

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT W. PHILLIPS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

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Elaine Blatt: This begins an interview of Robert W. Phillips, on the 13th of April, 2007, in Washington D.C. [Also present are Andrea Blatt, Michael Blatt Jessica Ding, and Sandra Stewart Holyoak] I just want to start with when and where were you born?

Robert W. Phillips: August the 12th, 1920 in Duluth, Minnesota.

EB: What was your childhood like?

RP: Wonderful.

EB: Wonderful?

RP: Yep.

EB: In Minnesota.

Jessica Ding: Did you play ice hockey or did you do join any groups, such as Boy Scouts, growing up?

RP: No hockey, we skated for fun, in the winter time.

Andrea Blatt: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RP: I have a brother, two years younger than I am. Yes, we fought. [laughter]

EB: What was his name?

RP: Chester.

EB: Chester.

RP: He's still alive, and we stay in touch.

EB: What about your parents? What were their names?

RP: My father was Chester Warden Phillips, and my mother was Doris R. Black Phillips.

EB: What did your father do for a living?

RP: He was a beekeeper.

EB: Beekeeper?

RP: Yes.

EB: He made a living doing that?

RP: No. [laughter] No, a lot of work, we carried newspapers, we all chipped in.

EB: Okay.

AB: Was that during the Depression for the most part?

RP: Yes.

EB: How was it growing up in the Depression?

RP: It was fine.

EB: You had everything you needed.

RP: It was all that we knew.

EB: It's all you knew.

RP: We were poor, but wasn't everybody else?

AB: Right. Did you actually live on a farm with these bees?

RP: No.

AB: You just had them out in the backyard?

RP: No, we lived in town and the bees were kept out in Snake County, Minnesota. Around the clover and alfalfa fields, and things like this, where they would pollinate the crops and harvest the honey. We harvested the honey, and we gave the bees sugar to drink all winter long. They had to be backed up, insulated well.

EB: That's interesting.

RP: I hated it.

AB: You hated it?

RP: I joined the army to get away from it.

EB: Did you get stung a lot growing up?

RP: Yeah. I didn't like that. Least of all, I [didn't] like when they got mixed up in my hair.

EB: Good thing you weren't allergic, that would have been a horrible job.

RP: But, the whole business of what kind of childhood did you have, it wasn't the issue; we just did it. I went to school.

EB: Where did you go to school?

RP: I graduated from Fargo High School in North Dakota in 1938. Probably the same year as your dad did. [Dominick Giantonio, Andrea Blatt's father]

AB: Maybe.

RP: I think he was a year older than I, maybe. But, we just did things.

AB: You never thought about it.

RP: No. You don't analyze it to death. Like it's cold in North Dakota in the wintertime, in case you haven't heard, and yet, we walked miles to school, miles to church, miles to get home, miles to choir practice. You just did it. You didn't feel sorry for yourself.

EB: That's what my grandfather said, too. So your only job was the beekeeper job, you didn't have any other part time jobs?

RP: My father's job. We were talking about my father's job.

EB: Well, did your father do anything else besides the beekeeping?

RP: In the wintertime, the bees slept and we fed them, and he worked at other jobs, like driving a streetcar, or food service company.

EB: Anything to get by.

RP: Yeah. He'd make fifteen bucks a week. You would do anything, legal.

EB: So, where did your father come from? Had they been in the country for a long time?

RP: Yes. His mother's family was, maybe, only second or third generation, but the rest of them went back all the way to the 1700s.

EB: So, they were some of the first settlers.

RP: No. The first hundred years.

EB: Well, compared to my grandfather, he was the first one born here in his family, so that goes back further.

RP: Well, the late 1700s was one hundred and fifty years after the first settlers. But they just did it.

EB: So, around this time that you graduated from high school, were you aware of what was going on in the world at the time? You were all the way out West. Did you read the newspaper and know what was going on in Europe and Japan?

RP: First of all, I wasn't out west. Fargo, North Dakota is just about as middle as you can get. North; Upper Mid-West. Secondly, we read the papers. I peddled them for seven years, from the time I was eleven years old until I joined the army. ... We saw war clouds, but I joined the army May the 24th, 1939, because I wanted to go to an aircraft mechanics school.

EB: Did you think airplanes would be in your future? That working on being a mechanic would give you a job after the war, too?

RP: Don't think that far ahead; just do what you going to do. I just had already a lot of experience working on airplanes, as a boy; I wanted to go into the Army Air Corps and go to aircraft and engine mechanics school, and I did.

AB: So, 1939, that was pretty well before the war started.

RP: The war began in Europe on September 1st of that year. I well remember where I was that day.

AB: Where were you?

RP: Scott Field, living in a tent and going for my first month of aircraft and engine mechanic school.

EB: Did you think at that point that maybe you would be sent to Europe?

RP: No, you don't think it. You don't analyze those things. You just go school and learn your job and do the best you can, and just do it.

EB: Did you find that being in the military was actually a better situation? You got three meals a day. A lot of people went into the military because they didn't have ...

RP: There is the old 'feed them but don't need them' syndrome, and, later on, there was the 'need them don't feed them' syndrome.

AB: That was when you were a POW.

RP: Yeah. No, I didn't run away for a square meal.

EB: Right.

RP: No, a square meal could be something really simple. We had friends that were on relief that gave us some of the food that they didn't like, like whole wheat flour. I'd drive five miles to pick up a bag of flour. They didn't like it, but we did.

AB: Turns out you made the healthier choice didn't you?

RP: I did.

EB: So, what did your family think of you joining the military?

RP: Well, they regretted that I dropped out of college after one semester. But, I struck a bargain with my father, and because I was only eighteen years old, he had to co-sign.

EB: Right.

RP: But, he agreed to do that on the condition that ... I would go first to the Army Air Corps aircraft mechanics school, finish the school, but if (fall?) came along I would go back to college. That was our deal. Then Uncle Sam spoke first, so, there again, just do it.

EB: So they ...

RP: It's an opportunity. You don't think of the downstream ramifications of that.

EB: Obviously, you couldn't have known it was going to turn into what it did. So, you joined the Air Corps because you wanted to be a mechanic on airplanes.

RP: US Army Air Corps.

EB: US Army Air Corps. Did you think about joining the Navy or just joining the Army?

RP: Yep. It was the Army.

EB: I meant infantry.

RP: Nope. Aircraft mechanic school, that's where I was. They needed me and they were willing to train me, and I gave them their full value, and I loved it all, except for those three years. [laughter] [Three years referring to prison camp]

EB: Where was your basic training?

RP: Chanute Field, in Illinois, and some of it down in Scott Field.

EB: What did you think of basic training?

RP: Basic training in the military is learning how to be a soldier, basic training to be an aircraft mechanic was learning to read blueprints, use tools, a little sheet metal work, a little filing here

and there, learning to make threads on pipes, developing some skills, some manual skills, most of which I already knew. That's compared with military skills. Now restate your question. Which one did you have in mind?

EB: The first training where they said, "Welcome to the army."

RP: Army Air Corps. "Welcome to Tent City."

AB: So you went to the "University of Tennessee" like my father? [Mrs. Blatt is referring to a story her father Dominick Giantonio would tell. He had a work shirt from Underwood Typing Company that had the initials UT. At leave from training camp he would go with his friend to the University of Illinois and tell the ladies they were exchange students from the University of Tennessee to be able to go to the school dances with them]

RP: Well, Chanute Field was right along the flood line of Tent City. Nobody asked me if I liked it or not, we just did it, and we learned all the recruit stuff, which largely was designed to make you, to give you the skills to take care of yourself ... So you'd have to do your own shoe shining, bed making, send the laundry out. That was a new experience, somebody else to do laundry. But, military drill, learning a soldier's life, a lot of it is designed, really as I look back on it, not to so much to do a skill, but to form a team, to bond with other guys. And if you don't, you're gone. Misfits show up, and they'd go home. Not many, because the peer pressure was tremendous. I didn't look at it then, like I'm talking now, but looking back at it, to come under discipline, some people never had discipline and one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, was a very rigid regime, but it's expanded to every aspect of your life, from the time you get up until the time you go to bed. It was a piece of cake. We just did it.

