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Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: Willie L Benton
(Signature)

Date: 3/10/75

Oral History Collection

Willie L. Benton

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas Date: March 10, 1975

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Willie L. Benton for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 10, 1975, in Fort Worth, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Benton in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese during World War II. Mr. Benton was a North China Marine and was actually taken as a prisoner-of-war in Peking very, very shortly after the war had begun.

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

Mr. Benton: Well, I was born in Alvarado, Texas, in 1917. I moved to Waxahachie when I was small, oh, about a year old, and then I was raised in Waxahachie. That's about it.

Dr. Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Benton: June 8, 1939.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Benton: Well, I was twenty-one years old. I was in perfect health. The newspapers was full of war. That's all you could read. They was already fighting in Japan and China, which started in 1937. I got to looking around, and I said, "Well, here I am. I know they're going to get me, so why don't I get on in there and get in on the gravy train!" Well, after I got in, I spent from June until December in California. Then I left for China on the fourth of December, 1939.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Marine Corps as compared to one of the other branches of service?

Benton: Well, that's a long story, too (chuckle). Back in them days it wasn't easy to get in the service. Now you could get in the Army pretty easy, but the Marine Corps and Navy was real hard to get in. Well, I had been turned down for the Navy and the Marine Corps both. I could have got in the Army, but I didn't want to.

So one day a buddy of mine, he said, "Let's go to Dallas. I'm going to join the Navy." I said, "Alright, I'll go with you." So we drove to Dallas, and we go over to the Navy recruiting office. The only thing they could find wrong with him was that he

had a false tooth. They turned him down! So then we went over to the Marine Corps, and they turned him down over there for the same reason. I said, "Well, being as I'm up here, I believe I'll take the examination." And they accepted me and didn't accept him. That's how come I went in the Marine Corps. I didn't even go to Dallas to join at the time.

Marcello: Just to refresh my memory, when did you say that you left for the China station?

Benton: December 4, 1939.

Marcello: Now at the time that you entered the Marine Corps, did you have any idea that the country would soon be going into war, and if so, did you think it would occur in the Far East?

Benton: Well, really, it didn't . . . it hadn't really entered my mind that we would ever go to war with Japan right at that time. I figured a war, if it come, would be in Europe. I never could see Japan and us fighting, but that's something you never know.

Marcello: What was your specialty at the time that you got out of boot camp? And I assume that you went to some boot camp over to China.

Benton: No, see, I spent . . . at that time we spent six weeks in boot camp. I got out of boot camp . . . I went to sea school. I didn't like it, so me and another Marine

asked to get out of sea school. That was what we . . . at that time you went through the sea school, and then you went aboard ship. We decided we wasn't going to like it. So finally we stuck around there a couple of weeks, and we had a real good gunnery sergeant, and he let us out. So then I spent two weeks on KP duty. After that, then they shipped us out to the destroyer base.

That was my break. See, I wanted to go to China. But if I hadn't went to sea school, I'd been put in the 6th Marines, and they wound up in Greenland. By me going to sea school, I missed going to the 6th Marines and went out to the destroyer base. Well, I found out later that most of the boys that go to China went from them kind of places. They didn't go into the 6th Marines and pull them out. They would pull them out from these outposts. See, they had Marines out at the destroyer base, out at North Island, out at Point Loma, which are just little guard details. We'd taken care of the brig and the main gates on a, you know, Navy base. That was our duty. But when they'd get a detachment to go to the Far East, they'd come in to them and pick a few out of each one. Mostly the boots is the ones, see, the one that had the most time because when I first went out there, a tour of duty out

there was two and a half years. Well, after I got out there, they set that down to two years.

Marcello: Now did you mention awhile ago that they would usually pick boots to go on this China station?

Benton: The Far East, yes. Well, now I would say, the best I can remember, it was anywhere from 75 to 80 per cent would be boots.

Marcello: Why was it that they selected people from these outposts as opposed to pulling people out of the 6th Marines?

Benton: Well, now that's something I can't truthfully answer. It's just that they didn't want to . . . they'd get these boys in the 6th Marines, and they didn't want to have to keep replacing them and retraining. Once you got in there and you got trained for a certain duty, well, then it was easier to pull a guy out that hadn't been trained for that thing.

Now that didn't work because there was a lot of guys that actually went back to the Far East from these 6th Marines and places, but they was mostly guys that had been out there before. Because once you ever went to China, and if you stayed in the Marine Corps, you went back, or tried to go back.

Marcello: Why was it that you wanted to go to China?

Benton: Oh, I guess that's just a young kid's dream, I guess.

Marcello: Was there a lot of prestige in being a North China Marine?

Benton: Well, yes, there was. You see, we was the embassy guard, which was, I guess you could call it, something you could be proud of. I mean, actually, I'm not ashamed of it. I'm proud that I served as an embassy guard in Peking, China.

Marcello: In other words, it was more or less like an elite outfit, would you say?

Benton: It was a show outfit. It was strictly show. We wasn't a fighting outfit. We was there for the express purpose of, oh . . . generals and VIP's would come in there, and we'd break out our blues and have a big honor guard and, you know, just strictly a show.

Marcello: Okay, I gather that there were also some of these Marines in Tientsin and places like that, also, weren't there?

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: But in your particular case you went to Peking.

Benton: I was in Peking.

Marcello: Okay, now when you got to Peking, identify what your unit was in full. Did it have some name other than the North China Marines?

Benton: Well, we was known as the embassy guard.

Marcello: But in other words, you didn't have a designation like the 6th Marines that we talked about awhile ago.

Benton: No, this was strictly an embassy guard in Peking, China. That was the name that we went under--the American Embassy Guard, Peking China. Where we got the North

China Marines name was after the war started. We'll go into that later.

Marcello: Well, describe what happened now when you got to China. Did you go directly to Peking? Where did you land?

Benton: Well, our first stop in China was Shanghai. The best I recollect, we spent about two days there, maybe one day and two nights or two days and a couple of nights. I don't remember exactly, but I never did . . . I didn't go ashore in Shanghai because I didn't have any money. Back in them days we wasn't very flush with money--$21 a month (chuckle).

Marcello: What was your rank at this particular time?

Benton: I was a private. Twenty-one dollars a month.

Marcello: How did you get from Shanghai to Peking? Did you go by railroad?

Benton: No, we went by boat up to Chinwangtao.

Marcello: Which is another port city, is that correct?

Benton: It is another port city. And we hit Chinwangtao the nineteenth day of January, 1940. We broke ice coming into the dock.

Marcello: It was that cold?

Benton: It was that cold. I don't remember. Well, it probably wasn't too thick. As I say, that's been a long time ago. I remember it, though, because we went up on deck and were breaking that ice. We docked and we looked out

there, and it was the most . . . I don't know. It's real hard to describe. Them Chinese were nasty, dirty, working them coal ships. It made your stomach feel like it was sitting on the ground. I mean, it was a feeling that you would have said, "Well, let's go back home." And I would have went back. Well, I'll tell you more about that.

Marcello: Well, what happened, then, when you landed at Chinwangtao? What happens at this point?

Benton: Well, we got aboard a train. We spent--well, I don't remember--the biggest part of the day. See, it's only, I believe, about eighty miles from Chinwangtao to Peking.

Marcello: Chinwangtao would be the port city, I would assume, for Peking.

Benton: Well, now ocean-going vessels do go up as far as Tientsin, oh, I think within about ten miles. But this particular ship we was on, which was an American ship . . . well, I don't know. They might not have let them. But we spent the biggest part of the day. It was cold.

We got into Peking that night about ten o'clock, and it was the same thing. We got off the train and them Chinese people, starving to death, hungry, laying around asleep. It was a heck of a feeling.

So we went on over to the barracks. They carried us up there and gave us a bunk. A friend of mine named Beeman,

Gerald Beeman, lived in Ohio. I had seen him a couple of times on the transport. He was from the East Coast. He'd come all the way through Panama Canal. Well, we got up there, and me and him got to a bunk at the same time. We liked to have had a fight over that bunk. You know, that was our first meeting. Well, as it turns out, during the year me and him becomes the very best of friends. I mean, even today we're still friends. I talked to him on Saturday on the phone. We talk about, oh, at least once a month. He lives in Dayton, Ohio. Oh, that was . . . I guess you could say that was our entrance to China.

Marcello: What were the Marine quarters like here in Peking? Describe what they were like from a physical standpoint.

Benton: Well, very good, very good. Number one, actually. Our barracks was a three-story brick building. Well, actually, it was four stories. It had a . . . the basement was about half underground. And then on the first floor we had the galley and mess hall. And on the second and third floor was the barracks. Of course, there was regular squad rooms, but they were very clean and very good. As far as I'm concerned, they were number one as far as the service is concerned. And our compound wasn't . . . of course, see, now there we had our own power plant, had our own water well, had our

own hospital, had our own gymnasium, had a big baseball field, big swimming pool, hospital. As I say, it was number one as far as conditions.

Marcello: How many men were here in this unit at Peking altogether? You might have to estimate this, of course.

Benton: Do you mean when I first got there?

Marcello: Yes.

Benton: Well, there was four companies, I mean, two companies and four platoons which . . . I would say there was around 300 men at that time.

Marcello: Did this number swell as time went on, that is, up until the time you were captured?

Benton: No, now they would decrease.

Marcello: I see. In other words, they were eventually taking them out of China.

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: Was this done in conjunction with the worsening relations between the United States and Japan?

Benton: Well, I can't answer that truthfully. I don't know. But we figured it was.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that the barracks and so on were very, very clean and very, very neat. Did you have the Chinese house boys and things of this nature?

