

Interviewee: Irving Silverlieb

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 18 July 2003

Location: kitchen, Silverlieb residence, St. Louis Park, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2003

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, 2004-05

Irving Silverlieb was born on 31 May 1922 in the small farming community of Danzik, North Dakota, one of five children of Russian immigrant parents. The Silverliebs moved to Minneapolis when Irv was four, and he grew up here, graduating from North High School in 1939. In July of that year Irv enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Following Basic Training, Irv was stationed at several island locations in the Pacific. He was part of the 1st Defense Battalion on Wake Island when the Japanese attacked on 7 December 1941. Wake resisted, but on 24 December the island fell and all service personnel became prisoners of war. Irv remained a POW of the Japanese for thirty-nine months, primarily at several locations in China—camps by Shanghai and Kiangwan during January 1942 – May 1945.

After a brief time at Pusan, Korea (likely June 1945), Irv was transported to Japan, and with other POWs used as slave labor at a coal mine, called Hakodate Camp 3, on the northern island of Hokkaido. He was here when the Pacific war ended in August 1945. Work details at these locations varied from farming and construction to dock labor and mining; in Irv's opinion, the mine work in Japan was the hardest and most dangerous. Like all POWs of the Japanese, Irv endured malnutrition, mistreatment, and disease.

Following his evacuation in October from the coal mine camp, Irv returned to the United States; he spent time in several medical facilities before being discharged in April 1946 with the rank of sergeant. He was married in April 1946 (wife Jeanette), and worked many years in the scrap metal business, retiring from American Iron in 1988 with thirty-five years of service. At the time of this interview (July 2003) Irv and Jeanette lived in St. Louis Park, Minnesota.

Irv Silverlieb's POW odyssey (based in part on interview information)

24 Dec 1941	captured at Wake Island
12 – 23 Jan 42	Hell Ship <i>Nitta Maru</i> to Tokyo
Jan 42 – Dec 42	Woosung POW camp by Shanghai, China
early 43 – May 45	work camp by Kiangwan, China
May - Jun 45	camp at Fengtai, by Peking, China
Jun 45	Pusan, Korea (dock worker)
Jun 45 – Sep 45	Hokkaido, Japan (coal mine at Hakodate, Camp 3)
Oct 45	evacuated from Japan by US forces

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

I = Irving Silverlieb

[text] = words added by editor and John N. Powers, 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: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today is 18 July 2003, and this is our interview with Irving Silverlieb of St. Louis Park, Minnesota. First, on the record Irv, thanks very much for taking time this evening taking time to talk with me.

I: My pleasure.

T: We have talked a bit before we started taping, and I want to enter this into the record. I've learned that you were born on 31 May 1922 in the small town, very small town of Danzik, North Dakota. I think you said it was a couple buildings and not much more than that.

I: That's right.

T: Your parents were both immigrants from Russia and you grew up as one of five children with four sisters and no brothers. Your folks moved to Minneapolis by the time you were about four years old. You attended local schools including North High School class of 1939. You said seventeen days later you enlisted in the Marine Corps, July 1939. As an aside here, I'm kind of curious. What is it that made you decide to join the Marine Corps?

I: I always wanted to join the service. I knew I was going to go in the service. In the yearbook: future soldier in the Army. What it was, I had two or three uncles who fought in World War I and I was told I was never good enough to make [it], and stuff like that, in the Marines and more or less expected... So I wanted to go in. Then I was in the National Guard when I was fourteen, fifteen years old. Served in the Minnesota National Guard. I did what I wanted to do.

T: How did your folks--here's their only son going off to join the Marine Corp after high school. How did your folks take that?

I: They battled me.

T: Explain that.

I: I was the only male survivor, and youngest one, and stuff like that. They just didn't like the idea, but they knew this was what I wanted to do. At that time they were pretty rough there, during the Depression. Things were pretty rough up there. It was just the natural thing for me to do. Join the service.

T: Did your folks have to sign papers for you to go in because you were only seventeen?

I: Yes, they did. They signed them reluctantly.

T: So it sounds like there was some discussion in the Silverlieb household about whether you should do this.

I: Right. Right.

T: You did join the Marine Corps, and I know that when the war started in December 1941 you were stationed on Wake Island.

I: Right.

T: Now how long had you been on Wake Island before the war started?

I: We were the first group of military people that got out there. We got there in August, pretty sure, early August of 1941.

T: You had been there a number of months.

I: Yes.

T: The position of Wake Island, which is way west of Hawaii, actually to the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Was there any kind of discussion among the guys that you were with there about what you were doing there or why it was so important to station guys on Wake Island?

I: We pretty well knew. They told us what they wanted up there. They wanted to make a naval base, an airstrip and a submarine base on the island. And we were the first, other than they had a few civilians. At the time, when we first got there, they had a few civilians who were working for Pan Am Airways there.

T: No kidding.

I: Yes. It was an equipment stop. We stopped up there and we used it as a military headquarters. More like a local construction outfit. To build barracks and put up some kind of defense system.

(1, A, 75)

T: So before you arrived with the Marines, there weren't US service personnel on that station.

I: No. We were the first ones there.

T: What kind of rumors were there in the months before the war about what might be coming? Was there, in other words, was the Japanese starting the war, was that a complete surprise for you guys?

I: Not really, because a cadre of the 1st Defense Battalion were guys who were with the 4th Marines in China. By the time they were discharged they reenlisted in the Marine Corps. Most of them were veterans of the 4th Marines who had been stationed in China, and they knew the Japanese, and they knew how they operated. Us recruits, us kids, we thought the Japanese were maybe five feet tall with coke bottles for glasses and stuff like that.

T: Really?

I: That a war with Japan—[it will be over in] six months. By that time, us guys would have overseas duty, and we were all going to come back with a lot of fruit salad and the broads were going to go crazy over us. We're gonna get all free booze and drink. That was pretty much the...

T: So the guys, and yourself included, had a pretty low opinion of the Japanese...

I: We did but—let's say the privates, PFCs and corporals did. Noncoms who were senior, who knew the Japanese, they said, you're kidding! They told us we were kidding ourselves. But we were kids. If we were Marines, nobody could beat the Marines, you know.

T: That's right. And what were you? Eighteen, nineteen years old.

I: Yes. We were a very proud outfit. Very proud outfit.

T: Well, rumors turned to reality.

I: We knew something was going down. The Japanese delegation [going] to and from Japan [to the mainland US] were always stopping on our island.

T: They stopped at Wake Island?

I: They stopped at Wake Island. Took rest stop and whatever. Refuel and stuff like that. And when Japanese envoys... We always knew when a Japanese envoy was around because what they would do is they would march us in front of the, they would take a squad or part of a platoon, and march us in front of the Jap hotel that was built.

T: On Wake, there.

I: Yes. One time we had our dungarees on and they said to get our shirts and stuff like that just to impress [upon] the Japanese that there was a large force of service personnel on the island. And they thought that when they first took it. They wanted to know where all the men and the big guns were.

T: Because apparently you had fooled them into thinking there were more men.

I: Yes.

T: Now were they stopping, these Japanese delegates, by air or by ship they were traveling?

I: By air. The Pan Am Clipper.

(1, A, 128)

T: So they would stop there.

I: On the way for a day or two. Whatever it was. To refuel or emergency landing. Whatever had to be done. They stayed there. They had free run of the island. They could go wherever they wanted. Our barracks, our tent area, the camp where we were was a restricted area.

T: Wake isn't very big, so it wasn't hard for them to get up and around both sides of the island really.

I: No. Pan Am had their little cars there and they'd take them out to visit places.

T: Very interesting. You had seen Japanese, in a sense, before the war even started.

I: Yes.

T: The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7. Now is Wake across the date line?

I: Yes. Where it was Sunday, December 7, in the United States, at Pearl, it was Monday, December 8, where we were on the other side of the date line.

T: So for you the war began on Monday, December 8.

I: Right.

T: What did you hear on Wake Island about what was happening in Hawaii?

I: Some guys said they heard that it was bombed. Some guys said that it was a rumor. We didn't believe it at the time. How were the Japs going to get to Pearl? Because most of us guys, the ones that came across on the *Enterprise* from the States, our Navy and our Air

Force were the greatest thing. Nothing was going to get by. It was hard to believe it until we saw the wheels go off the Japanese planes. We thought we were coming. Wake Island is also a stopover for B-17s going to the Philippines. So we'd be notified if planes were coming in or something like that. We heard that some B-17s were going to be stopping at the island. But the B-17s turned out to be Japanese bombers that hit us.

T: And what day was that?

I: December 8.

T: So the same day they attacked Pearl they attacked Wake Island too.

I: Yes. They hit us, our time, maybe an hour and half, two hours after they bombed Pearl.

T: What happened? Now Wake is fairly small. What did the Japanese attack look like from your perspective?

I: I think: they've got to be crazy. You know, we have the equipment... Like I say, a war with Japan—six months. We'll all come home big heroes, you know. Because the Japanese couldn't, they were all those little guys that could shoot but they couldn't see...

T: But there they are bombing your island now, so what was your perspective on the aerial attack?

I: We were at general quarters at the time because the first day we shot down three bombers.

T: That were coming over Wake?

I: That were bombing us. We hit three bombers, we smoked them. The guys said they saw two that crashed, but the rumor was that three Japanese planes were hit. Oh, yes! Look what we did the first day. They came over with about forty planes. They got us, but we got them.

T: So still no sense of panic or fear or anything like this.

I: No. No. No.

T: What day was it that the Japanese attempted the invasion?

(1, A, 180)

I: The first attack came on December 11, three days after the war started.

T: Did you have any advance warning this was coming?

I: No.

T: So suddenly, really, with binoculars, you look out and here are these Japanese landing...

I: Yes. We saw the fleet, because they bombarded us. They laid off shore and bombarded—shot their cannons. But with the atoll with cannons, you couldn't hit it, everything was low. Most of the shells landed in the lagoon.

T: So because Wake is flat it was hard to hit?

I: Right.

T: It sounds like a reversal of roles. Usually we hear of Americans doing invasions of islands, but here it was the Japanese sending landing craft to the island.

I: Yes. As silly as it sounds, Wake Island was the only time in World War II, regardless of what Army or what Navy, that an invasion was beat off.

T: So here they attempted this...

I: They attempted a landing. We chased them. The only Japanese on the island were the dead and wounded.

T: Some of them got onto the shore, but...

I: Got ashore, but were pushed back. Yes.

T: Where were you, personally, when this assault was taking place?

I: I was in position between the two channels. It was on the north end of the island.

T: On the north end of the island. Were you manning a particular kind of gun?

I: Basically the first defense battalion at that time—all the guys were supposed to be proficient in rifles. Every man is a rifleman. We were .30 caliber. I was basically a machine gunner. Thirty caliber and fifty. We were being trained also on five inch and three inch guns.

T: What kind of gun were you manning when the Japanese attempted to invade?

I: A .30 caliber machine gun.

T: Could you really see them coming into the beach there?

I: Yes. South of us—maybe one hundred fifty, two hundred feet away—what they first did, they ran two ships that were hit by artillery, they ran them aground trying to land their

troops between these two ships up there. But they were pretty much caught in the crossfire between our .30 and .50 [caliber] machine guns.

T: So the invasion attempt on the eleventh, did it last most of the day this action?

I: It was a good eight, ten-hour battle from the time they first attempted until they...

T: So they actually did land some people on the island.

I: Oh, yes. They landed... The landing parties were beaten off at the time, when they left there was mostly dead. A few wounded Japanese that were there.

(1, A, 222)

T: It sounds from the way you describe this, that some of the combat was very close quarters.

I: The Japanese troops were battle-hardened troops that all fought in China and Manchuria. By the time they came in, we were half-way fortified. Pits, and artillery in the bush...

T: Once it became apparent the Japanese were, I guess, were ceasing this attempt to land troops and capture the island, what was the mood among the guys?

I: Very angry. The reason I say that, why we were very angry, I think the only Japanese on the island, at the time of the surrender, the only Japanese on the island were the dead ones. But at that time the war started, they had approximately one thousand civilians on the island.

T: For Wake?

