for our officers. I'm sure they had orders what to do. We were still in the field working. This railroad seemed to have been very, very important to the military at the time, and I can understand why. They certainly couldn't move heavy field artillery pieces fast with the type of roads and railroads that they had. Our projects or jobs that were assigned to us were really very important military jobs.

Marcello: And you mentioned that this alert was called off when?

Perkins: It was called off Saturday, December 6, at midnight. We had returned to our base in the field at "Tent City." We were

told that we could go on into town if we had Class A passes. This was the type of pass that you could use to go into Honolulu anytime you wanted to go or go on leave or leave the post anytime that you wanted to, so far as it didn't interfere with your duties. So our first sergeant told us, "You can go into Honolulu if you want to, but don't say that I told you this. You're not supposed to be signing out until after midnight tonight, when the alert is over."

Marcello: So what time did you actually get in from that alert?

Perkins: Well, we moved in from the field, from where we were, some-time during mid-day.

Marcello: Okay, so you went from "Tent City," which was in the field, back to your regular barracks.

Perkins: No, we did not. Maybe I'm confusing you. We were in the field at the time doing just small maneuvers for engineer forces. We were still based at "Tent City." Our home base or our permanent barracks was Schofield, but we weren't in Schofield. All of our belongings--practically everything we had--was with us at the time. The barracks were empty other than a skeleton force to maintain the barracks.

Marcello: Normally, how did the liberty routine work for you there at Schofield?

Perkins: Before the war?

Marcello: Yes, assuming there were no alerts or anything like that.

Perkins: Before the war we generally had a pass once a week. If you

got this pass, you could go into Honolulu unless...if the Navy...if the fleet was in, before the war the Army wasn't allowed to go into Honolulu. When the fleet left, we'd go back to our normal pass routine. If you were a good soldier and behaved yourself, you could go into town on a Saturday afternoon after inspection and Sunday--spend the night or whatever you cared to do as long as you were back for duty before midnight.

Marcello: How far was Schofield or your barracks from Honolulu?

Perkins: Approximately fifteen or eighteen miles, I would say.

Marcello: How would you get there?

Perkins: They had buses. They had buses that the Army would run. Also, they had a transit company that had cabs.

Marcello: Was the transportation pretty cheap to get from the base into Honolulu?

Perkins: Oh, yes. I think it cost you maybe a dime.

Marcello: How often would you get to go into Honolulu? Would that be mainly a weekend sort of thing as opposed to doing it during the week?

Perkins: Not necessarily. If your day off was on a Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday, you could go in in the morning and come back before midnight that night. Being new troops, I think we would have got in maybe one day a week. Most of the times, we were busy on the weekends.

Marcello: When you went into Honolulu, what would your liberty routine

normally be, that is, for you personally?

Perkins: Well, we would go in and go to a bar and have a couple of drinks, go get a haircut, maybe go to Fort DeRussy or go down to Waikiki Beach and hang around on the beach. We'd do everything young men do at the time--look for girls and whatnot.

Marcello: You mentioned that you would go get a haircut. As I recall, they used to have a lot of female barbers in Honolulu.

Perkins: All female barbers at the time. We would go, after you had two or three drinks, to get this haircut without having some guy mulling over your head. It was pretty good to be able to talk to a female even if her eyes were slanted (chuckle).

Marcello: What attraction did Hotel Street have for the troops at that time?

Perkins: Well, Hotel Street had a lot of houses of prostitution there. Of course, that is a big attraction where you have a lot of men. This is one of the reasons that the Army could never go into Honolulu--could not have passes--when the fleet was in, because the Navy more or less took over that street and all the other streets in Honolulu or any other cities there. It was absolutely a beautiful city at the time--1941, 1942, and 1943.

Marcello: Did you ever stay overnight very often when you went in on liberty?

Perkins: No, I did not.

Marcello: Why was that?

Perkins: Well, the main reason, I think, was that I didn't have the money. I sent most of my money home to my mother at the time.

Marcello: This would have been your aunt?

Perkins: My stepmother, yes--my aunt. She needed it. Of course, she saved a good portion of it for me, which later I really appreciated because I got married in 1943 after I had gone back to the States--when I cadreed back to the States.