EB: Right, so, then you went to mechanic school to learn mechanics training to work on airplanes.

RP: And engines.

EB: And engines. Did you find that more interesting?

RP: That's why I went in.

EB: Were you put into units before you left?

RP: No. After we finished school do you mean?

EB: Yes, after you finished mechanics school, were you already in your units? Who you were training with and that was going to be ...

RP: I taught hydraulics for a while, until I got an opportunity to volunteer to go overseas. There was a list for the Philippines, and I was a shutterbug along with the aircraft aficionado, and Coda Chrome was kind of new, and I had a, I could picture myself on the beaches with palm trees

hanging over the water. From North Dakota that was quite a dream, and I thought, "Gee, I could take the best pictures in the world, work on the best aircraft in the world, and just do it."

Sandra Holyoak: So, your decision to volunteer to go overseas was based on a romantic vision of the Pacific, the South Pacific.

RP: Combined with the opportunity to apply my latest skills, to being an aircraft mechanic.

SH: On your dream list what was your second choice?

[TAPE PAUSED]

RP: Do you mean which was higher? I think aircraft, yeah, I'd been in love with airplanes since I was ten. Had a lot of experience at the local airport doing mechanical work.

SH: So that was barnstormers and aerobatics?

RP: Rides and private flying. Northwest Airlines had a base there. It split off to Winnipeg from Fargo, as well as Missoula and all points West. I had a lot of experience. It stood me well when I got into the aircraft mechanics school.

SH: Had Lindbergh's flight been something you were following?

RP: Well, that happened in '27, that was before I got interested. Maybe it interested me a little bit. I was probably influenced more by some of the radio programs of Jack Allen and people who, he was a fictitious character who was flying for the Chinese. Ever hear about him?

SH: Yes.

RP: Did you really?

SH: I am fascinated by what makes people attracted to especially the Air Corps.

RP: Well, it was new, exciting, dangerous, yes. But I didn't know how dangerous, yet.

EB: So when you volunteered to actually go to the Philippines, what were you expecting when you got there? Just some kind of paradise where you would be working on airplanes?

AB: Well, what year was it?

RP: 1940.

AB: 1940.

RP: I had a little leave, and I went back to, I reported to Brooklyn Army Depot in May '40, and then by June the 8th I was on the ship up to Panama, back up to San Francisco, then on another ship, the USS *Grant*, to the Philippines, arriving there July 20, 1940.

EB: When you first got there, do you remember, when you first arrived was there a band playing? Was there a lot of excitement when you first arrived there?

RP: You just get out of the truck, go to your tent, show up for chow. We were told what to do.

AB: Was that at Clark Field?

RP: Yeah.

EB: Where were you housed when you got there?

RP: Tents.

EB: Tents.

RP: For another nine months. Then the rain.

EB: Some of the guys said they were kind of shocked when they first got back there how hot it was.

RP: Oh, yeah, but you don't stop to worry about it. You just do it. You're looking at a generation that takes things in stride.

AB: That's for sure.

RP: Your dad was that way.

AB: Yeah, absolutely.

RP: You just do it. You look for opportunities, but, whatever is there, get on with it. No pity parties.

EB: What were you actually doing there before the war broke out? From the time you arrived until the bombing?

RP: Working on airplanes, and flying them.

EB: You were on ...

RP: Guard duty, woodcutting duty.

AB: You actually flew the planes, too?

RP: No, I flew in them, I said.

AB: Oh, flew in them, sorry.

RP: "Flight engineers," we were called. Mechanics would fly with our own bombers. B-10Bs. Our mission was to patrol the Lingayen Gulf, over to the China Sea, back down to Manila Harbor, each day looking for any signs of hostilities, from the water.

SH: Were these routine or were you expecting something?

RP: Routine. I mean, whether you are an infantry or a cavalry ... you should always try to not be surprised. Of course, our mission was to keep the whole archipelago from being surprised. Not that we could have prevented it, but we could have prevented a surprise.

EB: Where were you when the bombs were dropped on the Philippines?

RP: I was at Clark Field.

EB: Can you describe the feeling when that happened? Were you shocked and couldn't believe it was happening?

RP: Hard not to believe it.

AB: When you saw those bombs coming down.

SH: I think maybe perhaps, did you know about the bombing that had happened earlier at Pearl?

RP: It was Monday, the 8th of December, Sunday, the 7th in Hawaii. The dateline threw it off about sixteen hours, I think. That was when I was awakened early and went out to my airplane on the flight line. The radio was talking about Pearl Harbor being attacked. All these radio men around and they ran the batteries down so we were always a little bit begrudging of them, but this time, that's how I learned that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. We went about six hours before they started unloading on us.

AB: Could you hear them coming? Could you hear the sounds of those airplanes coming for you, before they actually started dropping bombing, or did suddenly bombs start dropping?

RP: I remember seeing them. But I don't remember if I heard them first. There were two formations of twenty-seven airplanes each, two triangular formations.

EB: Now, when you had heard that Pearl Harbor had happened, did you think they could go all the way from Pearl Harbor right the next morning and attack again? Attack the Philippines?

RP: Not the next morning. The same day.

EB: Oh, yes, the same day, that's right. I guess you didn't really stop and think about it, but ...

RP: Analyzing it wasn't my job.

AB: So you saw them coming, you see this big formation of Jap planes in the air, and what came into your head?

RP: Well, I can see bombs falling.

AB: Oh, you could.

RP: So, I decided to crawl under something. My airplane was parked along the jungle, across from the barracks, and I dived under the best-looking thing I could find it was a trailer. Not paying any attention to it, I realized after the raid was over, it was a gas trailer. You just do it. Not always the smartest thing, but you do what you can.

SH: Had there been any kind of alert before that, because of what had happened at Pearl Harbor?

RP: There was no time. Our airplanes, some of the B-17s had been bombed up. Then we removed the bombs. They were ready to go over to Taiwan. But, you see, the mentality of our leadership was not to provoke the Japanese. Or they might hurt us.

EB: Were you actually part of the fighting for the Battle of Bataan?

RP: I never said that.

EB: That's my question.

RP: You're leaping ahead a month or so. The week after the war began we had daily raids, not only from the heavy bombers, but from dive bombers. They could fly all the way from Taiwan, down to Manila and back. After one week of that, on the 15th of December, I was picked to go to Mindanao. We took a B-17 down there and landed at Del Monte airfield. Have you heard of that?

AB: Del Monte, as in pineapple.

RP: As in pineapple, right in the middle of a plantation. The plantation was on relatively high ground. There were plateaus, ravines, plateaus, ravines, it was very rough. Hence, one of those plateaus was turned into an airfield. I might mention that there were no paved runways at Clark Field until after the Japanese owned it, and there were no paved runways in Mindanao. There were at Nichols Field in Manila, the outskirts of Manila. Bombers take off and land on grass, just like you see light planes doing now. Just do it.

SH: Father Bob, could we go back to the morning of the 8th for a minute, when you first dive under the wagon, and talk about the days, if you can remember, chronologically? What you

were doing, and what you were being told, and what the men were thinking, and kind of set that stage for us if you would?

RP: Well, our barracks was destroyed.

SH: On the first run?

RP: Yes. So we spent nights in the hills, and I sure admired the cooks from our squadron; they had a field kitchen and they got at least one square meal a day for us. But during the day, we'd be salvaging parts, for example, or repairing airplanes.

SH: So there was order.

RP: No order.

SH: So, you were all operating independently on what you knew needed to be done.

RP: A few people doing this, a few people doing that.

SH: Had there been wounded on that first day?

RP: Oh, a lot of people died, too. Oh, yes.