Benton: Oh, yes. The only thing we did was clean our rifles. Now we had room boys that . . . they'd shine our shoes, press

our clothes, made our bunks, swept the floors. We had regular mess boys doing all of the KP. That cost us the equivalent of about fifty cents a month, which was very good as far as we were concerned. Most of us tipped our room boys. We had a room boy that was taking care of one row of men, which consisted of anywhere from seven to ten men. We didn't have many turnovers, but most of us always tipped our room boys. They was like anybody else--the more tipping, well, the better service. And they was very trustworthy. You didn't have to worry about them stealing. Now I was up there twenty-three months. We didn't lock our lockers. They didn't even have no locks on them. I lost a little old cheap wrist watch--I think it cost about a couple of dollars--and ten dollars in Chinese money in twenty-three months. It might have been some . . . my buddy might have borrowed that money and just forgot about it. He might have been half drunk and come over there and got it and sobered up and he forgot about it. I mean, it can happen, and he didn't do it intentionally. That's the reason I say I don't accuse anybody of getting the money.

Marcello: I gather that these Marines at the embassy here at Peking did not use regular service-issued uniforms either. All of you had tailor-made uniforms.

Benton: Yes. Our khakis was all tailor-made. Our greens, we had them re-tailored. They were big-legged, sort of like our flares today. Our overcoats was re-tailored. They had two pleats on the back with a leather belt. It was very neat, very neat.

Marcello: Were these coats fur? I know you had the fur hats.

Benton: We had the fur hats. No, we had the regular G.I. overcoat. But they didn't look like a G.I. overcoat after we re-tailored them, except the color.

Marcello: Did you know that one of your buddies, Sparkman, still has his fur cap?

Benton: He does?

Marcello: He sure does.

Benton: Well, I wore mine out. I have some pictures in there if you care to wait after we get through, if I can find them, and I will show them to you of us leaving Peking. You can sort of tell by the uniforms we've got on.

Marcello: Okay, that sounds like a good idea. Now you went over to Peking as a very young man, and quite obviously you were being thrust into an environment that was totally different, I'm sure, from anything that you experienced either in Texas or even in California. What were your impressions of the Chinese and the country itself during this pre-World War II period? Now you went into this just a little bit awhile ago when you first landed in China.

Benton: Well, it was very depressing, really. Even though I went into the Marine Corps during the Depression when things was rough here, they wasn't rough like they was out there. People were starving to death. It bothered me when I first went out there to walk out on the street and see a dead person. But after you stay there awhile, you'd open the gate, and if there'd be a dead man, you'd just take your foot and drag him over to the side ditch and forget about him. In a little while they'd come along and pick him up. As I say, when you first get there, it's a very depressing thing.

Of course, we got out there and we was nigger rich. We thought we had all kinds of money, making twenty-one dollars a month. The exchange rate was about twelve to one when I first got there, which would mean . . . twenty times twelve is what? About $240 a month? Well, to give you an idea how far your money would go, a haircut cost you four cents. You'd get a shave for two cents. You could get a shave, haircut, and massage for about a dime. Well, it would cost anywhere from ten to twelve cents. You could get a big T-bone with french fries, coffee, salad, and it'd run you about seventeen cents. So, you see, our money went . . . and you could buy a quart of beer for four

cents. You could buy a drink across the bar, and it'd cost you a dime. Would you care for me to go into the houses and things?

Marcello: You might as well. I think that's all a part of your experience in China.

Benton: Okay, well, I think in this day and time I don't think people look at that like they used to. We had different houses there. They were different numbers. In China they numbered their whorehouses by numbers. Of course, we had our own house, which was . . . the girls was inspected by our doctors so that, you know . . . VD out there was, oh, it was bad! And so these houses . . . you could go in them, and it'd cost you about . . . it'd cost you two dollars. If you spent the night, it'd cost you ten dollars. That was their money, which is about fifty cents in our money for all night and ten cents for one time. A young man, that's all he's got on his mind anyway. So that's all we did, was drink and fool around, party. We enjoyed it.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that these whorehouses were numbered. What exactly do you mean by that?

Benton: Well, the Chinese have a custom. A number one house is your young girls where a lot of times a lot of your virgins go. The older they get, well, then they move up to number two, number three, and so on down the line

until finally they just fade out. Of course, see, now when I first went out there, you could still buy a girl like they used to sell back in the slave days here. You could still buy women at that time.

Marcello: Did any Marines ever do this?

Benton: Yes, I knew of one that bought a girl. His name was Smith. He lives in California today. I hope his wife don't hear this (chuckle). But he lives in San Diego. He was a cook. He went down and bought him one of them girls. She was supposed to have been a young virgin. Well, it turned out that she wasn't such a virgin after all (laughter). But that's a long story. That's his story (chuckle). He was the only Marine that I ever knew of that bought one. Now I'm sure there could have been occasions or other cases.

Marcello: Getting back to these Chinese again, how would you exactly describe your attitude toward most of them? Was it one of pity? Or contempt? Or fear? How would you describe your attitude or emotions toward all of this poverty and squalor that you saw around you?

Benton: At first it was fear, and then it became, I guess you would say, more pity. Then the longer you stayed out there, you got to where you didn't pay any attention to it. You'd argue with them and fight them over a ten-cent _____, which was about a half a cent. You'd

argue with them all day. And you got to where you didn't feel sorry for them. They didn't feel sorry for you. It takes you a while to find out that they don't feel sorry for you. So then you sooner or later get the same attitude. It's just like any other thing. You feel sorry for somebody, and then he does you wrong, and then you don't feel sorry for him anymore. That's the same way it was with us.

Marcello: Did you ever make any effort to learn the language or Chinese customs or anything of that nature, or does a young Marine have things other than that on his mind?

Benton: Very few of us ever had a desire to learn. We always said we were too busy. If they wanted to talk to us, let them learn English. There was exceptions. We had guys that did learn their language. I've got a book here. A captain that was in Tientsin has just written a book. I just got it here about two weeks ago. I let my wife's brother have it the other night. He's got it or I'd let you even take it home and read it. If you're ever back down here and close, stop by. If you'd like to read the book, I'll be glad to let you read it.

Marcello: Okay, that's a good idea.

Benton: It's being told from a different viewpoint--from a viewpoint of an officer, which is . . . there is a difference between the officers and enlisted men.

Marcello: Which I'm sure we'll get into later on when you were actually prisoners-of-war. How much contact did you have with the other foreign contigents here at Peking? In other words, there were other countries that also sent embassy guards, did they not?

Benton: Yes, we had . . . when I first went there, there were the British, the Italians. They had some French Indo-Chinese, which is now what they call Vietnam. Back then it was French Indo-China. Well, we had very little to do with them. One reason was they didn't like us too much for the simple reason we had more money and we lived better. I guess they were envious of us. I don't know of any other thing. Now there was some of the guys who made friends with some of them.

But personally, I remember one time there was a boy by the name of Cohn. I don't know whether I have his address or not. I have it on my list. He don't live in Texas. But he was the type of guy that was very hard to get to know. He was a Jewish boy. He was very, very overbearing. He just . . . and I hated him. I just didn't like him at all. I say I hated him; I don't hate nobody. I never did. I use the expression, but . . . so the more I was around him and got to know him, it turned out me and him got to be good friends.

It's one of them deals where you get an impression of a person and you don't like them, but the first thing you know you're awful good friends. Well, that was the case.

So he used to hang out at a place where some Italians and British hung out. I went down there a few times with him and met a few of them, oh, I guess, a couple of times. I guess that's the only dealings I ever had with them. But as far as . . . I guess they were good people. I can't . . . as far as their background, I can't really fill you in on anything.

Marcello: How about the Japanese? Did you have very much contact with the Japanese embassy guards while you were here?

Benton: No. See, they was off limits to us. All of your Japanese places, cabarets, and all was off limits. They didn't want no . . . we had several incidents up there that was pretty nasty.

Marcello: Were you personally involved in any of these incidents?

Benton: No, not myself. I was down . . . a friend of mine that was from Waxahachie, same place I was, was in one of them. He died. They buried him the first of the year, New Year's Day. Now he was involved in one of them, and he got beat up pretty bad.

Marcello: Were these like barroom brawls?

Benton: Barroom brawls is what it was. I have been in them. I was in one barroom brawl with them, but we didn't get

captured. See, the Japs captured them and threw them in jail. Well, we got away. The bunch I was with, well, we got away clean, and the Japs never did get hold of us. So it was just what you'd call a barroom brawl, and that's all it amounted to. But our relations with the Japs was very poor.

Marcello: Now, of course, while you were stationed here in Peking, I gather that there was fighting going on all around you, was there not, because by that time the Japanese had invaded North China?

Benton: Oh, yes, see, the war with the Japanese started in Peking out there at the Marco Polo Bridge. I'm sure you probably read the history of that. That's where the first shot was fired in 1937. But as far as fighting, the fighting was far removed from Peking. There was actually no fighting except guerrilla warfare. There was a little guerrilla activity.

Where our compound was, well, it was on a main thoroughfare, one end of it was. Every morning they'd bring these truckloads of Chinese by there. They was taking them out to the execution grounds to shoot them. They'd bring them by there in truckloads every morning. Of course, we knew what was going on, but, of course, there wasn't anything we could do about it anyway.

Marcello: Besides that there were a lot more Japanese around there than there were United States Marines, I'm sure.

Benton: Well, they said there was around 50,000 Japs in and around Peking. When the war started there was about sixty of us, so you can see what the odds were. The odds were in their favor (chuckle).

Marcello: What sort of training did you yourself and the rest of the embassy guards undertake while you were here at Peking?