Marcello: Just for the record, what was your aunt and uncle's names?

Perkins: Mary L. King. My aunt had been married for the second time. Before that her name was Bushell. They raised me, and they certainly were great people. They were struggling people like a lot of people was in those days. Of course, when I was in high school, I left high school to go to work, like I said before. But I was very fortunate to be taken away from a farm that had twelve or fourteen children--more than my dad, my real father, could handle. I was very fortunate to be able to go into Richmond and get the education that I did get. What education I finally got was in the Army through USAFE. Are you familiar with that? With the education I had, I think that I did well. I could have gotten an Army commission in Germany in 1944, I think. In 1943 or 1944, they offered me a second lieutenant's commission, but I was better off with the war coming to a close than I would have been if I had taken the commission. I was a sergeant-major,

and everything was furnished, and I was making a good salary; so if I had become a second lieutenant, I would have just had more duties and less money and so forth.

Marcello: I know that in some of the units, especially in the combat units, I gather, there seemed to be a shortage of equipment and material. Did the 34th Engineers ever experience any of those kinds of difficulties or shortages?

Perkins: Well, we had them constantly because of the supply gap from the States to Honolulu. There were very few merchant ships at the time. It was definitely a shortage, as far as we were concerned, on everything. If we would go out to do a job, scrounged around and got the materials the best way you could. The better you were at getting them, the faster you got promotions, because you were considered a procuror, I guess (chuckle). It was really a hard job. We'd have non-commissioned officers' meetings, and like I said, the captain would assign you a job. You didn't ask him where you got the materials because he'd ask you, "Who do you want to replace you?" You just got the materials the best way you could. But you had to get the job done; otherwise, you wouldn't be a non-commissioned officer very long.

Marcello: We were talking about the liberty routine awhile ago. How much drinking was done by the troops when they went into Honolulu on liberty on a weekend or whenever?

Perkins: I would say that the soldier's drinking habit before the war

was no different than the drinking habit of any young man today that goes out for a Saturday evening or Saturday night, has a few beers, or some drinks. I would say that after the war started, the drinking pattern of the average soldier in Honolulu or Schofield or on the island changed radically. When I say changed radically, I mean for this reason. Whiskey, beer, and wine were all rationed. Generally, the bars would open at ten o'clock and close at twelve o'clock--ten in the morning and close at twelve noon. So if you're a drinking man, and you go in to have a few drinks, and you only got two hours to get them, you double up on every drink, or you triple your drinks. So the drinking habit of the average soldier or sailor...when I say it changed radically, I think we found many, many more that drank too much. The MP's would pick them up, or they would put them on a bus, or your best friend would take you back to the barracks or send you back to the barracks to keep you out of trouble. I'd say it was definitely a big change.

Now I would go in and get a haircut and do these things that you do on leave. I'd go to a bar and drink for two hours --double scotches or whatever you care for, bourbon, and you mixed in two or three beers with this type of thing. It doesn't take you very long to get pretty well charged up. Then you would go find something to eat. You'd either go to Fort DeRussy or eat at the Army barracks. But then, also,

everything was closed, so if you were fortunate to find somebody that would sell you a bottle or had a bottle, you would go with them. Otherwise, you would go to Fort DeRussy and stay over there and drink beer the rest of the afternoon for your entertainment.

Marcello: Now was this before or after the war?

Perkins: This was after.

Marcello: Yes. I was thinking this was after the war.

Perkins: Because, like I said, before the war started, the drinking habit of the soldier was normal--normal for a guy that would go in and have a few drinks. Maybe he'd get a little charged up, and a lot of them would wind up on Hotel Street and whatnot. But these houses were very well monitored by the military. All the girls were inspected. They had to have licenses. There were no streetwalkers. They didn't allow streetwalkers. Shortly after the war started, there was a book published called The Revolt of Mame Stover. Have you ever heard of it?

Marcello: Yes.

Perkins: Okay, there's no need to go into that, but this is what happened. The revolt was her revolt. None of the other girls did it. They weren't on the street--never were on the street. I never remember any of the girls being on the street. Like I said, it was organized for the benefit of the soldier and to keep the soldier clean.

Marcello: Did you have a favorite bar that you would usually frequent when you went into Honolulu?