SH: Were there facilities set up to take care of them? Had anything survived as far as that kind of equipment?

RP: I didn't see that. But, yes, there was a hospital at Fort Stotsenberg. See, Clark Field was not even a military post of its own. Fort Stotsenberg was part of, Fort Stotsenberg was a major, Philippine Scout, the 26th Cavalry, the 23rd and 24th Horse Artillery. I mean, really state-of-the-art fighting forces. That was Fort Stotsenberg. We had, when I got there, two-hundred men in the 28th bomb squadron until they started to add more. They got up a thousand by the time the war began. But, there was a hospital at Fort Stotsenberg and I am aware that some of the casualties went up there. Yeah. I don't know how many people died but we took a real pasting.

SH: They believed each of the different units stayed together, in other words, there was not a general coming together of all the services all around. You stayed with your people doing what you had been doing prior to the bombing.

RP: As well as we could. We had lost most of our airplanes, and we had no place to live. Outside of that, it was perfectly normal. [laughter]

AB: Well, when you went to Del Monte did you go as a group or just a couple of you guys?

RP: A couple of us.

AB: All of you, did you say?

RP: About eight or so.

AB: Eight.

EB: Who told you to go there? Who chose you?

RP: Beats me.

EB: Someone higher up said, "You, you, you, you're going"?

RP: Somebody said, somebody said; you don't wait for orders. Took off in the dark, landed at daybreak. Just did it.

AB: And what were you supposed to be doing at the plantation, defending it?

RP: No, maintaining airplanes.

AB: Oh, maintaining airplanes there.

RP: Java was still intact and there were flights between Java, the Dutch East Indies, and with Del Monte. There was an air-naval battle fought in Micatras Straits and the bombing end of that was fortified by us at Mindanao. Ammunition, bombs, and fuel.

EB: Were there tents you stayed in there?

RP: No, we lived in Nippon huts. The plantation was a working pineapple plantation. We ate a lot of pineapple. The laborers for the pineapple plantation lived in Nippon huts and were kept in groups of houses, scattered all over the place, so they didn't have to spend all day walking to work. There was one nice one that belonged to the management. The one I was in was (*cinjuves*) which is Camp 29. From there we had a central field kitchen. We were taken there before sunup and brought back before we could be spotted from the air. We had aircraft to maintain, to fuel, and a lot of it was done at night. The fuel was all stored in these fifty-five-gallon drums, down in these ravines. *Modus operandis* was, a bunch of guys would get down the bottom of it and with a rope, wrap the rope around the barrels and start lifting, and somebody else would tug on the rope and pull it up. Just manual labor to get them out of these ravines. Then lift it up into a six-by-six truck. Get the truck full and drive it to the field and then pump it into the bomber. Just did it.

SH: How many barrels would go into a tank? How many runs would it take?

RP: At fifty-five-gallons, thousands of gallons, a couple hundred a day, per airplane. You just did it. Bombers were the same way. Even though I wasn't in ordnance, we helped them handle those things out of the ravines. We just got on with it.

EB: And did you feel you were better off on Mindanao then on Bataan?

RP: No, no. I hated being separated from the body of my squadron. It turned out to be a blessing because the whole squadron was brought down by boat and then by truck. Asked a lot of us and then down by the Giandi River as a defense perimeter for Mindanao. So I really lucked out, but I hated it, because I didn't want to get separated. The myth of strength in numbers.

SH: This field you were at, Dole, Del Monte, I had the wrong company.

RP: The other company.

SH: The other company. Had that been an active base or just a peripheral?

RP: We had auxiliary fields all over the islands. I remember flying into one, southern Luzon, Mt. Matutum, one of the active volcanoes in the Philippines. It was required of our pilots to be familiar with all the outlying fields and how to get there in case they had to. This became a major one because it ended up to be the northern end of the connection to Australia. From there is where a lot of key people were evacuated over the next couple weeks.

EB: Now, did you hear about MacArthur being evacuated?

RP: I happen to be the personal bodyguard for him. I mentioned this nice place where the management had lived, well, that was taken over by military command and there were some, by their standards then, a rather nice home and a club, and I had one of the two rifles in my group, serial number 7954 issue.

AB: So that made you the guard because you had the rifle?

RP: I guess. [laughter] That may be part of it.

AB: So at this point, had Bataan already surrendered? No, still not.

RP: Nope.

AB: Okay.

RP: We went on like this from December to April.

EB: Until April.

RP: Then Bataan fell.

EB: You heard about Bataan falling?

RP: Yes.

EB: You got news about it?

RP: Yes.

EB: What did you think was going to happen to you?

RP: Bummer. I don't know, you couldn't anticipate. Once again, I did not anticipate.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Please continue, you were talking about how you had been armed with one of the few rifles.

RP: Oh, yeah.

AB: You guarded MacArthur when he came.

RP: I was told to guard that area.

SH: The compound.

RP: The compound, and I went over there, my shift came before sun up, and when the sun came up I realized there was clothing scattered around on the grass and these people ran out and started to collect them so they wouldn't be spotted from the air. And that is when I found out the MacArthur party had arrived by PT boat. It was about twenty kilometers down from Subic Bay and brought up there awaiting air transport to Australia.

SH: You were told that.

RP: I found out, after the fact. I didn't know what I was guarding. I was told to be there. Just do it. You have no idea how loose that was.

SH: Well, that is what we want you to tell us.

RP: I never did see him in the week that they waited for an airplane.

AB: Really?

RP: Never saw him outside. I saw her, I saw his son, Arthur, saw their Chinese maid. They went for evening walks. Never saw him.

SH: Do you know if there was a large entourage with him, other than these three people you named?

RP: No, I don't know who else was with him.

AB: So, there weren't like important people in and out, conferencing, making plans? As far as you know, he might of been sitting in there doing nothing all day.

RP: Well, I don't know what general officers do when they are waiting for an airplane. Just do it. They keep on being generals.

EB: What did you actually think about MacArthur at this point?

RP: I wasn't paid to think about my commander.

EB: Well, what do you think about him now, because I know a lot of people that we've talked to have some things to say about MacArthur?

RP: Well, now we digress away from what I know to what I think and feel. You should distinguish between those two, because one is objective and one is very subjective.

AB: We want to hear your opinion.

RP: I look back at him as the only leader that we had of that magnitude, that grasp of the situation, that confidence, that ego to take on the job, that experience in Asia. It was almost a no-brainer to evacuate him, and he took some key staff with him, I think, and a couple of mattresses ... but, besides from that, I read about him in the Japanese newspaper. I'm in his cheering section, and I know that he was a supreme egotist, he manipulated the press, and he brought his press with him, but that's part of galvanizing a country into a humongous effort.

SH: The press was not with him at Mindanao when you were there.

RP: Not that I know of.

SH: It is important to know what you knew at the time.

RP: You can never prove the negative, but I never saw any signs of a press corps.

SH: Or any auxiliary personnel with him? Were you there when he boarded the craft out?

RP: No, I was not there when he left. I didn't see him leave the compound, and I was not on the flying field. I was over at Camp Twenty-nine. *Vienta Vienta*. Probably sleeping, probably sleeping, sleeping through history. Interesting thing, a week later, a repetition of the same drill, only this time with the president of the Philippines.

AB: Oh, really.

RP: [Manuel L.] Quezon. The same exercise. Brought in by PT boat, stuck around until some B-17s came in and flew off. He'd go out for a walk in the evening, too. No big deal, just the president of the Philippines.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RP: Got out my Springfield and went on guard duty, and then, that was shortly before the Japanese landed at same Bugal Bay where those PT Boats had come in. That kind of irritated the Japanese, happened right under their noses.

EB: That the president of the Philippines had ...

RP: Yeah.

SH: So that area hadn't been bombed where they came in by sea?

