

**Interviewee: Robert Heer**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 22 August 2005**

**Location: by telephone to the Heer residence, Sequim, WA**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, August 2005**

**Editing by: Thomas Saylor, September 2005**

Robert Heer was born 30 November 1921 in Dubuque, Iowa. He grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, until age sixteen when his family moved to Riverside, California. Here Bob graduated from high school in 1940.

In 1941, Bob enlisted in the US Army Air Corps. After completing training, he was assigned to the 30<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, 19<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and that unit was sent to the Philippines, arriving in Manila in October 1941.

Japanese forces attacked the Philippines on 8 December 1941. Along with others in his unit, Bob was taken prisoner on 23 June 1942 at Malaybalay, on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao.

Bob's POW odyssey, corroborated by external sources and the diary of Charles Forry, a POW with Bob for the entire period:

23 Jun 42	captured at Mindanao (Forry diary dates this exactly)
Jul – Aug 42	Bilibid Prison, Manila (stated during interview)
Aug/Sep 42	shipped from Manila to Formosa (probably 12 Aug on the freighter <i>Nagara Maru</i> , with US Gen Wainwright and others; if not this ship, then likely 20 Sep on freighter <i>Lima Maru</i> )
Nov 42 – May 43	“officer’s camp; stayed seven months” (probably at Karenko, Formosa [now Taiwan]) “28 Sep 42 – May 43”
May 43 – May 44	Heito [Pingtung], Formosa (“one year and twenty days”—Forry diary dates this exactly)
June 44 – Feb 45	Taihoku [now Taipei], Formosa (from Forry diary)
27 Feb 45	Hell Ship <i>Taiko Maru</i> from Keelung [now Chilung], Formosa to Moji, Japan (arrived Moji 4 Mar 45); train to Hokkaido
Mar – Jul 45	camp at Hakodate, Hokkaido (“prisoners worked shoveling coal”); worked in kitchen (daily diary entries)
Jul – Sep 45	coal mine, Hokkaido (name not clear, possibly Camp 3); worked in kitchen (daily entries)
9 Sep 45	evacuated from coal mine camp by US forces

Once back in the United States, Bob spent time at Letterman Hospital in San Francisco. He stayed in the military until retiring in the 1960s. Bob was married in 1946 (divorced 1968), and raised two children.

In this interview, Bob talks in depth about the human side of his POW experience, both during the war and after.

**Interview Key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**R = Robert Heer**

**[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation**

**(\*\*\*) = words or phrase unclear**

**NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity**

**Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.**

T: Today is 22 August 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. This evening I am speaking [by telephone] with Mr. Robert B. Heer, [at] his home in Sequim, Washington.

R: Let me correct you on that.

T: Yes.

R: It's...when you see it, it's spelled S-e-q-u-i-m, but it is an Indian word and it's pronounced "Skwim," and it means peaceful waters.

T: Okay. Sequim, Washington. So we have an "e" but we don't pronounce it.

R: Right.

T: All right. And Mr. Heer, let me see, do you prefer Bob or Robert on the phone?

R: Just call me Bob.

T: Bob, for the record then, a brief background information. You were born in Dubuque, Iowa, 30 November 1921, and you grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, until age sixteen when you moved yourself – literally – to Riverside, California. Finished high school and it was at March Field there that you enlisted in the Air Corps, June of 1940. To complete that, you were discharged from service initially, by your information, in April of 1946.

R: April 22.

T: Back to the information. You served with the 30<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, 19<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and that unit...you arrived in Manila October 1941. Just about six weeks before the outbreak of hostilities in the Pacific.

R: Very close.

T: So from, let's see, from Bataan to Mindanao you were with the 19<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, at Del Monte Field.

R: I wasn't at Del Monte Field.

T: You weren't at Del Monte Field?

R: No. There were several groups. There was the headquarters squadron and there was support squadrons. Some of those went there to service aircraft but my squadron was converted into infantry and right down on the beach at Bugo. We had three machine gun emplacements and we had infantry training with bayonets and a very few rounds of ammunition and our project was just to stay there until the Japanese came in and to defend that part of, or that sector of, a military force there north at Macajalar—I forget how they pronounce it—Bay just north of Cagayan De Oro and along the northern...it's sort of like a half moon shaped bay there.

T: On Mindanao.

R: On Mindanao. Right. I was there when the Japanese came in.

T: And do I have your capture date correct, 10 May 1942?

R: 10 May 1942 is right.

T: Let me ask you, to begin with, to go back to the 10 May 1942, at the time you became a prisoner of war. Let me ask what was going through your mind on 10 May 1942?

R: At that particular time we were retreating. We had just finished retreating from Bugo and we were up near the area around Malaybalay. We used to call it Mallybally, but the Filipinos corrected us. Anyway, just outside of Malaybalay is an old Philippine military training camp called Camp Casisang and we were on our way to surrender, and on our way to surrender we were captured by a Japanese scouting group. They made us line up and we had to empty our pockets out and they came along and they picked what they wanted to take, cigarettes or whatever, rings or whatever, and then they let us have what was left. So we finally got into Camp Casisang and it was very primitive. Just like swalley (sp?) huts with thin bamboo sheeting on the walls and open. No mosquito nets. Thatched roofs. That's where we were for a while. We had it fairly easy there for a while because where we were located, the 30<sup>th</sup>, was way back on one side of the camp and nobody ever bothered us over there.

As a matter of fact, I recall one time a guard came over there and he wanted to take a nap. So in the best English he could muster he said, "One of you guys watch my rifle and let me know if the sergeant of guard...if you see the sergeant of the guard coming, so that I can...you know, get back to looking like I'm on duty." And we did that. But that was the only time we did that.

But outside of that we had things. We were forming a glee club. The only thing that was really not very good there was the fact that the food was so bad. There was plenty of rice, but it was full of rice worms and we ate with those old

aluminum mess kits. Sergeant Robinette was our mess officer, and during the time that we were eating we would try to start throwing out the worms. Finally after the third day we decided to eat the worms and all, and we did that from then on until we got into other camps, where we didn't have that problem of worms in the rice.

**(1, A, 62)**

T: Now you were at this initial location, by your information, until September 1942. Is that right?

R: Until early September, yes.

T: Let me ask. Before you were captured the 10 May, what did you know about the Japanese?

R: Well, we feared them because we had heard reports of some of the fighting that had gone on northern...up by Olongapo and places like that. Lingayen Gulf where they first came in. They really had superior forces and had command of the air and they had command of the water. So it was just a matter of attrition really, and we often wondered...because we knew when we got down to Mindanao and they selected a number of important personnel like pilots, copilots, chief mechanics and things like that. They flew them down to Java and then from there they flew them down to Australia and they got out. But when the planes couldn't come in anymore because the Japanese had command of the air, we just sort of figured that we were stuck there with no place to go.

T: So when you became a prisoner, would you say it was something you had been sort of thinking about before that day?

R: Oh, yes.

T: And when you thought about becoming a prisoner, what did that mean to you?

R: Well, at the time, to be very honest with you, we felt that we had a larger military force than we had and we really believed that it would only be just a matter of very, very few months. Like six months at the most. That we'd be rescued. We'd have an army coming in fighting the Japanese and they'd take us and rescue us and that would be it.

T: So there was a sense of optimism then that this was going to be a short term thing.

R: Yes. And this is one thing, I think, that kept us going all through prison camp because we'd always say, well, gee, maybe six more months. Maybe six more months. And six and a half months or six months turned into three and half years.

T: Did that sense of optimism, this is one thing that will come up later, but let me ask you now: how hard was it to maintain a sense of optimism when it did go to years?

R: Well, it depended on a number of things. We were always looking for news. That was one of the biggest difficulties we had, was getting correct news. There were always rumors. Always rumors. Actually the rumors are what really kind of pumped us up.

T: How so?

**(1, A, 91)**

R: Well, for example, like when we were at Karenko the Japanese gave us a newspaper printed in English, and in this it was telling us that the Japanese had won a big, major victory at one of the islands out there in the Pacific, and they gave the number of ships we had lost. We were so depressed. We were depressed until... We had a navy chief, Chief Martino, who was a torpedo man on one of those little boats they rescued MacArthur on.

T: PT boats.

R: Mosquito boats. He laughed and he says, "Hey look, I read that thing and they've sank more of our ships than we had when the war started. Don't you guys believe that crap. Just take it and turn it around." In other words, take their losses as ours and realize that what they claim were our losses were really their losses. Well, that changed the attitude a great deal and helped our morale. And we'd always look for things like that because we always knew one thing—we learned the thing real quick. When things weren't going too well for them, they'd get mean and they'd start batting guys around.

T: So in a sense, it was almost a way you believed how to read how the war was going by how the Japanese treated you?

R: Yes. And we figured that whenever they'd get their anger up you'd find more guys standing around getting slapped or beaten or whatever. So we didn't like it, but it was a sign to us that the war was going in our favor. How long it would last, we didn't know.

T: When the rumors didn't turn out to be true, and rumors aren't always true, was that a way to get...did that get you down sometimes when the things you had believed or wanted to believe weren't really so?

R: No. I don't remember anything that really got us down. We were just hoping that the war would end soon and...I guess after about the first year and a half we sort of figured that hell, we don't know when the war's going to end, so we'll just do our best to keep in good physical shape so that we can survive whatever time that is.

T: From your observations, and you were on Formosa there for geez, more than two years, and then also in Japan, did some guys maintain a sense of optimism better than others, Bob?

R: Yes. Sometimes we'd get a Red...well, quite a few times we got Red Cross parcels. When I say quite a few times, that would be about eight or ten.

T: That's still more than most of the guys got them in the Pacific.

R: Yes. So that was optimism. And of course we never got...I never got any letters from my parents until after the war was over with. And a lot of those letters were written long before the war was over with. So they [Japanese] held onto those. Well, like they'd have air raid warnings once in a while. And we figured, well, there must be something going on, you know. And I think just the actions of the Japanese. The guards and the camp commander and things like that. Their display of emotions, whatever emotions they were, mostly negative whenever something wasn't going right. We'd watch for those. We didn't watch for them but whenever we saw them we'd be encouraged. They're not doing too well so they're going to take it out on us. So those things would occur every once in a while.

T: You kind of became good at reading the tea leaves, in a way.

R: Yes.

T: Let me ask you about your health. Back to May of 1942. When you were captured, what kind of shape were you in?

R: Pretty good shape. I was probably about 135, 140 pounds.

T: And what was your typical weight in the service? About that?

R: About that.

**(1, A, 136)**

T: Did your health suffer during those first months at Malaybalay?