Perkins: No, I did not.

Marcello: It seems as though most of the people did.

Perkins: I did not. No, I can't say that I did, really. I drank. I don't remember ever having to be carried back to the barracks. I drank my part, I'm sure. I could go over to Fort DeRussy and drink beer the rest of the afternoon. I unfortunately can't say that about all of the soldiers. Anybody that drinks occasionally will get too much. I was fortunate that...I stayed...I could have gone to Honolulu a lot more than I did, but money was a problem with me.

Marcello: Do you remember a place called the Black Cat Cafe?

Perkins: I do not.

Marcello: The reason I asked is because it seemed to be the first place that a lot of people hit especially when they got off of a taxi at the YMCA. I believe it was a bar across the street from the YMCA.

Perkins: I don't remember it. Possibly I've been in there, but I can't remember. I couldn't recall the name of any bar. I really couldn't.

Marcello: Tell me what you know of a little town right close to Schofield Barracks called Wahiawa.

Perkins: Wahiawa was off-limits to soldiers when I was at Schofield Barracks. It had a reputation of being pretty bad. Several

of the soldiers had been beaten up. One or two, I understand, had been murdered over there, so it was off-limits. If it was off-limits, I didn't go there (chuckle).

Marcello: This was even the case prior to the war?

Perkins: Prior to the war, yes. This was off-limits when we arrived.

Marcello: Was this just a small town?

Perkins: Very small. I can't remember, but I'd say you could drive through it in two blocks. It was spread out a little bit. I don't think I ever stopped there at all.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the morale of the men in the 34th Combat Engineers on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack?

Perkins: On the eve of the attack?

Marcello: Yes.

Perkins: I think our morale was very high. I really do.

Marcello: What do you think was responsible for that?

Perkins: Being an engineer soldier, really. It was something that engineer soldiers had--a comradeship--that...I guess it exists in the Army throughout. I don't know. We had a very close outfit. We always just felt that we were above the infantry soldiers and the artillery soldier and this, that, and the other. I don't mean that we were flippant about it, but we just had that feeling. I think our morale was excellent. If I graded it from one to ten, I'd give it a nine easily.

Marcello: What role did sports and athletic competition play in that pre-Pearl Harbor Army?

Perkins: Very, very large. Very large. If you were a baseball player or football player or good in any type of sport, you were very much wanted and coddled. You could almost name your own ticket--what you wanted. Particularly boxing at the time, these fellows would get promotions. They could just about write their own ticket for whatever they wanted--days off--because there was so much competition among the outfits. It was the infantry against the engineers or the infantry against the infantry or the infantry against the air corps or whatever. Before the war it was very, very nice to be a good athlete.

Marcello: I've even heard it said that the officers in many of the units would actually go out and recruit.

Perkins: Absolutely. Absolutely. They'd offer promotions: "Transfer over to my outfit, and I'll see that you make buck sergeant, staff sergeant, whatever it might be." This was pretty demoralizing to some soldiers, I would say, because according to the TO&E, we called it--Table of Organization and Equipment--a captain would be only allowed so many sergeants, so many staff sergeants, so many privates first class. You take a guy that gets out there and works all day and trains men and works with the men, if someone's promoted over top of him because he can hit a long baseball or throw a forward pass or can block, I think this at times was very, very demoralizing to the foot soldier--the regular, run-of-the-mill soldier. This very much existed. It was shown in From Here to Eternity. From

Here to Eternity, I would say, was very authentic in lots of things, especially the provost marshal's office there. I've actually seen men double-time with a lawn mower--prisoners. It was very well portrayed.

Marcello: Are you saying, in effect, that the stockade at Schofield Barracks was not a place to be taken lightly?

Perkins: No, it certainly wasn't, and I did everything I could to avoid ever going there, I'll tell you (chuckle). I had a fear of being Absent Without Leave. I had a fear of that place, a real fear. I had more of a fear of that place than I ever had of any other place during my whole war experience, and I had some.

Marcello: That's interesting. So again, you think the James Jones portrayal in From Here to Eternity was rather accurate?

Perkins: From what I saw, absolutely. From what I saw, I do.

Marcello: He also makes it quite clear in that book that in some units, like you just pointed out, if one were a good boxer, that was the key to promotion and all sorts of other privileges.

