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WWII in the Pacific

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Student Interviewer's Name: Amber Henski
Interviewee Name: John Freeman

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session on November 8, 2015 and lasted approximately thirty seven minutes. Mr. Freeman was 94 years old at the time of this interview. It was conducted over the phone in the girl's dorm in Collegedale, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About John Freeman:

John Freeman was born in St. Augustine, Florida on November 16, 1921 and has lived most of his life in Hendersonville, NC. He graduated from Forest Lake Academy in 1942. He did not attend college, however when he returned from the war, he went to Yale University on the GI Bill of Rights and took a photographic course on portrait commercial and color. He married his wife, Idy Freeman in Kissimmee, Florida and together have 5 daughters, Kathy, Melody, April, Sherry, and Jonna. He fought in WWII in the Pacific as a non-combatant and medic, driving ambulances. This interview covered topics ranging from, his life while in the war, and his life and feelings after the war ended. It was conducted on November 8, 2015 at his home in Hendersonville, NC.

Interviewer: Amber Henski (AH)

Interviewee: John Freeman (JF)

AH: So to get started, what are some highlights of your life?

JF: Well, when I came back from the army and the GI Bill of Rights up at Yale University, I moved down to Florida for a while, and the my brother and I went up to Ohio and opened up a print shop there. And I stayed there a couple years, and then from there we went to Michigan. And the interesting thing is, (let's see, I just lost my train of thought there ... chuckle) Oh yeah! In 1967, I started Maranatha Volunteers International. And our first project we went on, we flew down to, in my business, I did color brochures for hotels and resorts, all over the country. And I flew around and I had my own plane I had taken flying lessons, and so I had flew around and gone down to Puerto Rico, no... Jamaica. And I promoted a boat company, and then I started Maranatha from that. And then that's what's developed out of Maranatha.

AH: Oh cool! So now I am going to ask some questions about the war. So were you drafted into the war, or did you enlist?

JF: No, I was drafted in. That's why I was drafted in 42', and that's why we got married before we went overseas. Yeah, I was drafted into it.

AH: Ok. And of course it's WWII, what branch of service?

JF: I went in the medics, as a non-combatant. Now most people today don't know what a non-combatant objector is. But, see back in those days if you didn't wanna work on Sabbath, they called you a conscientious objector. And so, I was in the medics. First medical regiment.

AH: Mhm... Umm... So what rank were you in?

JF: I was PFC. Or, First Class. I drove an ambulance.

AH: That's so cool! So where did you serve again?

JF: Where did I serve? In the Pacific.

AH: Ok... So where did you live during the war?

JF: Well, during the war, we went to Medford, Oregon like I said. And then my wife came out there, and then I shipped overseas. When I shipped overseas, I was overseas, I was in the war for 3... 4... I can't tell you exactly.. (slight chuckle) Overall, the time in WWII, I was in the service for 3 years and 2 months. I was overseas in 2 years and 11 months. In the Pacific.

AH: Ok... Umm.. Did you work during the war?

JF: Yeah, I drove an ambulance. I drove an ambulance in the first medical collecting company.

AH: Alright... So what was your main wartime activity? Tell me a little bit about what you specifically did, and what you did and didn't like about it.

JF: (Clears throat)... Well, they shipped us to New Guinea, and we were in training at New Guinea. And then they, we were the main invasion from there to the Philippines with MacArthur. If you remember in history, MacArthur said he would return. And so I was with that. We came in on that one day on the main invasions back to the Philippines and against the Japanese. And so we were there for about 3 or 4 months. We saw a lot of Kamikaze flyers. I saw a lot of those. I drove the ambulance, and they would crash dive or blow up ships and stuff.. We were down there for about 3 months in Leyte, and then there's an island just south of the Philippines called Mindoro, and so we went in on the invasion of The Battle of Mindoro. There were a big convoy of us going up there on the invasion, and I was on an LST. It's called an LST, its name means "Landing Ship Tank." That you could put the big tanks on the front. It would drop down and they would go right up to the beach, and then they would drop down and then they could drive off. So there was 3 of us LST's on the convoy off to the left of the convoy as we went up there. And so the captain of our LST had an announcement that we would probably be attacked by the Japanese just before dark. And if a plane flew over real high, they'd be taking photographs of us. And they'd take photographs and