R: Not very bad. We lost weight and we didn't like...the food was being cooked with all the worms in it, but we had...for a while, once a week they would allow the Filipinos from Malaybalay, vendors, to come into the camp and they would bring things like eggs and fruit and stuff like that, and if you had money you could buy it. Of course at that time I was...I had volunteered to be an orderly for General Vachon, and he cautioned me one time. He said, "I know it looks attractive to buy the candy things that are made by them with their hands, you know. If you buy or eat or anything from them make sure that you can peel it, like a banana or an orange or an

egg. Whatever. You know. Just spend your money on something you can peel, so that you won't get diarrhea or dysentery."

T: Was that advice that helped you?

R: Yes. For a while. Sometimes, at a point, you'd steal almost anything to get food.

T: Yes. How soon did hunger become a real serious concern for you?

R: Well, as long as we were working—this is after we got to Formosa—we got there about, we got to Karenko about 28 September 1942, and it wasn't too bad there. I ate a couple snakes there. We found a couple snakes and we tried eating snails. But I gave that up because they had no taste at all (*chuckles*). Then we'd try to find things like papaya. That turned out to be pretty good because, green or ripe, they had a skin on them and they could be cooked. Sweet potatoes and whatever we could steal.

T: Boy, for a young man who grew up Iowa, you sure are eating different things.

R: Well, I guess when you get hungry you'll eat almost anything. One time, after we were moving up to Hokkaido they gave us some food, and I found out later, one of the guys—I ate the same thing—I ate my mess first and he was eating his and [he says], "Hey, did you see this?" I said, "Yes, I saw that." It was in my rice kit. He says, "Well, it's a grasshopper." (*chuckles*) And I said, "Oh my God, did I eat a grasshopper?" And I guess I did. Anyway, it looked like something that wasn't a grasshopper, you know? But there were a lot of things. Like little tiny eels. Baby eels and...but I'm getting far ahead of myself.

T: Well, it's interesting that the kind of the menu of foods you're running through are things that, I guess had you been shown to eat before you were captured you might have said no way to, but after a while you learned to eat anything.

R: Well, down at Casisang there was a monkey running around loose and one day two of us decided that we were going to catch that damn monkey and cook it. The next day after we decided this somebody else beat us to it. Somebody else got it.

T: Somebody else got the monkey first?

R: They got the monkey first.

T: Let me ask about the Japanese. When you were first captured there, and the Japanese have been the enemy for some months now, but when you had them literally standing right in front of you, what kind of a feeling was that?

R: Humiliation more than anything.

T: More than fear, you think was humiliation?

R: Well, I think the humiliation was greater than the fear, and I can explain that by saying that at Heito I was in a group of soldiers, some of them, most of them were British really, and we had a little wooden table there that we'd eat on and one of us would have the task each day of cleaning the table off and doing the dishes. When I was through doing the dishes I went outside and I just threw the water in one direction toward the side of the barracks, and just as I did a Japanese guard came around and I got him full-face. Oh, he was really mad. So he called the officer of the day, who happened to be Lieutenant Tamaki. We used to call him Baggy Pants. Baggy Pants really worked me over. Then they put me in the guardhouse for three days. When he was hitting me—he hit me a couple times—I automatically doubled up my fists and he saw this and that infuriated him, and I learned from that experience don't show any sign of wanting to get even or revenge, because you're in deep trouble if you do.

**(1, A, 200)**

T: How do you suppress that, in a way?

R: You just say well, it will soon be over, and that's it.

T: That kind of, the physical abuse like that, did you observe that, or endure that yourself personally, often?

R: Oh, yes. For example when we were—this is at Karenko before I left and went to Heito—but at Karenko, they had this little fountain out in back that you could wash clothes and it was right next to what we called then the *benjo*, which is the toilet, and they had some bushes around the one side of it. When we come out at night we were always supposed to bow to any Japanese soldier we saw. They called it *kaerae* [Japanese word—spelling unclear]. We had to bow to them. Anyway, I came out one night and I didn't see any guards. He was hiding behind the bushes, watching and waiting. Anyway, not for me specifically but for anybody. As soon as I started to walk into the *benjo* he yelled *kaerae!* And he came out and he made me stand at attention. Then he came up and he snipped me on the nose with his finger about six times. Have you ever been stung on the nose? Well, it burns. Stings I should say. And it's very humiliating, and it really makes you mad, but you don't do anything. Because then he'd probably give you a good working over.

T: Do you think sometimes they were trying to provoke?

R: Oh, yes (*emphatically*). I really do. And one thing about it. I used to say if you didn't get slapped at least once a day you were collaborating with them. Now that's how frequent the slappings were.

T: Almost a daily occurrence.

R: Well, not for me specifically, but they were always...almost every day somebody was getting slapped.

T: From your observations did the Japanese seem to single out certain people, or was the kind of slapping and abuse pretty general?

R: It was pretty general except one time...I think they picked on General Wainwright, and there was another General Percival from the British army who was in Singapore I believe. They used to single those guys out. The guards would run into the room and they'd find anything wrong and slap them. I remember one day General Wainwright dropped a bowl and broke it just as the guard was walking by. The guard rushed in and just beat the hell out of him. It was really kind of sad because the guy knew...see, Skinny Wainwright was really tall. He was over six feet.

T: Yes. I've seen pictures of him, slender of build.

R: Yes. And of course the Japanese are very small in stature, and they're not very tall. And of course I think they felt that, you know how some psychologists say that small men can be mean sometimes because they're small. I don't know whether it's all psychological or what it is, but this is what I felt. This guy was just saying, I'm a little guy but I'll show him I can beat those big Americans, you know. Sometimes they'd get up on a chair to do it.

T: No kidding. Was there at Malaybalay, were there work details or a daily routine there of any kind?

R: Of all the time I was at Malaybalay I was never on a work detail, but there were work details. Now I wanted to mention one thing. Some of the guys got very bored. I remember one sergeant in our outfit, Sergeant Dick Bone, and he took a lot of pictures that I have, that I got a hold of. He's dead now. He died just a year and a half ago. But he started repairing shoes, and somewhere he got these old tires and he'd cut the rubber off and take the ply and use the ply to repair GI shoes. Now he got fishing tackle someplace, and I don't know where he got it, but he got it, and he made himself a needle and he'd repair the shoes for some of the guys. Of course he charged them for it, and usually it was food.

Then we had a glee club that I had joined. Of course I had to leave that because I had been with the group that was taking General Sharpe out of Malaybalay or Casisang. So I figured if they were taking the officers out, the treatment might be better for their orderlies. And of course it was for a little bit.

The building we lived in at Karenko was very nice, but we had mosquito bars and all that. But after we got out of there down to Heito it was just malaria and dysentery, and diarrhea was so easy to get that it was...you just had to be so careful.

**(1, A, 271)**

T: So the conditions you lived in really differed from one location to another.

R: Yes.

T: Going back to boredom, how much of a problem was that around the camp?

R: You know, I think we just looked forward to activity. Like the vendors coming in. We weren't really there too long. Let's see...from May...yes, we were there quite a bit. From May 10 to September 6. About four months. Well, I guess there were enough things there. I know that sometimes we'd be allowed to...the Japanese would march us down to a river near Malaybalay where we could take a bath. Then we started growing vegetables.

By the way, within the first month [at Malaybalay] they were there they had two executions of Filipino soldiers that we were forced to watch. They had these guys tied to posts and we were supposed to watch this. It was the first execution I'd ever seen, and I hope it will be the last one to ever see. To see somebody's life just leave in less than three or four seconds, and that was it.

T: What was the purpose of having you watch that?

R: Well, it was to let us know that if we tried to escape, that would be our lot.

T: So you knew these...these Filipinos had tried to escape or had escaped?

R: They had escaped. Yes. You know Charlie [Charles Forry] came into the camp, oh, a couple of three weeks after I was at Casisang. He was with another group someplace out in...and Charlie felt like I did. We had no medicine, no food, and our shoes almost had holes in them. So I thought, well, I don't feel that I should go to the hills because I don't think...well, why go to the hills when we're going to be rescued in about six months. You know?

T: Sure.

R: We had this thought too. We'll soon be rescued, so why do that. So we didn't. But he came in, and he came in the camp with a few other guys later on.

T: Now you didn't know Charlie—Charlie is Charles Forry, by the way, for the record—you didn't know Forry before POW camp, did you?

R: Yes. Let me explain something. When we left Albuquerque we went by train to San Francisco, and in the bay there, Angel Island was the name of the place, they had a fort there and we were staying at the fort until they could process us to sail over to the Philippines. Well, as I came from Albuquerque, that's where we were stationed at Kirkland Field. Now Charlie was down at Fresno, California, with a group of...what do you call them? Guys that were drafted.

**(1, A, 318)**

T: Conscripts?

R: Conscripted. Yes. Now they were down at Fresno at an airbase there that was being built, and they were shipped from Fresno up to Angel Island at the same time because they were going to join us in the 30<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, part of the 19<sup>th</sup>, and we all became a unit there before we sailed. We were transported by a small ferry boat over to Fort Mason, which is in San Francisco, and we got on a troop ship, a ship that had just been converted to a troop ship, the USS *Holbrook* and we went over to the Philippines on the *Holbrook*. But we never got off the boat until we got to Manila.

T: So Forry was a guy who was known to you when he came into camp.

R: Oh, yes. I didn't know him too well until we got to Clark Field. I got to know him in the mess hall and then later on, on the ship, the *Mayon* from Mariveles on Bataan down to Bugo. That's where we landed.

T: On the subject of friends, and Forry is someone that you knew throughout as a POW, how important was it to you to have close friends?

R: Well, he wasn't a close friend. Actually I didn't have...well, I did too. A guy by the name of Jack Menary (spelling?). And Jack Menary, and another guy by the name of Marino, and Charlie, and oh, gosh, maybe about seven or eight others were manning .50 caliber machine guns on the beach. I think there were three machine gun emplacements on the beach. Charlie was in one of them. Marino and Menary were in another, and a guy named Johnson and Clayton Manners and several other guys were in these machine gun emplacements when the Japanese came in. They were very lucky to get out alive, because they were almost completely surrounded when they decided to leave and they had to go up a steep hill to get up on the plateau. But that's when I really became...well, you might say really became good, close friends with Charlie when we were at the officers' camp on Karenko.

T: Okay. And Karenko was where you ended up, and that was not until later in 1942.

R: Yes. That was in late September of '42.

**End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.**

R: — that were sent down to Heito, to the work camp there.

T: On a daily basis in the situations you were in as a POW, how can friends help each other?

R: Well, one of my friends—there were three of us. The British call it mucking together, or buddying together. But there were three of us. Dale Collingsworth, Charlie Forry, and myself. Dale was working down in the guardhouse. He would work down there every noon to clean up the table and the dishes and so forth after the guards had finished eating, and then what was left over was supposed to go feed the pigs. But the food was still clean, because when they'd take it out they'd take it out with a big spoon. So Dale would bring this food up into the barracks and we'd dump into a pan and share it. The rice or whatever it was. So that brought us pretty close together.