Perkins: This is absolutely true--absolutely true--and I think any soldier that was at Schofield Barracks would tell you the same thing.

Marcello: I think this brings us up to those days immediately prior to the Pearl Harbor attack. Let's talk about that weekend. Now you mentioned that you came off that alert sometime around noon, although it wasn't officially over until midnight on

Saturday, December 6. What did you do personally once you had come in from the field?

Perkins: Well, there was four of us to a tent--pyramidal tent. I walked down to the beach. I just laid around that Saturday afternoon. I wasn't going to Honolulu. I didn't want to go. I was tired. I just did the usual things a soldier does on Saturday afternoon--read a little bit, clean up equipment, shine shoes, things like that to maintain your personal things, clothing and whatnot. Maybe I sewed on a few buttons. Sergeants had more to do than a normal soldier would have, the field soldiers. We had some plans to do, and also you had certain things you had to hold up and be a little bit better than the regular soldier was. So I really hadn't planned on going anywhere Sunday. I was just going to lay around and read--study my manuals and whatnot.

Marcello: Did anything out of the ordinary happen that Saturday evening while you were there?

Perkins: No, not really. We had several boys who put on their Class A uniforms and walked out on the highway and hitchhiked into town. Not too far from us was Haleiwa. There was the Haleiwa Hotel, and there was a whiskey store, package store, run by a Japanese. We could walk down and buy a bottle and go...we weren't too far from Haleiwa Beach, although we had a beach right near us. Down at Haleiwa was girls, so we'd go down there. I didn't that Saturday. You asked me about that

Saturday afternoon. My memory is that I stayed in that whole Saturday afternoon.

Marcello: And likewise that evening?

Perkins: That evening, right.

Marcello: Incidentally, when you and your buddies sat around and talked in bull sessions, did the subject of a possible Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor ever come up?

Perkins: Yes, but not a surprise attack. The subject of war would come up. We thought possibly we would go to war, and sometimes it was very controversial among the men: "No." "Yes." "No." We knew that we were there for a reason, that they were training us for something. If it wasn't this year, it was going to be next year or next year, but it was coming. We all felt that we were going to have a war. I don't think it worried us because we were too young and didn't care, I don't guess (chuckle).

Marcello: I guess you didn't think it was going to come at Pearl Harbor.

Perkins: No, absolutely. We didn't think that. Very few people did because it was very few people who even knew where Pearl Harbor was.

Marcello: Awhile ago, we were talking about the alerts. I do know that there was a fear on the part of the Army that the people of Japanese ancestry on the island presented a potential threat in terms of sabotage or saboteurs. Was the 34th Combat Engineers involved in any kind of sabotage alerts or measure to prevent sabotage or anything of that nature?

Perkins: No more than the normal Army propaganda that was being fed to any soldier. As far any training against that possibility, we had none at all that I can remember. Today we know that the Japanese-American was a very patriotic person. At that time we didn't. I think that had we known how patriotic they were as Japanese-Americans, I think they would have been treated entirely different. There was some sabotage. I cannot pinpoint any directly that I know of. The only thing that I can say is hearsay--what I heard about it. We heard all kinds of stories after the war started.

Marcello: But you don't remember any anti-sabotage alerts prior to the war?

Perkins: Not prior to the war, I do not.

Marcello: Okay, so Saturday, December 6, 1941, is a rather uneventful evening, so far as your concerned. Let's move into that Sunday of December 7, 1941. I'll let you pick up the story at this point.

Perkins: Well, Sunday morning was a routine morning, as far as I was concerned. I was in my bunk, and it was early. The attack was at seven fifty-five. One of my men heard a lot of noise, and he said, "Sergeant, something's going on at Schofield. There's all kinds of smoke, planes." I was almost like the lieutenant that told the guy to go back to sleep. I said, "Oh, it's just the Army and Navy maneuvering."

Marcello: About how far were you from Schofield?

Perkins: Fifteen miles...eighteen or twenty miles possibly. I can't remember the exact distance. But we didn't think it was an attack. I did not, anyway. It was two or three minutes later, or maybe five or ten minutes later, that we really got the word. The first sergeant gets us all out and tells us that the Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor. We were ordered to go over and more or less try to protect this field that was right next to us. In the meantime some of the men were sent to Schofield to pick up some of our gear. We were without rifles or gas masks.