Benton: Well, our training was very limited. I was in what we called a machine gun company. We had a World War I machine gun with the old water-cooled jacket. Well, we actually didn't do . . . we did fire them, and we went out to the rifle range in the summer. We actually fired them with live ammunition. It was more or less a big . . . we just had a lot of fun, you might say. We'd get out there and get them old machine guns, and, man, we'd have a ball (chuckle). Of course, we were shooting into a background of a hill, so there was no danger to anybody. But you know what happens when a bunch of young kids get a machine gun and get to fire an ammunition round. It's a lot of fun. It's actually . . . we enjoyed it.

But I can't actually say that we were trained because we'd have a little schooling, and we'd go out

there and sit under a shade tree for about an hour and pass it around. Half of them would be asleep. The other half would be shooting the bull. There'd be one over there tapping on the gun.

Well, let me tell you more of our routine, and you can see how much training we had. I believe reveille went at six o'clock. Now these times . . . I can be mistaken very easy about these times. But it seemed to me like reveille went around six. Chow was either at 6:30 or seven. Then we'd fall out for what we'd call troop-and-drill at eight o'clock. We generally stayed out there in the summertime if the weather was pretty because we didn't fall out if the weather was bad. When it was rainy and stuff, we didn't go out. But on pretty days we would generally spend about an hour, which would be about nine o'clock. Then we would come back in, and we'd have about a thirty-minute break, and then we'd have school. That would go on until eleven o'clock. Recall went at eleven o'clock. In other words, our day was over at eleven o'clock.

Well, in the summertime we had what we'd call compulsory athletics. From one to 2:30 you had to fall out. They didn't care what you did. You had to get out of the bags. You could play handball. You could volleyball. You could play basketball. You could go swimming. You

could play baseball. We had any kind of thing you wanted to do. I used to play a lot of handball. That was one of my . . . handball. And I played softball and baseball on the . . . we had intramural . . . well, inter-company sports. It was a big thing because . . . and I just happened to be in the company where we had a bunch of real good athletes. I would say they were above average. With a group of men we had, I think they were a little above average athletes because I don't know of anything that we was ever beat in. I played baseball. I played softball, and I played handball. I wasn't much of a swimmer. I wasn't much of a basketball player. We used to have smokers--boxing matches. I used to box a little. We had one football game while we was up there. (Chuckle) I never will forget it. I was playing blocking back in the old single wing. See, I weighed around 180 pounds at the time. Generally my weight there varied from 170 to 180.

Marcello: That was a pretty big person at that time.

Benton: Yes, a whole lot bigger than I am now. Well, in fact, I wear a thirty-four pant now, and I wore a thirty-two then. I weighed 180 pounds. I weigh 155 now. So you can see my weight wasn't . . . my weight was in my legs and arms. I looked like I had the mumps. My face was real full.

But I'll tell you about the football game. We had a guy by the name of Wilbur Venge, who was from Texas. He come back to the States before the war started. Well, anyway he carried the ball on a first play, and I was blocking for him. He run over me and the tackler and all. My big toe . . . I pulled a big toenail off of my big toe on that first play. Well, I played the rest of the game. I knew my toe was hurting. I didn't know the toenail . . . when I pulled my shoe off, toenail and all came off. Well, that was the only football game they ever let us play because when we got through I think there was twenty guys that had to go to the hospital (chuckle). It was one of the roughest football games I guess . . . I don't suppose a pro game could have been any rougher because we had had . . . well, now old Venge, the boy that ran over me, he weighed around 210--big and tough. He was about 6'1". We had some big boys up there in the line. As I say, we had some real good athletes. Of course, we wasn't in no condition to play football. This was just more or less a make-up game. We didn't train for it. That was the reason we all wound up in the shape we was in.

Marcello: What sort of embassy duty or guard duty were you undertaking there?

Benton: Well, we had what we called one and two post. This compound was the American embassy, which was the ambassador's

quarters and all of the officers. Well, then there was just a wall. Then there was a guard compound. Well, we had one and two posts. Number one post was the American embassy gate. The ambassador and all the colonels and all of the officers used that gate. Well, number two post was for the non-commissioned officers. Then number three, which was on the other side of the compound, was where the enlisted men anywhere from . . . I don't remember. It seems to me like corporals on down had to use that gate, which took in quite a few boys. But our duties was to stand guard on these gates. That was our duty.

Marcello: What sort of a shift would you pull?

Benton: Well, when I first went out there, we pulled twenty-four hours on, we had six days off, and then you'd stand about three guards, and then you'd get twelve days off. That was when we had around 300 men. Well, as the months went on, see, they rotated out there every three months. There was a ship that went out every three months. That's the way it had been set up for years. Well, as the ships would come in, they'd bring in twenty-five men and take fifty out. In other words, they just . . . there at the last, then, we was pulling guard duty every other day, a day on and a day off. Then I think about every sixth guard you would

miss one and you'd get three days off. But when I first went out there, it was one on and six off, and then after three or four guards and you'd miss twelve days.

Marcello: I think you've answered my next question in part, but I'll ask it again, anyhow. How did your routine begin to change as relations between the United States and Japan worsened? Now one of the things you mentioned here is that gradually they were withdrawing or pulling out a great many of these embassy guards.

Benton: Well, we could sort of see that things wasn't so good between the United States and Japan. See, we had an English-published newspaper out there, which was what they called the Peking Chronicle. I guess about half of us took that paper. It was just a small paper. It was always talking about how relations between Japan and the United States was getting worse and worse and worse.

This is a horrible thing to say, but it's the way I feel, and that's why I'm going to say it. I still believe that our politicians . . . that Pearl Harbor was a set-up deal. I have no proof. That's just my own thought for the simple reason if a . . . well, at this time I was a PFC. If a PFC in a Marine Corps could see what was going on, surely our President of the United States knew something.

Marcello: What exactly did you see going on that led you to believe that war was coming very shortly?

Benton: It was in the paper (chuckle). It was in big headlines, too, which was before the war was started.

Marcello: Let me ask you this question. This is one that has recently received quite a bit of news. I also know that sometime during this period the bones of the Peking man were evidently removed from wherever they were in Peking, and I think they were going to remove them from China altogether. Of course, one of the big mysteries today is, what happened to those bones? Do you know anything about that?

Benton: Well, I will give you my full account of what I know of it today. I have been keeping up with it very . . . this Beeman I was speaking of . . . I will give you my account of it. I figured . . . we went to Dayton, Ohio, in 1972--we have a reunion of our outfit every year--and in Dayton, 1972, we was having our . . . it was one of our banquets up there that we was having. Beeman got up and spoke of the Peking man. That was the first time I had ever heard of the Peking man that I remember. I told Beeman time and time again that it might have been mentioned to me, and back in them days Peking man didn't . . . pile of bones. Well, it didn't mean a thing to me, and so I

might have just blocked it out of my mind and not remembered it. But anyway, the best I remember, Beeman mentioned it. He was telling us about the Peking man. Well, of course, everybody's curiosity got aroused.

The bones . . . now this has pretty well been established now up to this . . . the bones, if I'm not mistaken, are 37,000 years old. That's the estimated age. Well, they found these bones in China in a digging up there. This book that I've got tells where them diggings was.

Well, anyway, when the Japs come in there they stopped the digging. So they had taken them bones and taken them over there to the . . . what they called the PUMC--Peking University Medical College. It was a university and a hospital combined. It was the Peking University. So they got them bones, and they carried them over there. They had them over there unbeknown to the Japs, either that or the Japs didn't want them. I don't know which. I can't answer that.

Well, when they found out that we were leaving Peking, well, they come to our colonel and wanted him to bring the bones back to the United States for safe-keeping. So they boxed the bones up, and some of the

boys from Peking brought them down from Peking. See, we was evacuating.

Marcello: In other words, they were being shipped out at the same time a great deal of the other baggage and so on was being shipped out.

Benton: That's right. It came down with our baggage. And so the bones were shipped out, and they come to Chinwangtao. That's where the trail has died.

Marcello: Now when was it that these bones were allegedly shipped out of Peking?

Benton: Well, I can't give you the exact date. I can give it to you approximately. It was sometime between the first of December and the eighth. Well, you see, the war was the eighth out there, the seventh here. See, the time starts at the international date line and goes that way. It was the eighth of December. So the bones were shipped out sometime between the first and the eighth of December, 1941.

Marcello: Like you mentioned, nobody really knows what happened to them after they left Peking.

Benton: Well, we didn't . . . the boys that carried them down didn't even know we had them. They didn't know what they had. They just had a box . . . a big trainload of stuff. They didn't know what was in them boxes.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that a great deal of baggage was being taken out of Peking at this time as relations

between the two countries continued to deteriorate. What did you personally send out of Peking during that period? Anything?

Benton: Nothing. See, we were shipping . . . none of the enlisted men had shipped any of their personal belongings. Now a lot of the officers had.

Marcello: In other words, mainly the things that you were shipping out of there were official property or government property.

Benton: That's right. Government property is right. See, our personal belongings . . . in the Marine Corps we carried all of our personal belongings with us at all times. See we'd live out of the sea bag. If you had anything more than a sea bag . . . well, now out there we was allowed to bring a trunk back home. But they were shipping out . . . and as far as the Peking man's bones, that's where the trail had dead-ended.

Now since that time I have received letters from this Janus. He's the boy that's hunting for the bones. He is with the Greek Heritage Foundation in Chicago. He is planning a trip to China in October. He has promised we could go with him (chuckle). Nothing definite, just a promise. That's what I was talking to Beeman about. We found out about it . . . Friday

was a week ago. He called me Friday a week ago. See, we had been trying to go back. In fact, we'd been working on it and working on it. I've got a whole bunch of correspondence out on it now. But if we can go back with him, this is really good. He said that we could have ten spaces on the plane--ten seats. We don't know whether that's going to include . . . if we can take five of us and our wives or whether it's going to strictly have to be ten Marines or what. We don't know. We're hoping it's for our wives because we really don't know whether we can get ten men that can go. See, our ranks are beginning to get pretty thin. There's a lot of them in pretty bad health. Of course, financially, some of them are not in such good shape. But we don't know yet whether we can get five to go or not.