Then Dale got sick and he said, "Which one of you guys is going to go down and take my place?" He had malaria. And neither one of us wanted to do it because we just weren't...we didn't know what kind of treatment it would be like down there. So I volunteered. I said, "Okay, I'll go." And it worked out pretty well, because then I'd bring the food up and we'd share it. I finally had to give it up because we were shipped down to Heito [in May 1943].

But I recall one day I was in...I'd always go down a little early just like Dale would tell me, and get everything all set up and set the food out. What we got was very clean. Just as clean as it could be. Right out of their kitchen. Sometimes they had some very interesting food like battered food, and onions and carrots and things like that.

T: Things that you weren't seeing in your diet.

R: Absolutely not. But anyway, one day I was there early and this one guard came in. He was kind of a tall guy and he came in to me and the first thing he says...something happened. Because he was really ticked off. And he says, *(speaking Japanese)* "Roosevelto domi-domi," which means, "Roosevelt no good." And I made a mistake of returning his answer with, I said...I could speak Japanese then, I said, *(speaking Japanese)*, "Anatawa hanasu Roosevelto domi-domi watashi wa hanasu Tojo domi-domi." Which translates as, "You say Roosevelt no good, I say Tojo no good." Oh, boy, he really... He turned bright red and he pulled his bayonet out of his scabbard and he grabbed me by the hair and he raised that...now I don't know whether he was doing it or just trying to scare me, but just at the time he raised that bayonet, the sergeant of the guard—we used to call him Big Stupid, but his name was Shiba san—Shiba san came in and just gave him hell and told him to put his bayonet back in his scabbard. I'll never forget that.

T: I imagine with your life passing in front of your eyes maybe you wouldn't forget it. Holy mackerel. What prompted you to say something like that in a situation like that?

**(1, B, 36)**

R: Because I thought it would be safe to say.

T: In other words, he would take it as a not serious remark.

R: So anyway, I found out he took it very seriously. So I figured that something might have happened.

T: When you were at Karenko there on Formosa, you were still at that time still an aide to General Vachon, is that right?

R: Yes. General Joseph Vachon.

T: What kind of duty did you have there? That was from September '42 to May '43.

R: Actually we didn't really have too many duties that were respectively tying us to an officer, because everybody sort of had to take care of themselves there. You know, you had to make your own bed and things like that, where as if they were in their own American quarters we'd probably be making their beds for them and shining their boots and so forth and so on. But that wasn't allowed there.

T: Did you go to any kind of work detail during the day here at Karenko?

R: Yes. Shortly after we got there one part of the camp, in one corner of the camp, they marched us up there and we were to...oh, they had these little like hoe things and shovels and rakes and we were supposed to dig up the ground and get ready to plant. One day, I think it was the third day we were up there, one of the officers uncovered the body of a baby, and of course we got out of work that day. They called the local police up there to inspect the area where the baby was uncovered.

T: But that kind of agricultural work or working in fields, was that something you did commonly there or was that kind of out of the ordinary?

R: Well, they wanted us to raise our own food. So that's what they would do. Most every Japanese camp had that program where you had a garden to work in, and you raised your own food. I recall down at Casisang that—I wrote his name down too because I wanted to mention this to you. His name was Colonel Ben Hur Chastain, and he was a full colonel, and some of the guys had been raiding the gardens around there where there were no guards and they were stealing sweet potatoes and sweet potato leaves, the big leaves, and cooking them.

The colonel called a formation. I guess he had been ordered to do this by General Sharp. But anyway, he got out there and he was just furious and he says if you see it, a *commode*—*commodi* is a Filipino word for sweet potato—if you see a *commodi*, no. If you see this, no. If you see anything that doesn't come through the mess hall, no. Don't take it. But I guess they had been advised by the Japanese that they should do something about the stealing.

T: So how successful was the raising your own food system here or other places you were?

R: Well, at Karenko the officers, they would save all the garbage or stuff they could find to use as compost and they would...oh, there may be about a half dozen had their own gardens. But I don't think any of them ever realized the fruits of their work because they weren't there long enough.

**(1, B, 72)**

T: You were at a number of locations. Did the Japanese guards that you had at Karenko, did the treatment from the guards, it changed over time you mentioned. Did the guards change too? Did you see different guards at different places?

R: Oh, yes. My firm belief is this: that our guards were Japanese soldiers who had recently been in combat and were sent to camps to be guards as rest and recuperation. That's my honest opinion. A few of them were pretty good, because they had been in combat and they knew that it was no fun. But the ones that gave us the most trouble, I think, were those who had never been in combat.

T: So you could detect different levels of treatment from different guards.

R: Yes. I remember one time at Karenko I was chosen to assist a Japanese, oh, I guess you would call him a quartermaster, and he was supposed to clean out a couple rooms in a building. I was doing the work, you know, cleaning up. And I came across these two Japanese emblems that were gold and I showed them to him and he says oh, and he put his hands over his lips as if to say shhh! Let me have them. So he says, I'll give you something. And he did. Later on, a couple days later, he gave me two big bowls, washbowls of sugar, brown sugar, and of course brown sugar was just like money. I could buy rations with that. But he wanted those medals in the worst way. He probably could sell them and get money. So every once in a while you come across a situation like that where there would be somebody that would help you. But I would say maybe about five percent of the time.

T: So the vast majority of the time you learned to avoid or to fear the Japanese.

R: Oh, yes.

T: Your health, you mentioned, at first held pretty steady. Was there a time when it began to decline, shall we say?

R: Well, the only time I remember that it declined was down on Heito. Now at Karenko, I remember in the wintertime, of course it rains a great deal there on Formosa and they have typhoons sometimes, but my toes began to—what do you want to call it? Sweat? It was a fungus, and it was very painful. I could hardly walk, and of course I was like that for about three weeks and then all of a sudden the weather turned fair for about two weeks and I'd go out and sit on the balcony, the double story building. I'd go out and sit on the balcony right in the sunshine with

my wooden, you know, my shoes and socks off, and it healed up within a couple of weeks and was all right again. But I don't know what the fungus was, but sort of a skin rot.

T: Did you have problems with malaria, beri beri, any of that stuff?

R: I had malaria twice, and I think that was down at Heito. I think everybody down there had malaria at one time or another. But, now down at Heito I got a real bad beating one time and another guy, American soldier who was probably in his late twenties or early thirties, his name was...well, the only thing I knew him as, his name was Hook Johnson. I've been trying to find that guy for years or find out where his family was. He was supposed to have had a daughter.

But anyway, we were caught stealing sweet potatoes just outside our barracks in the garden, and they took us out to the guardhouse and they made us both get down on our knees and they put a bamboo stick...you know how you get down on your knees? Put these sticks to the back. They made us put bamboo, pieces of bamboo stick about an inch in diameter or a little bit larger underneath the backs of our knees, and then they made us hold our hands straight up. And then whenever our hands would drop the Japanese sergeant of the guard would come with a big kendo stick, and he beat us on the back with the kendo stick. Well, I didn't know it at the time, but he fractured two of my vertebrae, and I don't know how badly Hook was hurt but he got about the same amount of beating I did, and then afterwards something happened and they grabbed—he had hair, I didn't. They grabbed him by the hair and dragged him all around the front of the guardhouse. Then they threw us both in the guardhouse for three days with no food and just some water, and that was it. So we were glad to get out of there.

T: For what could someone end up in the guardhouse?

R: Any infraction. Any infraction that they could think of. I think Charlie was in the guardhouse a couple times. I was in the guardhouse twice. As a matter of fact, it was Charlie that brought some food to me when I was in the guardhouse one time. Oh, something like stealing sweet potatoes or not bowing to them or maybe just a body motion, a negative body motion toward them would cause something like that.

T: Really sounds like it could keep you totally on edge.

R: It did. And we were always warning each other to be careful if there was one around. Because after you're there a while you get to know the ones that are bastards and you start to warn the other guys. Watch out. Here comes old Snake Eyes or whatever. You know. You'd modify your behavior until the guy was gone.

**(1, B, 138)**

T: I see. So Japanese acquired nicknames, and you could warn each other look out for so and so who is coming.

R: Yes.

T: The prisoners. I remember reading in the information you provided that you were in camp locations where there were not just Americans around.

R: British and Dutch.

T: How did prisoners of different nationalities, from your observation, how did they get along with each other?

R: We got along pretty good I thought. We enjoyed the British. I remember the first time we were put in the same camp with British, with British workers that is, was at Heito. I remember one time this one little British guy come up to me and says, "Hey, Mate, fetch me a glass a wa-ar." (*trying to imitate British pronunciation of the word water*) I didn't know what he was asking for. He was asking for a glass of water.

T: Sure. That's the first time you'd heard that growing up in Iowa I guess, isn't it?

R: Yes, it is. Anyway, you got to learn their jargon. You knew just about what part of England they were from. So we got along with them pretty well. We all treated each other with respect because we were POWs.

T: Did POWs of different nationalities tend to keep to their own or mix it up?

R: Well, I think that they more or less stuck to their own to a certain extent, but it was impossible to do it entirely. And you know, like you're in a mixed squad, like we were in a squad with ten guys and maybe four of us were American and six were British. So you had to work together in that squad. So you got to become friends with them and to understand them, and they'd teach us British songs and we'd teach them American songs.

T: Among the prisoners you were with on Formosa there or in Japan, did you feel that prisoners could trust each other?

R: To a certain extent, but in certain working conditions, no. There were always some that were hungry, and they'd steal from their buddies, well, not from their buddies, but from anybody if they could get away with it. Like especially food.

T: Was food the prize possession in the locations you were at?

R: Oh, *yes (emphatically)*. Well, that and cigarettes. Because cigarettes could buy food.

T: Now was there a regular supply of cigarettes coming in?

R: We got cigarettes pretty regularly from the Japanese, and once in a while we'd get cigars.

**(1, B, 170)**

T: Cigars?

R: I tell you, I can remember the names of the cigarettes were Sherasaki. Sherasaki was a Japanese cigarette, and then once in a while we'd get a cigar and the cigars were Norasaki, Norasaki cigars. They were good cigars if you could ever get a hold of one. Once in a great while. Really enjoy that. But you see one thing is, I was a smoker.

T: That was my next question, was whether you were a smoker or not.

R: I was a smoker, and Charlie, Collingsworth, and I...when I left Karenko, General Vachon gave me his suitcase, and his suitcase had one of those rotary locks on it. You know, certain numbers. So we used that on our side where the three of us slept to keep our valuables in. So Charlie always kept his cigarettes in there, and so did we. I remember one time that Charlie would just trade his cigarettes, because he didn't smoke. He'd trade them for food or whatever. Something like food or candy or fruit.