Marcello: In fact, you didn't have any weapons at all, I gather.

Perkins: No, we didn't have a weapon at all--nothing to fire to protect ourselves. It was late in the afternoon, two or three o'clock, that we were issued gas masks and M-1 rifles.

Marcello: In the meantime what did you do, and what did you see?

Perkins: Well, in the meantime we saw...the Japanese planes would come over the North Shore when they had left Pearl Harbor. Most of them came our way. One or two of them strafed our position. They were really strafing the airfield. They would come in on that airfield because there were several little planes there, and one of the Flying Fortresses that was coming in at the time was trying to land there. Well, they would come in and strafe that field and pull out of their dive because of the trees that were protecting our tents--"Tent City." That was, as far as I was concerned, up until that night, very uneventful for me, other than the smoke. Later on, that

afternoon, we put up guard posts all around the emergency landing field.

Marcello: Let's back up a minute and talk a little bit more about the Flying Fortress coming in and the Japanese planes strafing it. What other details do you remember about that?

Perkins: I don't remember the plane ever landing. It may have; it may not have. I don't think it ever landed. I think it had to have gone on to Hickam Field or wherever it could have possibly landed.

Marcello: You did witness this, however?

Perkins: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Describe what happened? Was the Flying Fortress coming in like it was trying to make a landing, and were there Japanese planes pursuing it?

Perkins: The planes never were pursuing it. The Fortress, from what I can remember, never landed. I don't think they were really attacking it. I think that it was just in their way.

Marcello: Did the Fortress make a pass at the field as though it were attempting to land?

Perkins: It could have possibly been attempting. The field wasn't big enough, I don't think, to land that type of plane. It was too small. It was a fighter-type airfield.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that a couple of these Japanese planes did strafe. How low were these Japanese planes coming in?

Perkins: Low. Mighty low. I'd say they were at four or five hundred

feet before they would pull up.

Marcello: Were you able to distinguish the pilots?

Perkins: Well, yes. One of the pilots looked back. I remember the scarf on his neck, and I can remember that smile--that Japanese smile that's portrayed so often--with his teeth shining. This is actually what I saw, and it's not something that I visualized later in life.

To get back to the Fortress, I think the Fortress must have gone on into Hickam or wherever it could land. I never heard any more about it. But for the Japanese planes, like I said, I think that the Fortress was in their way. At that time they were trying to get back to their ship.

Marcello: You mentioned there were small planes on that field. What kind of planes were they? Do you know?

Perkins: Well, what the Army was flying at that time was P-38's and P-40's, and that's what was there. They possibly had mechanical trouble and had landed there maybe on Thursday afternoon or Friday, and the pilot called for someone to come get him, and they left them up there.

Marcello: Did they destroy those planes?

Perkins: Some of them were hit. As far as seeing them go up in flames, I don't remember seeing them go up in flames because they were parked back near the woods, so it would have been hard for them to come in. I doubt if the Japanese pilots could see very much other than maybe one of them had told them they

were there--radioed that they were there or something.

Marcello: Approximately how many of those small planes were there?

Perkins: Two or three.

Marcello: Okay, you mentioned that it was two or three o'clock in the afternoon when they finally get the small arms out to you guys, and you establish your guards on the perimeter and so on. In the meantime what kind of thoughts are going through your mind? What are you thinking about?

Perkins: Invasion. Paratroopers. We would get together in little groups and talk of possibly what would happen. Then your officers would come up and put the fear of God in you to what's going to happen. Our intelligence was terrible as to what could happen and what would happen.

Marcello: Were you believing all the rumors that you heard?

Perkins: I think we did.

Marcello: I guess you had no reason to think otherwise, considering what had happened.

Perkins: Absolutely. Our thought at the time was, "Boy, are we unprepared!" It was really a mass confusion, as far as we were concerned. I think that our officers had not been trained well for this type of emergency. I can explain that to you by the places that they had set up guards along the ocean. It was impossible for a Japanese landing craft to come in because of the coral rock. They had men strung all along these places for an invasion, so our intelligence, as far

as setting up a defense, was terrible, as far as I'm concerned, to try to protect that type of place.