Marcello: Well, this brings us up almost to the start of World War II. What I want you to do at this point is to describe what you were doing and what your reactions were when you heard about the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941--which would be December 8, your time.

Benton: Well, on December 8, 1941, we got up. I was supposed to go on guard duty. We looked out of our barracks, and you couldn't see a soul. We knew something happened. We didn't know what because . . . it's

just unheard of because you could look out your window at that time of morning, and it's just like ants. We looked out the window, and there was nobody. Well, it wasn't long after that we got a radio message that . . . and our message wasn't too clear, but it did get through that the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Well, it's a feeling that's hard to describe really--the way you felt. I mean, we didn't feel good. You know, it was a letdown feeling. We about half-way wanted to fight even though we figured we couldn't come out of it. But I believe if they'd have left it up to a vote, we would have fought, and we would have all died right there. But the decision wasn't ours to make. I guess that's the reason I'm here today.

Marcello: Did you think that it would be a relatively short war, however?

Benton: Oh, definitely.

Marcello: What was your personal feeling or attitude toward the Japanese at this time? You mentioned that the Japanese areas were kind of out of bounds to the American Marines because of the barroom brawls and this sort of thing.

Benton: Well, I think the reason they was out of bounds was because they didn't want any trouble. I don't know

whether you was ever in the service or not, but a service . . . well, it's an experience. A kid between eighteen and twenty-one, you get away from home, first time most of us, you let your hair down. I could tell you about a boy . . . I can mention one boy that was one of the best boys you ever saw--religious, didn't drink. He went into the Marine Corps. He was a virgin when he went in. He got his first taste of whiskey, first taste of women, and he went hog wild. For two years he lived that way. He come back to the States, came into the hospital, and there was his old girlfriend who was a nurse. They got married right then and there. The guy hasn't had a drink or missed a day of church since.

Marcello: Well, again, what was your attitude toward the Japanese at this time?

Benton: Well . . .

Marcello: How did you look upon them?

Benton: . . . I really didn't have nothing against the Japs, really. They hadn't ever done anything to me personally with the exception of a couple of fights that I had with them, but you can't fault a . . . that was as much my fault as it was theirs. So you can't fault the Jap as a whole. As I say, they had never done anything to me so why should I hate somebody that had never mistreated

me? So actually my attitude was . . . I guess you could call it, one, that "Well, we're at war, and if I don't kill them, they're going to kill me." I guess that's the attitude you have. It's not that you actually don't like the people.

Marcello: Well, what happened at this point then? You received the news about Pearl Harbor. What happened next?

Benton: Well, of course, the Japs came in. They give the colonel an ultimatum to surrender--lay down our amrs or fight. They said, "Either lay down your arms or we're going to take you by force." And as I said a few minutes ago, you've got 50,000 Japs, and you've got sixty Marines, and we don't have any amunition. He done the only thing he could do. He didn't feel like sacrificing sixty lives, so he surrendered.

Marcello: Did you feel that perhaps you might be repatriated because in a way you were a part of the United States embassy?

Benton: Definitely! We definitely . . . I'll get to that. After they come and give us the ultimatum and the colonel sent word down that we was going to surrender, well, our captain, which was a captain by the name of Hester--Captain Hester--he come up. The assembled us all. He was our man, and, of course, each company there was the same way. So he told us, "Now we're

going to surrender." He said, "We don't know what's going to happen." He says, "They might come in here, take us all out there on the parade ground, and mow us down." He said, "Now we do have what is known as the protocol, which was signed in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion." He went on to explain that we was part of the embassy and that we had a good chance at being repatriated with the diplomats. Well, of course, that made us feel good.

Well, as we later learned . . . now I have learned from this Captain White that he has researched and he has never found that document that was supposed to have been signed. I can't say either way because I don't know.

Anyway, well, when he made the speech, we didn't feel too good even though we knew about maybe being repatriated. But still the first thing that entered our mind was getting out of there. We didn't want to take no chances. But anyway, I guess that just about sums up the morning of the eighth. And then that afternoon at one o'clock . . .

Marcello: What did you do in the meantime? Just kind of sit around and do nothing? Speculate?

Benton: Yes, just sat around and talked and speculated.

Marcello: I'm sure morale wasn't very high at that point.

Benton: No, morale wasn't . . . I wouldn't say it was too high. Then again, it wasn't too low. You would be surprised that the morale didn't deteriorate very much. In fact, our morale never deteriorated for forty-four months. There was low points. But as far as the morale it was kept up pretty good. But anyway, that pretty well sums up up to about one o'clock.

Marcello: Okay, what happened at that point?

Benton: Well, at one o'clock the Japs come in. They allowed us to lower the flag, which . . . they'd taken the flag and give it to our colonel.

Marcello: Were you standing out on the parade ground at this time?

Benton: We went out and stood at attention. We had our arms stacked out there in the compound. We went out and stood at attention and saluted the flag as he brought it down.

Marcello: Who lowered the flag? The Japanese?

Benton: No, we did.

Marcello: What sort of emotions did you experience when this took place?

Benton: Well, I guess it was emotion that we all . . . I don't mind saying that I cried a little. I mean, I'm not ashamed of it. I think that pretty well sums up the whole bunch because I don't think we ever did talk about it too much, but I think their feelings was all about

the same. I think there was tears in everybody's eyes.

We had a bugler by the name of Gray. He lived here in Fort Worth. He's dead. He died about three years ago. Now according to Colonel White, Bucher blew taps up there. And he's also dead. He was killed . . . he didn't make it home. But Colonel White said it was Bucher. I say that Gray was the one that blew the bugle, blew taps. Beeman confirms my belief. The reason I say that, Bucher . . . they were both corporals, but Gray was senior corporal. He also says that Bucher, after he blew taps, he had taken and broke the bugle over his knee--broke it in two and threw it away--which I do not recollect. I don't remember seeing him do it.

But, anyway, they lowered the flag, and they give the flag to the colonel. Then we all went back upstairs in our barracks. We all had to go back by our own locker. They come up there and sealed our lockers.

Marcello: The Japanese did this?

Benton: They come up and put just a paper seal on them, sort of like a piece of tape. If you opened it you'd break the tape, and they'd see you'd been in it.

Marcello: Now were they acting in a military manner up to this point?

Benton: Who?

Marcello: The Japanese.

Benton: Yes. They didn't bother us in any way. See, at that time they didn't know our status, and they didn't want to do anything to make them look bad because if we come home they didn't want us spreading propaganda about how bad we was treated. So they were sort of . . . I guess you could say it was a Mexican stand-off.

But anyway they sealed our lockers. The only thing we had then was our clothes. Of course, our boilers all went out, and the barracks began to get cold. We didn't have no cook. See, we had Chinese cooks, and we had Chinese boys to stoke the furnaces. Well, they all had to leave. Well, then it was the next day before we could get our own crews down there to get the furnaces stoked back up. See, we had a big stockpile of coal right there. So the next day we got . . . and then we got our cooks back in the galleys. We still had quite a bit of food, and they didn't take any away from us. So we ate fairly decent.

Marcello: Had they taken any of your personal belongings or anything of that nature?

Benton: No personal belongings. Personally, I never had one thing taken from me by the Japs. They never had taken one item that belonged to me. I could speak for a lot

of them. Of course, as I say, we were the only group, so our situation was a little different than a lot of the other stories that you will hear.

Marcello: How did you sleep that first night?

Benton: Well, I don't think we slept too much.

Marcello: Were you still mainly speculating?

Benton: Yes. It wasn't too much sleeping going on. We all had money. We had quite a bit of money. See, we had broke the club up, and we got sixty-five dollars a man out of it. See, we dissolved it and we took all of the cash and divided it up equally among each man. We had sixty-five dollars of that. That was in American money. We was playing poker and killing time.

Marcello: The Japanese were leaving you alone at that time.

Benton: Oh, yes, they left us alone. They didn't bother us, except occasionally they'd walk through the barracks. But they wasn't bothering anybody. The treatment as being a prisoner-of-war, well, it wasn't bad at that moment. Of course, it gets worse (chuckle). I guess that pretty well sums up the first day.

Marcello: What happened the next day then?

Benton: Well, actually, for the next month it's just about . . . it's the same old thing. We'd just get up in the morning, and we had nothing to do. See, we couldn't get out of the barracks. We had to stay

in the barracks. Well, the routine got to be pretty . . . well, it was very routine, I'd say. You get up and you go down and eat, and you come back and lay down, play cards, and then at mealtime you'd go down and eat again, come back and either sleep or play cards. That was just all you had to do.

Marcello: Were there ever any ugly incidents during this one month while you were still in your barracks here at Peking?

Benton: No, not really, not as far as the Japs was concerned. We did have a couple of guys that tried to go over the fence one night and got caught. They got banged around a little bit but not what you would call a severe beating. They just sort of slapped them around and . . . tongue lashing more than anything. As I say, they were still sort of handling us with kid gloves. That pretty well sums it up. You might say that we left Peking sometime in January.

Marcello: This would be January of 1942.

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: Now during that period did you finally come to the realization that you were not going to be treated as embassy personnel and that you were, in fact, prisoners-of-war?

Benton: No, not up until this time we didn't know it. That pretty well sums it up until we left.

Marcello: Now in the meantime did you still have all of your baggage and everything of that nature?

Benton: Everything.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less would bring us into January of 1942. Again, I will ask you to describe what happened at that point.

Benton: There is one incident I want to put in here that happened . . .

Marcello: Okay.