But anyway, one day somebody stole some of his cigarettes and he thought it was me. It broke us up. It broke our friendship for about three or four months. He wouldn't have anything to do with me. He thought I took them. Well, later on Collingsworth admitted that he's the one that took them. Then Charlie apologized and we became friends again. But this is what would happen, you see.

T: It really shows the value of something like a piece of food or cigarettes that could cause a breakup of a friendship like that.

R: Oh, yes.

T: Was that something that you would say was out of the ordinary, or did you observe other times when prisoners had disagreements over things like that?

R: Oh, yes. They'd fight over rations sometimes. For example, we had one guy, our squad leader down in Heito, our squad leader was a British lance corporal. He was a nice guy. He was one that always divided the rice up. I thought he did it fairly evenly. But sometimes some of the guys would say hey, you gave him more than you gave me. It might have been maybe a half a teaspoon. Or maybe a teaspoon full of soup. Then that would start a fight. It was usually taken care of right then and there.

T: Now when you worked in squads...you mentioned squads of ten. Was that the standard kind of work detail, squad of ten?

R: Yes. They put us in groups of ten.

T: And was it typically the same guys you worked with for some time, or did it change daily?

R: No, it was during the whole time you were at the one camp.

T: So you always had the same other nine in a sense.

R: Right. Of course when you changed camps you'd get a new group.

T: Right. When you were at Heito and Taihoku you did different kinds of work. Artificial lake construction work, for example.

R: They were building an artificial lake. Yes, I was working on that detail. Sometimes I'd work in the garden. You know, in the garden doing weeding and planting potatoes or digging potatoes up, bringing them into camp. Of course, whenever we had a chance we'd steal the sweet potatoes. And what I used to do is, I used to have...remember the old aluminum canteens they had with the water?

T: Yes.

R: Well, they had this little round hole at the top. And when we were out in the garden weeding, whenever I saw a fingerling sweet potato about the size of your finger, I'd slip it inside my water bottle. By the time I got through in the day that thing was full of little fingerling sweet potatoes. Then when I got in the camp at night I'd take and fill it full of water and shake it until I got no more dirt out. Then I'd fill it with water, and they had a fire there where you could...was a fire for heating water for our baths. I put it in the fire and let it cook. When it was finished I'd have sweet potato soup.

**(1, B, 220)**

T: So you become creative in the acquisition of foodstuff.

R: Oh, gosh, yes.

T: Now there's a number of jobs you mention. I mean, at Heito you mentioned sugar mill, sugar plantation work, agriculture work essentially.

R: Yes. Basically what we did...they had this old narrow gauge railroad track that went way down about a mile or mile and a quarter away from the camp, and it was flat country down there. It was sort of like a river valley really, but I don't think it was. But anyway, they had the sugar plantation there. Sometimes we'd work pushing sugar...all these little things, like a coal mining cart.

T: The narrow gauge stuff.

R: Yes. And they were made out of wood, these carts were, and we'd push...they were full of sugar cane stalks. And of course, we'd push them over toward the factory, and then there would be somebody to take them from us there and take them into the factory for processing. We liked this job because we could always break off a piece of a stalk of sugar cane and conceal it and take it home and eat it at night. So it was sweet, and like chewing gum almost, you might say.

T: So certain jobs, the way you're describing them, were more desirable if they offered a chance to eat.

R: Yes.

T: You also mentioned doing some work in a railroad roundhouse. That sounds like it wouldn't be as valuable.

R: No, it wouldn't be. Now, I didn't work in the roundhouse. Now, Charlie did. Charlie worked in the roundhouse there at Taihoku.

I'd like to explain something else now about the sugar cane fields. This large field, probably about twenty-five acres, five acres square, and they had Chinese coolies working with us and what they would do, they would dig down a meter, dig down into the earth a meter, and sift all the dirt a meter deep to get all the rocks out, because then when the rocks were off the field they had some good soil there they could plant sugar cane in. That was the purpose. And of course that was our job. That was the worst.

I remember when we first started working there we had to carry these punkies between us. It was something like a...it's one guy on each end and you had two handles and you carry weight. It was a bamboo webbing in between, and we'd carry the rocks in that.

T: So you carried the pole on your shoulder?

R: No. We'd carry it by our side. A hand on the right hand and left hand side. The first three or four days our wrists were so weak from carrying these things that eventually we just used pieces of cloth to tie around our wrist and loop around the handle of the punky so that our hands would be relieved from that. Well, we couldn't hardly hold a punky, actually, after about three days until the hands healed up again. But we got used to it.

Oh, another time, God, I've got to tell you about this. It was down at Heito and we were out in this field working on the rocks, and there was a guard tower right...Charlie and I were standing right below at the base of the guard tower and all of a sudden this Japanese rifle falls down with the bayonet on it, and it sticks right in the ground between us. And we just turned to each other and says, whew!

T: Holy mackerel.

R: Yes. What had happened is, the railing upstairs where the guard was, the railing had broken and it had fallen and this guard was so damn scared and he couldn't...it seemed like he couldn't apologize enough. We didn't mind that, because it didn't hit either one of us. So there's some things you remember like that, that were real close calls.

T: Well, sure you remember that. Now you spent about a year at Heito it looks like. May 1943 to May 1944.

R: Yes. A good year.

T: And basically doing the same kind of work?

R: Yes. Digging and working on rocks.

T: Did that field ever get used, or did you just work on it all the time?

R: Well, it got used eventually, but then the sugar...there were so many sugar cane factories down there. Michael Hurst, who's an American living over there now, has said that those fields have all been replaced now by trees and things. He had a picture of that same railroad tracks that they used to carry the food down to us when we were out in the field. That same railroad track was still there. Narrow gauge.

T: Michael Hurst is his name? Let me get back to our questions and ask you about the work details that you were on there on Formosa, and it was almost two years. A year and a half anyway. Which of those did you find most difficult, personally?

R: Well, I think Heito was the worst camp to work in, because it was raining all the time and the malaria was rampant. I can remember some days that they'd have three or four funerals at one time.

I'd like to give you a little incident of a guy that was in our outfit at Heito. His name was...I put it down here too. You know I've crammed so many things into my head the last few years in getting information. Albert Stilley was his name, and he was married. He was about our age, maybe a year or two older than me, but he was at Heito and he got a letter from his mother. He got a Red Cross parcel from his mother and a letter from his mother, and in the letter she told him that his wife had divorced him. He committed suicide by starving himself to death. He stopped eating. We'd steal eggs. We did all kinds of things to get him food. He wouldn't eat it.

He used to carry this picture of his wife around with him inside of his shirt. It was just a portrait of her face. Real attractive girl. We felt so bad for him to think that... Thank God we didn't get married, because we'd be worrying about our wife back there in the States and how she's doing and all that. That's one other thing the

Japanese used to do. They would give us newspapers telling us how loose the American girls were and stuff like that (*chuckles*).

T: Subtle kind of information, it works on your morale, that's for sure.

R: Yes. It did lower our...well, I didn't have anybody specific, so...I had no girlfriend. No, I wasn't engaged or anything like that. But I did feel sorry for a lot of the guys who were married, especially the young guys, because they were worrying about whether their wife was being faithful or not.

T: Sure. And being completely powerless to do anything about it.

R: That's right.

T: That sense of feeling powerless, is that something that you felt when you were a prisoner?

R: Well, to a certain point. But you know, you always have this hope that the war would be over with soon. And to tell you the truth, I think that's the only thing that really kept us going after the first year was that: well, another six months it will be over. Because we still believed that we were able to recoup and come back and whip the Japanese, and it would be all over. We had no idea how powerful the Japanese were, and we had no idea how weak we were. And of course it took nearly four years for us to build up the strength to win the war.

T: Now, sort of following that one step further, did you get concerned, you or the men around you, at any point, as the war began to go badly for the Japanese wondering what might happen to you if they did indeed lose?

R: We never thought that they would do something like that. We always figured that we'd be rescued. We never...we didn't even know that they had a plan in late '44 and early '45, that they had a plan to kill all prisoners of war if the United States invaded Japan.

T: And that of course came out afterwards. But you didn't know during the war at all, did you?

R: No. We didn't know that at all.

T: Were there rumors about this, because particularly towards the end of the war the Americans were right offshore.

R: Yes, they were. As a matter of fact they hit—

**End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A starts at counter 000.**

T: So even when you were on Formosa there you saw carrier based American planes.

R: Yes. We called them Little Blue Angels. They were little Hellcats, is what they were. But they did a hell of a lot of damage on that airport. It was really surprising.

T: How was that for morale to suddenly see the Americans again?

R: We kept our morale to ourselves until the Japanese were not around us. Then it was just really great. You know, we could just talk and laugh and it boosted our morale and we'd think, well, it's kind of maybe just a couple more months. And then it was just a couple more months for about ten months.

T: For you were the conditions at Taihoku better than those at Heito?

R: Oh my gosh, yes. Much better.

T: In what ways?

R: It didn't seem like there was many mosquitoes there, and we didn't have that problem of...although it rained a lot there, it didn't rain anything like it did down in Heito. It just seemed like there wasn't that much malaria going on. I want to tell you about one incident when the navy aircraft carriers were sending their dive bombers over, these little Hellcats. The Japanese decided that, the camp commander decided he better have all his guards dig foxholes, and it rained just about three days before they made their first raid on the airport across the field and of course those foxholes were half full of water. We got the biggest kick out of watching those guys jump in the foxholes and then jumping out real quick just covered with water and mud (*chuckles*). We kept our humor quietly to ourselves, but it was a joy to see that.

T: It must have felt good to laugh after a while.

R: They really were ticked off. Oh, another incident I want to tell you about at Taihoku. I told you that occasionally they would change guards. Bring in a new group of guards. And I remember one day this one British guy, I don't know his name. All I know is that everybody called him Jody, and he was Welsh. Jody was a Welshman. He was sort of brazen in a way, but he was humorous. I remember one day this new guard came through, and of course we were all standing on our tatamis, where we sleep, in our stocking feet and as we bowed, we bowed to him, you know, because we were supposed to do that, Jody said to this guy, "Hello you old son of a bitch," and he bowed and he smiled toward the guy, and the guard smiled back and bowed toward him. We had all we could do to keep from laughing. But he called him...and after the Japanese walked by I suggested to him, you know, "Jody, you never can tell when these guys, these guards, can speak English. You can get the rest of us in trouble by doing that." He didn't seem to give a damn.

T: I guess you meet all types, and you must have met those that didn't care either.

R: Well, I think he cared. Now he went with us when we went up to Hokkaido, and he and I one time worked on unloading salt from one of the ships in the harbor there.