Marcello: What were some of the kinds of defense that were set up, other than the guards?

Perkins: Well, all I really know about is that we set up a defense around the Haleiwa Airport. It ran from our "Tent City," down past the airport, over to the ocean, and back up to our ...and I was made sergeant-of-the-guard that night. We had two men stationed about every twenty or thirty feet along the highway down to Haleiwa, to the end of the airfield, over to the ocean, and back this way. Well, everything was fine until it got dark. You know, the men could see you coming down and holler, "Halt! Who goes there?" This was the usual Army routine of stopping someone that's coming into an area that you're trying to protect.

My men were given orders to shoot anything that moved that night. Across the highway there was a pasture--a cow pasture--that had cows and horses. I guess there were maybe seventy-five or a hundred over there. So when it got dark, it was really dangerous for me as sergeant-of-the-guard because when I walked out to that highway and that army boot hit that asphalt, it made a terrific noise; and it was just one after the other hollering, "Halt! Who goes there?" "Halt! Who goes there?" We were issued M-1 rifles and had absolutely no training in M-1 rifles. We were trained with the

1903 Springfield at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, but they picked them up when we left. The Garand rifle, if you weren't trained with it, was a dangerous weapon because it would go off if you set it down hard. So everytime I walked that highway that night, I was really in very much danger, not from the Japanese but from all the men. It went on like this all night.

Can I tell you a little funny incident? We had a machine gun nest sitting up on a beach with three or four men on the machine guns. They hadn't been trained. We put an old Army sergeant up there with them. I guess he had worn out more barracks bags than I had socks. He'd been in the Army thirty or forty years. He'd been busted from master sergeant, tech, on down. We had him up there. At midnight we heard a machine gun going "RAT-A-TAT-TAT!" So I started running up there, and this officer-of-the-day caught me, and we go up to this machine gun nest. We had flashlights and were holding our hands over it. So we asked the sergeant, "What in the world are you doing firing this weapon?" This guy had to be sixty years old, sixty-five years old--old Army man. He said, "Well, Lieutenant, this machine gun has been in cosmoline since 1918, and if you think I'm going to sit here and clean this gun and not test fire it, you're crazy as hell." So the lieutenant looked at me, and I looked at him. What could you say? He was right (chuckle). But, you know, if he had let someone

know...he put whatever he had in his hand down, and about that time he reached over and picked up a carburetor bowl. I don't know where he got it from. There were several vehicles along the beaches from time to time--broken. He reached over and picked up a bottle and poured a glass of sake and downed it (chuckle).

Marcello: This was a carburetor bowl?

Perkins: A glass bowl off of a carbureter. They used to have them on Model A Fords and different automobiles back in the old days. This bowl was to catch sediment from the gasoline and whatnot. He was using that as a jigger. So we finally laid on during the night and pulled him from the detail because he was not too useful.

Marcello: Did you get much sleep that night?

Perkins: None at all. I didn't go to sleep until the following day. I was sergeant-of-the-guard all night.

Marcello: What did you do in the days immediately following the attack?

Perkins: Following the attack?

Marcello: Let's say on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday.

Perkins: Well, if I can remember correctly, we were ordered back to Schofield Barracks for a while. We had a burial detail. We buried some men at the Punch Bowl that they had taken from the harbor and were killed at...and we were on burial detail either one day or...on the eighth or ninth, I was on a burial detail--my squad.

Marcello: What exactly did that entail?

Perkins: Well, it entailed mostly us. As far as we were concerned, it was just digging trenches for the men.

Marcello: Were these mass graves?

Perkins: Mass graves, yes.

Marcello: So you were using heavy equipment now?

Perkins: Dozers. Heavy equipment. We identified and helped Graves Registration, which was a very small unit at that time, because they didn't expect this type of thing.

Then after that we started really putting up defences. We were building pillboxes which were placed on practically every corner of Honolulu. Then the other units were building air raid shelters all over Hickam. In other words, this was the engineers' job to do, so from that day on this was mainly our job.