I: Civilian construction workers. Doing the main fortifications and like that. They surrendered. The senior officer on Wake Island was a naval commander and next was Major Dearborn. He was in charge of the Marines.

T: The second attempt which was successful, ultimately, to capture Wake—what day was that?

I: They started on the twenty-third, on December 23, and the last troops were surrendered on the morning of December 24, 1941.

T: What happened in the intervening days? I mean between the eleventh and the twenty-third?

I: (***) at the time.

T: Could you see them still out there?

I: No. They weren't there. They came back. We saw them there on the evening of the twenty-second. The twenty-third they started their invasion.

T: So a respite here of what, ten, eleven days when they were gone. What were the rumors then about what the situation was?

I: Come and we'll beat your ass. Our morale was very high. Very, very high. We were proud. One thing I would say for the guys: they were the proudest guys I've ever met in my life. They were all very, very proud.

T: Had you taken casualties that first attempt?

I: Yes. The first attempt. I personally got wounded in the arm on the first day of the war. In the time from the day the war started to the time we [surrendered] we lost about approximately 107 or 105...

T: That's about a quarter of the guys that were there.

I: Military personnel.

T: Right. When the surrender on the twenty-fourth—what happened to those civilians? Are these American nationals?

I: American nationals, yes. All Americans. And they were just classified as POWs also.

T: So they threw you all in one pot so to speak?

I: They separated us; they kept the military and the civilian population separated, but they were treated as regular POWs.

T: Do you know what happened to those civilian construction workers?

I: Same thing that happened to the military prisoners.

T: So you got sent to the same places...

I: I remember the first camp in Woosung, they were there with us. Then they started breaking them up.

(1, A, 270)

T: It doesn't sound like the Japanese made much of a distinction between if you were in uniform or out of uniform.

I: No. They didn't.

T: At the time that the surrender took place and you became a prisoner of the Japanese, what was going through your mind?

I: I remember it [my mind] was pretty much of a blank. We were scared as hell because what they had done with the guys, they made us all strip down to our shoes and shorts. They tied our hands behind our heads with leather and marched [us] to an airfield that we were building. This was Christmas Eve Day, the twenty-fourth. Most of us guys hadn't eaten since the attack first started. On Christmas Day in the evening they brought us some water that they had mixed with gasoline, and that what we had for Christmas.

T: They had filled old gasoline drums with water.

I: Yes.

T: So you could smell and taste that?

I: [You could] taste it. Yes. A lot of guys got sick on it.

T: But that or nothing, right? Did you drink it, yourself?

I: Sure. We were sitting in the hot sun for a couple days so...

T: You have to drink it, I guess.

I: It was terrible. A lot of guys threw up.

T: Wake is small enough, it seems like they could hold you there temporarily but they had to move you somewhere else.

I: Yes, they did. We stayed there for about two weeks, if I remember right. Ten days, two weeks, whatever it was. Then they put us aboard a real hell—actually, was one of their biggest passenger ships, the *Nita Maru*.

T: Now was this a passenger ship or a freight ship?

I: A big passenger ship.

T: And they put all you guys on there?

I: All personnel that they kept on the island. All put down in the holds. Probably one of the worst times we had. We were fed once a day. Gruel. Rice gruel. That was it. Two buckets each hold that was used for toilets. Once a day the buckets were hauled above. On this particular ship I heard it was six guys, but the Japs just randomly picked six guys out of each hold and took them topside and beheaded them. Just as a victory salute or whatever it was. But we know the six guys were murdered by having their heads cut off.

T: So they were taken out of the hold that you were in.

I: One from each hold.

T: On this ship, describe the space that you had, that you were transported in.

I: Just where you could sleep on or stand up. We were packed in. Because they at that time, not counting the ship's compliment, the ship's compliment, they had approximately one thousand civilians and three hundred Marines all in the hold of the ship. No space whatsoever.

(1, A, 308)

T: Now from Wake Island to Japan, that's a pretty hefty journey.

I: The trip took approximately fourteen days from the time we left Wake to get to Japan, because in wartime there is zig zagging and stuff like that.

T: How do you remember those fourteen days?

I: Some of the worst days of my life. By far some of the worst. We were fed once a day, soup or gruel. Rice gruel. That was it. Buckets [for toilets] were placed...

T: Was it on board the ship that you had the appendix operation?

I: No. The appendix was taken out at Woosung, the prison camp in China, on February 28, 1942.

T: Hold off on that for a second, because there's an interesting thing... Now you were taken from Wake, and you weren't taken to China. You were taken to Japan.

I: To Tokyo. We were paraded through the streets of Tokyo, with our hands tied behind our back. The *Tokyo Times*, English paper, had the headline: "First Americans Arrive in Japan (Not As They Expected)."

T: So here you are, two months removed from Wake Island, being paraded, after this horrendous ship journey, through the streets of Tokyo. What do you remember about that?

I: Being jeered at. The way the civilians treated us... At that time we hadn't bombed Japan or anything.

T: So the Doolittle attack hadn't taken place yet.

I: No. That was after we went back to China that the attack, the Doolittle attack had taken place. As a matter of fact, some of the stadium that they were beheaded, that they were

caught and beheaded, in China was a stadium in Shanghai that some of us guys worked at. Not at the time of the beheading. We had worked in that stadium.

T: So here you are, even before this takes place, being paraded through Tokyo and you could see—you weren't blindfolded here, right?

I: No.

T: So you could see civilians along the street there.

I: Oh, yes. I could see civilians along the street.

T: What do you remember about that?

I: That's a good question. I really don't think I remember much about it at all. We were all scared. Some guys say they weren't scared and stuff like that, but I myself and I'm sure most of the guys were pretty well... *(trails off)* What's going to happen now? Because we had heard, we knew this for a fact that we were told by a senior noncom, the Japanese don't take prisoners. They just brought us there to kill us. I think of all the stuff, the worst days were yet to come. Which they did. Which it was.

T: So there were some who were telling you, don't expect to get out of here alive.

I: Right. Right. We knew that.

(1, A, 346)

T: Now, they didn't keep you in Japan.

I: It was a morale booster for them. They just used us for parade and propaganda purposes. Some of the guys had to give public speeches that the Japanese treated us good after we surrendered, and stuff like that.

T: How had they treated you on Wake?

I: After we were captured?

T: Yes.

I: Not bad. I think the troops there that took us respected us. They were professional soldiers. I think they respected the fight that they got out of us. But those guys.... They treated us, they let us have the run of the island. But where would we go? We had no... We were in a confined area, but we could travel all around.

T: Did that provide a false sense of, or a sense of this might be survivable before you moved on?

I: I think so. Up until the *Nita Maru* I think we all figured, this won't be too bad.

T: And the *Nita Maru*, the ship, was a rude awakening, it sounds like.

I: Very rude awakening. Yes.

T: How do you pass day after day after day on a ship like that?

I: By praying. A lot of praying. A lot of thinking. It was one of the things that was, we had to be quiet. We couldn't—theoretically we weren't supposed to talk to one another. We were supposed to be quiet. So we had a lot of soft prayer, a lot of thoughts.

T: You had just days and days to think.

I: Yes.

T: That could be good or bad depending on the kind of person you are. Now, were you a religious person before you went in the service?

I: Semi. My folks were very religious, but I was... (*trails off*)

T: What was your religious background?

I: Jewish faith.

T: Practicing?

I: I graduated Hebrew school and stuff like that. Spoke in Hebrew and Jewish, Yiddish... but practicing... My practicing was forced on me (*chuckles*).

T: I see. And you were a young person.

I: Sixteen, seventeen years old.

T: At this point or later, how much did your faith provide as far as support for you? Inner strength, you might say, in getting through what you faced?

I: Lots.

T: In what ways?

I: Please, God, let me out of here and I'll do whatever you say. I'll be the best Jew they got, that you've ever seen. That's in faith. There were eight or ten of us Jewish guys that were captured on Wake. Like anybody else, together with... As a matter of fact, my nickname that I got the day I joined the Marines, got the first day of boot camp, another Jewish fellow

gave me the nickname of Heeb [vulgar slang: Jew]. He came out and asked my name and he said, "Another Heeb." So I got that name. Still carried it.

T: So guys still called you this.

I: Christmas cards that I still get every year, "Mr. Heeb..." Not with my name, Irving, but Mr. Heeb Silverlieb. Still say it.

T: You didn't take offense to this.

I: It was never ever, I say this now seriously, it was never ever meant as a slur. Every guy had a nickname, Swede, Red, you know. Whatever you want to call him. Slim, or whatever you wanted to call him. Almost every guy had a nickname. My nickname happened to be Heeb.

T: Do you feel, as a Jew in the Marine Corps, did you ever feel you were being discriminated against?

I: Never.

T: A couple years before you were captured there you were actually in the service.

I: Yes.

T: Do you feel you ever received any discriminatory treatment?

I: Never.

T: Any preferential treatment?

I: No. The only preferential treatment that I remember... It was always posted on the –

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 385.

T: Posted on the bulletin board?

I: Posted on the bulletin board that members of the Jewish faith would have a day for our holidays, a half a day off. That was the only preferential treatment that I recall.

T: And you don't recall ever being discriminated against because you were of the Jewish faith.

I: No. Mainly because most of the guys I went to boot camp with were put in the same outfit. At that time the 6th Regiment... I never heard of any discrimination.

T: And never felt any either.

I: Never felt any. No.

T: Back to this story. After being paraded through Tokyo—that sounds horrible, quite honestly.

I: It was.

T: You've now had a couple of bad experiences. The hell ship transport on the *Nita Maru* and being paraded through Tokyo. You mentioned earlier you didn't stay in Japan all that long right now. They moved you out pretty quickly.

I: They moved us out days after we landed there. Then they took us aboard another prison ship. Took us to China. And the first camp we went to was a place called Woosung, China. It was out of Shanghai.

T: Woosung. Another one of these terrible ship journeys from Tokyo to Woosung?

I: It wasn't as bad as the *Nita Maru*. Maybe we just didn't know any better. But I don't recall it as bad as the *Nita Maru*.

T: Now were you still together with essentially the same guys?

I: Same guys.

T: So you'd been moved a couple steps here from Wake to Tokyo and now down to Woosung.

I: All the guys.

T: Now, in talking to you before we went on tape, your estimate is that you got there early in 1942. February you were there, because your appendix were out there?

(1, B, 432)

I: Yes. Yes. Late in January we got to China.

T: And your estimate was that you were at Woosung about a year.

I: A little over a year at Woosung. [In December 1942 all POWs at Woosung were marched approximately five miles to their new camp at Kiangwan. They remained there until May 1945.—JNP]

T: So December 1942 you would be moved out of here?

I: Yes.

T: Let's pick up the appendix story, because I don't want to forget that one. Having had my appendix out myself, tell me the story about that.

I: I had a couple of minor attacks. They put hot and cold packs on the side to keep the swelling down. We got to China and they got a sickbay. They stick cold packs on my side. We had our own doctor there. Dr. Gustav Mason Cahn, who was our doctor. He was attached to us, a naval doctor, and [there was also] a Japanese doctor who was trained in the profession in the United States. The Japanese doctor wanted to send me to a Japanese field hospital. But Dr. Cahn and our corpsman didn't know—I think I was the first sick guy. Dr. Cahn was telling Dr. Shindo, the Japanese doctor, that if he has to die we'd rather have him die here where we can give him a Christian burial. That made me feel real good. Sitting there with cold packs.

T: Do you think Dr. Cahn feared, or did you fear, that if you were operated on by the Japanese that they would just let you die?

I: Yes. That's what Dr. Cahn... Very, very much thought so. So they kept me there. Dr. Shindo—another interesting story—gave Dr. Cahn five single-edge Gillette razor blades to do the cutting with. What other tools he had, I don't know. The anesthetic I had were four Marines and two corpsmen, holding me down. That was the anesthetic. You've heard stories like this, but this is the real deal.

T: They had nothing to give you.

I: Ask me the date: February 28, 1942. They just recently got into camp. We had been there less than a month. Nothing was really set up good. The Japanese, I don't think they had the stuff themselves to do that. But I know this for a fact. There were five single-edge Gillette razor blades individually wrapped. When he did the sewing up and what he used... [I don't know.] I was out.