T: Because you were a stevedore for a while, weren't you?

R: Yes.

T: Before we get there, you were like a lot of guys who were transported by ship up to Japan, and I'm wondering if you can bring back your memories about the ship journey from Formosa to Japan.

R: Well, I think...I'm not too sure that it was on the *Lima Maru* or the *Taiko Maru*, but Charlie and I were singled out on this boat to come up and help cook rice up in the kitchen on the deck. That was really great for us, because we were up there in the fresh air and we got to eat the food that they ate, which was much better than they were carrying down into the hold to feed the POWs down there. But I do remember that we were very crowded and it was just (*heavy sigh*) like living in a shit hole, to tell you the truth.

I recall that water was a very prized thing down there, and right above where we were on the—there were layers of holds down there, and the hold just above me was metal. We'd take a handkerchief and we'd put it up against there, because it seemed like the moisture would collect there and it would drop down. That was moisture that was dropping down. We'd collect a handkerchief full of moisture and drink that stuff. It was bitter, but it was water. That's the only thing I can remember about that part of it. You might say it was just living in filth, like a pig. In a pig sty.

T: How does that, the conditions on board the ship, compare to the conditions you encountered in different camp locations?

R: Well, the difference between day and night, if you want to put it that way. At least we had a chance in camps to keep our area clean and to keep ourselves clean. To at least...to get some rest without having to sit with our knees up to our jaws. But that's about the only thing I can say. The difference between night and day. (*pauses three seconds*) We were so glad to get off those ships. Sometimes you'd get, what do you want to call it? So stiff it would take a little bit of walking before you could stand up straight.

T: Now on board the ship in the holds there, there wasn't, from your memory, enough room to stretch out certainly.

R: No. There wasn't.

T: From your memory was the ship ever attacked by American planes or submarines?

R: No, I don't think so. I don't think any ship I was on was attacked. I think the only time we had a problem was when we first left Keelung on that one boat, and they were trying to avoid submarines and they got too close to the shore and I'm sure they dented the bottom of the boat when they went through that patch of loose rock.

**(2, A, 65)**

T: So you could hear clearly [that they were] hugging the coast as closely as it could.

R: You could hear the rattle on the bottom of the ship of the rocks that it was going through, like a bed of rocks. They weren't huge rocks but they were—you've seen rocky beaches. Something like that. Then we came around and got back on the *Taiko Maru* to finish the voyage up to Moji.

T: Did the Japanese supply food on board the ships that you remember?

R: Yes. But that was a mess, because a certain portion of the guys never got any food at all, and there were a lot of deaths on the ships. That's why they call them Hell Ships. But we would always lose a few guys on those trips.

T: How was it that some guys got food and some guys didn't?

R: The ones closest to the food are the ones that got it. The ones that were way back in the holds, you know way back in the depths, couldn't get out unless somebody would help them or pass food back to them. They didn't get it, and they probably didn't get much water either.

T: It really sounds like survival of the fittest, Bob.

R: At those times it was. There's only one way to put it, and that was that.

T: Was this a time when it was important to have people looking out for you and you looking out for them?

R: Well, at these times it was very difficult to have anybody looking out for you.

T: Even among people you might have considered your close friends?

R: Oh, people like Charlie or Collingsworth, we stuck together. We worked together to help each other. Share food and share water.

T: From your observation did, in a stressful situation like the *Taiko Maru*, did some guys handle that simply better than others?

R: Yes. I think some guys just gave up. On the *Taiko Maru* I think they did. They just gave up. We lost several. As a matter of fact, when we got to Taihoku we had one British kid...this was pathetic. He used to eat his rice a grain at a time. A real skinny British guy. And about a month after we were there he died. He died all crinkled up and they had to break every bone in his body to put him in a box to get him out of the camp. He was the only one I knew that died on the island of Hokkaido.

T: So up in Japan he died.

R: Yes. Anyway, there were several that died. They just tossed them overboard. Slid them over. They put a plank up and slide them down the plank. I don't know how many they were or if anybody kept any records on them, but I understand that they do have records of a lot of those guys that went overboard.

T: Some guys have mentioned that they relied on religion, on faith, their own faith in difficult times. How would you contribute to that? Were you a person who relied on faith, or was that not important to you?

R: I think I relied on faith after the war started. The first few days before we left Mariveles. Now Charlie was a very religious man. On Bataan I was pretty religious and I carried a little New Testament Bible [that] you could slip into your pocket. But after that I wasn't too religious about things. I just figured that what was going to happen is going to happen, and a lot of guys felt that way and they would try to survive as best they could.

**(2, A, 104)**

T: You're right, Charlie Forry was quite religious. His diary entries show that too.

R: Yes. I was going over his biography just the day before yesterday, and of course he mentions a lot about religion, God. He mentions about his brother and his mother in Virginia and yes, he was very religious.

T: Were there, from your recollection, any kind of church services at all, even small ones, either on Formosa or Japan?

R: Yes. And I've gone to some of those. At Heito I was sort of active. Maybe I'd go about once a month or every six weeks. But it depended a lot on if they could hold services. Of course there weren't always ministers of the Gospel there, and some of their...usually was by a British person under the Church of England. Anglican Church. I enjoyed those. And I went to them at Karenko and Heito, and not too many at Taihoku. After we got to Taihoku, after that I don't think went to any. Charlie did. I wasn't even aware that he was going to church. But I was so damn tired from working in the coal mines that the only thing I thought about was getting

some sleep and rest, because we worked long hours. We worked ten and twelve hours a day.

T: The work days remind me: did you have like a standard work shift when you were at the different locations on Formosa?

R: [Answer appears to be talking about Japan] Usually we'd have to walk to the mine. Then we'd have to get down to the bottom of the mine and there were just a lot of things we had to do. But we weren't drilling into coal yet. We weren't coal mining. We were drilling through slate to get to the coal, and it was very dusty.

One of Charlie's friends, Paul Furth, he tried to break his arm down there and he failed. So he had to work with a sore arm, I guess, until he was liberated.

T: So people were at times willing to go to lengths to try to get out of this kind of work.

R: Well, I tried it a couple times too. If I could get a fever up or something like that, but I never had much luck at doing that.

T: Too darn healthy, huh?

R: I was too damn healthy I guess. *(both chuckle)*

T: When you got off the *Taiko Maru* there in Japan after that long journey, in March 1945, what kind of an impression did Japan make on you?

R: Not much. Well, not there at Moji anyway. We had to stay, I think, in the warehouse or something like that overnight and get on the train the next morning, and the train was a regular passenger train, but they kept the windows covered. They took us all the way up through [the island of] Honshu. We went through Tokyo and on the railroad way up to Aomori [in far northern Honshu].

T: Aomori. Right.

R: Now there's two Omoris. Just outside of Tokyo. But this is Aomori. A seaport town.

T: You went the length of Honshu. That's hundreds of miles.

R: Yes, it is. I guess it's about three hundred miles. It took us a hell of a time to get up there. But anyway, when we went through Tokyo we looked out the window. One of the guys had the slit open and I'd look out the window and all these people...we were going through the railroad depot there in Tokyo and everybody was running and screaming. We found out later of course that the B-29s were within about twenty minutes of Tokyo. A big bombing mission was on. We were lucky, actually, to get out of there before they came over.

**(2, A, 147)**

T: Yes, that's right. March '45, yes, there were a couple big bombing raids that month.

R: But anyway, on the way up before we got into Tokyo and after we got out of Tokyo, we could open the blinds a little bit and look out and [saw] some of the most beautiful farms I could ever imagine. I always thought we had beautiful farms there in Iowa, but all those Japanese would have beautiful farms and horses and cows. And even along the side of the railroad, the right of way of the railroad, they had these little terraced gardens where they'd grow strawberries and radishes and vegetables and things like that. They were very clean people. The only thing is that they were beginning to go hungry too.

T: It's interesting how even in those difficult situation that you were in there, you could still find beauty in the physical surroundings, the countryside.

R: Well, yes. The white fences, you know, just like we have back there in the middle west, and horses and cattle and so forth. Yes.

T: Let me ask you about when you got to Hakodate. That's way up on Hokkaido there. That's a heck of a long trip. You worked at Dispatch Camp Number 2, and from your information and you were working as a stevedore for a number of months.

**(2, A, 162)**

R: We got there, God, in the middle of March, I guess. And we did work as stevedores, and I think we first started out at unloading coal in one little place there where we'd meet and unload coal. We had these big scoop shovels. It was in the wintertime, and they always had a fire going there for us. Because the guards would build the fires to keep warm.

But anyways, one day they came in and—mackerel, that was the type of fish I was thinking of. They had one of these little train, it was a tank car, but it didn't have a top. It just had sides, and that thing was full of mackerel, freshly caught. So what we did is we went over to the water faucet and cleaned off our shovels. Cleaned the coal dust off our shovels, and we were frying those mackerel and the guards didn't seem to mind. As a matter of fact, I think a couple of them, we fried a couple of them, of mackerel for them. That was a real good day for us.

Now other times when we were stevedoring we'd have to go through warehouses and if there were any crates or cartons that could be opened, you know, very slowly. You know, each one going by and pulling a nail out or something like that, we would do that and grab the cans inside and hide them in our pants and take them back to camp.

T: So a constant search for edibles.

R: Right.

T: Was it easier or more difficult in this new setting, in Japan, to do that kind of stuff? I mean, you're not on Formosa any more. Suddenly you're doing a different kind of work.

R: Well, the barracks we were in was much better, and the only barracks that was better was the one at Karenko, but the opportunities to get food were better.

T: Here in Japan.

R: In Japan. Yes. At Hakodate.

**(2, A, 188)**

T: And is that because of what came through docks and warehouses?

R: Yes. Yes.

T: Now I'm thinking of the guys that got off the ship. Were they broken into groups now as you went north, or was basically the whole *Taiko Maru* sent up there, the whole complement of men?

R: No. We usually had one large group that marched down to the docks, and then we'd get down there and they might have three or four different places we'd be working. But the first few times we worked we were all working together there unloading coal. But that job ran out. I mean, we finished that job and they were hauling coal, salt. I remember one boat we were unloading salt. And Jody was with me on that one. He fell into the bottom and it was so damn dark I couldn't see where he was down at the bottom. So I said, "Just stay there. I'll come on down." So I jumped way out to the middle into the pile of salt, because it was piled up pretty high, and then I slid down to where I heard his voice. I hurt myself doing that. I cut my leg on a piece of a ladder. Of course I didn't tell anybody, because they'd probably beat the hell out of me if I showed it to them.

T: If they knew you were down there.

R: Yes. Anyway, I got him out of that. We got up onto the ladder again. A ladder on the other side that went down further into the hold. The one I went down on had broken off about halfway down, and when I fell that piece of the ladder was sticking out and cut my leg. But anyway, it healed up okay.