Benton: . . . because possibly it will come into play later on. See, there were three boys that went down and broke into the PX. See, we had quite a few cigarettes. Now I was not one of the three, but one of my buddies was one of the three. They brought all of them cigarettes and tobacco, and, oh, just . . . so my buddy give me half of his, which amounted to quite a few cigarettes and smoking tobacco. The reason I'm bringing this up now is that later down the line, it's more or less a funny incident in the way you're going to look at it. It shows you how the Japs think.

Marcello: Okay, so finally then, after that month, you get moved out of Peking. Pick up the story at this point.

Benton: Well, in the meantime they had unlocked our lockers.

Marcello: That was during that month that you were in Peking?

Benton: Yes, during that month they come up, and they went through everything we had. After they inspected

everything and saw we had no weapons or no radios or anything, daggers, well, then we had access to our luggage.

Then when we left Peking . . . I don't remember whether we left there . . . we ate Christmas dinner in Peking. I do know that. Sometime after Christmas, we went to Tientsin. I don't . . . now this is one of them days I don't remember. I don't remember whether it was still January or whether it was February. But anyway, we got to Tientsin . . .

Marcello: Did you go there by train?

Benton: We went there by train.

Marcello: Was this a rather uneventful trip?

Benton: Just a regular trip. We just got on a train and rode down there. Now these pictures I have show us getting on a train. We got . . . they was boxcars. It was uneventful. There was nothing happening. We went to Tientsin. Well, we got to Tientsin, and all the rest of them was already there. They'd already brought the boys from Chinwangtao back to Tientsin.

Marcello: Now these were still more North China Marines.

Benton: Well, see, this is where the North China Marine name comes in. It's more or less a nickname, actually, I'll get into that later--how we got the name we go by. But we got to Tientsin, well, they had already shipped

everything they had down there. They didn't have no bunks for us. Well, we carried our own mattresses with us. Then when we got down there, well, some of the senior NCO's, some of the PFC's and corporals had to give their bunks up . . . well, mostly PFC's had to give their bunks up to the senior Noncoms. They didn't like it. There was quite a bit of bitching going on about it (chuckle). We had to sleep on the floor. We had a mattress, but the only place we had to put it was on the floor.

Marcello: In the meantime you were allowed to carry all of your baggage and so on down to Tientsin.

Benton: Yes, we carried all of our baggage to Tientsin. So when we got down there, it was about the same thing. All we did was gamble and sleep. We had a little more freedom in Tientsin. They would take groups of us out so we could buy food.

I understand that they even let some women come in there to see some of the Tientsin boys--their girlfriends. They let them come in and visit with them. I do know they did because I seen them. We had one Tientsin Marine that they allowed his girl to come in and they got married. She was a White Russian, and they still live together today. They live in Saint Joseph, Missouri. His name is Sydow. They allowed

them to get married. Then after the war he went back and got her.

I do remember one incident. We found an old roulette wheel. These boys set this roulette wheel up. Man, they cleaned up (chuckle). They liked to won all of the money in the compound with that roulette wheel.

Actually, that's about all that happened was . . . except when we was in Tientsin the Swiss Consul come in. Now what I'm fixing to say is all hearsay. I have no proof or anything else except hearsay. The Swiss Consul told us that we was going to get to come home. Well, that raised our hopes, and our morale was pretty high. We had quite a bit of liquor, and we had quite a bit of beer. We was whooping it up quite a bit.

Marcello: The Japanese didn't confiscate any of this stuff?

Benton: No, see, they didn't confiscate . . . we had lots of whiskey and beer in Peking and we just brought lots of it with us. We didn't know whether they'd take it away from us. We brought it and got by with it. So we was doing a lot of drinking and gambling and sleeping and eating. That's all we was doing there for about a month.

Marcello: In other words, this was another month.

Benton: Well, I would say it was more like about three weeks.

Marcello: At Peking.

Benton: No, at Tientsin.

Marcello: At Tientsin, rather, yes.

Benton: We was in Peking about a month and Tientsin about three weeks. In the meantime, we were . . . even the Swiss Consul told us he thought we were going to get to come home, we were still planning a break all this time. There was quite a few of us. We was still trying to figure out how we could get out.

Marcello: Were you serious about that, or were you mainly talking big?

Benton: No, we were serious. There was no big talk. It was serious talk. And so, of course, the rumor got around, and it got back to our commanding officer. Well, he put out the word that there would be no escape attempts. Well, you know, being in the Marines, even though we didn't like the order, we was the old Marine Corps. Even though we didn't agree with the order, we didn't question them like they do today (chuckle). And so after he give the order out . . . the reason he said he give the order out . . . see, we had quite a few old men in our midst. The colonel himself was in his fifties.

Marcello: Well, Stowers was pretty old at this time, wasn't he?

Benton: I think Stowers was around forty years old, but Stowers was still a man that could have made it. He was in very good . . . Stowers was a person that kept himself in good shape--a very physical guy. It would have been no problem for him at that time. But anyway, we sort of dropped it. He said that the old men couldn't make it, and he was afraid that if we left and they caught the old men that they'd execute all of them.

Marcello: Did the Japanese ever tell you what would happen if anybody tried to escape and go caught?

Benton: Oh, yes, they was always threatening that they'd shoot so many if we tried to escape. They'd take so many out and shoot them. And they actually did that. They actually did that in the Philippines--in camps that I have heard about. I have no . . . except I have been told by witnesses. I have talked to a lot of men that was in the Philippines. It actually happened there. But anyway, after we stayed there in Tientsin . . . do you want me to just go ahead and continue?

Marcello: Sure.

Benton: Well, they come in there and told us then to pack up, that we was leaving. The escape attempt started up again. So then when they carried us out there the night and they loaded us in them boxcars--they carried us out at night--they loaded us in them boxcars and we started out. Well,

it was pretty well hard to get out of them boxcars because they had doors locked on the outside.

Marcello: Was this more or less the first time that you came to the realization that you were preisoners-of-war, that is, when they put you in these boxcars to take you wherever they were going to take you?

Benton: Well, yes, that's when it first began to dawn on us that we wasn't going home. Our hopes never did die for about three more months, I mean, completely. Our hopes were still there, but they was very faint as far as I was concerned.

Marcello: Now at this time yet had you been allowed to ship any of your possessions back home? Is it not true that somewhere in here at some time that arrangements were made with a Swiss firm or a Swiss company to ship some of your goods home?

Benton: Yes, there were some things left in Tientsin. Now I didn't leave any of my personal belongings, so I don't really know just what the details is, but I do know some of the guys left some trunks and things there with the Swiss Consul. I understand that they got them home. Now I can't vouch for it because I don't know. Personally, I didn't ship anything that way. In fact, I hadn't thought about it till you mentioned it, but it is true that some of the boys did.

Marcello: So anyhow, you were put on these boxcars. Is this when your ultimate destination was back to Shanghai again and the Woosung Camp outside Shanghai?

Benton: This is the trip where we went to Woosung. This was our first camp outside of Shanghai. When we got down there . . . see, these guards that we had all in this period, I don't know whether they'd been ordered to leave us alone or not. But they were very congenial. You could sort of shoot the bull with them. But anyway, then when we got to Shanghai, that's when things changed.

Marcello: Did anything eventful happen on that trip from Tientsin to Shanghai, that is, when you were on the boxcars?

Benton: Not that I recollect in the boxcars.

Marcello: Was it a very tough trip?

Benton: Yes, it was a tough trip for the simple reason that it was in these boxcars. You didn't have too much room.

Marcello: Was there room to lie down?

Benton: Yes, you could lie down. That was about it.

Marcello: How long did the trip take?

Benton: You know, that's one thing I tried to remember and I can't. You know, it's thirty years and . . . I'll get into it later. We take another train trip, and I'll get into that later, too.

Marcello: Okay, so you finally land in Shanghai. What happens at this point? Now you say things began to change.

Benton: Yes, this is when things change.

Marcello: How?

Benton: Well, see, the guards that we'd had all this time, as I say, they'd been treating us pretty nice. So then they turned us over to a new bunch of guards and a new . . . another . . . a colonel. It was a colonel by the name of . . . I can't recollect his name. I know it but . . .

Marcello: This wouldn't be Colonel Yuse, would it?

Benton: Yuse, yes. That was the first one. That was the first one. Well, as I recollect it, when we got out there to camp . . .

Marcello: Well, did anything happen between the time that you got off the boxcars and the time that you got out to the camp? In other words, did they rough you up any on the march from the boxcars out to the camp?

Benton: I don't recollect them roughing anybody up. As I say, at that time I was more or less paying more attention to myself. I wasn't really worrying about other people. And there was nothing that happened to me personally.

Marcello: How far was it from where you got off the train until you got out to Woosung?

Benton: I don't remember. I really don't recollect.

Marcello: But you did march, did you not, or go by foot?

Benton: Yes, we walked. As best I recollect, we walked. When we got out to this camp, there's when we had the low period. That was the low period for us.

Marcello: Why was that?

Benton: Well, of course, he lines us all up, and this colonel made his speech and said, "If you try to escape, you will be shot," and he rambled on there telling us . . . oh, it's hard to recollect just what he did say. But, anyway, that's when we met the Wake Island boys.

Marcello: What did that outfit look like? Now they were already at Woosung when you got there.

Benton: Yes, they had been there a week or ten days when we got there.

Marcello: Describe what that outfit looked like at this time.

Benton: They were pitiful. They come right out of the tropics into the cold weather. I would say Shanghai weather is comparable to ours right here. This was around the first of March, and you know what kind of weather we're having right here today. That's just about the kind of weather it was, and it was raining when we got there. They didn't have no clothes.

Marcello: In other words, we're talking about a temperature in the thirties or forties, perhaps?