RP: It had been bombed, but it had never been occupied. They had major land forces around Davao, Cotabato and, I think, up in the northern part of the island. But they never put any serious effort into occupying Mindanao until these irritating things; like MacArthur went out, Quezon went out, and a bunch of airplanes came up from Australia and fanned out to bomb targets as far away as Manila, and that irritated them, and then they started landing nearby. Luckily, this was probably around the first of May in 1942. We had been cut off from the flying field so we headed back into the mountains. There was about forty of us, on foot, and we had a pony carrying some rice and a Filipino, who was kind of our guide. We stayed up there for about a week, hoping to outflank the Japanese. But they had the better roads then we had, and they got to the center of the island before we did. But it was at Sumilao that we were surrounded. ... On the ninth of May I knew that, that that was the last day that I was going to live. With the trusty old 7954 Springfield rifle, I was posted along the trail, and I knew I was going to die there, and I just wanted to get as many of them as I could. I thought, "You just do it." Luckily, there was, outside of my control, they arranged for the surrender of the entire archipelago. See, Corregidor actually surrendered on the sixth of May, but that was not accepted by the Japanese. The guys on Corregidor had to add four days till the Japanese decided whether to kill them off, or accept the surrender. The conditions of surrender were that the entire archipelago would surrender. The Japanese didn't want to have to do a group here and a group there, and that saved my life. Because that was all agreed upon while I'm laying outside the trail with number 7954 expecting to die the next daybreak. I was told I could go to the hills if I wanted to and I wouldn't be court-martial, but I had already went through those options. See, I had been there almost two years by that time and I was acclimated, I had had all the fevers, all the things that go with tropical living, then tropical living. I had camped in the mountains many a night, climbed the mountains many a time, and I was as acclimated as a white guy could be. But, I disappointed a group that I was linked up with when I said, "I'm not going to go to the hills." If you are going to go to the hills you are going to have to, number one, you are going to have to eat. Are you going to steal food and make the Filipinos mad and get turned in? Or are you going to find a place where you can plant a crop and hope that things are stable for a few months and keep the wild boars out? You have to put up a fence, so you are talking about more formal living then. If you put roots down that way, that was not going to fly. So I decided to take my chances with the herd, again. Although the Japanese had never taken prisoners in China and I wasn't really expecting them to take us prisoners, until they did in southern Bataan. But that was the option I made. Next morning we stacked our arms, after I wrapped number 7954 around a palm tree, bent the barrel. Then the Japanese had the problem of being responsible for us. They couldn't feed us. They said to our officers, "Whatever food you had in your warehouses before, just keep on keeping on. Keep your own trucks, keep your logistics going,

we can't feed you. Pretend we are not here. Except you are going to walk to Manila and there you are going to pretend we don't see you unless you try to leave and then we are going to shoot ten guys for every one that walks away." They made their point through the Filipinos, too. So it was kind of strange.

SH: How did you communicate with the Japanese?

RP: I didn't. I was so far down the totem pole I just got rumors.

AB: So, your officers were doing the communicating.

RP: Somebody was. It just happened.

EB: So, you were told the whole archipelago was surrendering, you turned yourself in, and you were taken to the Philippines?

RP: No, I never left them.

EB: No, no, I mean, Bataan?

RP: No, I never was, never there. I was at Mindanao, in the village of Sumilao. We stacked our arms, and we were permitted to live, that was the bargain. The next day they said, "Go to Malaybalay." I had never been to Malaybalay, but somebody knew, and we got there. I don't know how it happened. We just did it.

SH: How many are traveling in this group?

RP: I suppose forty or fifty in that bunch.

SH: Now were you Filipino and American?

RP: No, we were all Americans. Because we had been on the flying field, doing maintenance, servicing, just like in peace time, only under different circumstances. So, did you run out of tape?

EB: No, no.

RP: Let me speed it up a little bit by saying we grew some sweet potatoes, or at least we planted them, but, by the time they got ready to eat, some of us started shipping north, and by September I was headed for Manila, Bilibid Prison there, and after a few more days was put on the *Totori Maru*, up to Taiwan. Messed around there waiting for a convoy for weeks. Eventually, up to Korea, Pusan, and dropped off fifteen hundred people, who went on to Mukden, and five hundred of us stayed and went to Mojida through the Inland Sea, up to Osaka; a train to Kawasaki, and I was there most of the rest of the war, working in the war industry in the Kawasaki area.

AB: In the actual factories?

RP: Yep.

AB: What were they making?

RP: Munitions, steel, Shawenako was a chemical plant, Nippon Coukon was a steel company, and we did a lot of manual labor, entering bolts of steel, and coal for making steel there. To support a steel mill you need a brickyard for pouring hot molten steel. Nearby, and where our camp building was located, was Mitsui property. There was a huge terminal where the railroad came down and stuff would be transported to barges, piers in other words. So we spent, that detail would load rice into the warehouse in the fall and carry it out the rest of the year to feed the population. Other things, like, whatever industry needed. I remember there were these huge electrodes, carbon poles, about this big around.

SH: About eighteen inches?

RP: Yeah, and, maybe, eighteen inches is a good guess. They were obviously electrodes for some kind of a heating process. The darn things were maybe six feet long. That's a big piece of pencil lead. In the end of it were threads. They threaded together so that they had continuous arcs for welding, or whatever they did. Beats me.

EB: So, was this dangerous work, did people get hurt?

RP: Oh, yeah, you would get hurt, and lose weight in a hurry. Those things were heavy. We tried not to break many; tried not to break many. Once in a while they'd just get away from us.

AB: Where were you actually living when you worked in these factories?

RP: In a converted office building on Mitsui property.

AB: Oh, right on the property of the factory.

RP: Factory was within a couple miles. We could get back and forth in less than an hour, on foot.

EB: You would always have a guard with you all of the time?

RP: Yep.

EB: So how many people, how many prisoners per guard would you say?

RP: Work details varied. Let me give you the overall picture. Industry needed our labor. The army brought us up there and rented us out. They spent that money on the converted office building, our food, and stuff like that. That's how they solved part of their labor shortage. That meant that we had, maybe, four or five different details all over Kawasaki, in different factories

and warehouse areas, and the detail size would run from twenty to forty, I suppose, on the average. There were about three hundred people most of the time in that camp. That figures.

EB: Had you been hearing anything about what was going on outside of those camps? Any word from other camps, or other friends, or people you had been separated from?

RP: A little bit. But most of it came from reading Japanese newspapers.

EB: Could you read Japanese?

RP: Yep.

EB: You could.

RP: I followed the progress of the war in Europe, in painstaking detail, and the war in the South Pacific, in painstaking detail.

SH: Where did you learn to read Japanese?

RP: There.

AB: You taught yourself.

RP: Yes. Konakon primarily, which is a phonetic language and not difficult, its not the same as the Konji which is shared by most of the Asian nations. The picture calligraphy kind of thing, that's Konji. But, Konakona and another phonetic language called Hiragota, those were not too difficult. But the trouble is that I learned to pronounce things wrong. I never heard about Eisenhower, until I learned it in Japanese language. General Patton, there, was a General Pachi, and the Solomon Islands, all those names that I had never heard before, until I read them first in Japanese, phonetically. That's how I learned them, and the funny thing is we would go to work and I would taunt the Japanese with this news, that the Americans have landed in, say, oh, Guam. I knew that one, because I had been there, and they would say, "Well, they are being beaten back," you know, and, very quick, they would say that they were all gone. But then the next island they would take was another thousand miles closer to Tokyo. So they had trouble reconciling their progress with what they had said about their defeats, and we just had a wonderful time teasing them, and taunting them, and scaring the hell out of them. A lot of head games. We cooperated. Let's back up. Guards took us out. Employees of the company would come and get us. There were guards in the camp. There were guards circulating around the whole city, between details. But the guys who got the work out of us, who wore the armbands with the Fru, as in fruhill, we saw the same guys day after day. We knew that they were suffering. Their families were hungry. They would lose their homes when the B-29s would burn them out, and they were vulnerable for blackmail. Which Japanese guard could say no to a little extra cooked rice to take home? All he had to do is turn and look the other way, and warn us if the soldiers arrived when we were cooking the stuff, contraband, on the job. It took a couple of years to work out the fine details.