T: Did you have any encounters or daily encounters, shall we say, with Japanese civilians while you were there?

R: Yes. Down at Heito we did. We had two foremen. Two supervisors that were Japanese. One of them we called...he was a little short guy and he always wore a brown suit. Then the other guy was...Harry. Harry was sort of all right. His boss was the old man in the brown suit, and of course the old man would stand up there. First he told us, "You fill these boxes. You fill so many boxes in a certain amount of time, you've got the rest of the time off." But he'd stand up there and watch and time us. So we found out later on that he was trying to see how long it took us to fill one box, and then he'd judge how many we could fill the next day. So we really did ourselves a disservice by trying to get some time off at the end of the day by working faster.

T: Got it.

R: But Harry...he was kind of funny. If he didn't please his boss, then he didn't please us.

T: How about in Japan when you were suddenly in a different location. Did you encounter Japanese civilians there on a daily basis?

R: Yes, when we were working at the mines up in Akabira [in northern Hokkaido]. We used to have...I don't know what...the same material...the same brown suit material. This guy was about fifty-three or fifty-four years old. He was in his early fifties, and he was always talking under his breath about telling us about (*speaking Japanese*), and he was trying to tell us that the B-29s were causing a hell of a lot of damage in Tokyo and other places. He also mentioned one time, he says, "Maybe soon war be over. Maybe soon war be over." But he did it very quietly so the Japanese guards wouldn't hear him. But he was one guy that really encouraged us. To feel that the war was coming to a close.

T: I see. And did you work with any Japanese sort of side by side?

R: Down in the mine, yes. There were always Japanese. The guys who were in charge of putting the dynamite in the blasting holes and blowing up...guys like that. They were always in charge of doing that kind of work, because they didn't want us to get a hold of the dynamite or anything like that.

T: So the Japanese did that themselves.

## **(2, A, 243)**

R: Yes. But anyway, we'd work the face of this wall, which was pure slate. It was about six feet high, the wall was and about six feet wide, maybe a little wider. About seven feet wide. And we'd drill four holes across the top a meter deep. A little over three feet. Three across the center and four across the bottom. Then the Japanese worker there, we'd blow those out with an air hose and then he'd put the dynamite

in there with the wires on them and they'd be sticking out the holes at our end. Then they'd pack those with sand. They'd pack each hole with sand, then put all the wires together and then they'd run that wire up around a little place where we could detonate, where he'd detonate it. That's where we'd go so that we wouldn't be in the area where the rocks would be flying. And they blasted, and then we'd have to go up and clean up that mess, and that was our day's work. There was a lot of dust down there, and the only way we could get around breathing the dust was to wear something over our, a handkerchief or something; if we didn't have a handkerchief we'd find something else to use. Back at camp that we could use as a mask.

T: Right. So you had Japanese there. Did you have them when you worked as a stevedore? Were there Japanese around there?

R: Oh, yes. Usually one or two of the boat crew and then the guards were there, and of course we knew just about what we were supposed to do. In other words, if we were carrying crates, we'd have to put them on our shoulder and we'd have to walk a certain distance and pile them up someplace, you know. And that was about it. But they'd show us what to do. In other words, sometimes they'd do it themselves. Carried the pack and walked to where they wanted it piled up or like in the hold of the ship when we had all that salt. They'd drop in a big canvas thing, tarp, and we'd fill this tarp and they'd raise it up with winches, ship's winches, and then move it over to the dock and dump it down into whatever they were there to dump it into.

T: When you were first as a stevedore, where were the barracks there? Were they nearby or did you walk to work every day?

R: We had to walk about a mile to work.

T: Through town or not really?

R: Well, it was through a part of town. It was through the docky part of town, if you know what I mean.

T: So not really residential area.

R: Yes. And right across the barracks from where we were on some days we could watch the Japanese working. There was a couple businesses across the street. They were building these small fishing boats, and it was really interesting to watch them because there would be one guy up on a platform and another guy down below the platform. They would be cutting this...cutting a length of this big timber and the guy on the bottom and the guy on the top would use...they were using the same saw working it back and forth. They were pretty good at it. We enjoyed watching them, because they were very skilled workers and they were building these boats. And another thing they would do is, they never used nails or bolts or anything like that. They'd use plugs, wood plugs. When they'd plug in certain things then they'd also

plug in the plugs. So the plugs wouldn't come out either side. So we thought that was quite interesting.

T: So from a craft perspective, you sort of almost enjoyed watching them. As craftsmen.

R: Right.

T: Your barracks there at Hakodate at first, one of the better places you stayed or not really?

R: One of the better places we stayed, yes. It was very clean inside. It looked like it had been an old union shop or something like that. Very clean inside. Very warm considering that time of winter. The food wasn't too bad. We occasionally got horsemeat. That was a bad thing one time, because they gave us horsemeat and they decided to keep some over and serve it the next day and everybody got dysentery. Diarrhea I mean. So we were a little leery of horsemeat after that.

T: Yes. You moved then to Akabira which is further north.

R: Yes.

T: And did the whole group move or just some?

R: I'm not too sure about that. It seems to me that the whole group moved. But you know, they had several prison camps there, and Charlie mentioned one camp that we went to first and I only remember two camps that I was in there—the one there in Hakodate and the one at Akabira. But after reading his diary I'm convinced that we were at one and I had just forgotten about it.

**(2, A, 320)**

T: Of the three, which one did you forget, first, second or the last?

R: The second one. I remember the last one and the first one. But I think the reason I did that is because maybe the first one was so bad. I don't think Charlie pictured it that way. Anyway the second one we were in, it was pretty bad. We slept on platforms and things like that. But one interesting thing is that there were some Marines that came in from northern China, and there were also some Marines that came in from Shinai, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines. They brought a Wurlitzer with them and how they got this, how the Japanese let them bring this Wurlitzer with them, I don't know.

T: A Wurlitzer? A record player?

R: A Wurlitzer record player. Now you beat that.

T: Of all the things I would have expected, that's about last on the list.

R: Yes. Well, anyway, there were two Marines working on that damn thing. They were trying to convert it into a radio receiver and they had been working on it for, oh, a few weeks after I got there. At Akabira. After they got there I should say, because I think they came in after we did. But anyway, they asked us if we could find any wire or pieces of metal that could be used in a radio receiver to bring it back to camp. Well, you know, working around the mine there, there was always a lot of wire, especially around where we did the loading the dynamite. Up to the little pump that you pumped to detonate the dynamite. But they converted that thing into a radio receiver on the 14 August [1945].

T: You're kidding.

R: Charlie thought that they had brought a radio, but it wasn't a radio. It was that Wurlitzer. But that was the night we got a broadcast from Manila, from Manila radio station. Because we [Allied forces] were in there already, in Manila. And it said that the Japanese had surrendered—it was the fourteenth or the fifteenth we got the radio working. But we got the first news the Japanese had surrendered on that date. The night of the fourteenth and the day of the fifteenth.

T: You didn't get it from the Japanese, though.

R: No. And I'll tell you something else that a lot of guys didn't mention, and I recollect it very vividly, was that when the guys heard this news it spread around the barracks so fast. We lit up cigarettes and were laughing and joking and then all of a sudden this Japanese guard comes in and he goes (*speaks Japanese*), what the hell's going on here? Three of the guys, I think they were Marines, those Marines had a lot of guts. Anyway, two of them grabbed the guard and one of them grabbed his rifle away from him, and they threw him out the door and they threw his rifle out after him. I don't know why they threw the rifle out after him, but when he got up he picked his rifle up –

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.**

T: Did he know the news? The Japanese guard.

R: I'm sure he did. He didn't waste any time getting away. And I'll tell you, the camp commander come down and he didn't want us to know that the Japanese had surrendered yet, and we had two officers in our camp and we had one British—not British, one Marine sergeant major. His name was Sergeant Dietz. Dietz walked up to this officer. I can't remember what his name was. I think it was an American officer, and he says, "I think it's time we went to the camp commander and tell him what we want in food." The American officer said, "We can't do that. We're not sure the war is really over with yet." So Dietz, he said, "If you won't go, I will." And he went up to the—Kendo, I think the guy's name was. Lieutenant Kendo. He was

camp commander. He went up to Kendo and he says look...he had a list of stuff he wanted this camp commander to get for us (*chuckles*). And the camp commander told him, he says, "I can't get that." He says, "We don't have anything like that." Dietz says, "You better have it here tomorrow or I'll have your saber."

Dietz came back and he said, "I think we're going to get most of what I asked for." And they did. They brought the stuff back. And that's the only one. Now Charlie didn't mention that, but I can't understand why because, you know, he slept right close to me or right close to where I lived. I think that a lot of things that Charlie went through he forgot, and I lot of things I went through he forgot. In going through his diary proved that there were a lot of things I did forget. But that's one thing I didn't forget.

But anyway, shortly after that Charlie mentioned in his diary that he made a trip over to the other POW camp one day. But instead of going to a POW camp I decided that I would go into the little village of Akabira to do a little shopping.

T: And did you?

R: Yes. All by myself. I went into this one little shop and there was a young Japanese man and his wife standing there, and they had souvenirs like fans and cigarette lighters and little dishes and things like that. Tea cups. Anyway, when this guy saw me, they had a door that had a curtain over it, and he ran through the curtain into another room, [but] she came over and I told her that I wanted, I pointed out some things that I wanted to buy, and she stayed there and worked with me on this until I got what I wanted and I paid her.

And then on the way home there was a Japanese farmer out there in the field, and he hollered at me and he waved for me to come over. So I went over and I said (*speaks Japanese*), you know, what do you want? And he was trying to tell me, in his own way, that he wanted *machi* and *secon*. Now *machi* is match of course, and *secon* is the Japanese word for soap. He wanted to get some soap and some matches. So I said okay. Well, I think that was shortly after the first drop, when the B-29 dropped a lot of food and candy and soap and cigarettes and stuff like that to us. So after he asked me, the next day I took some matches and soap and I went down to his home. He [had] pointed out where his home [was], and when I went down there they had a big meal spread out for me.

T: You're kidding.

R: Yes. In the kitchen. We all sat down on a tatami and in our best English and best Japanese we talked for a little bit. They were very nice.

T: Now Bob, that seems like a surreal setting. You know, you've been a POW of the Japanese for more than three years and suddenly you're sitting down with civilians having a meal.

**(2, B, 37)**

R: The only ones I was afraid of were the guards and the officers. Because they had this Bushido stuff, you know. But the civilians, they were starving. They didn't have much food and they had no soap. They had no matches and the very few things that they could get. Can you imagine a guy just being tickled to death to get soap and matches? I enjoyed that visit so much.