T: So you passed out when it was...

I: The first cut.

T: Thank God.

I: Yes (*laughs*).

T: So you came to later, and knew then that you had made it through the operation.

I: Yes.

T: Let's pick up the Woosung story. What kind of facilities, what kind of conditions did you encounter there?

I: The barracks were basically, to start out, the Japanese cavalry station. We cleaned that up and making that a...

T: So it had been a camp of some kind.

I: A cavalry camp. We'd do the cleaning up and stuff like that to make it so-called livable. Livable barracks.

T: You'd been kept together up till now. How many of you were there here at Woosung?

I: Between the military, approximately three hundred guys military.

T: So still all together.

I: Yes. [All the people from Wake were] still all together. All three hundred military and probably eight, nine hundred civilians.

T: So they're not breaking people off into groups.

(1, B, 498)

I: Not at first. No.

T: So there are barracks. What kind of sleeping quarters or living quarters did you have?

I: The food was brought to the barracks in buckets. So much rice in each bucket. So much... We called (***) river. It was just a thin soup. That was our ration. We were fed twice a day. A cup of rice each meal. That's what we were given.

Now living quarters. Barracks. Summertime it wasn't bad. It was a warm climate. Wintertime, it was colder than hell.

T: So it gets cold in China.

I: Oh, yes.

T: What about the Japanese? You've had encounters with Japanese now several different ways. Professional soldiers at Wake. You've been on a ship. You've seen the civilians in Tokyo and now you have... What kind of Japanese at Woosung?

I: What the Japanese did in China was, the sentries that we had were basically soldiers who were wounded. Their temporary duty was guarding prisoners.

T: So these guys would cycle in and out?

I: Yes. They weren't too bad. I mean they had to do what they were told but looking back they weren't probably the... Better than usual.

T: You have a way that you can compare these people because you have different experiences.

I: Right. The combat soldiers, like I said before, I think they respected us for the fight that we put up. These guys, the first group of sentries, not too bad. The ones that were worse were the interpreters, whose bare English was as good as our Japanese, which was very bad both ways.

They did everything backasswards than we did it. Their culture just clashed with us. Our mistake was often... The only good way I can explain this: we wave, if we want somebody we'll wave for them to come to us. To their thinking, when they called you they waved you away. (*hand motion: hand palm down, fingers together, alternating clenching and stretching out of fingers, together*) Just with...

T: With a hand motion.

I: Yes.

T: And for the Japanese, that means come here?

I: (*repeats hand motion*) This is, come here. That's, go away. (*hand motion: hand palm up, fingers together, alternating clenching and stretching out of fingers, together*) Just backasswards from what our [American culture says]... It clashes. Several officers thought they were a superior race to the white man.

T: How did they make clear to you that they thought that they were superior to you?

I: A lot of them were egotistical guys. They were probably well trained in judo and jujitsu and stuff like that. They liked to use us Americans to practice on, until we learned how to, got enough sense [that] when they throw us down, stay down. Because if we got up, all they would do is throw us down again.

T: You were physically assaulted by these guards here?

I: In that respect, yes. A lot. We saw this happen many times. Some would go around the camp. The colonel in charge of the camp would take and beat the heck out of, publicly slap the major. The major would beat the heck out the captains. You worked down the line until the lowest private got beaten, slapped and stuff. So he would take it out on us, because we were lower than their lowest privates.

T: You could see the Japanese disciplining each other?

I: Yes. They would start from the top and work down, and that happened several times that we saw.

T: And you're right. You guys are lower than anybody else.

(1, B, 560)

I: Right. Yes. They did us a favor by letting us live. That was their thought.

T: Did they tell you that as well?

I: Oh, yes. The emperor spared our lives, and stuff like that. Yes.

T: Were there Japanese that spoke English at the camps that you were at in China?

I: Oh, yes. Many of them. They claimed they didn't speak it, but they understand it. I personally got knocked on my butt. My number was barracks one, section six, number thirty-one. *(counts in Japanese)* Thirty-one in Japanese is *sangu-ichi*. I came down, and I don't why I said it. Instead of *sangu-ichi* I said "sangu-bitchy." And this Jap hit me! This Japanese noncom hit me and I hit the deck. He let me know very quickly, "I understand."

T: So if there was a slip of from *sangu-ichi* to "sangu-bitchy" ...

I: That got me knocked on my butt.

T: So he clearly understood.

I: Yes. He told me. He said, "I understand English. Watch yourself." We were warned.

T: Were you scared of the Japanese at these camps in China?

I: Yes. A guy coming drunk from liberty could be very mean to us. Two of my friends... One because of the guy was bayoneted in my section...

T: Being bayoneted?

I: Bayoneted. Yes. The Japanese come by and just walked up and for no reason at all they hit him in the chest.

T: So there were not many limits placed on their behavior here.

I: There weren't. Most of them as far as... The drunks were bad. The younger soldiers who were just being recruited and waiting to be assigned were bad. The older civilians are too old to go to the front were bad. The combat veterans basically treated us [better], you know.

T: So that was the best treatment you got, was from some of the combat soldiers themselves.

I: Yes. The combat soldiers.

T: Now you were at Woosung first.

I: Yes.

T: What kind of work were you doing there?

I: Whatever they wanted us to do. Whatever they needed personnel. We worked on the airport. We worked building a mountain. We cleaned up things. Whatever they wanted to do. Work in military compounds. Wherever they wanted these guys.

T: So they would come in, in the morning, and detail—would take a number of guys to a certain job.

I: Right.

T: Now did you come back to the camp every night?

I: Yes.

T: You mentioned building a mountain, and we had talked about that off the tape and I think you said this was a mountain. It was supposed to be a monument to the glory of the...

I: The greater East Asia Coast. It was to celebrate the great Japanese victory over the Chinese. It was like a national park. It was going to be.

(1, B, 605)

T: So you were helping to build a monument to...

I: That was probably one of the worst jobs in that particular area.

T: Why is that?

I: There was four men to a cart, and you're pushing a load of cars in sand and dirt up, to build a mountain. Narrow tracks [railway]. Small wheels. Narrow tracks. It was just... *(trails off)* We were emaciated by that time. I would say our ration was two cups of rice a day. Two cups of so-called soup. That was our ration. And our workday was anywhere from twelve hours on up.

T: So you were losing weight and strength.

I: Right.

T: What did you weigh when you were stationed at Wake?

I: About 170, 175.

T: Are you six feet tall?

I: At that time there I was almost five ten. But then over the years I have shrunk down. When I got liberated I know I was weighing under ninety pounds.

T: How much?

I: Under ninety pounds.

T: Under ninety pounds? That's not even skin and bones. That's just nothing. If they were feeding you only that twice a day...

I: When they fed us.

T: There were times when they didn't?

I: If I screwed up or you screwed up or somebody screwed up, that person was punished but not as much. It was always group punishment. If somebody screwed up the whole group, the whole camp was punished. Maybe one or two guys screw up, the whole group was...

T: So they created a sense of collective responsibility.

I: It was. They had told us—we were in groups of tens. I understand some other people were groups of fifteen. But if one guy escaped, the rest of the guys would be shot. But we were in the middle of China. We were white. We were different in everything. Where could we go?

[Two groups of POWs did escape from Woosung in Spring 1942; they were recaptured and sent to a prison in Shanghai. Almost the entire group tried again in October 1944. Three of them made it to US forces in southwestern China; the others were recaptured for a second time. One of this group was the Navy commander on Wake Island, Cunningham. Later, when the entire camp was being transferred to Japan, in May 1945, two more groups escaped by jumping from the train at night.—JNP]

T: You really think to yourself. You might want to get away...

I: But where would you go?

T: You would stand out like a sore thumb.

I: Right. We knew that. Why they didn't think that—they should have known that too. That we couldn't. And that we knew... there was a two hundred pound sack of rice if any prisoner—and they told us this—any prisoner who escaped from the Japanese... tried to turn him in... with a two hundred pound, one hundred kilo sack of rice.

T: That's two hundred and twenty pounds. That's a lot of rice.

I: Yes. That was probably more that they would give you, and they would have.

T: It kind of takes escape out of the options.

(1, B, 640)

I: Oh, yes. The only time people were... were guys up in Manchuria at camps there.

T: And even there... I don't know. You think if you're stationed in Europe you might think about escaping, but here in China...

I: You can't. Or in Japan. Where would a guy go?

T: The next Japanese village, and that's about it.

The next stop was also in China. You were at Kiangwan [from December 1942 until May 1945].

I: Right.

T: Is that also close to Shanghai?

I: It was approximately five miles farther inland than Woosung.

T: So both these camps, at Woosung and Kiangwan, are close to each other.

I: About five miles apart.

T: How did the conditions differ at these two camps?

I: They were the same—very bad. Very, very bad.

T: So you got some kind of barracks here as well?

I: Basically, they were rundown barracks is what they were. Like at Woosung I know it was a stable that we moved into. I can't quite remember... The barracks were the same type.

T: Was it kind of a lock, stock and barrel move everybody, or were you split up into groups and only some were moved?

I: Our first move was guys splitting the groups up. Some guys went to one place, civilians went to another. Then after Woosung every time we moved, the group, the survivors, the group shrunk in size.

T: Woosung or Kiangwan, those first two places, were people dying at these places, among the prisoners?

I: Basically very few. We were fortunate. We had some of the greatest noncoms in the world. They kept the discipline. Kept the guys in line.

T: Why is that important?

I: For morale. We heard from guys at other camps where they separated them out and stuff like that or where the noncoms didn't care. They lost a lot of guys. One instance that I happened to witness was at the camp in Fengtai, China. Another camp, my third stop.

[The camp at Kiangwan was closed down in May 1945 and the entire group of POWs was enroute to Japan. They were sent by train from Kiangwan north towards Peking. They stopped at Fengtai, not far from Peking, and were housed in an open warehouse under miserable conditions, from 17 May to 19 June 1945. While there they were sent out on various work details.—JNP]

We were working for this group of Kempetai. The Japanese military police force, or Gestapo if you want to call them that, was called the Kempetai. The Kempetai took us on this detail we were on, and we saw two Euro-Asian young girls walking with their children. Come walking down the street. Women were the last thing on our mind—food was our biggest thought. The guys started whistling, and this big bamboo—

T: So the Americans are whistling at these...

I: Yes. They lined up two machine guns and start beating, punishing the kids. Five, six, seven-year-old kids in front of us and taunting us. "You brave Americans, do something about it." Wanting us to do something so they could waste us. And Sergeant Rush got up on his knees, "We live through this. Any guys move, and we live through this..." and he'd see that we spent the rest of our life in Portsmouth, which was a naval prison. That was the kind of discipline.

(1, B, 688)

T: So don't rise to their taunts.

I: Yes. [He told us that] they're going to do things to get us angry at them.

T: And try to get you to lash out, in which case they could...

I: Waste you. Yes.

T: Now the Kempetai have a bad reputation. Did they assault the prisoners or did they interrogate people and mistreat them?

I: Their basic weapon that they had, big bamboo club. They'd walk along and just whack you across the back or head or something like that. You expected, maybe expected, but you didn't expect it.

T: So when something like that happened you wouldn't be shocked.

I: Right.

T: And for no reason?

I: Yes. Because you know, the things—any Japanese ex-POW will tell you the Japanese did this. You've got a gun pointing at you, whatever they tell you to do, you're going to do without hesitation if you have any brains in your head. But the taunts and stuff like that... They did taunt us. A lot of them were skilled in jujitsu and stuff like that and they would want to wrestle. They'd outweigh us and stuff like that, but they still would taunt us and wrestle and knock us on our butts. There was nothing we could do about it. No. If you were to get up and hit them, you knew you're asking for... *(trails off)*

T: You're underfed and underweight, to begin with. Then the power position.

I: Right. It was nothing like they had in Germany or some of the camps that they had in the Philippines, the guys dying off like... It was mostly physical and mental stress. I have to say physical and mental.