Michael Blatt: They were not like the guards.

RP: Oh, they were. By the time we left there, by the spring of 1945, there was a lot of empathy between us and them, because they suffered, too. They had their homes burned out and some family members killed. Their world was being upset. They knew it was better to be nice to us by then. They knew that we could help feed their families. That's about it.

AB: We want to hear about how you came home and ended up in the ministry.

RP: Oh, after the war.

EB: Let's finish up with the war, and then you can tell us about when you got back. So, could you tell that the war was coming to an end?

RP: Oh, yeah.

EB: Was it because you were reading the paper and you knew that the war in Europe was ending?

RP: Yeah, we knew that Europe was finished.

SH: How would you celebrate back with the camp, when you would come back with that news? Obviously, from the factory, because that is where you saw the papers, is that correct?

RP: Oh, yeah, a lot of it.

SH: And you were able to share that with everybody that was there?

RP: Yeah, and the word gets around, and we could see things were going badly for the Japanese. It didn't mean that it was going well for us. We found out, later, we were assigned an execution date. But we didn't know that so we just did it.

SH: What kind of sabotage was there on your part, or your colleagues part, your fellow soldiers?

RP: Oh, some of the best happened in Mukden. They had machines they were building foundations for, huge poured blocks of concrete. A lot of machinery disappeared inside the concrete. I was told, I wasn't there. For my part it was little things. First of all, these guys with the Fru on their sleeves, we found out that if they told us what we had to do everyday, and we understood what work had to be done, to keep them out of trouble, keep us sane and not overworked, it was often agreed upon how much had to be done. If there wasn't an agreement there were wonderful slow downs. The unions had nothing on us. Because we could justify being sick, you got to go to the *benjo* [Editors note: Japanese word for bathroom] every half hour. That's a slow down, and they don't want the alternative.

SH: So, they really did try to keep you alive and working. Is that a fair statement?

RP: They had a quota of work they needed to do, and over time they found it was better to work toward a reasonable goal and not to be at odds, because their livelihood depended on us, and that's uncomfortable.

SH: Were they the same age as you or much older?

RP: Older, otherwise, they would have been in the army.

SH: That is what I was going to say.

EB: So, were they actually old men that couldn't fight?

RP: By our standards. Some of them were probably been pushing forty. [laughter] But, I am making jests and lightly of something which really involved years of hardship; forming these interesting relationships with them. I am looking back at them now; analyzing them differently then I lived them out as a boy.

EB: ... A lot of the Japanese guards in the other camps in the Philippines were seen as more evil, that they did really horrible things on the Death March. These men, you just saw them as guys just doing their jobs and you were just working trying to get through every day?

RP: I can't say anything about the Death March. But, after they got used to us, and they had to get used to bigger guys, even in our emaciated state, stronger then they were, performing super human feats of strength on occasion, which was partly part of the head game to impress them, because we wanted to maintain a little fear in their minds about us.

SH: The troops that were guarding your camps, how did they compare to the troops you met at Mindanao?

RP: Oh, they were boys, really young recruit kind of thing. They were totally afraid of us.

SH: Now this was in Japan.

RP: Yes.

SH: Not in Mindanao?

RP: Right. Because they had no idea.

SH: Were some of the men, who were part of the factory oversight for you, do you know if they had any sons who were serving in the Japanese military?

RP: I don't remember any of that.

EB: Were there ever lighter times? I know my grandfather said that one of the guards liked Hollywood and he talked about the movie stars in Hollywood. Was there ever a time that you did talk to these guards? Any moments of ...

RP: You didn't talk to the guards. They weren't allowed to talk to us. But the food, we talked over tea, we'd have a tea break. I actually felt sorry for some of them. There is the Stockholm Syndrome in which they transfer allegiances; I didn't see any of that. I did see some of that happen.

SH: But I think another side of that is a compassion for a fellow human being.

RP: Yeah.

SH: That's my question. Were you able to see them as fellow human beings rather than ...

RP: Oh, yeah. Some of the Fru.

SH: The Fru.

RP: Yeah. They were, they had to live with that mess. I'm going home, they are going to live with it.

SH: As you read in the Japanese newspapers and, of course, from their angle of what was going on in Europe and how the war was progressing even in the Pacific, how was the morale of the people you were billeted with or housed with? Was it always up, did it stay level, did it go up and down?

RP: Oh, it was pretty stable. Just wait it out.

SH: You just felt you needed to stay alive long enough.

RP: Yeah.

AB: So, you felt you were going home. One day you would be going home if you could just wait it out.

RP: That was the important thing. You know, I could look across the bay and look at John Aldren, who is here today, and say, "Golly, it would be nice if he went home with me. I'm going home and I hope they can go home, too."

EB: What did you dream about at night? Did you dream about meals? Home cooking or seeing your parents?

RP: I don't think so, we were too tired.

EB: Did you daydream during the day when you had tedious work, or did you think of your family?

RP: No, I did mathematics in my head, on the job. Got a hold of a book and just trained myself to do college algebra and trigonometry, things like that, mental challenges. I'd come home and compare my answer with the one I found in the book.

SH: Did any material get to you from either the Red Cross or family while you were in Japan?

RP: A limited amount. A very small fraction of what was sent to us. The Japanese got most of it.

EB: Did you get a couple letters from home?

RP: Cards.

EB: Did you send any V-Mail out to say you were alive? The idea of the mail just so your family would know you were still alive?

RP: I got to send some out, I don't know what got through.

SH: So your family was aware that you were a POW in Japan.

RP: After a year of MIA status, they were told I was a prisoner. I found this out later.

SH: So, the mail you were getting in was generic or it was from your family?

RP: From my family. But it didn't happen for a year. A couple of letters over a three year period.

EB: Were you religious at this point, fairly religious, had you grown up with religion?

RP: Oh, yeah. I was a devout Presbyterian.

EB: So did you pray a lot in the camps?

RP: Sure. There aren't any atheists over there.

SH: Was there someone who was assigned the role of chaplain, or did you have a chaplain with you?

RP: Not that I remember.

SH: Did you have organized services? Did you try to acknowledge different holy days, Christmas?

RP: Not that I remember. I've heard of it. In the Philippines there were chaplains. But I was out of the Philippines so soon.

SH: Because I wondered how the Japanese would have viewed you as a group.

RP: I think we had Christmas service, but I don't remember it.

EB: Were there certain saints that you prayed to.

RP: No. The Presbyterian's weren't into that.

AB: That was Grandpa [Dominick Gianonio] that did that.

RP: It came later.

EB: I think he prayed to Saint Anthony.

SH: One question more about the holidays, do you remember ever singing Christmas carols?

RP: That was what I was just saying, I remember that there were some, I just don't remember any details.

EB: What did your fellow comrades, Americans, what did you guys talk mostly about? Did you talk a lot like during the day when you were working, or was it mostly silent?

RP: I think food talk was a favorite past time. Recipes.

AB: I have heard that. Recipes and the meals you were going to eat when you got home.

RP: Design the ultimate dessert. Combinations of ice cream, and nuts, chocolate, layer upon layer. Whatever the mind could conjure.

EB: You didn't have a girlfriend before you left, right? You were too young.

RP: I was too scared. [laughter]

EB: Did you think about girls at all? When you would get back, you would get married?

RP: Nope.

AB: It was a day-by-day thing, the farthest away you can think of was tomorrow.

RP: I think so, yeah.

SH: When you were transported from the factory back to your camp.

RP: No, walked, not transported.

SH: Okay, when you were going, did you see any of the civilian population and how they were living, and how foreign is that for a young man from North Dakota?

RP: It was foreign. Mind you, I had been in the Philippines for a long time before then, too. So I knew Dobie life.