But after we left camp there we went down to, they took us by train down to Sapporo. And we flew from there down to Yokohama. Atsugi [airfield, by Tokyo] really. We flew into Atsugi, and they took us over to Yokohama, and [in] Yokohama we got on a...Charlie wasn't with...was he with me? He may have been at that time. Because we all wound up down there at Camp 29, in Manila.

T: Before I forget this, how long was it before the B-29s came and made the first drop?

R: I've got the actual facts on that. What I'm going to do is, I'm going to send you another packet and I'm going to have that information in there. It's the 315<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing that the B-29s were from. I think they were on Guam or Saipan, I forget which. And then we also had Navy planes that came over. They were from those little aircraft carriers. They were little dive bombers is what they were.

T: So they found you within some days anyway.

R: Oh, almost within two or three days they knew where we were. But anyway, we flew out of Sapporo about 15 September.

T: So it took a month after the end of hostilities before you actually got out of Japan.

R: That's right. Just about a month.

T: Had you begun to put on weight in the meantime?

R: Oh, my God, you know how much I weighed? How much weight I gained the first month I was liberated? Seventy pounds! And you know, this is really funny, but I kept this weight until I got home, which was in October. Got back home in October. Because I flew back home. And my mother was so worried. She says, "You're not eating. You don't eat anything anymore. You don't even eat breakfast." And I said, "Mom, I'm not hungry." I was so fat, you know, I looked like I had the mumps.

T: You must have just shoveled the food in for a while there.

R: Did I!! And all the stuff. They were dropping us candy and all kinds of goodies, you know. It was just...we just really put it on.

T: How much trouble did your system have adjusting to eating so much so suddenly?

R: Not very good. The first few days—they warned us. Just don't eat too much at first. Until your body gets used to it.

T: That sounds tough to do.

R: Yes. Well, it was. I managed to do that. But then after a while there was nothing left to do around [camp]...waiting for someone to take us out. We just found ourselves eating and just talking and just lazying around.

T: Yes. And not working any more. Right.

R: No. So you put on weight real quick.

T: You mentioned your mom a moment ago. I'm going to jump ahead here for our project's purposes. When you got back to the States, how soon was it before you had a chance to see your family back in Iowa?

**(2, B, 74)**

R: Well, there's a little story to that too. When I came back in October we were sent to Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco, and the Red Cross allowed us to make a free telephone call to our homes. So I called home and my sister, the only one that wasn't in the service because she had a little girl, she was the only one at home. I really became a little frustrated because I said, "Can I talk to mother?" And she said, "Bob, she's not here." And I said, "Well, where is she?" She said, "I don't know, Bobby." And she didn't know because my mother was in the service someplace overseas. I said, "Let me talk to dad." And she says, "He's not here either," and I said oh, my God. I began to think, are my mother and father divorced? And I was really concerned. So then later on we got talking and she said, "No, they're both in the service, Bobby, and I don't know where they're at but they're both overseas." Now my mother was in England, and she was also in five different countries. She was in OSS, Office of Secret Service, and she was an agent and she would be dropped behind enemy lines to make contact with the underground.

T: Is that what your mom did?

R: Yes. And I look at her and I couldn't...and she had learned to speak German. She had been taught to speak German, I guess, in a really crash course. But anyway, she'd never talk about where she was or who she met because a lot of those people were still living and they were in the underground.

So then my dad was in the quartermaster corps, and he was down at Basra [Iraq]. In the Persian Gulf they would offload war supplies for Russia, and then he and the quartermaster corps would have these trucks and they would do this in relays. They'd have several relays going right up into Russia and the relays were about 250 miles long. So my dad would drive the 250 miles through really rough terrain up through Iran, which was then Persia, and part of Afghanistan, well, they

even went up through Afghanistan and further up than that. But they would drive up and stay overnight and then drive the empty trucks back the next day. The ones coming back. So then my sister, she was a control tower operator in the Air Corps. And the last camp she was in as a control tower operator was in Camp Phillip Morris, just outside of Paris.

T: That's one of those cigarette camps.

R: And she and my mother got together while they were there. My mother and my sister got together in Paris and had a day or two together. Then my brother was on the USS *Pamonset*.

T: He's younger than you, this one, right?

R: Yes. Four years younger. And he was in the South Pacific on the *Pamonset*, which was a submarine tender. And he was all through the Philippines.

T: You never saw him when you were there.

R: Never saw him. Didn't even know he was there. And he didn't know where I was.

T: So what this meant, of course, is that if you went back to Iowa there was no one waiting for you.

R: Nobody but my sister. It was a couple weeks before my mother got home. And then my dad was in the hospital in Des Moines, Iowa, and he came home. Then a few days, a few weeks later my older sister came home. But my brother didn't come back for almost...God, it must have been almost a year after that.

T: So into 1946 for sure.

R: Yes. And that meeting was really interesting too, because when we were younger...I don't know. I always had to take him every place I went and it got to the point where my buddies, they didn't want me to circulate with them anymore because I always had that younger kid with me.

**(2, B, 118)**

T: Sure. Four years younger you said, right?

R: Yes. So anyway, once in a while I'd kick him in the butt or something like that and say go home, I want to be with my buddies. And you know, he never forgot that. He never forgot that. I know that after the war was over—this is probably shortly after I was discharged in April. I was driving home. I was living down there in Riverside and Arlington, living in Arlington really with some friends of mine, and I was driving

home one night from Riverside and I saw this sailor guy on the side of the road and he had his big pack with him, bag or whatever they call it.

T: Sea bag, I think.

R: Right. As I got closer, it was my brother. So I stopped and I had a guy with me in the front seat. Well, my brother opened the door and he told this guy, he says, hey, buster, you get in the back seat and the guy couldn't get in there quick enough because my brother was about six foot two and he was bigger than both of us, the other two of us. Anyway, then he threw his sea bag against the side of the car and he walks around to my side and he opened the door and he said, "Do you still think you can trim my butt, buster?" And I said, "Any time." He leaned in, grabbed me around the back of the neck and reached in and grabbed the seat of my pants and lifted me out of the car. And he started to laugh. And he laughed and he laughed and he laughed. Then he put me back in and he says, "Come on. Let's go." Just like that. Since then we were the best of friends.

T: Now when you and your brother and actually, when all your family got together, how much did they want to know about your POW experience?

R: Not very much. They never asked me. Well, my mother made one comment. She said Bobby never talked much about his experiences, but he used to play two records. One of them was "Don't Fence Me In" and the other was "Sentimental Journey." And those were two songs that I guess I played constantly. But I never talked about it very much, but I wouldn't mind talking about it. But nobody asked me.

T: And that was my follow up, was whether they didn't ask or you didn't tell, and it sounds like they didn't ask.

R: Yes. And they'd have to ask me first, you know.

T: Is your POW experience something that you did talk about after the war with people?

R: No. In my first marriage nobody asked me. My kids never asked me.

T: Now what year were you married first?

R: I was married in 1946.

T: Okay. Same year you got out of the service.

R: Yes. I was married on December 22, 1946. And we divorced in 1968. But we split up in 1966.

T: With your first wife, how much did she know about your POW experience when you got married?

R: Nothing.

T: Did she know you had been one?

R: Yes. She never asked me.

**(2, B, 125)**

T: All right. Did she not care or did you just sort of make clear that you didn't want to talk about it?

R: Well, I never gave any indication that I didn't want to talk about it. I just don't think she cared.

T: How about your kids, Bob? You said you had three, right?

R: Yes.

T: Did they ask you as they were growing up?

R: No. They never asked me.

T: These three kids, how much do they know now about your POW experience?

R: Very little. Very little. As a matter of fact, my youngest daughter called me just the day before yesterday and I told her that I expected her and her brother and sister to see this movie "The Great Raid." I said after you see it, I want you to report to me how you feel about what you saw because what you're going to see is three and a half years of what I went through during World War II. I don't think they'll answer though. I don't think they really care. My present wife probably knows more about...as a matter of fact, if I died tomorrow she could probably write my bio.

T: This is Karen, right?

R: Karen. She's a great mentor.

T: Your first wife, your three kids, how tough has that been for you, the fact that they don't seem to care?

R: Well, let me put it this way. I don't have post-traumatic stress from the war. I don't have post-traumatic stress from anything else that I know of except working in the Post Office and my first family. I do have some real bad dreams about that. And then I have dreams about working in the Post Office and those dreams always

include the fact that the Post Office is so far behind in modern technique. Of course when I was working in it, they were still using those old hampers and canvas bags and things like that, and you look over at United Parcel and you see how modern they've become and some of the others, you know.

T: Yes. Right. Now you were career military, right?

R: Yes.

T: And you were in until the 1960s. Was the fact that you were a POW known to other people that you were in the service with?

R: Not too many. I never told anyone. The only ones I think that knew were those that kept military records. They would have to know. But I guess it never bothered me that...and then of course there's a lot of things I forgot, but I was always willing to talk about it, especially when we've had conventions of POWs, and we talk about things. Of course some of the guys would bring their wives, and my first wife would never go to one of those.

T: Did you go to conventions pretty much from the beginning? After the war?

R: Well, not too many. I can say that the number of POW conventions I've been to, including the American ex-Prisoners of War and the ADBC [American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor], probably would add up to about eight or nine.

**(2, B, 196)**

T: Okay. That's still, from my research, more than the average of guys I've talked to. The interview that we're having today, you've been most forthcoming, Bob, I'll tell you. Is this something you could have done twenty, thirty years ago do you think?

R: Yes. Yes. Now with one exception. I have a greater knowledge now of the incidents of which I was in, like the Hell Ships, dates, and the places and the incidents. But there were a lot of things that Charlie mentioned in his diary that refreshed my memory, and I'm very grateful that you sent that diary to me.

T: So glad I was able to help you. That's what this is all about.

R: Yes. Because it's really going to help me in compiling my book.

T: Good. Good. That's the best thing you could possibly tell me, I think, is when I can help somebody else. That's what it's all about.

R: Well, right now there's so many people that have helped me, and I feel that any time I can help somebody with information I may have or maybe in an insight or something like that that I can pass on.

There's one thing I'm trying to find out: after the war was over with, while we were still up there in Akabira, there was still a group of former POWs. Dale Collingsworth was one of them and he was still down there at Taihoku. And they had taken those guys up to a place called Oka, and they were going to kill them. They were planning to kill them and they were going to plan to kill the others. But then I found out recently, within the last six weeks, that there was a group and they were called AGAS, and AGAS stands for Air Ground Air Service, and they were the group that came in and rescued the POWs. Made out rosters on them. Made arrangements for their shipment or their travel out of Formosa.