T: This is going on for years. You were at Woosung for a year, more than a year. You were at Kiangwan also for more than two years.

I: Almost three years really.

T: How do you get through month after month after month of no end in sight?

I: Pray. You talk to God a lot.

T: Now do I hear you saying that you became a more religious person during your time as a POW?

I: No. I got mad at God many times. I cussed him out. Because how could you let man do this? How would you let one man do this to another? What we saw being done. Cuss him out, and the next minute you're praying to him. There was even the angle...

T: Very interesting.

I: I personally don't believe... Every POW talked to God. I believe they did talk to God. Yes.

T: Let me try to carry that thought forward. When you were released from your POW time and you were back in the States, how was your faith then?

I: Diminished.

T: I appreciate your honesty, because it would be easy to say that you stayed religious, and what you're saying is, you didn't.

(1, B, 726)

I: No. Oh, sure I would go to the synagogue. But I wasn't faithful to God after I got out, got liberated. He had done his job, you know. I've become more agnostic. The more I think about it, why did you let this happen? Why did...

T: So there are no atheists in foxholes, which you think might be true.

I: Absolutely true.

T: And yet after the war, you say you felt this anger again about what had been allowed to take place?

I: Yes. Why did you let this happen? Especially when you came back. We didn't know anything about the Holocaust or anything like that. It seemed a minor holocaust, what was going on in Nanking and some of those places. Who would believe that people would do those things? Just for no reason at all, kill? It just seems like that don't happen. It did happen. It's hard to believe.

T: Yes. Hard to believe. That's it.

I: The more we found out about it the more, I wouldn't say the agnostic I got, but... (*trails off*)

T: Did you become bitter in a sense?

I: I wouldn't say I was bitter. I came home. I came home with both my legs, both my arms. Mentally I might be screwed up, but, you know...

T: You were all in one piece, and you lived.

I: Yes.

T: Let me ask you to compare those first two places in China. You said that the barracks, the conditions were fairly similar. How about the daily routine and the work you were doing?

I: Same.

T: Same thing. So you were being detailed on all kinds of...

I: All kinds of... Most of the physical labor. Mental strain. Stuff like that. I think most of the guys... [I think it] weighed them down. If we hadn't had our senior NCOs—they kept us, kept the survivors alive so we could get out.

T: What was, when you think about your time, and this is those two stops in China there, a number of years, what was the most difficult thing for you personally?

I: Food. Thinking of [food]. My mother was a pretty good cook. Eating good like that. Fed well in the service. That's all you could think about. Food.

T: Was there a way to scrounge food? That is, to get more than the Japanese were providing?

I: No. There was ways—you'd steal. Everybody stole. Everything from equipment to... Not from one another. That's one thing that I'm sure everybody watched out for. There was no stealing amongst [the prisoners].

T: Was there no stealing among the men because you were careful, or because it wasn't done?

I: It wasn't done. But what we could steal outside of camp, it was legal. Anything out of camp was okay.

T: Did you have opportunities to come across animals, shall we say, when you were outside the camp?

I: Not in China. In China human feces were used as fertilizer on the ground. So you had to be careful. Even walking along.

T: Right.

I: You had to be very, very careful.

(1, B, 762)

T: You could get dysentery.

I: Everybody had dysentery. Stuff like that. You'd watch. If the Chinese on a working party would eat it, okay. If we could steal it we would, but even then we were used to things. We still would kind of watch it.

T: So even if you saw something edible you still had to be careful.

I: We'd be very careful. If a guy could get it into camp and boil it or whatever...

T: Coming into camp were you frisked or searched every day?

I: Not every day. Because they knew we didn't have anything. If a guy was lucky enough... Those guys who were on work details on airports and stuff like that were bringing in alcohol and stuff like that. We gambled for food and stuff like that. The guys were dumb. Gambled for cigarettes and gambled their food away.

T: You talk about working a lot. How did guys spend time when they weren't working? There's sleeping. There's working. When there was waking moments [how did you spend your time?]

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

I: If we had, let's say two or three free days in the month, whatever it was, you'd try to shower or wash clothes or do whatever it is. We kind of learned that coming from work you were crapped out. Work, eat, and sleep. Mostly all work and sleep.

T: What kind of conflicts did you observe among the men, among the prisoners? It seems like a stressful situation here.

I: It's stressful. My mother was a better cook than your mother. Our applesauce was better than your applesauce. Most of the fights between the prisoners were about who was a better cook, what food tasted better, or I won't eat spinach, I wouldn't ever eat spinach, but I'll eat spinach now. Ninety-nine percent of the big arguments were about food.

T: The way you described it, that was the topic of conversation too.

I: Yes. It was. You'd be talking about girls and two minutes later talking about every woman. Within minutes everything switched. Some guys had made up menus. What they were going to eat for three years ahead of time.

T: No kidding.

I: The stupidest thing. Of course, we would get to see each other every day. After the war was over, we'd see each other once a month or once or twice a year.

T: You mentioned how your faith became more important to you, [it's amazing] how the whole situation seemed to have changed, and then when it's over...

I: It's over. Am I sounding different than any other people that you talk to?

(pause in tape to check evidence)

I: When we left Woosung to go to Kiangwan, we were in Japanese uniforms. Perfect condition Japanese uniforms. Japanese military clothes. When we got to Kiangwan, they took away everything that we had gotten in Woosung.

T: Your personal belongings or your clothes?

I: We had no personal belongings. The only thing was what they issued to us. All our clothes, the shoes to our hats or whatever we got at Woosung, they took away and gave us the same stuff, but from this camp. When we left somewhere we went from Kiangwan up to Fengtai. They took away everything that they gave us and they deloused us and stuff like that. Took away everything from Kiangwan and gave us clothes. Different clothes. Just as dirty. Just as full of lice and stuff like that.

(2, A, 55)

T: Almost the same stuff, but belonged to a different camp?

I: Different camps. Everything; what we took out of the camp stayed in the camp.

T: You were at Kiangwan, from the record, until May 1945?

I: Yes.

T: How much awareness did you guys have, you personally, of the progress of the war?

I: Some guy said they had a radio, but if it worked I never heard about it. A lot of guys figured oh, oh, we're getting rations cut and guys are getting meaner and stuff like that. They must be losing. How the war was coming out, we never knew.

T: So you could guess based on things like that.

I: Everything was rumors. One of the big rumors for quite a while—it was a big rumor—I guess this was in all the camps, they would give all the POWs a new car when they got home. Things like that.

T: But that's interesting, because I've heard that rumor from somebody else, another POW. That made the rounds apparently.

I: Oh, yes. It did. I know taking to the guys from the Philippines—they talked to a lot of the guys at these other camps. The rumor was seemed to a universal thought. We were all going to get a new car.

T: New cars. If you make it out of here.

I: Oh, yes.

T: You described Woosung and Kiangwan [with] essentially the same kind of conditions, barracks and food and the details. Pretty much the same thing. Now when you moved to your third stop in China, at Fengtai, it was May and June 1945 when you were there.

I: Yes.

T: Are things getting any different?

I: Worse. They're getting worse.

T: What's getting worse?

I: Less soup. Less water. Less soup. Instead of a packed cup of rice, it was a loose cup of rice. At that time the Japanese soldiers knew what was going down. As we got close to Japan, the Japanese soldier's, his treatment, personal treatment of us, went from bad to worse. They were taking out on us what was happening to their comrades and friends. That's how we pretty much figured out how the war was going.

T: For you the conditions at Fengtai, the barracks or the sleeping quarters—

(2, A, 107)

I: Just old barracks that weren't being used anymore.

T: So it sounds again pretty consistent with what you've been... So are you getting sort of used to this in a way?

I: We were used to getting it all the time.

T: Did the work change here?

I: Mainly because of our condition. Our weakening condition, both physically and mentally. It became harder.

T: To actually to work?

I: Yes. Yes. I remember down at Pusan, in Korea. [The group was kept at Pusan, Korea, for three to seven days only before being sent on to Japan.—JNP] Working loading [salt onto] ships. There whatever we could steal we put up there. We'd be loading ships that would dock there. Hundred kilo sacks of salt.

T: Hundred kilo sacks?

I: Yes.

T: How do you pick that up when you don't even weigh that much?

I: Someone would help you.

T: Let's talk about those if we can. At Fengtai, China, which is by Beijing and Harbing, which is in Manchuria. You said that the work was, again, pretty similar. Being details?
[No record of Silverlieb group being at Harbing, China—JNP]

I: Detail work, yes. At Harbing and at Fengtai the hours were short. Pusan was still a fourteen, fifteen hour day. The Japanese wanted to keep us out there. Their detail was short, and our detail was short.

T: Because they had to stay out there with you.

I: Yes. They had to stay out there with us.

T: What's an example of the kind of detail you were on at Fengtai, or at Harbing?

I: Working at military camps.

T: With Japanese soldiers around?

I: Yes. Working in garage compounds fixing flat tires or, one time at Fengtai they decided to have us clean the Japanese spent shells, the artillery shells.

T: The shell casings.

I: Shell casings. Yes. Just cleaning a thing like that. Harbing was mostly just waiting. Nothing. The thing that we missed most over Fengtai, I mean Pusan, were the air raids. In China we were bombed by Americans and Chinese.

T: Talk about that a little bit, because this is something new for you to experience.

I: Oh, yes. Basically a lot of times in the Shanghai area we'd get bombers, American bombers that bombed that area. Never the camps.

T: Were these carrier based planes or B-29s, or didn't you know?

I: B-29s we didn't see until Japan. Mostly bombers (***)

T: How did you deal with something like that?

(2, A, 161)

I: Loved it. We loved it.

T: Even though they could have bombed you too.

I: They could have yes, but that was the only encouraging thing that we had was the bombing. We knew when the bombing came, there's no work. Once the sirens sounded

things were pretty off. You were in a ditch or wherever it was. When the all clear sounded you were back to what you were doing. Whether we were building a mountain or working in the compound. Once the siren sounded...

T: Of course you have to take cover.

I: We missed the bombing. Over in North China we missed that. We missed American bombings.

T: You didn't have them in north China, in Manchuria.

I: No. Not until we got back to Tokyo.

T: The food you mentioned was getting thinner, or less of it.

I: Less, and thinner.

T: And the kind of details you mentioned, give an example, another example if you can, for example what you were doing in Harbing.

I: Nothing. We knew it was a transit. Basically it was a transit camp. Other than they put us on a detail at a military base or something we were just, whatever a Japanese soldier would do. Not doing anything.

T: Seems like killing time.

I: Just killing time. Yes.

T: By the time you got to Harbing transit camp, June 1945, were you still together with a lot of guys that you'd been captured with at Wake?

I: We were all together. Only Wake personnel. One time they brought in some American aviators that were shot down, but they didn't stay with us too long.

T: Then you really were together with the same group of people.

I: Pretty much so. Yes.

T: I wonder if you can talk about the importance of friends. How you make friends and how important they were.

I: Very important. The most important thing you can have is a buddy. A friend. You help out each other in every way we can. A guy was sick, you'd maybe spare some food. You give him something. Even if it was a little bit. But you still gave something. A little more soup; you could give the guy or one or two teaspoons of rice, or three teaspoons. You gave it to him grudgingly, but you gave it to him.

T: So it's those who tried to be loners, in a sense, had a rough time.

I: They did have. Yes. We talked about this. Had meetings. Everybody had a buddy. Everybody was a buddy.

T: Did you have, yourself, did you have, would you say, one really good friend or did you have several?

I: Several good friends. A lot of the guys I went through boot camp with. Guys that were in the same squad.

T: Because you were with the same...

I: Same group all the time. Yes.

You'd have to be at a reunion to see—everybody is hugging one another. You could see a guy... You're hugging everybody who was there with you. You felt that way. The closeness. We were closer there than we were with our own families, our own brothers. We get together—it sounds silly—at first, when we first started going to meetings up there, we'd rather be with our buddies than our own wives. Because your wife, you were seeing every day. These are guys you see once or twice a year.

(2, A, 212)

T: So that's a deep friendship then.

I: Oh, it's great. I still... Let me show you. Thirty, forty guys at every... survivors.