EB: Did you have interaction with them at all?

RP: What?

EB: Did you have interaction at all with the Japanese?

RP: Oh, heaven-forbid. Oh, that would have been trouble. That would have been trouble.

SH: Did people stop and stare as you walked along? Because you talked about being so much taller.

RP: Maybe a little bit. They took us for granted after a while.

EB: What about in the Philippines? I know people said they wanted candy and chocolate, and stuff like that, did you have any interaction with the local Filipinos?

RP: What candy? You're thinking of seeing our troops in Iraq handing out candy, nothing like that.

SH: When you were being transported by ship from the Philippines to Japan, when you were all boarding the ships, were there several of them being boarded at the same time by prisoners like yourself? Or was there just the one ship?

RP: I saw only one ship. It was a early on, in September.

SH: What do you remember about that voyage and how were the other soldiers who were with you? What are some of the things you remember about that?

RP: I remember we left from pier number seven in Manila, which was the one I came into a couple years earlier.

AB: How ironic.

RP: And I remember being packed into the holds, in these shelves that they put in there. To the point where I couldn't find a place to pack myself in, until a Jap jabbed me with that bayonet. Suddenly there was a hole. You just do it, find a way. It sounds awfully matter-of-fact, but that was the way we did things then.

AB: Did your ship come under attack by any of the Americans, or was that too early?

RP: No. It did, and with a little luck, and by the grace of God, those WWI torpedoes never hit us.

SH: They were still going under.

RP: Although, I never went below decks again after that.

SH: How far down were you in the hold of the ship yourself?

RP: Way in the bottom.

SH: You were in the bottom. What did they feed you, and how many days? Do you have any idea, did you keep track?

RP: Remember, a couple of days out we got attacked. I went up on ... the foredeck and I never left it for the next month.

SH: How did you manage that?

RP: I don't know. I just never left, except for *benjo*. We were brought little bags of crackers once in a while, water, I suppose. Guys were dying of dysentery, bad dysentery on the ship, and dying. I remember one guy who had dysentery so bad, I'll never forget his last few hours. He had a bucket, on the deck, he had a loin cloth on, because his clothes were soiled. He's in there with a little sea water and he'd go like this, and, he'd feel the urge, he would just throw his leg over there and go, and then throw a leg back like that. He wasn't with it mentally or he couldn't have known what he was doing.

SH: And there was no way to help anybody, there was no medical personnel or help in any way?

RP: No.

SH: Were there American medical corps men or aide men or anything with you?

RP: I don't remember any.

SH: Were the officers in the same hold as you, or did they separate the men from the officers?

RP: Separated them.

SH: Did they?

RP: I had no idea where they came from. In Kawasaki, we had non-coms, yes, but officers, about two per camp. The Japanese medic, but not a trained medic.

SH: So you don't know where the Japanese took the American officers? They just spread them out.

RP: There was a camp of officers on another island called Sansushi, and we were aware of that. It was a different world for them. They weren't working camps either.

AB: Really.

SH: Was the Geneva Convention anything that the Japanese ...

RP: I never discussed it. [laughter] That was so far ...

SH: I know, but we have to ask.

RP: The only thing I remember about that is that the night of the surrender one of our officers had a shotgun, which had been originally used for recreation, had been carrying it, decided it was not wise to be captured with that on his person. He got rid of that because that was against the Geneva Convention. No shotguns. We had riot guns, which we called twelve gauge shotguns with pump action, used for guard duty, and they were better for guard duty than were hand guns, or rifles, or even sub-machine guns, because they just had a different pattern of pellets. The ammunition was all in brass rather than paper shells for shotguns, because it was used over and over again. You had to load it and unload it at the end of each ... It dented, got all beat up, but it would still fit.

SH: Do you think your growing up in the mid-west helped you?

RP: Enormously.

SH: How?

RP: Well, I think, first of all, I think I had an innate sense of "good will triumph." Now eve, because it doesn't always seem to. I had a sense of patriotism. I knew that my country would come after me. I believed in God. I believed in being self-sufficient, as much as I could. I come back to a certain amount of stoicism; "suck it in" is a favorite expression, and "get 'er done." To this day you see a wonderful piece, a mockery of the New Orleans debacle, which has to do with a blizzard in Minnesota. Have you ever seen that? They didn't call for federal aid. They just shoveled snow. They didn't ask to have new homes, and stuff like this; they just dug out the old ones. There is a sense of independence that you don't find new. We've become so dependent upon big government. It's scary.

SH: Talk to us about how, as you are reading these Japanese papers, there must have been a sense of, how did you control not going up to them and saying, "We're going to win." Or was it not reported to the Japanese people? Did they not know how badly it was going?

RP: It was their papers I was reading.

SH: I know, but what I'm saying, were they forthright and honest?

RP: They knew.

SH: Those papers were.

EB: So it would announce that they just lost another battle, or lost another island?

RP: They would never say it. They would say they pushed the Americans back off of it, but suddenly that island is used as a springboard to the next one, and that was never explained.

SH: Did you read anything about President Roosevelt's death and was that being reported?

RP: Oh, yeah. I had no idea who the vice president was until I read his name, "Tr-u" in Kotakona. Do you know anything about that?

JD: No.

RP: I had no idea what he was, what Truman was like, so I turned on the offensive. The Japanese would say, "The war is over, Roosevelt is dead." I would tell them, "You think Roosevelt hated you, this guy is really anti-Japanese, and you are going to be worse off now." Turned out to be true, but I had no idea.

EB: Instill that fear, just a little bit, right?

RP: Scare them.

SH: So, could you read in the Japanese newspaper about Iwo Jima and then about Okinawa? You really knew that the Americans were getting close to the homeland.

RP: Oh, yes. We see the airplanes, the smaller airplanes flying out of the old Asawana group, ... all the Jimas, single engine airplanes, seven hundred and fifty miles, escorting the B-29s by then, and doing interdiction work after they got to ...

SH: So you were seeing the effects of that, the bombing raids? I wasn't sure if you were too far north.

RP: Oh, yeah, and aircraft from the carrier groups, they'd be around a lot towards the summer of '45. They owned the air over Japan.

SH: What would the Japanese have you do then when there was an imminent attack? We heard about the bomb raid shelters in London but what were the Japanese doing? Did they just tell you to stand out there and take it?

RP: No. I don't remember where we went. At night we would just burst from our camp when the B-29s were dropping napalm, and, there again, there was enough of us that we could put out a lot fires. Then the Japanese around there lost their homes. We had them outnumbered.

SH: So you were putting out the fires that the American planes were starting?

RP: When they were in our camp.

SH: Okay.

RP: At one point, one night, we took down the fence and put out fires of neighboring Japanese shanties, wooden houses, put those out because they were a threat to us. Then put the fence back up.

SH: Keep them out of ...

RP: Yeah.

EB: Now, did you listen to Japanese radio at all? Did they have Japanese radio there?

RP: Not that I remember. I never listened much to radios at home either. That was a novelty.

EB: The radio.

SH: As you say, the B-29s own the air, and the auxiliary aircraft, just kind of talk about how it progresses then for you. What happens?

RP: I remember the first of November, 1944, as the first B-29 came over, all by himself, just looking it over, and then by the spring of '45 it turned into about every three days. Grids of probably about five hundred of them, at night, not very high altitude, and they would come in a stream of, it would take all night to get through them, because they didn't all come at once. The lead one would come in and start a fire ... and the rest would wait until that gets lighted up a little bit, burning well, and drop on the perimeter and the thing spreads. The fire storms that resulted from all that would be winds of forty miles per hour, and they sucked up the oxygen out of the air to the degree that a typical night's casualty in Tokyo would be eighty thousand people; more than the atomic bombs did, and this was repeated, and it happened in Germany, I found out later.

SH: You were reading about this in the papers, is this how you knew this was happening in Tokyo?