Benton: Oh, I would say we were talking about temperatures of forty or below. All they had was a little khaki shirt and khaki pants. They was miserable. They'd been starved. They'd been brought in there in them ships. They'd been starved. They was already starving when

we got there. Well, we had been eating good. In other words, our standard of living, outside of not having liberty, hadn't really been downgraded that much.

Marcello: Besides that, you had all of your winter clothing with you.

Benton: We had all of our clothes. We was dressed in winter greens. We even had our fur hats, had our overcoats, had our longhandles on. But we were comfortable compared to them people. Well, when we got there, they put all of our clothes in a shed. The only thing we had was what we had on, even though we were dressed warm. That was one thing in our favor. We had our overcoats, and we was warmly dressed even though they put our stuff up. Of course, as soon as we got in there, well, they all flocked to our barracks. Well, our barracks was warm compared to their barracks. You know, you'd be surprised what human body heat will do. Just take ten people in this room and none in the other one and I'm sure . . . you might not think it, but it'll raise the temperature in that room quite a bit. Anyway, you could walk in our barracks, and it's be pretty warm. But you could walk in theirs, man, and you'd nearly freeze to death. Of course, the stories they were telling . . . of course,

they'd fought and put up a helluva battle. They was telling us all about it.

There's where we got the name of the North China Marines--from them. See, we had never thought of ourselves as the North China Marines or anything. But when we got there and told them where we was from and everything, then they dubbed us this name North China Marines.

Marcello: Could you detect any jealousy or envy on the part of those Wake Island Marines because of the fact that you were in pretty good condition, you had had enough food, and you were obviously dressed rather warmly?

Benton: No, not really. They envied us but I don't think that they resented us in any way because we had got to keep our clothes and everything. They just said, well, we were lucky and they wasn't. I don't think there was any hard feelings. If it was I never felt it. Of course, we all become good friends before the war was over.

Marcello: So far as the barracks were concerned were you segregated from the Wake Island Marines?

Benton: Yes, we was in our own barracks.

Marcello: Were there ever any efforts made or were you ever able to share any of the things that you had with them?

Benton: Oh, definitely, yes. I don't remember just how long it was. It was either a matter of days or a week or so

before they finally allowed us to go back and get in our sea bags. There was three boys that was on Wake Island . . . let's see. There were two . . . two or . . . I don't remember now. It was either two or three from Wake Island. I know there was four of us in that camp that went through boot camp together. There was one in Tientsin and myself, and then there was two, I believe, on Wake Island. Well, see, we went through boot camp about six months before, and we still knew each other pretty well. One of them, a guy by the name of McWiggins . . . and I can't remember the other boy's name.

Well, anyway, when they let us get into our sea bags, well, I got a bunch of clothes. I had quite a few clothes. In fact, I had, I guess, about ten or twelve pair of khakis and about five or six suits of green, and then I had my blues. I had quite a few clothes. I built up a pretty good clothing allowance, and I went down and I kept drawing my clothing allowance. I kept good clothes. I've always been pretty particular about my clothes (chuckle). So I had quite a few of them.

So I got a bunch out, and I got a bunch of cigarettes out. I had all of these cigarettes that I had brought down. So I got some of them out, and I got

a bunch of clothes, and I went down and give them to these two boys that I went through boot camp with. Those were the only two because I didn't have enough to go around. Those were the boys I knew, so naturally those were the boys I picked out to help. And they were very appreciative of it, too. They really appreciated it. I would have liked to have had enough to give everybody. But there was other guys that divided with some of the others, but there wasn't enough to give them all. But we did spread them around as far as we could.

Marcello: Generally speaking, did most of the North China Marines share what they had with the Wake Island Marines?

Benton: Definitely. As far as I'd say, it was more of them than it was to us. Now I say everybody. I can't sit here and say they all did.

Marcello: But it would be your impression that the vast majority of the North China Marines did.

Benton: The vast majority did, yes. So I guess . . . then they moved their clothes down into our barracks--in a room in our barracks and locked them up in there. Then that's where we . . . after a few days, well, we decided we wanted in there, so we went up through the attic and we pulled some boards off, and we went down and got what we wanted out of our sea bags. Finally, they give it all back to us.

Marcello: There was never any rhyme or reason why they locked them up to begin with?

Benton: No, just that they wanted to. That's the only reason. But finally we got everything that we had.

Marcello: Describe what this camp looked like from a physical standpoint.

Benton: Well, it was a wooden barracks.

Marcello: How many stories?

Benton: One story. It was a wooden barracks. I wish I had that book here. I could have showed you a picture of it.

Marcello: How many men were in each barracks?

Benton: Well, I'm trying to think now. We had about forty men to a section. Well, now there was 204 of us, and we was all in the same barracks. They had a section or two of British. So I would say there were around 250 men to a barracks. That's roughly figuring now. That might vary but that's just a rough guess without doing a whole lot of research.

Marcello: And, again, by way of estimation how many people would there have been in this camp altogether?

Benton: About 1,200.

Marcello: What else was in the barracks? Were there showers or toilets or washing facilities or anything of that nature?

Benton: Not inside. We had outside plumbing (chuckle).

Marcello: But bathing facilities as well as toilet facilities.

Benton: Yes. And our barracks . . . the best I can describe them . . . you can take this room right here and build this house, these two walls, and take this room and put it one right after the other. Then on the other side do the same thing, only they were bigger than this. Well, on each side they had a platform. That would be four platforms in each section. They just had a wall between the section with a hall going all the way down--with a wall, section, and a wall. They had this platform. There was ten of us that slept on this platform. So that was forty men to a section. Oh, now they didn't run . . . sometimes you might have eight on a side or maybe nine or ten. That was the maximum. So we just slept. We had, I guess you could say, thirty inches a man. That's about how much room we had. That was all the way up to the wall. Then we had a shelf up there. Then you had that thirty inches up there to put all of your belongings. Of course, now we kept our sea bags and things stored.

Marcello: How did these barracks stack up so far as lighting and heating?

Benton: They had one little electric light bulb right in the middle and that was it--no plugs or anything.

Marcello: How about heating?

Benton: We had a wood stove, but we didn't have no wood (chuckle), so the stove wasn't . . . we could burn the stove, it seemed to me like, an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon.

Marcello: How much protection did these barracks offer against the cold?

Benton: Well, they had windows in them. They had old wooden siding on them. There was no insulation. I guess you could say you could feel wind coming through the cracks. So, actually, you could say it kept the wind and rain off of you. Outside of that, that's about it.

Marcello: Did you have your mattress yet?

Benton: No, we had . . . no, we left our mattresses in Tientsin. We had mattresses filled with straw.

Marcello: In other words, it was a ticking.

Benton: Yes, it was a ticking with straw in it. Every spring we'd take these mattresses out and undo them, take our straw and spread them out on the ground, dry them out and fluff them up. They'd get hard--that old straw (chuckle).

Marcello: How about blankets? Did you still have your Marine issue blanket?

Benton: I kept my two. I had two Marine Corps blankets myself. I think most of our bunch did have their two blankets.

See, that was all the blankets we had. That was regular GI issue--these two blankets. In our barracks in Peking it was plenty.

Marcello: Now here again you were faring better than the Wake Island Marines because I think they had those old Japanese issue blankets which were quite thin.

Benton: Yes, and they were cootton. Our blankets was wool.

Marcello: What sort of fence was there around this camp?

Benton: Well, in Woosung there was just a . . . you know, see, we stayed in Woosung . . . we got there about the first of March. This is estimating. I don't know. I don't remember when we left there. I don't remember whether we left there before the year was up. It was around '43 when we left there.

Marcello: It was December of 1942, so it would almost be 1943 when you left there.

Benton: Okay, well, that's probably . . . that's when we left Woosung. In Woosung, actually, the only thing I remember . . . we worked out in the yards a little cleaning the yards up. But in Woosung . . . it seems to me like that's the day we made the trip on a train. That was a (chuckle) . . . it was sort of a comical trip.

Marcello: Now was this when you left Woosung for good?

Benton: No, we was on a work detail. This was on a work detail. They'd taken us out and worked us out on a highway, the

best I recollect. We got on that train. We was all over the engine. You know, we just climbed all over the engine. It looked like a bunch of flies on that thing. They carried us out to work. Then we rode it back in. You know, that's about the only thing that I remember about Woosung.

Marcello: Let me ask you some general questions at this point, and probably you can fill in a lot more details about Woosung than what you think you remember.

Benton: Alright.

Marcello: Was there not an electric fence around this camp?

Benton: Well, that's what I've been trying to . . . I don't remember an electric fence that went around Woosung.

Marcello: What sort of food did you receive here at Woosung? You might describe the chow.

Benton: Well, that's a funny . . . that's sort of funny, see. When we first got there, we were still pretty full. We wasn't . . . we'd been eating pretty good, and we hadn't lost any weight, actually. Well, they brought that rice in there and that old . . . it was a soup deal. It sort of had seaweed and green stuff in there. Well, I wouldn't eat it. I couldn't eat it. Man, it was tasteless, actually.

Marcello: Is this what they nicknames "Tojo Water?"

Benton: Yes, that's "Tojo Water."

Marcello: I didn't know if you had ever heard it called that or not.

Benton: Yes, that was what we called it--"Tojo Water."

Marcello: What did it consist of?

Benton: Well, it varied. It varied. It was never good. But it had some kind of old greens in there. I never did really know what it was--Johnson grass or something. I don't know.

But anyway, we was giving most of ours away there at first. Well, the longer you go without something to eat, well, sooner or later we began to eat a little of it (chuckle). Then we got to where we was eating all of it. Then we was beginning to get hungry, which makes a whole lot of difference.

I don't remember now about the fence. I really don't know.