T: These are friends for life.

I: Yes. We don't see each other but once or twice a year. In my group up there we basically meet most of the time. The Wake Island guys. We have our general reunion once a year. Most of the time guys that are survivors are there. We get thirty, forty guys at the national meeting. Every once a year we get together at Laughlin, Nevada. For a mini-reunion. So we go at least twice a year, and then we see a lot of the guys up there. We still are involved, but we're depending more on our wives, but we still want to be there to see our buddies.

T: When you talk about the friends that you had, your close friends, did you find that once you were in the prison experience, that your close friends were different people than the ones who had been your close friends on Wake or in boot camp?

I: They were the same guys, but I broke through when I got married. Three guys stood up at the altar—ex-POWs came to Minneapolis here to stand up for me. I stood up for a couple guys at their weddings. Stuff like that.

T: So it's the same guys. I guess what I'm trying to figure is, are the close friends that you had in boot camp and on Wake, are those the kind of friends that you kept through your POW experience or was it different guys that you found yourself grouped with?

I: Same guys.

T: Same guys.

I: Yes. We were all together.

T: Because you had been friends before.

I: Yes. Boot camp. Most of us guys, we were on three different islands together. The Johnsons, Palmiras, and Wake together. And most of us guys were together by the time the war ended. The survivors had been together for four and a half, five years. Every day of our lives.

T: That's right. You were on a number of small islands before you went to Wake, and then these stepping stone POW experiences.

I: Yes. Same guys all the time.

T: Same guys. That's a unique aspect to your story in that a lot of other guys found themselves bunched, and then split up, and then moved around to where they really didn't end up with the same people.

I: Even those that were moved around would see each other. Most of the splitting came after the first move from Woosung when they took us to Kiangwan. But those guys were mostly civilians. But after Kiangwan then they started, they'd just grab a group of guys and take off. Where they'd go to different camps in China and Japan, Formosa or wherever. But after the war we survivors still got together. But basically the guys stick together most of the time. The guys I was with there. The guys were transported to Taiwan. Those guys probably survived closer, even though we were in the same outfit and went all through... We didn't know to stay together and went different places.

T: This is interesting how you bond, to use a modern phrase, you bond with people.

I: Right. Right.

T: And it's really a concrete bond.

I: It is. It is. A good example. This guy here in Minneapolis, the only thing we have in common was the fact we got guys who were all caught aboard ship, *Suwannee*—this lost battalion. The guys from the Philippines...

(2, A, 260)

T: This is the lunch group once a month.

I: Yes. You see how we kid each other. See for yourself. I'm going to a meeting. It costs me twenty, thirty bucks for drinks. Most of the time somebody's picking up the tab for those. For the whole luncheon. And we don't mind it. We love it.

T: In that shared experience, the larger POW of the Japanese experience, because you have very different stories that you tell.

I: Oh, yes.

T: Yet you feel that, and I've heard other guys say this, and maybe you can comment, you can let your guard down more easily...

I: Yes.

T: Because (a) they'll believe everything you say and, (b) they've shared the same aspect of this.

I: We can tell the guys that are bullshitting us. We know the guys who are.

T: Yes?

I: Oh, yes. Because they say things that would be just impossible... Like, the Japanese didn't change. Basically the guys in the Philippines, the first year they were POWs they could have been in a German concentration camp. The way the guys were dying off and stuff like that. Of course those guys, a lot of guys from the Philippines were ill. Several of the guys from the Philippines were draftees. Where our group, everybody was—we had no draftees.

T: You were all Marines and a few Navy on Wake, right?

I: Yes. Even the naval personnel were all guys who had been there just as long as we had.

T: They were regular Navy too.

I: Yes. All regular Navy. So it was the same thing. Al Kopp [US Navy veteran and POW, sunk off the USS *Houston*] and I, we had kind of a bond together. We considered ourselves old timers. Guys who come in and went in early.

T: You're also both from North Dakota too.

I: Yes. Sure (*both laugh*).

T: Irv, let me move here to your last stop, because this is where you gained experience as a miner. On the surface this looks like a different can of worms as far as work and conditions.

I: Right.

T: So let's start with Pusan, Korea. There you worked in a salt mine.
[Experience that follows must be from Japan, and after end June 1945. Likely a coal mine, too. No record of salt mines in Korea with POW labor.]

I: A salt mine, yes.

T: This is from the end of '44 to early in '45. [Actually July 1945.]

I: Right.

T: Talk about the conditions at Pusan.

I: Working and cold in the salt mines. Freezing. Cold. It was cold. We had to borrow from the guys who didn't go down in the mine, we borrowed jackets from them. It was cold. Even though the climate was warmer on the surface. It was cold down in the mines. All we had on was just a jacket and trousers.

(2, A, 296)

T: Talk about the kind of work you did underground in the mines.

I: Shovel. Scraping the walls with a pick. Loading that in a sack and loading it into carts.

T: Was the blasting done by the Japanese?

I: No blasting. Everything by hand.

T: Everything was by hand.

I: Yes.

T: How many of you were working underground at any one time?

I: Half to three quarters of the camp. All Americans.

T: Did you have Korean overseers or guards?

I: Oh, yes. They were the honchos. Koreans would be honchos. The Japanese—very few went into the mine with us. If they did they stood right at the entrance.

T: So this is the salt mine [ERROR], and the time in Hokkaido.

I: Yes. They wouldn't go into the mine. They would just go to the bottom of the shaft. That's as far as they would go. They wouldn't go in. We were supposed to load a car a day of coal. [Now correct: coal on Hokkaido, at Hakodate.]

T: This is in Hokkaido now.

I: Yes. At Hokkaido [at Hakodate]. If we loaded a car in three days we had a lot because we kept up. "You give us more food, we'll work hard. We can't work with the rations you're giving us." And they would get mad at us, and stuff like that, and maybe cut our rations. Of course, they didn't have the rations themselves. We kept telling them, feed us more and we'll work more. By that time all we wanted was food. Nothing else. Nothing else counted.

T: It was the food. Now you've mentioned even in Harbing and Fengtai the food was getting a little less.

I: Less.

T: What about in Japan?

I: It wasn't the same ration we were getting in Woosung. It was less. The soup was more watery, if it possibly could be. It was just basically hot water that we were getting up there. Where maybe in Woosung, China, there might have been a little meat thrown in. Not much, but there was something thrown on top of the pot...

T: So you noticed a decrease in...

I: Decrease in food. They beat us. They would beat on us. It didn't do any good. They knew that. But the way the hurt us more than anything by cutting our food.

T: They must have known that.

(2, A, 326)

I: Oh, yes. They knew that.

T: Now you mentioned you had Korean guards, or honchos?

I: The bosses were called honchos. There were Koreans. Yes.

T: What kind of treatment did you get from the Korean honchos?

I: Worse than the Japanese. And we figured out it was a natural thing to do. They were sucking up to the Japanese. If they didn't get their quotas done, or whatever they had, then the Japanese took it out on them. They were basically worse than the Japanese guards.

T: So were they physically assaulting prisoners, this kind of thing?

I: Not that I remember, but they would swear at us more. Physically I really don't think they were. I don't think the Japanese would allow them to. The Japanese would sit there and beat the shit out of us. They didn't care. But I don't think they—maybe they respected us more than the Koreans. That's the only thing that I could think of. They didn't like the Koreans. The Koreans hated them, and they hated the Koreans.

T: What was the most difficult thing for you about your mining experiences? When you worked in the mine, did you work every day?

I: Oh, yes.

T: So there wasn't a day off in there pretty regularly?

I: I think the short time that we were there, I would say we got two, three days off work in the lot. It was still your twelve, fourteen hour day every day.

T: So they were working you a lot.

I: Yes.

T: So you were kept in quarters. Did you just go to the mine shaft as a group and were taken down?

I: Walk to the shaft, walk to the mines, walk out of the mines.

T: What did you wear? You mentioned the mine was cold.

I: Japanese Army [uniforms]. We were cold all the time in Japanese Army coats.

T: Did you always work underground or did you work above ground sometimes too?

I: At Pusan I loaded ships, scraped salt and loaded ships.

T: Which of those, of working above ground or below ground, which was perceived to be worse duty?

I: Loading the ships. Like I say, the sacks were a hundred kilos. Burlap sack with...

T: That's 220 pounds. That's very heavy.

I: Yes. We had to load that. It wasn't automatic loaders. It was walking up the gangplank.

T: So it was human labor.

I: Yes. That's the cheapest thing they had.

T: So they just made you load these ships...

(2, A, 358)

I: By hand. Yes.

T: Was there a chance, being in a port area, could you scrounge food or anything else of value there?

I: I suppose. We tried. I can't remember anything substantial that was stolen. We were guarded pretty good there. I know it was easier working on land to get stuff. The Japanese, even though we tried to avoid it, there's stuff on the ground but you still, if you're hungry enough you're going to eat it.

T: So here in this port, could you see ships coming and going from the port when you were above ground?

I: I don't think so. We saw the ships that we were loading, but that's about it. You walked your fifty, one hundred yards whatever it was. You did see the ships come and go.

T: This mine, by the way, was it near the camp?

I: It was roughly, I'd say a mile and a half, two miles from our camp.

T: And your camp was in town?

I: At the edge of town [of Hakodate].

T: So you're talking not much transit time.

I: Yes.

T: And back to camp every night.

I: Every day. Oh, yes.

T: Were you bombed at all by the Americans, that you remember?

I: No. Not while we were there anyhow. Not while we were there, or that we saw any damage to the city when we were there.

T: Was that good for your morale in a sense, that you figured that the Japanese were having a worse time in the war?

I: Yes. Any move that we made, it was a good sign for the Americans, for us.

T: You're getting closer to Japan, for starters, so you know that you're moving backwards. Let me talk about Christmas and New Year's. Were holidays difficult times?

I: No. I'll tell you what happened in 1942. The only days the POWs, I can remember, ate a decent meal. The American and British communities that were living still were being repatriated out of Shanghai, sent into our camp. For the guys up there [it was] the only day in the prison we didn't have rice. We had anything you want. We had cake. We had meats.

T: How strange.

I: They sent it into the camp up there. Anything else the Japanese would steal. In all the time, the four years I was a POW, our group only one and a half rations, some guys got two, but I know we got one and a half rations. One and a half Red Cross parcels.

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 387.

T: You mentioned getting only one and a half Red Cross parcels. That's as good as nothing in a sense.

I: It was nothing. But the Japanese had warehouses [with parcels]. Another thing, another day I'll never forget. None of us guys will. It was Christmas Day 1941 [on Wake]. You were a prisoner of war and there was no food or nothing. Gasoline tainted water. Most of the time we still had our hands tied. Christmas Day 1941 was one of the worst. Christmas Day of '42 was probably the best. The civilians were being repatriated.

T: There was a large international community in Shanghai before the war.

I: There were two other days. Jewish Passover one time. There was a large Jewish community in Shanghai. The Jews weren't safe in Germany and places like that.

T: That's right.

I: So a lot of them found a job in Japan. They didn't stop them or anything. So they sent into our camp—it wasn't Passover yet—they must have sent hundreds of pounds of matzo. I don't know if you know what matzo is. The Jewish guys, we stuffed our faces. We gave the rest of the matzo to the camp. We broke it up and stick it in the soup. Maybe three or four days we had thicker soup. They still talk about the Jewish bread that they got during that time. Those three days I know were the best holidays. Otherwise they didn't recognize any Christian holidays. The emperor's birthday mostly and I can't remember, once or twice we were given candy.

T: What difference did it make to the Japanese that you were Jewish?

I: None. None.

T: Positive or negative.

I: Right. Either way. Not if you were a Jew or a Catholic, Protestant. I heard they were pretty rough on some of the Hindus though. That I heard. I never saw it.

T: But among the prisoners you were with religion didn't make any—it was Western religion, therefore...

I: Right. Didn't make any difference.

T: The mine experience sounds like it was difficult. You're describing it as more difficult physical labor than you had up until then.

I: The labor itself, whether at Pusan [harbor] and Hokkaido or even Kiangwan, it was physically and mentally rough.