RP: No, no. First of all, we were right there, Tokyo, Kawasaki, and Yokohama are right along the water front, and we were right in the middle, and they start on one end and went right through. Kawasaki was more burned out, also, except when we put the wall down, put out the fires, and put the wall back up.

SH: But your plant was never hit directly.

RP: Oh, yes. . . . These napalms came in small canisters, and there were many of them, but we had a lot of guys and we could put out a lot of fires.

SH: Oh, okay. I misunderstood; I thought they were just small incinerations.

RP: They are, they were.

SH: I didn't realize it was a multitude.

RP: A typical napalm bomb would be a cluster of canisters about this big around, about this long. On one end is a weight and a blasting cap and it's filled with what we called snot gas because of the consistency and the smell, we didn't know what else to call it, and there was a cloth trail went out the back. So when it's fired it would have, it would put the heavy end down so it would fall on the ground. It acted as a mortar, it would shoot this stuff up against walls of buildings. Places where people couldn't get to, to put it out. Very effective, because there was so many of them, and their Japanese structures were so easily burned.

EB: So you read about V-E Day, you said, in the papers, and did you think that V-J Day, the end of the war, was coming soon then?

RP: Yes. We knew that the Japanese knew, it too. We taunted them about it. We played a lot of head games. Get by with whatever we could to keep them off guard.

EB: So when did you actually hear about the end of the war then?

RP: We were aware that on the sixth of August, I think it was, they asked Russia to negotiate a peace. But they picked on the wrong people because they had just defeated the Russians forty years earlier and driven them out of Manchuria and Korea, so the Russians declared war on them, bad move for the Japanese. We heard all this stuff. All the guys from Manchuria were repatriated by the Russians, by the way. I was told, I wasn't there. But, my take on this whole thing is this: they were so badly beaten, they knew they were so badly beaten, only their supreme desire to save face had kept them from surrendering long before. Rather bring the world down with them, rather than to, those two nuclear weapons, their best outcome was it gave them an excuse the world would accept for surrender. Nobody could blame them anymore.

EB: Did you hear about when the bombs were dropped?

RP: Eventually, not the details.

EB: After the first bomb was dropped, you didn't hear about it until after the second bomb was dropped.

RP: Nope, and then it was just that there was something different, no details. But the, all of sudden, they say, "We're not going to work today." By then, I was up the coast at a place called

Hitachi, which is a city on the coast which is at the foot of a valley. Over the mountains were copper mines, and then working your way down the valley were copper smelts, copper rolling mills, wire-making things, motors, that kind of stuff. They ended up as airplane starters, or whatever they wanted out of copper. That was Hitachi assembly line. You see it today in your television sets, by that name, Hitachi. So one day, "We're not going to work today," then the next day, "We're not going to work today either," and the word got out. They started releasing more food to us. They started to do what we wanted, our officers and NCOs, to the point we actually said, "We want to go swimming." It was only about six kilometers down to the Pacific from our camp, "and we want a guard to go with us." The roles had reversed. We went swimming.

EB: So then how long before you were sent home?

RP: A week or two.

EB: A week or two.

SH: They continued to feed you well for that two weeks.

RP: We started getting air drops, too, food and clothing.

SH: When did they start the air drops? When they were still negotiating the treaty, or after that had been done?

RP: Oh, I don't know the sequence. They actually surrendered verbally before the treaty was signed. Somewhere in there, they just did it.

SH: I didn't know whether the Americans had been able to drop you any literature to let you know what was going on, or whether they were dropping you food with any information.

RP: I don't remember any literature. But I know I nearly got killed by some of those fifty-five gallon drums of food and clothing.

EB: Did you know anyone that did get injured by the dropping of the food?

RP: No, just me. [laughter]

EB: So you got the food and then did they actually send you to somewhere to get on a ship or a train or a bus? How did you get back?

RP: But the ship never showed up, so we got back on the train and went down to Yokohama. You do the best you can.

SH: Now, did you do that as a unit? Did someone say, "Okay, the ship didn't show up, we're all going?"

RP: As a camp.

SH: Were there already Americans in Japan, as far as the occupation, by the time you left?

RP: Patrols I saw, and, in Tokyo and Yokohama, we were met at the train station in Yokohama by the First Calvary Division and the Eleventh Airborne Division. They took us to the piers where a hospital was set up to receive us. The hospital was a unit from the University of Maryland. They shipped them out intact, as units, we found out. There they took our temperature, made sure we were healthy. [laughter]

EB: How much weight had you lost?

RP: About sixty pounds.

EB: So, what were you originally?

RP: One hundred and seventy-five.

EB: So you were almost down to one hundred pounds.

RP: Hundred and twenty.

EB: How tall were you?

RP: Five ten and a half.

EB: That's a lot of weight lost.

RP: Well, keep in mind that nobody was overweight in those times either to start with.

EB: That's true. So they sent you on a ship after that, after the hospital?

RP: Oh, no. I went to the Doc and I got a little piece of paper, which I still have, that says, "Acsuni," which is the name of one of the airfields that we appropriated for evacuating PWs. That was my ticket home, at least as far as Okinawa. A couple of days there, through the rest of the way to Manila. We were getting farther from home all the time. Careful planning. Then, they put us on a slow boat with nothing but food.

EB: That was nice. What was your first meal?

RP: I don't know.

EB: Ice cream?

RP: We could have ice cream sundaes night or day on the ship, just go get them.

SH: Nobody had any thoughts that maybe you guys should be introduced to food slowly or ...

RP: Some guys should have. There were a few people who got sick. But, mostly, our stomachs had shrunk to the point where you couldn't really, I couldn't eat as much as my mind said I should or I wanted to.

EB: So from there you went back to the US?

RP: San Francisco.

EB: San Francisco.

RP: About three weeks by slow boat. We didn't even stop in Hawaii on the way back. We did stop at (?).

AB: Once you were home is that when, you have like a couple of Master Degrees, right? Did you go to school right after you got back?

RP: No, no. I had to grow up first.

AB: You had to grow up first.

EB: How old were you at this point?

RP: I turned twenty-five almost the same day as V-J Day. Feast of the Blessed Virgin, the fifteenth of August, so I make that my second birthday.

EB: Oh, yeah.

RP: I turned twenty-five that day.

EB: So, you turned twenty-five.

RP: What was your question again, Andrea?

AB: I found that it is interesting that you have two Master Degrees. Did you use the GI Bill to go to school? Were you already married? How did that whole home thing come into play for you?

RP: I'm married by February of '46, and stayed in the service until '63. At which time, I got a degree in mathematics and I continued and got a Masters Degree in Physics.

AB: Where did you go to school?

RP: Rollins.

AB: Were you using the G.I Bill?

RP: Yes.

EB: So, you said you took some time off and then you went and got your Masters?

RP: No, no, no, all at night. I worked days. You just get her done. You work days, send your kids to school, I got my first degree within two weeks from the time that our son graduated from college. I am a late-bloomer.

EB: Oh.

RP: I am the definition of late-bloomer.

EB: When did you meet Audrey, correct?

RP: Oh, yeah, on leave, December of '45, I suppose. We waited until February to get married.

AB: They all had short engagements in those days.

RP: Yeah.

SH: Did you stay in the military?

RP: Until '63, a total of twenty-four years.

EB: So you met Audrey, and within two months you were married?

RP: Yep. What's the wait for?

EB: Where did you meet her?

RP: Oh. We knew each other existed. She was my younger brother's age and, therefore, just snotty little kids, you know, you don't mess with them. But, a friendly neighbor, who was a mutual friend, was getting married, and Audrey was making arrangements to dress her up and all this stuff, and that's where I really got to know Audrey, started to get interested. She had grown up a lot during the war. [laughter]

EB: I was just curious because my grandmother always loves to tell the story that she picked my grandfather up at the corner drugstore, so I was just curious as to how you two met.

AB: You had a pretty exciting life, the two of you, after; you did a huge amount of traveling, all over the world, and raised your family.

RP: Europe and North Africa.