Marcello: Okay, well, let's just keep on talking about the food, then. So you did receive this watery stew, and then you also received rice.

Benton: Yes, a cupful.

Marcello: About a cupful per meal?

Benton: About like a teacup.

Marcello: And you got this at each meal?

Benton: At each meal.

Marcello: What was the quality of this rice?

Benton: Well, I really don't know. I never . . . I don't really know how to grade rice. I would say it was poor.

Marcello: Well, let's put it this way. Did it have weevils in it or pebbles or anything of this nature?

Benton: Well, we used to . . . there was a guy by the name of Smith. He was a Tientsin Marine. He slept right across the bunk from me. He weighed, oh, around 200 and he had a big beer belly--big beer drinker. We used to kid him. He sit up there on his bunk with his feet folded and pick all of his worms and rocks out of his rice, and he'd get through and he wouldn't have no rice left (chuckle). We used to "hurrah" him. Oh, we kidded him. "You're going to starve, man. You are picking all of them worms out of that rice." (chuckle)

Marcello: In other words, in the beginning that sort of thing probably turned your stomach, but as time went on it didn't make any difference.

Benton: Yes. We sat there and watched old Smitty melt away. I mean, you could actually see the fat leaving. Every day he'd get smaller and smaller. It affected the bigger men worse than it did the smaller men.

Marcello: This seems to be an opinion that most of the former prisoners share.

Benton: Well, now we had one guy by the name of what we called "Birdlegs" Brown. Of course, we had nicknames for everybody.

Marcello: "Birdlegs" Brown?

Benton: Yes. He's dead. He died here about a year ago. I don't guess he lost five pounds all during the war. He didn't have it to lose. He was skin and bones. If he'd lost any more, he'd . . . there's no way he could have made it. He lived on cigarettes and coffee before the war, and whiskey sours and whiskey cokes. He was so small so he didn't actually . . . he never suffered. As far as hunger was concerned, he never suffered.

Myself, I weighed around 175. My lowest weight got around to 125. So you can say . . . look at me now. Of course, I'm big-boned. You can take twenty-five or thirty pounds off of me now . . . so you can see I'm not fat now. Say you would take twenty-five or thirty more pounds . . . so you could see how I was mostly bone.

Marcello: And did you receive this sort of rations three times a day?

Benton: Three times a day.

Marcello: Who did the cooking?

Benton: Our own cooks did the cooking. They picked the cooks that was cooks in the Marine Corps, and they cooked in the galley with additional help. They had guys that

volunteered that . . . well, they say they volunteered, but they could have gotten 1,200 volunteers (chuckle). But they was . . . they was just picked at random, you might say.

Marcello: Did you notice that the people that were doing the cooking perhaps retained their weight a little better than the ones who were not cooking?

Benton: They fared better, definitely. They wasn't supposed to get any more than we did, but they fared better for the simple reason they didn't have to work as hard and they were eating better. Even though, as I say, if you are there cooking, it's . . . you can always . . . I mean . . .

Marcello: You can always sneak a bite.

Benton: So definitely they eat better.

Marcello: Did this ever cause any resentment?

Benton: No, none that I know of.

Marcello: Was this because you all figured that you would do the same thing if you could have?

Benton: No, we didn't figure. We knew we would (chuckle). We just . . . we'd have swapped places with them. But we didn't hold it against them.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that food was the thought that was most constantly on your mind during your tenure as a prisoner-of-war?

Benton: I would say it was the only thought. You know in this country . . . I'm sure you've sat around and have been talking in conversations . . . I don't care . . . before you get through you're talking about sex. Sooner or later in a group of boys, I'm sure . . . sooner or later you start talking about girls and stuff. It's hard to make people understand that you'd go months and months and not think about sex. It never entered your mind.

You'd walk up to a group of men, and they were talking about food. That's what they had on their mind, was food. And when you walked up there that's what you talked about, was food.

Marcello: Did you ever sit around dreaming menus or dreaming about a certain type of food?

Benton: Oh, definitely! I made up all kinds of menus. I mean, that was our hobby. You'd see guys sitting around with a pencil, if he was lucky enough to have a pencil--which we did. Our group . . . we had more of that stuff. You'd see a guy sitting around with a pencil and paper writing out the menus--have a whole page of it!

Marcello: I would assume that didn't help the situation any.

Benton: Well, I don't know. I don't see how it did becuase your mind was on food, and talking about it just made it that much worse.

Marcello: What particular food did you seem to crave more than any other?

Benton: Sweets. I still do. I still crave them. I go for maybe a month or two months right today, and I wake up in the morning just craving sweets. I'll go down and buy a couple of pounds of chocolate candy and go in there and eat every bite of it. Then I don't want anymore for a while. But I can eat two pounds of chocolate candy when I get the craving, and it don't bother me a bit.

Marcello: Now I think in the summer of 1942 that you did manage to receive some Red Cross packages. Do you remember that?

Benton: I don't remember when we got our first package, no.

Marcello: But do you remember the first package?

Benton: Oh, definitely. I went down and helped unload them and helped bring them into camp. I was on the detail--the working detail--that brought them in.

Marcello: What did those Red Cross packages mean to you as a prisoner?

Benton: It's real hard . . . it was . . . I guess you could say it was about like a kid getting his first bicycle or maybe a teenager getting his first automobile or something of that sort.

Marcello: What items were in that Red Cross package?

Benton: Well, you would be surprised. It was a little box about like that (gesture), and every inch had something in it. It depended on who packed them. There was no box

containing the same thing even though they was all the same size. Some of them had more in them than others.

Marcello: What did yours have in it? Do you recall?

Benton: Well, as I say, as I recollect we got seventeen . . . in forty-four months we got seventeen. That's my recollection.

Marcello: You got seventeen packages?

Benton: Seventeen boxes.

Marcello: I see.

Benton: They had Spam. They had roast beef. They had concentrated coffee. They had two of them real concentrated chocolate bars. They had cigarettes. Sometimes you'd find some chewing gum. Sombody scrounges around and finds a package of gum sticking in there. As I say, you'd find little things like that. Roast beef, Spam, coffee . . .

Marcello: Klim?

Benton: Yes, yes, Klim! We had a can of Klim! We used to eat that stuff up (chuckle). We had a bag of tea, if I remember right.

Marcello: Did the Japanese ever provide you with any tea here in the camp?

Benton: Yes, we had tea three times a day, if you wanted to call it tea. It was colored. It had no taste to it--no sugar in it or nothing. The reason we'd drink it . . . I guess you thought of drinking tea, but it was actually tasteless.

But now the rest of that stuff that was in them boxes, I don't . . . those are the . . . the Klim, the coffee, the tea. I don't believe every box had tea in them either. But every box had coffee, or was it . . . some boxes had coffee, and some of them had tea. That might have been the way it was.

Marcello: What did those Red Cross packages mean to you in terms of survival?

Benton: Well, that's a real hard question, really--a hard question to answer. It definitely helped us, but there was a lot of them that come back that never got any of them. So I can't say that they saved my life because I know people that went over there and never did get any and they came back.

Marcello: Oh, everybody didn't get these Red Cross packages?

Benton: Oh, definitely not.

Marcello: Not even in our group?

Benton: Well, in our group, but not in all the camps. See, some camps . . . I think in some of them camps in Japan they didn't . . . might have got a few, but they didn't get as many as we did. See, we liked to have had a . . . in fact, I had eighteen boxes. Everybody else had seventeen. I got an extra one. I swapped a picture album--a big picture album . . . oh, it was beautiful.

Marcello: I know what you mean. I've seen a couple of them.

Benton: Well, I had one of them, and I swapped it for a Red Cross box. We liked to have got in trouble. The colonel and them all . . . because they wanted me to give it back. But anyway, I finally got to keep the box. The old boy is still got my album, but at that time that album didn't mean a thing to me. That food meant more to me than any picture album, and under the same conditions I would do it today. I'm not . . . I never have regretted that I did it.

Marcello: I don't think any other prisoner would have regretted it either, given the circumstances at that time. When you got one of those Red Cross packages, did you eat the food all at once or did you stretch it out?

Benton: Well, no, we stretched it out. Now the first one we got--the first box we got--I ate both of them chocolate bars. I don't know . . . of course, I ate a can of Spam. Our stomach, you'd be surprised. It didn't take as much to fill it up as you would think.

Marcello: I'm sure that it must have shrunk quite a bit.

Benton: Yes. You could take a can of Spam, you know, the same size you buy in the store today, that's quite a bit of meat there for one man. I'm sure that you couldn't go in there and eat a can of it today right now--well, of course, with everything else. So you could see that a can of Spam or a couple of of them real high concentrated

chocolate bars . . . man, they was rich. I think you were only supposed to eat one of those squares, I think, a day or something. Well, two big bars like that . . . sit down and eat both of them at once. Man, you could sit there in them cold barracks and eat them chocolate bars, and you could just feel the heat. Actually, it would just feel warm--that energy coming into your blood. It's amazing--the feeling you'd get.

Marcello: How about supplements to your diet? Now you mentioned the rations that the Japanese were giving you, that is, the rice and the stew, and we've mentioned the Red Cross packages. Were you ever able to grow any vegetables or anything of that nature here at Woosung?

Benton: No. Now the officers had a garden. We never did have one. Now the officers . . . in that book he mentions vegetables going into our chow. I don't remember any of it ever going into our chow.

Marcello: At this time while you were in Woosung, did you ever resort to eating dogs or cats or anything of that nature if one were unlucky enough to stray into the camp?

Benton: Well, we had a dog. We brought a dog down with us. That dog disappeared. We never did find out what become of the dog.

Marcello: But you had a pretty good idea.