Now AGAS was under SACO. Now, SACO is S-A-C-O and it's Sino-American Cooperation Organization and it was operating out of China, and what they would do is they had weather and the radio and things like this, and they would track down pilots from aircraft carriers and from land planes that had gone down in the South Pacific and radio submarines and other sources [so] people could go in and rescue them. It was quite an operation. I'm trying to get some information on that now, and later on when I get the information I promise I will send [it to] you. I feel this way that they were on Formosa before the surrender, but I'm not sure. And they were just like guerillas. They were just smuggled in there and they were looking for navy planes that had crashed there on Formosa, for bodies and for others that had escaped death in a crash and were hiding out. That was their project. I'm trying to find out more about that because there were so many efforts being put into rescuing the POWs.

T: Things that you didn't know about at the time.

R: No. Absolutely not.

T: That sort of prompts my memory here. The subject of escape. All kinds of stories about escape or thinking about escape. Where were you with that one when you were...Formosa or Japan. Is that something that ever came up in your mind?

R: No, it never did come up, because we just didn't look like Japanese. Well, we could look like Germans, but we couldn't speak German. I mean, there were Caucasians there in various offices, you know, in consulates and things like that, but it would be a dead giveaway in just a matter of a couple days if you tried to imitate... We had no clothes. So in the Philippines the only thing we could have done would be to become a guerilla up in the mountains. Now some of the guys, Tony Manners who was on the machine gun emplacement on the beach and a couple guys who were in my squadron, they became guerillas on Mindanao and they called themselves AGOM, American Guerillas on Mindanao. They all got commissions for being up there in the hills, and they did a lot of good work just keeping an eye on what was going on around that area. You know, Japanese shipping and aircraft and so forth. So they did a lot of good and I think they had the same thing on Formosa, but there's not much been written about it and I'm trying to find out what I can about that.

**(2, B, 264)**

T: So the concept or the thought of escape wasn't really seriously anything you could even mull over.

R: No. We had our chance to become guerillas and decided well...the reason we decided to become prisoners of war was because we thought the war would be over in six months. So had we known that we were going to be prisoners for three and a half years, I would have gone straight to the mountains. Be a guerilla.

T: Boy, only for a crystal ball back then, right?

R: Yes.

T: Yes. Now, tying up loose ends here. Another thing you mentioned was that post-traumatic stress disorder was nothing that really bothered you.

R: I had oh, I guess about fifteen years ago, that was probably about the last time I ever had a dream about being in a POW camp. I had maybe about a half a dozen dreams in which I'd find myself back in prison camp, and the first thing I thought about was, how the hell did I get back in here again?

T: So you were kind of conscious of yourself in the wrong setting.

R: Yes.

T: Are those dreams that you began to have right after you got back from overseas, Bob?

R: No. They came later. I don't know why they came later but they did.

T: And you mentioned at least one dream that you had more than one time? The one of being back in the camp again.

R: Yes. I think about three times I dreamt I was put back in the camp, and I was trying to figure out now how the hell...why am I back in here again? You know. I just got liberated, so what am I doing back here again? Am I going to have to go through another three and a half years?

T: In the camp there, in your dream, did you recognize the camp itself? Was it one of the places you'd been?

R: One time I did recognize the camp, and I think it was the one at Taihoku.

T: How about people? Were there other people in the dreams too?

R: Oh, yes. There were Japanese soldiers and other POWs, but who they were, I don't recall.

T: Okay. So they weren't necessarily specific people, but they were the scenery in a sense that would make it the correct setting.

R: Right. To the best of my knowledge, yes.

T: A couple of our last points here. Have you been helped by the Veterans Administration any time after 1945?

R: Not for quite a number of years. I was getting a thirty percent disability for quite a long time, and then after Karen and I were married and we moved up here we had a young—well, she wasn't a young lady. She was in her fifties. But she was gung ho for POWs and she got on my case. You need to put in for disability. So I did and the only thing I can tell you now...I think Charlie had the same thing. He had one hundred percent disability. So do I. Then because I was in the service, my retirement pay—I was in the service for twenty years, so I got a retirement here from the Air Force, but they knocked that off of my retirement...I mean they knocked that off of my VA compensation. So it's just been in the last three years that they reestablished it, and I now get my complete one hundred percent disability and I also get my one hundred percent pension.

T: But it took you a long time to get that re-instated.

**(2, B, 320)**

R: Yes. But the VA has been...I've had excellent treatment from the VA. Dental, eyes, everything. I don't worry about prescriptions or anything. Everything is taken care of.

T: Has it been that way over the years or has the treatment from the VA differed over time?

R: Well, when I was living in California they weren't as generous. The VA wasn't there in California for some reason. But you know, these VA centers are operated by different individuals.

T: Yes. That's what I've understood. Treatment can vary greatly.

R: It sure does. But up here I've been nothing but the very... If I have the least, if there's a suspect in my mind, if there's the least thing wrong with me, like oh, I've had arthritis for several years now but it was really bad about four years ago. It's still bad but it doesn't bother me as much as it used to and I'm grateful for that. But I had open heart surgery. Well, my wife and I were traveling. We were coming back from our family reunions in Tennessee and Iowa. In Omaha, Nebraska, I had a

problem breathing and they took me to a VA hospital and they told me that I needed a bypass. You know, that my heart wasn't getting the blood and that I had a bad aortic valve. So they said well, we can't do it here because we don't have any heart doctors, but we can send you up to Wisconsin or down to Texas or Denver, Colorado. I said how about sending me to Seattle, Washington? She said, yes, they have heart doctors too. They have them there. So I said, okay. That's where I want to go. And you know, they flew me there in a hospital plane. A little single engine. They flew me all the way to Boeing Field.

T: So they've really taken care of you with whatever you needed.

R: Well, they sure took good care of me. And what hurts me is to see... I know a guy down in Atwater. That's where I retired. Down there. And you know, he wouldn't go to the VA and try to get...he was a POW but he wouldn't go down to the VA and try to get disability. You know what he did instead? He'd go around town picking up aluminum cans and selling them. And I talked to his wife and she said, I'll try him one more time. She called me and said he still wants to pick up the cans. You know, what can you do?

T: Yes.

**End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A starts at counter 000.**

T: When you think about the three plus years you were a POW, what's the most significant way that you think that experience changed you as a person?

R: Well, I was an Iowa boy and I was very naïve, and even in the service I was very naïve. But the POW camp life opened my eyes to a lot of things. I was involved in theft and things like that. Not from my buddies, but from the Japanese. I've often said the best criminals in the world come out of a prison camp. But you forget about that if you get out. But I think the most important thing is that everyone in the world who are ordinary citizens of their country are just like ordinary citizens here, and they're not evil or wicked. They're just people who are trying to have a meaningful life. That's one thing it taught me.

T: Do you think you recognized that at the time, Bob, about the Japanese?

R: Yes, I think so. I didn't like the treatment I got from the guards, because they were brain-washed so much into this Bushido stuff that to die for their country was...regardless of what...under what conditions. To die for their country was the greatest thing they could do. It was like...almost reminds me of Islam. If they kill a Christian they're going to have seventy virgins and they're going to be in hog heaven.

T: But you think you were able to separate the Japanese soldier from the Japanese civilian.

R: Yes.

T: Do you think your family saw or experienced a different person when you got back?

R: I think so. I can't tell you how, because they never told me. But I think they were a little concerned about how I might feel. I think it made the family closer than we were ever before.

T: You think so?

R: Oh, yes. The family became very close. And that experience with my brother down in Riverside, that was really a real nice event. To have my brother say come on, let's go.

T: Boy, you just sort of put a lot of...laid a lot of things to rest with that it sounds like.

R: Oh, yes. As mean as I was to him (*chuckles*) when he was younger. I think it sort of mellowed us out.

T: Yes. Well, he was older too by that time, wasn't he? We grow up and good things happen sometimes.

**(3, A, 25)**

R: Yes.

T: That's the last question I had, Bob, and I on the record will thank you once again for what has been a most, most enjoyable interview this evening.

R: And I'll try to put some things together and put them in the mail for you. Thank you very much for calling.

T: Thank you, Mr. Heer, and I'll look forward to hearing from you. Goodbye now.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

### **EXTRA from another conversation**

T: ...Atlanta Falcons.

R: Yes. Atlanta Falcons.

T Yes. He was for a number of years.

R: Yes, he was. So anyway, he's a nice guy.

T: Yes. He's a real sensitive guy and by his request we split the interview up into really small sections. Small bits of time. We would talk for twenty, twenty-five minutes. Then we'd have to stop. Then set up another time to meet and call him back. It went on for months, actually, until we actually got the interview completed and then, of course, he can't see. He's completely blind.

R: Yes.

T: So the transcript review went with...I sent it to his family and they went over it with him. But when I saw him last year he was very thankful that he had actually done this and put down at least some of the things on the interview that he remembered. Except certain things he wouldn't talk about. He wouldn't talk about Bataan. He would only talk about places he'd been...Davao and LeSang on Mindanao and then the Shinyo Maru, no. Then he called me back or emailed me six weeks later and said yes.

### **(3, A, 39)**

R: You know the guys, most of the guys on that Shinyo Maru that were killed were part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and a lot of his buddies were killed on that torpedo I guess.

T: Yes. The ship was torpedoed. Right.

R: And his boss, Sergeant Robinette who was the mess sergeant, he survived that and I was really surprised. I ran into Robinette when I was recalled to active duty during the Korean War. He was a mess sergeant at Long Beach Air Force Base in 1951. We had some good times together. We talked, you know. And saw him several times. He was at a couple of the 19<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group reunions, one in Sacramento and one down in Modesto.

T: Did he talk much about his experiences or about the Shinyo Maru thing?

R: Well, I think so. We'd talk about the funny things that happened you know. Or kid each other about our weaknesses and things like that. But I remember one time

at March Field when I was just in the service. Jimmy Greene was on the...oh, what do you call it? Where you walk along your tray and...

T: The cafeteria line.

R: Cafeteria style. They had fried eggs, and I loved eggs, so I said gee, Jimmy, how many eggs can I have? He said, I don't know. I'll ask Robinette. So he couldn't see Robinette but I could, and Robinette couldn't see me but I could see Robinette. Anyway, he says Robinette how many eggs shall I give here? And Robinette held up one finger, and he said give him all the eggs he wants. I'll never forget that. And Jimmy Greene turned around and he's got a big grin on his face. He says, hell, how many do you want? He was a nice guy.

T: Yes. He really seems like a good natured guy even today when I met him a year ago. It's interesting that just looking over the record...that's right. 19<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. We've got Charles Forry and Jim Greene listed in the same category. That's right.

R: It is. Those big gold teeth of his.

T: Yes. Quite a guy. Just prompt me in your email and I'll ship you his transcript and let you take a look at it.

R: Okay. Thank you very much for calling.

T: Thank you, Mr. Heer, and I'll look forward to hearing from you. Goodbye now.