We worked so hard that our men started having physical breakdowns. We would be in the field from daybreak until dark and then come in and have to study weapons and military tactics and things like that. So it finally got so bad that the medical section of the Army made a ruling that we had to take one day off a week regardless whether we didn't do anything but lay in the barracks. But we had to take the day off because we were having a lot of accidents from overwork and stress. Just mentally you can't work eighteen hours a day for six months and not fall out eventually.

Marcello: To which particular locations were you able to go where you could see some of the real damage that was done during the attack? For instance, you were essentially at Schofield Barracks. However, there wasn't a whole lot of damage that was really done at Schofield.

Perkins: No. We had one or two bullets went through our barracks, through the shower room. At Hickam Field was where you could really see the damage, as far as we were concerned--visual damage. The planes were all shot up out there and burned. The barracks buildings had been bombed. Hickam Field had the first million dollar Army barracks in the world, which were beautiful barracks. They were really ripped apart. They were bombed pretty badly. As far as Pearl Harbor, when you went into Pearl Harbor and looked out into the harbor, you could still see ships smoldering. There was a lot of traffic back and forth by small boats and whatnot trying to salvage the ships and whatever they could do. Most of the damage that I saw was at Hickam Field.

Marcello: What were your emotions or thoughts when you saw this damage, this extensive damage, that had been done in places like Hickam Field?

Perkins: Well, you know, "We'll get them. We'll get even. We'll win. We'll win this war. We'll come out of it all right." I have a letter that I wrote home to my mother. I still have the letter, We all had an attitude of being surprised and

mad--you know, mad. Like, we wanted to get there and fight them hand-to-hand right then. We would overcome. I even predicted, almost, the time it would take us to defeat the Japanese in the letter. I said, "Give us four years, and we'll win this war." Of course, I didn't know that we were going to be at war with the Germans and everything else at the time. Most of us boys were just kids, youngsters. We didn't realize...I guess it was a month before most of us really realized what we were into.

Marcello: When was it that you were first allowed to send some kind of word back to the States to your aunt that you were alive?

Perkins: I think I wrote a letter that night. I don't think it left Honolulu for three or four days. It was censored. From then on they were censored.

Marcello: I know that in some cases, the people were restricted to simply sending back a pre-printed card where they had to check a certain statement such as: "I am well." "I have been wounded." "I am in the hospital." It was something along those lines.

Perkins: I never had anything like that. I wrote a two- or three-page letter. The only thing is that my letter was censored. Some of it was blocked out by the censor. I can't recall what it was--possibly a troop movement, which was very highly top secret at that time.

As far as our feelings, I think we all had just this

mad attitude. We wanted to just grab one of them around the neck and choke him to death, whether he was the one that did it or not. If he was Japanese, that's all we needed to know. I think it was this attitude that made us work as hard as we did and not complain anymore than we did. As far as the 34th Engineers were concerned, and the men that I worked with, I think I heard less griping in that unit than any unit that I was with. I was in several others after that. When I say this, I think that the reason was that they knew they had a job to do, and they set out to do it.

Marcello: When did you finally leave the Hawaiian Islands?

Perkins: I left in March of 1943.

Marcello: And like you told me in your pre-interview conference, I believe, you also were later on transferred to the European Theatre and participated in the Normandy landing.

Perkins: Right.

Marcello: Unfortunately, that's beyond the scope of this particular project...

Perkins: Right.

Marcello: ...and sometimes I get rather discouraged by this fact because that's obviously something that was very important. Maybe one of these days we'll initiate an oral history project on that subject.

Perkins: Maybe you'll interview me again, huh?

Marcello: This is true. Well, Mr. Perkins, I think this is a very good

place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated in our project. You've said some very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that scholars and students will find your comments most valuable when the project is finished.

Perkins: I thank you for giving me this opportunity, and I hope what little I have said might enlighten someone, and maybe it can be pieced together, and one of these days we'll get a real story about what happened at Pearl Harbor by having, you know, as many people participating that was actually there. I don't mean to get back to the invasion of Europe, but the invasion of Europe, as far as I'm concerned, was much more important--D-Day-- than the December 7 attack was. I would never try to convince a Navy man of this--that was on one of those boats in Pearl Harbor--or any of the Air Force men that were stationed at Hickam Field because they went through much, much more than I did. They are the real heroes of this December 7 thing.