then they'd give these photographs to a Kamikaze flyer and they'd put an "X" on there. And that flyer is to crash dive all that protective ship. And they'd put the Kamikaze flyer, these Japanese, they would put em' in the cockpit of their plane, and the plane was nothing but a living bomb, literally. And they only had it up for you to go one way, and then he would crash dive on the ship. So late in the afternoon, just 3 of these Jap zero's came flyin' high in front of us. And they circled around and threw our lift on the outside of the convoy, and the one on the tail peeled off and started to dive for the first LST ahead of us. And they shot him down and he blew up in the air. The second LST zero, peeled off and crashed dived on the LST directly ahead of us. And it blew up. And I got pictures of all of this I was telling you about. And that blew it up. Now there was 2,000 service men on that LST, plus the Navy crew, and so the commander of the ship of the convoy asked our LST to... Oh yeah, then I knew the third LST zero was gonna peel off and come back down for us. And I looked up and was watching him where he was goin' and I noticed he passed us, he didn't peel off like that. And I looked forward again, to where the burning ship was ahead of us and when I looked back to the rear again, I see the LST zero had changed tactics. He had flown past us, he dropped down above the water, about a hundred feet and was coming in on our tail, on the back of the LST. Now these LST's have 20mm machine guns, and they also have what they call bofors, 40mm bofors. It's a big navy gun to shoot off the shell, that's about 40mm across and they would go, whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp, as these guys loaded there things. And so I looked back and I saw him right on out tail. And so I hurried up and jumped/crashed on the deck in front of us because I wanted all the steel behind us on the LST between me and the plane. And all a sudden, everything went quiet. No more shooting and we didn't get burned or blown up! So I jumped up and ran around to the rear of the LST, and these Navy guys were jumping up and down and pattin each other on the shoulder. And one of the 40mm bofors hit this one Jap zero. And he curved and missed our tail of our LST they said about 20 or 30 feet and crashed in the water. So the Lord has saved me, for many things in the future.

AH: Wow... That is so interesting! So what year did this happen? (Cuts me off)

JF: This was in the year 1944. Oh yeah! So then the convoy, the commander of the convoy, this was just before dark. The commander of the convoy told our LST to drop out and take on survivor. It was almost dark, and so water was just covered with these service men in life rafts floating in their life gear ya know. And so we took on these, and they were heavy. You try to pull these guys up and they're all wet with their gear on, it'd take 4 or 5 of us to pull them up over the side of the boat. Some of them were burned pretty badly and so forth. We did this for bout a half hour, then the commander called our LST to catch up with the rest of the convoy. So we left about probably 1500-1800 of those service men floatin around in the water out there to be eatin up by the sharks.

AH: Wow... It's just crazy to hear this from someone I know and that I have gone to church with since I was little because I only hear about in history books and from online sources. It's so much more different coming from someone you actually know personally.

JF: That's war for you... And after that, towards the end of the war, they sent us back down to Leyte. And this is the most important thing I want you to bring out to your class. They sent us back down to Leyte, gave us new uniforms, gave us all the material and said we were gonna go on an invasion in Japan. Our captain had a few orders that he could not open til we were out there on the way. (clears throat) And so we were ready to go, the next morning to ship out, and that's when they dropped the atomic bomb. As a result of that, I am here talking to you. Because I would not be here cause we were to go in on the northern part of Japan as a feint attack, like we were gonna land but we didn't. And then what was left of us, if anything was left of us, we would come down and support the rest of the invasion. And so, I have a book that was put out later on from the secret files, and they said that there had been over a million to two million of soldiers that would've been killed, and several million Japanese had remade that invasion. So a lot of people think that this was terrible. Even these younger kids, a lot of them think that was terrible. But if it wasn't for the atom bomb, there's a few hundred thousand or a million of us guys that wouldn't be back here.

AH: Yes I agree with you. The atomic bombs helped so many of you guys live. But like you said, not only was it the bombs, but also the Lord protected you the entire time. So now, I am just going to ask you a little bit about after the war. Umm.. First of all, how did you feel about the war?

JF: Well, I was pretty young. I was 21 years old. The war was totally different in the Pacific because the Japanese would raise up their arms and come in to surrender on land when we were in invasion, invading. And then when they come in, army MP's would get em' when they surrendered, and then as they surrendered, they dropped their hands and pulled out a grenade and blow up the whole bunch of them, of our troops. So it came to the point that very few of em' surrendered anymore because we didn't trust the Japanese anymore. And so most of them when they'd come to surrender, we killed em'. (chuckles lightly)

AH: Oh wow! That sounds so intense! I can't even imagine going through that! While you were in the war, what were the feelings that your family and friends had?

JF: Well they all felt about the same. All of our friends. Now I was in a medical collecting company, and I was an Adventist, and I refused to take a rifle. All the rest of the folks took the rifle, and I was a non-combatant, like I told you, a conscientious objector, and so the Lord protected me, took me through it.

AH: Yeah, I would say that the Lord did protect and bring you through because being and Adventist and not taking the rifle seems like there would be punishment. But thanks to

the Lord you were able to get through it all. So in what ways did the war change your day to day activities or your habits?

JF: Well, my wife said when I went in the war, I was just like a kid, ya know? (slight chuckle) But when I came back 2 or 3 years later, me and the other guys were totally changed. They were, we'd seen so much of this here, that it just changed our life.

AH: I'm sure it did have a really big impact on your life and how much it matured you and everyone else. So what effect did the war have on your physical and mental health?