EB: So you had one son.

RP: And a daughter.

EB: And a daughter.

SH: Now was this travel in relation to your work?

RP: No, for the first twenty-five or thirty years it was all vacations. Every other year we would go to Europe and the in-between times we would go back to Minnesota for family time. When I retired from the parish ministry in '84, I began doing a lot of traveling to Europe and that's probably what sticks in your mom's mind. The Church of England has parishes all through Europe, a lot of cities there, maybe more than a hundred, and they have, they tried to get chaplains on a three year-contract. I didn't want to go for three years, but some times they didn't get a new chaplain right away. There would be a month, two or three months, and those were called locum tenants, just temporary things, that was my bag. I have done those in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Warsaw, don't do that in the winter, [laughter] that was a hardship tour, a grand one in Madrid, Venice, St. George's in Venice.

EB: Why did you decide to go in ...

AB: Because you, at a regular civilian career, after you got out of the army, you worked for a company for a long time, right?

RP: Aerospace, aerospace, physics.

AB: And you worked for them for years, right?

RP: Thirteen years.

AB: And then, after that, you became a minister.

RP: Defining late blooming, I went to seminary at age fifty-seven.

SH: Where did you go to seminary?

RP: University of Oxford.

SH: Nice place.

EB: What made you decide to stop physics and go into religion?

RP: I don't know. I just walked into my bishop one day and said, "I need to be a priest," and he said, "I think you do." I had been an ordained deacon already, studied in ... for that, but I went to the Martin Company and said, "Please lay me off," because it had benefits over quitting.

EB: Okay.

RP: They said, "If you will sign this piece of paper that says we are not laying you off because of age discrimination, we'll be glad to lay you off." So, the usual hoops for holy orders, and England seemed like a good place for an Episcopalian to study. Wakelif Hall at the University of Oxford, and I was a rector of a parish five and a half years until I reached retirement age.

SH: And where were you a rector?

RP: Are you familiar with Florida?

SH: A little bit.

RP: Sanford, Lake Monroe, right across the lake from Sanford.

AB: He lived not too far from my parents down there.

RP: Right. Enterprise, right across there. Deltona is a huge a Makel Brothers development there, which really was the basis for the parish.

EB: Do you think going into that had anything to do with being a POW and feeling that God got you through the war?

RP: I don't think I did any of that bargaining kind of, "you do it, I'll do it," kind of thing, because we never know do we?

EB: I just wondered if it confirmed your faith that type thing. I was wondering if being a POW affected your life in any way?

RP: Well, I grew up a lot. You never know, do you? And you especially you never know yourself.

SH: How soon did you reconnect with the other POWs?

RP: Oh, it was in 1986.

SH: It was that long.

RP: I went to a couple meetings early on and I found pity parties going on. I didn't like that. In 1986 they had a meeting in Orlando and one of the guys said, "We don't have a Chaplain, except in a nursing home. He can't come, why don't you, please, be our chaplain for that meeting?" Turned out that Admiral Taylor was there, too, but, it was really 1989 when my friends ganged up on me and, remember Roy Gentry?

AB: Yeah.

RP: He was the principle.

AB: In those days, in that Florida group, you had some good times with that group. That wasn't a pity party kind of thing.

RP: No, no, I wasn't a part of them either.

AB: Oh, you weren't.

RP: No, I got turned off in 1946 or '47 and I never looked back again until they said they wanted a chaplain.

SH: Now being in the regular military, how often did it come up that you were a POW? And did you continue as an aircraft mechanic after the war?

RP: I specialized in, first in electrical, then I switched to armament. I was teaching these turret systems, one in Denver, then ... I was commissioned in 1948 and ...

SH: You were given a regular field commission or what did they call it?

RP: Just a commission. They just did it.

SH: Commissioned you as a ...

RP: Second Lieutenant, and I was a armament officer by then, called to active duty. I was in a fighter squadron defending St. Louis, over ... from the Russian bombers. Sound funny?

SH: SAC bombers, was that a SAC base?

RP: We were an Air Defense Command, against the Russians.

SH: Were there SAC bombers somewhere close by your fighter squadron?

RP: We were to shoot down Russian bombers, which came over the Pole, if they got down as far as St. Louis.

SH: You weren't to protect the SAC bombers who were going the other way.

RP: No, they didn't have any escorts.

EB: Were there any other ...

RP: B-29s, 50s, and, later on, jet bombers.

SH: When the Korean War broke out was there any chance that you would have been sent to Korea?

RP: I was. I went back for another year in the Orient. I spent six and a half years in the Orient.

SH: After that?

RP: All together.

SH: Okay. What did you do in Korea then? Did they send you to Japan and then to Korea?

RP: Yes.

SH: Tell me about that. What would it be like to go now, back as the ...

RP: I walked around my old POW camp area while waiting for a flight to Korea. Didn't see anybody I knew, so I went to Korea.

AB: I thought that there was some deal that if you were a POW they were never going to send you back to Asia?

RP: I heard that rumor, but it never worked for me.

AB: Because Tom Calderone was saying that he decided to stay in and they promised him. They said, "We have an arrangement if you stay in, we'll never send you back to Asia."

RP: That stuck in Audrey's craw. But I said, "You know what I do for a living."

AB: Yeah. When did you go back to Korea, what were you doing there? Were you actually like a soldier, or were you still a mechanic at that point?

RP: I was an armament officer overseeing the Republic of Korea, 10th Fighter Group, the 10th Fighter Wing at Seoul. Our job was to, okay, in order for the Koreans to sign an armistice, and there has never been a peace treaty, it's all still an armistice, we gave them a wing of fighter planes on this base, where there had been three wings of American fighter planes. We just left them one wing, and helped them maintain them, to fly and to fight defensively, but not enough to be aggressive and go north. That was our mission. My mission was to handle the armament stuff of that. I came back and went to guided missile maintenance school and that is what brought me to Orlando, Orlando Air Force Base. By '63, I could see another isolated tour coming up because the crews that I trained were starting to go to Asia again. I said, "Enough."

EB: You weren't going again.

SH: Then you went to work for Aerospace?

RP: What's now Lockheed Marietta in Orlando.

SH: What was your job there?

RP: I did a lot of computer simulation of flight trajectories. My field of expertise however, was electro-optics. But in physics you do what needs doing. Whether it was nuclear, electromagnetic, statics, dynamics, electro-optics, just do what needs to be done.

EB: I never actually got to physics in high school, so, I only got to chemistry.

SH: Did you suffer any health ailments from having been a POW that many years?

RP: Malnutrition takes its toll.

AB: Did you ever get your hundred percent? [Editor's Note: 100 percent disability]

RP: Yep.

AB: You did.

RP: Periphiralpolyuroptamy was the result of malnutrition. That's why I walk clumsy; I can't feel what I pick up, but you do what you can.

SH: Did they know that then, or is this something that has come out of that?

RP: The neurologist who first diagnosed this said, "Your nervous system, in particular peripheral, is about twenty-five years older than the rest of you." So here I am, with a hundred and ten year old, or a hundred-eleven-year old feet and hands, but, there again, you do what you do.

EB: Do you have any other questions?

AB: No, I don't think so.

SH: What are you most proud of?

RP: Oh, you're talking to me now, I'm just ...

SH: You're a very humble man, so this is your chance to brag.

RP: I'm just so pleased to be a child of god and inheritor of the kingdom. I was a good husband, I was a good care-giver for six and a half years. She wanted to die and I couldn't want her to die, but I surely didn't want her to live for me. In the end, she had no choice. Too many systems shut down. I had been grieving for six and a half years, and I lost her bit by bit, and I'm just so glad she's not suffering.

EB: Is there anything else you want to add about your children or anything?

RP: If you turn off the tape recorder, I'll tell you something personal.

----- END OF INTERVIEW -----

Reviewed by Elaine Blatt 8/1/2007
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Reviewed by Robert Phillips 1/31/2008