T: How was what you were doing mentally rough for you?

I: How long can I take this? Want to crap out. Make it harder for the other guys. You had to think about your buddies. The welfare of your buddies. But physically—it might have seemed harder, but it was probably the same.

T: But you got weaker.

I: We got weaker.

T: Did you have any serious health problems after your appendix?

I: Malaria was common. Malaria, dysentery. Now it's bad, but there it was common.

T: That's a good distinction to make. Now we meet with somebody who had malaria or dysentery we put them in a hospital.

I: Right.

T: But everybody had it.

I: Yes. You felt sorry for the guys... Or who had Beriberi. Everybody had Beriberi, so it was, you know... You look at a guy every day, you don't see any change. But if you see a guy once a month or once or twice a year, you can notice changes. But when you see a guy every day... We all had Beriberi. Every one of us guys. Malnutrition.

T: You probably looked as bad as the guy you're looking at.

I: Right. Yes. Exactly. I could look at him and it was like looking into the mirror. He looked at you and he's looking in a mirror. I don't know if I'm making myself clear...

(2, B, 469)

T: Oh, absolutely. Because there were no mirrors here to look in.

I: Right.

T: And yet there was the mirror image. Hundred guys around you.

I: Yes.

T: You probably looked just as bad as they did.

I: Yes. But I didn't notice it, because they were just as bad.

T: That's right. Talk about the trip. Now you were taken by ship from Pusan to Hokkaido?

I: From Pusan to Tokyo.

[The group was sent by ship from Pusan, and landed on the west coast of the island of the main island of Honshu, probably Susa (?). From there they traveled by train down the coast to Shimonoseki and then up to Tokyo.—JNP]

From Tokyo to Hokkaido, we went there by train. We had a long walk from where we landed in Hokkaido until we got to the trucks that took us to the mine.

T: When you landed in Japan in early 1945 American bombers had been visiting Japan.

I: Yes.

T: Could you see any indication of that?

I: Yes. Now we saw and we felt the repercussion from...

T: Tell us what you could see first. What could you see in Tokyo or elsewhere?

I: Bombed. Everything vacant. Everything burned down in the city. It looked worse after we came back [after the surrender]. Everything was burned down. The people were... terrible.

T: Explain that.

I: We were in the subways, in a subway. They took us there. The Japanese soldiers allowed—I would say they allowed—civilians would get by [the guards and] come in with clubs and stuff and beat on the guys, on some of the prisoners. Take out their frustration. That's all it was. They didn't know us from... But they took out their frustration on us. The younger people were the worst. The younger people and the older people. Old ladies were very bad. They were entirely the worst. Young kids... It was just like gang warfare and

stuff like that. They took out their... (*trails off*) The [US] Air Corps, most guys, they weren't prisoners of war—they were war criminals. That's the way that they [the Japanese] looked at them.

T: Do you remember being physically assaulted yourself by civilians?

I: [I remember] being hit by them and stuff like that, yes. Boards and bats and stuff like that. You know it wasn't an everyday occurrence, but when it happened, well, they're the boss.

[The group was actually attacked by a civilian mob in or near Tokyo. As they came in to a train station a US bombing raid was taking place. They had to take shelter, and were then taken through some streets to a different train. That is when the mob attacked them.—JNP]

T: To the air raids, you could tell in Tokyo and elsewhere perhaps too, that the American bombers had visited Japan?

I: Oh, yes (*emphatically*). Yes. Especially in Japan. Not so much Hokkaido, it wasn't bombed too much.

(2, B, 522)

T: It's too far north, but in Tokyo?

I: Kyushu, the main island [Honshu], and the... They wouldn't let us look out of the train windows.

T: So when went from Honshu north to Hokkaido on ...you weren't allowed to look out the windows?

I: No. If we could we would, but they had most of them with blinds, or boarded up. Prison trains.

T: How did this situation make you feel? On the one hand, I think you might be scared but...

I: Mentally we were winning.

T: So you took the kind of treatment you were getting, or what you saw, as evidence that America was winning the war?

I: Yes. That's how we knew. Of course, all of a sudden we were told in Japan that any prisoners of war, regardless—we were told this, verbally—any prisoner of war, regardless of nationality or rank, the day that the Allies landed in Japan all prisoners of war would be executed.

[The evidence is clear on this: POWs were to be executed in the case of an Allied invasion of Japan. And POWs were killed elsewhere: on the island of Palawan, e.g.; also ninety-eight civilians left on Wake were killed.]

T: So this wasn't just rumor. They told you this.

I: They told us that.

T: This is when you were at Hokkaido?

I: In Japan. It probably was Hokkaido, but we were told that. Verbally. Told by guards that came that the day the Allies landed in Japan, that all prisoners of war, regardless of nationality or rank, would be executed.

T: So how do you respond to something like that? On the one hand that means, of course, the war is coming to a close, but...

I: I think we had one hope that we would take one of them with us. We still thought of ourselves as soldiers. If I can take one guy with me you know, it was worthwhile.

T: Until that happened you were sort of stuck with your lot, which was to work.

I: Right. Correct.

T: Talk about the work you did in the coal mine. Because Hokkaido is way up in the north there. Let's start with the conditions you lived in.

I: Very bad. It was filthy. Filthy conditions up there. The food was at a very minimum. Very minimum. We were up there when they told us that Roosevelt had died. They said, We've got good news for you. The war should be ending soon. Your president is dead.

T: That's April 12, 1945. And from your memory, you were at Hokkaido when that happened?

I: We were up in Hokkaido. No matter where it was said, most of the guys would start humming "God Bless America" or something like that. Not a word, not a sound was made.

[The Silverlieb group was definitely not on Hokkaido in April 1945; the record shows the group arrived only late June 1945 in Japan. There is evidence of a secret radio in the camp at Kiangwan in China, so the news almost certainly reached the group there.—JNP]

T: So the conditions at your location on Hokkaido, you still had a work barracks?

I: No. Just regular army barracks. I understand some guys had private houses, but we were, group of us together [in barracks].

T: How many of you were in this group that got sent up there?

(2, B, 567)

I: At Hokkaido? Less than one hundred.

T: So just a piece of those guys that you'd been with earlier?

I: Yes. Yes.

T: Did you meet or were you put with any other POWs...

I: No. Never met anybody else except the guys I was with.

T: That does create a bonding experience I guess. How many hours a day were you sent to work in the coal mine?

I: Anywhere from fourteen [to] sixteen hours a day.

T: That's just every waking minute it sounds like.

I: Just about. Woke up, went to the mine.

T: What kind of clothes did you wear to go down to the mine?

I: Japanese army coats.

T: So once again the same kind of stuff.

I: The bad thing about it these mines in Japan, these coal mines were abandoned coal mines. They were deep. Colder than hell. And most of them were flooded. I'll use myself as an example. When I first came home, they had to operate on my legs. They had to staple the bones together in my legs.

T: What happened to your legs?

I: Our legs, the bones were very brittle and they were like chipping away or cracking. They operated on both legs. Not at the same time. I wore a cast from the hip to the toes for a couple months, if I remember right. They had to operate on them right below the knees and staple the bones together.

T: Because they were weakened.

I: Yes. We worked in ice water above our knees.

T: So these mines were flooded. They didn't drain them. They didn't pump them.

I: No. How we even lived... We heard that in some mines they had to take birds down with them just in case there was gas or something like that. We never had to do that. The Japanese dropped us off at the end. They would stay there. We had to go inside. We were supposed to produce, I think it was, if I remember right, a car a day, or whatever it was. It took three or four days before we could scrape up enough. More rocks were thrown in to the coal.

T: So this was a mine that they had found economically not useful...

I: Yes. They were abandoned mines that we reopened when we got up there. Even the Koreans had abandoned them.

T: Now as you think about the work that you've done and the stops you've made, how difficult was this last stop at Hokkaido [Hakodate]?

I: No food.

T: Was the work at Hokkaido worse or harder in your opinion?

I: It was hard. Physically it was easier than Pusan. We were carrying those sacks up there, and in China we were pushing carts up the mountain and stuff like that. So physically we were in the mines and freezing our asses off, but keeping active to a very minimum.

T: The Japanese weren't watching you...

I: They would come in to the mine. They would just go to the bottom of the shaft and that's it.

(2, B, 610)

T: So you were unsupervised almost.

I: Basically, yes. Unsupervised.

T: Did you have days off here or was it work every day?

I: Every day.

T: You were working every day. What was the most difficult thing for you about the Hokkaido experience?

I: Food.

T: You've come back to that a number of times here. It's getting less or poorer quality or both?

I: Both. Rations were cut down to just a loose cup of rice and hot water.

T: What about the treatment by the Japanese in the quarters in the camp you stayed in here?

I: In Japan?

T: Yes.

I: They didn't bother us at all.

T: In the camp too?

I: Yes. We wouldn't see them. The only time we'd see them was on our way to work and our way back from work.

T: So in the camp compound. Was it a camp or a compound?

I: Yes. At Hokkaido we were fenced in by a wooden, like a wooden fort.

T: So you had like barracks inside of a frontier fort, it sounds like.

I: Yes. Like we see in pictures with the Indians.

T: Yes.

I: But that was like that up in Hokkaido.

T: So the Japanese, what I hear you saying is, they kind of kept their distance from you.

I: Yes. They did. They kept their distance from us. Very, very much so. In Japan.

T: This work, pretty repetitive, and did you work underground every day?

I: Yes.

T: So underground. We talked about the food, the conditions, a smaller group of men. This was the last stop you made. The war ended when you were at Hokkaido.

I: Right.

T: What did you hear, or how did you hear, rather, about the end of the war?

I: It was at least ten days after the war ended that we heard about it. Some B-29s flew over and dropped messages written in English, Indian, and Dutch—three different languages on

the note—that the war is ended. If it's a prison camp spread blankets or do something. Once a day the Army would come over and drop us food. The next day the Navy came and dropped us food.

T: So they knew. It was some time before they knew you were there.

I: Oh, at least, I'd say at least a week, ten days before we even knew the war was over. We found out the day they came over and dropped the leaflets on us. That the war was over.

(2, B, 641)

T: You're counting days forward from August 15 or from September 2, when the treaty was signed?

I: It had to be from August 15. One day we just had to stop work.

T: Really? Just ceased?

I: No work. Our rations increased. We started getting a little bit more rations. We were now friends and stuff [according to the Japanese].

T: Pick up on that, because I've read these stories too. Did the Japanese really begin to treat you differently once the war was over?

I: Once they found out the war was over, yes. We had no more work. Our rations, which is the most important, our rations increased. Most of the guys had taken off. The guys that were more or less watching in camp, were the professional soldiers. The other guys just took off. The kids and the old men. Just took off. They helped us keep order amongst the Koreans. The Koreans went nuts up there when they found the war was over.

T: You had Koreans in the camp at Hokkaido?

I: Not in camp. They were living in the camp area.

T: What did you observe with these Koreans?

I: The filthiest, crummiest... Can't say anything good about them.

T: Did you observe them after the war was over? What did you observe of the Koreans after the war was over?

I: They were ticked off by everybody. We had free run of the thing up there. Some of the guys, we took over and tried to keep the peace between the Japanese and the Koreans.

T: Where on Hokkaido were you?

I: The closest town that we knew was a place called Hakodate. Close by Hakodate. And there were three other...

[Hakodate was the town on the coast which was headquarters for this series of camps. The camps were called Hakodate Numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4.—JNP]

In Hakodate Number 3 there were two other camps up here where they had hid this inspection—English or British...

T: Right. Away from your facility.

I: Yes.

T: Yours was still only these Americans.

I: Yes. British camp for British. Dutch camp for Dutch.

T: Now when the B-29s came over, what kind of things were they dropping to you? Food?

I: Yes. Food. What it was, they came down in parachutes. It had fifty-five gallon—two or three of them welded together. Split open. Any kind of food you could imagine. Everything. We were eating probably better than we had ever eaten in our lives. Which we thought anyhow. All the cigarettes you wanted. All the medication that we needed. They came over one day. The next day the Navy would come over. Two fifty-five gallon drums welded together and skip it. Come down low and release them. They skidded into the camp.