JF: Well, physically I wasn't wounded or anything. And for my mental health, it brought me closer to the Lord, as it did those many soldiers. We were to lay in foxholes that these Japanese would come across at night time and would drop these little bombs that were little miniature bombs that they attached to one big bomb. And the Japanese would be up about 300-400 feet in the air. It would burst off and all these little bombs would crash in all through our camp. And I know, we would jump out of our beds to get in those foxholes. And I remember one time when I got back up, one of these bombs had landed on my pillow. My pillow is nothing but an army blanket, is what we used. We would fold it up, and that was our pillow. And that thing had blown up, and just left my pillow in a big rain (chuckles) It had just blown that thing out. So I could see how the Lord had protected me for the future, for what I think has happened on Maranatha.

AH: Oh wow! The Lord did protect you! He already had in mind that He wanted you to come up with a business that would bring others closer to Christ! Um... What was your most memorable experience of the war?

JF: Well, the most memorable experience was that what I told you about. Going up there on the invasion and having the LST in front of us having to pick up and then having to leave all those troops out there in the water cause the convoy cannot stop, at night time especially, to pick up these survivors. They had to keep going, and so they were just left out there. I think that was the most remarkable thing.

AH: Oh yes you did mention that briefly towards the beginning of the interview. That would be so hard for me to see. I like helping people way too much I don't know if I could just leave them out there. But, how did you feel when the war ended?

JF: I was glad it was over (chuckles). We all were.

AH: Yes, I'm sure you were. How would you describe the ways that the war changed your life?

JF: Well, I think it made me more religious just like most all young people, 20-21 years old. Even like you guys, going to school and all that you know. You get tied up in all your school activities and so forth and you don't really get down to

thinking what the Lord's gonna do and how the Lord's coming. So I think when you get into a war like this, and go through these experiences, it brings you closer to God, and it helps you realize that you need to have your life prepared. And you need to do that while you're young. Not take a war, but the war brought that on faster than a lot of things do.

AH: Yeah I can't imagine how that wouldn't bring you closer to Him. It makes you have to rely on Him more than ever! Well, is there anything else that you would like to add or say about anything?

JF: Yeah. One interesting thing that happened on the Kamikaze flyers. We had a big liberty ship that they relanded on the Island of Mindoro. The Japanese had been blowing up all the supply ships coming in there, and we had gotten down to about a half a dozen shells per gun. And they told the gunners and the aircraft folks, don't use any aircraft shells to shoot any more then you need to cause we're bout out of ammunition on the whole island. And there was a big liberty ship that came in one day during the daytime loaded with ammunition for our guns and so forth, and one of these Kamikaze flyers crash dive bombed as they were unloading that. So they told the ambulances to get down to the beach as fast as they could. So we hurried up and got down there. When we got down there, we didn't find much of that whole ship then a piece of steel 6-12 inches across. It had blown that whole thing up. So we were still short on ammunition there. Then another Kamikaze flyer came in, and you know he decided he wasn't gonna die for the empire. When the ship left out of Kamikaze, like I told you, they sealed in the cockpit. And he only had enough fuel for one way. But he smuggled an axe and a parachute in his plane, so when he locked him in there and they flew over Mindoro, he decided not to die for the empire so he got his axe out and chopped his way out of the cockpit, out of the plastic on top, and we were down at the beach at that time, and we see the Japanese zero fly across, and all of a sudden we see a parachute come swinging down from it, and the plane just kept flying on up. The parachute came down, and I picked him up in the ambulance with several military police, and took em' back. And so they interrogated and found out exactly where the base was, so they sent a detailed group up and blew the whole base up.

See, when we were in the ambulance, and whenever there would be an emergency, they would send all the ambulances down. So on Mindoro, they had about 2 heavy bomber bases and several fighter bases on the island of Mindoro. And B24's would leave out just before sunrise in the morning, and they'd fly to the China coast and drop the bombs and get back late in the afternoon just before dark. And so we were not too far from their base, so we could hear the planes blowing up. When they would go get ready to take off, they run their engines up and warm em' up and be sure everything's good. And we heard em' go up, and all of a sudden, there's a big explosion. And we got a call for our ambulances to get out there, and so several of us went out there, and shortly after that, about 15-20 min, another one blew up. And then the third one blew up. And then they found out that what the Japanese would do, they would get in there and get some of the troops, just like this ISIS that

you're getting today, they would get troops that would give them a little bit of information, and the Japanese would pay em' pretty good money. So this one fellow had gotten information and told the Japanese to wire the Bombay so when the gears went up, the bombs would ignite and blow the ship up. They said if he didn't do that, then they would wipe out his whole family back in the United States. And he ended up doing that. So, I imagine when they got ahold of that fellow I don't think that had much inquiry or much to do other than take him out and shoot him down. (slight chuckle). There was about 12-14 gunners and pilots and not only did the plane blow up, but all the people are killed. That's the trouble with war, its going on now.

AH: Wow! Thank you so much for sharing your life and war experiences with me! They have really touched me and makes me think twice about history and the war. It also makes me rethink my relationship with God and how much closer I need to be with Him, especially while I am young. And you also make me want to go on another mission trip! Your life has touched so many people around the world, and for that I admire you!

JF: Yeah no problem! You're very welcome. I am glad you feel that way.