T: So you were suddenly getting plenty of stuff.

I: Yes.

(2, B, 677)

T: You've alluded to a problem with order, keeping order in the camp.

I: What do you mean? About our own guys?

T: Yes.

I: No. As I say, by this time we had no officers with us. All senior noncoms. Sergeants. These guys, like I said before, they'd done everything. They let us know we were still in the service.

T: So you felt that even after the war was over here in Hokkaido that there was still a semblance of order among the Americans?

I: Yes. There was no mob scene.

T: No retribution against the Japanese?

I: Most of the Japanese had taken off. The few that did stay they were probably there to protect us. More important to protect us from the civilians more than anything else.

T: Did you still worry about the civilians?

I: At that time, no. Because by the time the war was over, we had arms then. We had taken over the Japanese rifles and stuff.

T: So you could have protected yourself.

I: We could have protected ourselves. But basically the Koreans were still scared of the Japanese. I don't think they were scared of us, we were in the same shape that they were. No better or no worse. They still were scared of the Japanese.

T: What were your thoughts or your feelings when you found the war was over?

I: I made it! I made it.

T: Did you begin to think about: what now?

I: Yes. I was going to stay in the service. When I met my wife, I was going to stay in the service. Because you had ninety days to get reenlisted. (**). You could always go back in the service. It was ninety or one hundred twenty days, whatever it was. In the meantime, I had five years back pay on the books. I got in a little squall with our commanding officer when I came. The rumor was at Great Lakes Naval Office that this particular officer who had it in for several of the guys and he was going to get us after the war if we were still in the service. Fortunately I guess they found him and he was read off by senior officers. The rumor was he was read out by senior officers to get him out. Those guys went through enough. They weren't going to take no shit now. That's how it was. Then I met Jeannette, fell in love with her and for the next fifty-some years...

T: So you, for you staying in the Marine Corps...

I: I was damn near...

T: You were going to and then...

I: Yes. But then in the meantime I got married and stuff like that.

T: And you were married in April of '46. That was right when you got out of the service or were you still in?

I: A week after I got out.

T: Week after you got out. You were married 7 April '46.

I: Yes.

T: When you were in the camp in Japan, at Hakodate, you had to wait a while before you actually got out of that place.

(2, B, 714)

I: Yes. I say it was at least a month. I know it was September. I know I spent Thanksgiving in Guam. Christmas at hospital.

[The POWs were taken out of the Hokkaido camps about 15 September, a day or two either way depending on which camp.—JNP]

T: How did you get out of Hokkaido? I'm trying to think really physically. Did you walk? Were you flown out? Driven out? How did you get out of this place?

I: The Americans came. By that time got up to Hokkaido. As I recall they drove us to an airport in Sapporo. They drove us to the airport. They flew us down from there to Tokyo. But I got malaria at the airport and they put me on a hospital ship and sent me to Guam.

T: What were your thoughts when the first time you saw Americans? This time with guns. After five years. Close to five years.

I: We loved them.

T: You said earlier, a sense of just that you made it. Surviving this whole thing.

I: I was going to have that cake and ice cream and chocolate covered. I was going to have one of those.

T: So the food was still on the brain.

I: Not as much. I promised myself if I ever got out of there—what do you call them round cakes with the hole in the center? Bundt cake or something. I'd fill the inside with ice cream and all the chocolate. I had seen that every day. I was going to have one of those. Which I had.

T: Did you do that?

I: Yes.

T: Now, you spent time at a number of hospitals. You were at Guam, and then at Great Lakes.

I: Guam hospital ship. Oak Knoll Hospital in between.

T: Where is Oak Knoll?

I: San Francisco.

T: So you were at Guam, a hospital ship transport, and did you stay at Oak Knoll very long?

I: A week or so. Ten days.

T: So the majority of your time was Guam and Great Lakes?

I: Right.

T: How long did you stay at Guam?

I: Two weeks.

T: Then the hospital ship. So you were at Great Lakes for a while.

I: Yes.

T: Is that where they did the operation on your legs?

I: No.

T: At Great Lakes?

I: Here at the hospital here.

T: After you were out of the service?

(2, B, 738)

T: Well the physical recuperation, what did they do for you at Guam or Oak Knoll or Great Lakes?

I: Fed us. Come home. My first time I come home...

T: Here to Minneapolis?

I: To Minneapolis. I bet I weighed well over two hundred, two hundred twenty, two hundred thirty pounds. I just ballooned. Big as a cow.

[Weight gain such as this among liberated POWs is documented in a number of sources. On the hospital ships and in various facilities—Guam or the Philippines—the men were allowed to eat as much as they wanted. One problem was that the weight gain made them appear healthy when in reality they were not.—JNP and other sources]

T: You were under a hundred pounds when the war ended....

I: From the time the war ended to the time I got home, I put on well over one hundred pounds.

T: Six months, you put on a hundred pounds?

I: Yes.

T: So when you say they were feeding you, you mean literally. You just ate.

I: Ate and drank. That's all we did is eat and drink.

T: Now the drinking. What [was] the readjustment process to being in a different world again...?

I: We were in a different world and we were scared. Most of the guys will say they did not know how to act among civilized people.

T: For four years you hadn't been among civilized people.

I: Yes. We didn't know how to act. And the easiest place to hide, and a lot of guys will tell you, was in a bottle. It's nothing I'm proud of right now. I still take a drink or two, but not like I was drinking. At that time I was drinking between a pint and a fifth every day.

T: Goodness. You were drinking a lot.

I: This was every day for years. Where now the only time I drink is with these guys having two or three drinks, or Jeannette and I go out for dinner and maybe have one or two drinks. But it's not like when I was drinking.

T: You said it was easy to get into the bottle.

I: The easiest place to hide.

T: When you say hiding, how would you describe what you were hiding from?

I: Myself. At first—you've probably heard this from other guys too—when we first came home, especially with the VA, they treated us terrible. I think we were treated worse than anybody else. Whether they thought we were shell-shocked, or cowards, or whatever you want to call it.

T: You'd think they would bend over backwards to...

I: They didn't. When we first came home they didn't know what to do with us. I think at that time they probably wished every one of us had gotten killed. It would have been a lot easier for them. Of course they really didn't know... Things got better for all prisoners of war after Vietnam. The guys from Vietnam had enough brains. They squawked. If something's wrong, they squawked.

T: And you guys didn't squawk?

I: No. What our government did was right... Uncle Sam should do something wrong? No way. Everything the government did was right. We were true blue.

(2, B, 767)

T: Maybe too true blue?

I: Yes. We were. I'd go to the hospital when I first got back. I had a couple of kidney problems. Go down to the hospital. All they did was keep me in the hospital for one day, two days. They fed me nothing but water until I passed a stone. The second time I had to go down to the hospital I was there with malaria. They didn't even know how to treat it. They were shooting me in the ass...

T: They didn't know how to treat it?

I: They didn't know how to treat it. They told me it wasn't malaria. It was something else and they shoot me four or five times with five a day with one hundred units of penicillin. Shooting me in the ass with that. That's how they treated me for a week or whatever. In the meantime I'm freezing to death until things started coming down. They sent me home.

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

I: All they did was threaten you with your pension.

T: They threatened you with your pension?

I: Yes. If you didn't show up, if you didn't do this, they would take your pension away from you.

T: They said that to you?

I: Oh, yes. The doctor came down and tells me, look at you. You're big. You're fat. You quit smoking, you quit drinking, and you'll feel better. He called me down to tell me that? I bet for a good fifteen, twenty years I wouldn't go to the VA.

T: So you really had bad experiences with the VA.

I: Terrible.

T: Did that affect how you felt about the military or the government?

I: I think it had some kind of effect on it. Yes. I have yet to talk to any guys that basically didn't have the same experience that I did with the VA. [They said,] Look at you. You look good. You got both your arms. You got both your legs. They didn't look in here (*points to head*).

T: You're pointing to your head. So when it comes to psychological recuperation you're saying they did nothing for you?

I: Nothing at all (*with emphasis*). For years and years. I came down and I found a guy to help me. You've probably heard a name—Engdahl?

T: Dr. Engdahl [at the VA here in Minneapolis]?

I: Yes. He got me to see...

T: And this is fairly recently, isn't it?

I: It was the past few years. He helped get me into a staff psychiatrist. I think most of us basically see a psychiatrist every now and then. But they didn't know what to do with us.

T: So seeing psychiatrists or something like this was nothing they offered to you?

I: What do they do today when you go down there? Pills. I can take you in the room and show you, I bet I take sixteen different pills a day.

T: They'll give you pills for anything, it sounds like.

I: For anything. Yes. It's easier giving you pills and let you... (*trails off*) Most of us guys are drawing one hundred percent [disability].

(3, A, 43)

T: Do you get one hundred percent?

I: Yes. Most of us guys who were captives of the Japanese are getting one hundred percent. I had to get after Bob Michelson. He didn't want to apply. He was paying it himself.

T: Is he getting one hundred percent now?

I: Yes. He got one hundred percent now. I got on the test...

T: You did. Because we talked about it. He was not going to apply.

I: Yes. Why not, I asked him? You're retired. You've got it coming. He [said that he] ain't taking nothing.

T: He felt guilty.

I: Yes.

T: He gave the same response that you just gave, which was, he said physically I felt fine. And it's all psychological.

I: Bob and I, just the last week or two weeks ago, we went out, the four of us. Had a wonderful time. We got to talking about it. I know I'm mixed up. Bob is just as mixed up as I am. Bob was [a POW in Japan] there for three, four months [in 1945 after his B-29 was shot down over Tokyo, 25-26 May 1945]. I know he has his problems. He knows he's got this.

T: So it's easier to deny them you think, or to think they're not there?

I: Oh, yes. Yes. It depends on how anybody puts it. What am I going to tell them? You want to listen to my troubles? (*pauses three seconds*) Think about it, Tom. You know?

T: It's easier to say you feel fine.

I: I feel fine (*sarcastic tone*).

T: That's very interesting, Irv.

I: There's a doctor—I don't know if he's still down at the VA—he was there giving psychological testing. His name is Dr. Jim Whitaker. Same [name] as our veteran [common friend, Jim Whittaker]. I went down at the VA on the third floor—I grabbed him one time. Had him against the wall and I said, "I'm going to kill you, you son of a bitch. You tell me there's nothing wrong with me. Why am I acting the way... Why am I acting the way I'm acting?" Couldn't talk up there. He said, "You're fine." His examination: how do you feel? I just told him I feel fine. What am I going to tell him? He's looking at me. I'm healthy. I'm eighty-one years old and you look at me and I think I look pretty good for my age. Physically, mentally. But, you know, I go down and show the medication I take and he says, "Holy... That's impossible." I've got a high blood pressure and a bad heart, this, that. You don't see that.

T: That's right.

I: Let me tell you something. Most of our problem is right up here (*points again to head*), and we know it. It's psychological. Look at my dear friend Snuff [Harold Kurvers, POW of the Japanese]. I think he remembers every day that he spent in prison. Is that normal? That's not normal. He's going bad up there. Stan Galbraith [another ex-POW of the Japanese, known to both Silverlieb and interviewer]. Did you ever talk to Galbraith?

(3, A, 98)

T: Stan Galbraith. No. [Since interviewed for this project.]

I: Talk to him sometime. Some of the guys I think are in good shape. Every one of us guys put in three and a half or more [years as a POW of the Japanese].

T: That's right. Now after those years when you got back here and you saw your folks for example and your sisters, what did they notice different about you?

I: Everything. Short tempered. Drinking a lot. At that time I was even drinking a lot and stuff like that up there. Jeannette [wife] and I are going to—what the hell is the place that they want to take us to... Dr. Ostler took us to my house. At the time the folks were living in three rooms. So we slept together. Nothing happened. Not a thing happened. But how can we sleep together? You're going to marry the girl. How can you sleep with her? Like that's committing a crime. Even though nothing happened. But I'm still committing—you know, in narrow minds it's a crime. My sisters, they were married and stuff like that. No problem with them. But the guys who I hung around with, several of them were killed in the war. They all had their own problems and stuff like that. So they didn't want to listen to what I had to say.

T: Now let me ask you. Talk about talking about this. How much did your parents ask you about what you had been through and how much did you tell them?

I: If they ask I tell them, you know.

T: Did they ask you?

I: They want to (**). What the Japanese did to our camp—my folks didn't know I was alive until well into 1943. A couple years after the war had started.

T: They didn't know you were alive even?

I: No. But the first letter, form letter, that we had to write in China, "Don't worry the Japanese are treating us good. This is fine and this is fine." That was a form letter. I wouldn't write it. So finally the noncoms said, "Look, people back home know what's going on. Have them help them along." So we wrote five little letters that the Japanese are treating us good and stuff like that. When I called my folks up from San Francisco, they said, "What?" They didn't believe it was me (*emotionally*).

T: No kidding?

I: Yes. They didn't... Fortunately one of my uncles who was in the service at that time was home. Discharged and home. I talked to my Uncle Joe, and he had to convince my folks that I was still alive.

T: So your folks were convinced that you were dead?

I: Oh, yes. They had a funeral for me.

T: No way!

I: Yes. I got a picture somewhere. I have a picture of my funeral.

T: At the synagogue?

I: At that time there, the Torah where I graduated from was on Eighth and Freemont Avenue North. I don't know if the building is still standing. Graduated from high school, Torah high school, and they had my funeral there. The services were held there. Of course they didn't have a body to bury. I was with another guy who played taps at my funeral, and he still laughs at it. He played taps at my funeral.

T: So your parents really were convinced that you were gone?

(3, A, 152)

I: I was dead. This was the early part of the war.

T: They had heard nothing.

I: Yes. First notification that they got was the first day of the war. They got a note that I was wounded in action. Right after the first day of the war. Then after the third day of the war, you know, I was wounded in action, missing in action, killed in action. They had the telegram, but the government didn't know.

T: The government didn't know. But the government sent them a missing in action and a killed in action too?

I: I was MIA for a long time. Then I was transferred from a MIA to a KIA.

T: Because you were missing for so long?

I: Yes.

T: So your parents had to come to terms with the fact you were gone.

I: Right. Once they found out with letters I started writing, and we were allowed to write. Every three months we would write a letter.

T: So how was it coming home then? How did your parents react to that when you showed up?

I: Like I said, I talked to my uncle and I let him know from Great Lakes or wherever it was I called up. "I'll be home by such and such a time." I came home, and they were waiting for me. My mother went nuts. Just literally, my father, I thought he was going to squeeze me to death. My sisters were all living out of town. They didn't get a chance to come.

T: So really, the long lost son. You really were, to them you were dead.

I: Yes. They had the notice first of all wounded in action, missing in action, and KIA.

T: Then they had to assume you were gone.

I: Yes. I did write from late '43. Then they didn't believe the letters.

T: To shift a little. You mentioned that after the war you got inside the bottle and stayed there for a while.

I: That's right.

T: How did you finally pull yourself out of that?

I: My kid was in the service. Come back, he was all screwed up.

T: Your own kid.

I: Yes.

T: Vietnam?

I: He wasn't in Vietnam, but he was in the Armed Services. He came home and he was all screwed up. I was, at that time, superintendent down at American Iron.

T: American Iron is a scrap facility?

I: Yes. I got him a job there and he was working for me. St. Mary's was a big treatment center at that time there. So I went to the treatment center at St. Mary's. He went to school to become—until recently he was doing drug counseling. Counseling for drugs and stuff like that. Gambling. That was his profession. So I told him, you quit drinking and I'll quit drinking.

T: This took you a lot of years after the war, didn't it?

I: Years.

(3, A, 197)

T: What was the impact of that on, if I can ask, on your wife?

I: She was a queen. She was just perfect. Our first kid was—I told you, nothing happened—our first kid had to be born premature.

T: Ours was too. *(laughs)*

I: In the Jewish faith, when a person dies, basically there's a nine month mourning period. And my dad was ultra-religious. Him and I would go to synagogue every morning for prayer. Over the years it was very customary on birthday or anniversary or anything, somebody would bring a bottle of booze to the synagogue. Every morning. I'm not kidding, you see some of those guys up there. They take a water glass like this.

T: A couple inches tall.

I: Not a couple. Four inches. A four inch water [glass]. Fill it up with every kind... What they would do, at times if the bottle got down so much and there were three or four bottles, they would mix everything together. Scotch, Vodka, bourbon, anything you want. All mixed together and sit there drinking the glasses with no strain, had no effect on those guys. I was doing the same thing. I would go to work... And going to work every morning—I was superintendent down there—I had a hard time finding the key to open the joint up. Never missed a day of work on account of drinking. I was lucky. I never had a hangover. I don't know if it was lucky or bad. But drinking... *(trails off)*

T: Was that hard on your family life?

I: Jeannette—I don't know how she put up with it. I wouldn't... Had it been her... Like I say, I wasn't a mean drunk. I was a good drunk. One thing I've never done, I've never had to cash my check [in order to buy alcohol]. I come home, she got the money.

T: So you felt that was the safe way to do it.

I: It was the only way to do that. Wherever I was working, she always got my check.

T: In addition to that, did you have any kind of dreams or images that stayed in your mind after the war?

I: Oh, yes. Still have dreams.

T: If I can ask, what kind of images or what kind of dreams, what kind of images do you have?

I: Just of Japanese soldiers.

T: A specific one?

I: The first time, I had my knees replaced—I had both my knees replaced at the same time. Same day. That night I had a nightmare. They caught me down at the hospital. I was walking. Several hours later, both knees operated on, replacements, and I'm running away from the Japanese.

T: And when was this?

I: Fifteen years ago, twenty years ago.

T: This is well after, decades after the war.

I: Oh, yes. A lot of times I wake up just sweating. Even just recently. It's not as bad as it used to be. At first it was... I remember being beaten up in my dreams, being chased.

T: By the same Japanese?

I: Faceless Japanese.

T: But there they were, after you somehow.

I: Yes. You see, it's the same thing, they all look alike. The same as we say about the blacks: they all look alike.

T: As you've described it, things that stuck with you afterwards...

(3, A, 248)

I: Oh, yes.

T: You had trouble shaking the effects of it. How was the Dr. Engdahl group helpful to you?

I: Most of the people, first thing, how they treat you. You try to tell them the truth. "Oh, bullshit! Nobody would do... That's impossible. Nobody does that to nobody." People still don't believe about the Holocaust happened. Not only that, but still people [say] nobody could take that kind of shit. That's the thing. "Nobody can do that you to. You're making it all up," and stuff like that. That's the part that gets to trouble even talking about it. You're not going to be believed.

T: So there are people that don't believe you still?

I: Oh, yes. I'm sure other people have told you that.

T: Yes. Particularly the POWs of the Japanese.

I: Yes.

T: We're having a conversation now where you're sharing a lot of what you went through both during the war and after. Have you always had an easy time talking about your POW experiences?

I: If I think the person... and I like the person, I have no problem with it. But if some guys are bullshitting, I'll clam up.

T: Do you get angry or clam up?

I: Clam up. When I get...

T: Now if I had asked you for this interview ten years after the war, would you have said yes?

I: If I didn't know you, I'd say yes.

T: So as long as you trust the person, you know them –

I: If I know the person knows, has an idea, what had gone on. Reporters—I talked to two or three different reporters I'd convinced about these things. Like I say, I'm kind of unique in this respect—about my [appendix] operation [in China]. That is, people heard about it, but they never ran into anybody...

T: That's right. You hear the story, but here's the living proof.

I: I'm living proof. These guys [other POWs] know it. They had a convention, reunion here in Minneapolis a few years back, and some guys knew about it. So they know I'm not bullshitting them. The guys who I was with know I'm not bullshitting them. But when you tell that to other people that a guy cut you with a razor blade and you passed out... (*trails off*) Would you believe that?

T: It sounds almost like one of those wartime fictions that they create for the movies.

I: Yes. That's what it sounds like. But it happened.

T: And luckily as a historian who's fairly well read in the subject, it has to be true. You have guys who back it up too.

I: Yes. That's the thing. Like I say, we [other POWs] can tell when a guy is bullshitting. When a guy starts thinking that there, why even talk to him?

(3, A, 288)

T: What do you think, and this is kind of the last question I've got, what do you think is the most important way, good or bad, that your POW experience changed you as a person?

I: Good or bad about it? The good part is that it's a million years ago and me, like most of the guys up there, if it wasn't for our pension up there we'd be screwed. I get my medication free.

T: That's right. You get your hundred percent every month too.

I: Basically, I—most of the guys—we lived our lives after we came home. Money meant nothing to us. We blew it. They gave me 2100 bucks that day [after being released from captivity]... (***) While on leave I went to the Post Office that time and had to draw three hundred dollars at a time. Anytime I wanted. I'd go up three times a day but they would only give you three hundred bucks at a time. And you have over five years of back pay on the books.

T: That's right. And all at one lump sum they give it to you.

I: After we got discharged. But before that only three hundred bucks at a time I could draw. I was drinking like a fish. I'd get the money and give it to Jeannette. So we bought our first house on that.

T: Thank God you gave the money to her.

I: Oh, yes.

T: How do you think you are changed as a person because of this POW experience? As you look at Irving Silverlieb before and after?

I: I know this much, I think I learned some pretty good work ethics while I was a POW, because all of us thought the same way: if I fuck up I'm just going to make it rough on the guy I'm working with.

T: Because you're in a group.

I: Yes. So we did our best, whatever it was. We did our best for our buddies' sake. I think [in] that respect we were pretty good. Like I said, [after the war] I could drink like a fish, but I was still working every day. Never missed.

T: In a sense that's interesting. That contrast. That you were in a sense kind of down on yourself and drinking, and at the same time you had a work ethic that you went to work every day.

I: Right. Right. Never missed. Would never miss a day on account of... The only time I missed is when I started getting in big trouble with my legs. But otherwise I worked every day. My wife always got the paycheck.

T: That's very interesting.

I: In that respect I think so. Because like I said before, I felt like I'm married and having kids. I want my wife to be a wife. I always made a good living where I could support a family on my own. She didn't have to... She wanted to work. We used to get in big arguments about it. [She said,] Well, I can go out and work part time. [I said,] No. You be home here and take care of the kids. Today things are, the situation [is] you have to have people working even to survive.

T: Yes, it really has changed.

I: Oh, definitely so, and not for the better. I get ticked off at your president... I don't know if you're...

T: Who? Bush?

(3, A, 323)

I: I don't know what your political view is...

(pause in tape to talk politics!)

T: One of the things I wanted to ask you, Irv, was since the war ended you have been back to Japan.

I: Two times.

T: Business or pleasure?

I: Pleasure.

T: What prompted you, as an ex-POW of the Japanese, to go back to Japan?

I: Because of the progress they had made. I wanted to see what the people were like. You go there today, the kids know nothing about the war. Japan is a young country. The population—they are basically young. Very few of the people know about the war.

T: Now you were there in the 1980s as I remember, right?

I: [In the] '80s and '90s. We were there once in the '80s, and once in the '90s. I saw the guys my age... I'd be ticked off at him.

T: Really?

I: Oh, yes. Because I knew I was better than he was. That was my personal feeling. We beat you guys. We did a lot to beat you guys. But the kids up there [in Japan], they want to learn. They want to know everything they can about the United States. And they're nice. They're nice kids.

T: How were you received by the Japanese? By anybody who knew you were an ex-POW?

I: Nobody knew that.

T: Nobody knew that? So you kept that under –

I: Yes. That was my own business.

T: Was it hard? Some of the guys from the lunch group [POWs lunch group] said they would never go back to Japan.

I: See, if they ever did, they'd be surprised. Pleasantly surprised. I really believe that there. I've been to China twice. On two different occasions. I went to Australia a couple times. Two different occasions. You don't want to let them know that you're an American. Unless you're spending money. A lot of money. If you're just going there for tourist and stuff like that, be a Canadian. Be something else.

T: That's the last question I have, Irv. On the record then, let me thank you very much for your time this evening.

END OF INTERVIEW