Benton: We had a pretty good idea, but we never could prove it. I think the dog . . . somebody had admitted to getting that dog. I think eventually they found out where the dog went, and I don't remember who eat the dog now. Things were getting pretty desperate as far as food. After we'd been there about a couple of months, well, you can get pretty hungry in a couple of months. We was getting pretty desperate for food. It wasn't that the food . . . we could survive on the food. It was the quantity. That was the problem--the quantity.

Marcello: Let's talk about some of the other living conditions here. Were you able to maintain sanitary conditions in your barracks?

Benton: We were very lucky in that respect. We had plenty of water. That's the reason we shaved our heads. We found out that we could stay cleaner by keeping our heads shaved. We did have . . . we had one little siege of lice and crabs one time. We got rid of them pretty fast. We didn't have . . . it didn't become a major problem with us. In some camps it did--camps that didn't have the availability of the water that we did. But cleanliness . . . we was lucky we had plenty of water, and we could stay clean.

Marcello: Did the Japanese issue soap or anything like this?

Benton: Yes, we got a little soap along. It wasn't much but you learned to use it sparingly. You'd just use it in your vital spots, in other words, and very sparingly at that. You would be surprised at how long you could make a little bar of soap last.

Marcello: What did you do so far as toothpaste and toothbrushes were concerned?

Benton: You know, now we had quite a bit of toothpaste--I did. I'm speaking for myself personally. Of course, we realized right quick . . . and, you know, we got . . . the Japs issued us some powder. You learn to . . . that's one thing you learn quick--that you didn't waste nothing. You didn't throw nothing away. You didn't waste anything. We learned to live . . . I don't know. We just learned how to live all over again, you might say, even though I grew up in the depression, and I didn't . . . I done without a lot of things. But still I done without a lot more when I got over there. You learn to live with it. You would be surprised when you put a bunch of men together and combined their talents and threw them all together with what you could come up with. It's amazing.

Of course, in the summertime most of us didn't wear anything but a pair of shorts and shoes, probably a hat. Most of us had some kind of hat for working out in the hot sun with your bald head, see. Most of us

. . . in the summertime we'd come in . . . we had showers out in the back. plenty of water. It was cold. It wasn't hot water, but you could clean with it. In the hot summertime it felt good anyway. You'd run out there and . . . let's say you had the hot summers like you do here. You'd run out there and jump under that cold shower, and you'd just wash your shorts and take a bath. Then you'd put on a clean pair of shorts, and you'd wear them and sleep in them. You'd work in them the next day and . . . just over and over and over.

In the wintertime I would say the majority of the men only bathed once a week. I'm talking about the majority. Some of them might not have bathed that much, some of them a little more. It was pretty rough. Now you could get one bucket of hot water, you know, one of them little . . . well, we'd generally take that hot water and wash--soap down and wash with it. Then we'd go over there and bust the ice in a big tub and reach down there and get that ice water. We'd sit there and throw it on each other and rinse off. You say, "Well, how can you do that?" You would be surprised. When that first initial shock hits you, oh, man, you jump. But after that you could just stand there and pour it on, and they would do it. You know, it's amazing that once you got a bucket of that cold water on you, that second bucket felt warm.

Marcello: What did you do so far as shaving gear and that sort of thing was concerned?

Benton: Well, we had razors, and we had razor blades.

Marcello: The Japanese didn't confiscate those?

Benton: No, we had our own. It seems to me like the Japs gave the Wake Island boys some razors. Now I can't say for sure, but I had my own razor. Some of the boys had razor blade sharpeners, and we'd sharpen them over and over and over. You might use a blade for six months.

Marcello: How often did you shave?

Benton: About once a week is all. You see, with a double-edge razor blade and with resharpening it, you could use it a long time.

Marcello: What did you do for shaving cream or anything of that nature? Did you just use your soap, or did you dry shave?

Benton: A lot of us just dry shaved. You'd get used to it. I mean, as I say, you get used to a lot of things that you ordinarily don't.

Marcello: What were the hospital facilities or medical facilities like here at Woosung?

Benton: We had the best doctors in the world with no equipment (chuckle), no medicine.

Marcello: What would happen if a person did get sick?

Benton: Well, we had . . . we finally did get . . . through the Red Cross in Shanghai, we got a limited supply of . . .

the doctors got some . . . now our doctor . . . we had a doctor by the name of Foley, which as far as I'm concerned is one of the greatest men that ever lived.

Marcello: Why do you say that?

Benton: Well, I just like the man. He operated on me in 1943. After I got through, he told me that he experimented on me (chuckle).

Marcello: What did he operate on you for?

Benton: He'd taken a cyst off the end of my spine. But I never had a minute's of trouble with it. That was in 1943. But the reason I say . . . not for what he done for me as what I've seen the results of what he did for other people. With what he had, it's amazing what the man did. He was a . . . I'll tell you how good he is. You remember when President Kennedy's daddy had his stroke? He was on the team of doctors that doctored him. So you know that they had money enough to buy the best.

Marcello: I'm sure that these doctors had to do a great deal of improvising.

Benton: Oh, they did. Now when he operated on me, he had a local anesthetic. I sat there and talked to them all the time it was going on. He used an electric knife on me. There was one place where it wasn't dead (chuckle). I knew when he cut it, but it was one of them things that you learn to do things that you ordinarily wouldn't do.

Marcello: Was there a particular area set aside as a hospital?

Benton: Yes, we had a building over there. We had a regular barracks just like . . . except in the hospital they did have separate beds. Each bed was . . . they didn't have the . . . each bed was separated. They just had a little platform. When you went to the hospital, you had to take your mattress with you and everything.

Marcello: Did you have to be quite sick before you were allowed to go to the hospital?

Benton: Yes, you had to be pretty sick.

Marcello: Who determined when you were fit for the hospital?

Benton: Well, Dr. Foley had a whole lot to do with it.

Marcello: In other words, the Japanese didn't interfere in that procedure.

Benton: No. If Dr. Foley sent me to the hospital, they didn't interfere. But, see, we was all in the same shape. So you couldn't say, "Well, Benton you need a rest." But he was the man in that respect because after he operated on me, we got to be real good buddy-buddies. I was in the hospital for three months. Of course, he was around every day, and we got to be pretty close, and so I'd go back and make sick call. He'd say, "What's the matter with you this morning?" I'd say, "There ain't no more the matter with me than there is twelve hundred more men."

He said, "Well, I'll give you five days of rest." He'd give me a slip, and I'd get to stay in from work for five days. He would do everybody that way.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the Japanese in this particular camp. How would you describe the conduct of the guards?

Benton: Well, now I'm speaking from my viewpoint only in this respect.

Marcello: That's what I want.

Benton: I found out very quick to leave them alone. In other words, the less you had to do with them, the better off you were because I've seen quite a few guys that would get chummy with the guard, and he'd go and cut up with a guy today, and tomorrow he'd come around and the guy would say something to him, and he'd just knock the hell out of him. I could see right quick that they was moody. You never knew what mood they would be in. So I found out and made my mind up that the least I could have to do when them that that's what I was going to do. I learned before the war was over that it paid off as far as I was concerned because I was only actually beat twice in forty-four months, which I consider very lucky. These were not torture beatings. They was just . . . a guard would just get mad at you and work you over with a rifle butt or something. And so a lot of the other

guys went through just tortures and things which I never had to endure. A lot of that was brought on by being friendly with the guards and different things that happened. The Japs would try to find out who was doing it and this and that. They'd torture them, give them water treatments and stuff, trying to make them talk.

Marcello: Generally speaking, what form did the physical punishment take? Not necessarily in your particular case but in general.

Benton: Well, now I don't . . . let's see. Run that by again. I don't know exactly what you're . . .

Marcello: When the Japanese guards would punish one of the prisoners, what form would this punishment usually take?

Benton: Oh, well, it was beatings and knocking him down, hitting him with his rifle butt, and stuff like that.

One incident--I'm sure this has probably been mentioned before--but like the night . . . I didn't see it happen. I heard the rifle shot when the guard shot one of the civilians out there for no reason whatsoever. He just . . . they said he said something to the guard or waved or something. The guard pointed his rifle at him, and he just kept going, and he just shot him for no apparent reason. So that was one of the cases that

I was talking about. He might have knew the guard and might have shot the bull with him maybe the day before or something. I don't know this to be a fact. This is my own interpretation of it. It's not hearsay or fact. It's just my own thoughts on it.

Marcello: Were the beatings a rather common occurrence?

Benton: I would say no, not as a general rule, no.

Marcello: In some instances would it be safe to say that the prisoners deserved some of the thumps that they eventually had?

Benton: I would say that . . . that was what I was saying awhile ago. They would get friendly with them, and then the first thing you know they'd catch them out of the mood, and they'd . . . well, they'd be doing something they wasn't supposed to be doing, and they'd get a beating for it.

Marcello: Sometimes do you think perhaps there was a breakdown in communications? In other words, maybe the guard couldn't make the prisoner understand what he wanted done, and as a result frustration would set in, and the prisoner would get thumped.

Benton: Well, that happened, yes. That happened, I'm sure, because . . . but for me to sit here and pick out certain incidents, I can't do it. But I'm sure, you know, thirty years . . . you just can't . . . I can't sit here and

pick out incidents that . . . except I can give you one incident of mine that I got beat up for. We had what we called the night watch.

Marcello: Was this here at Woosung?

Benton: I don't know whether it was in Woosung or Shanghai. I don't remember. But I had the watch. You had to . . . a man had to stay up in the barracks . . . fire watch, they called it then. He wasn't supposed to smoke. Well, I was smoking and I got caught. I got worked over for it. So, you see, I just brought it on myself. If I hadn't been smoking, I wouldn't have gotten worked over. We all smoked but I just happened . . . the guard just happened to come up there and caught me. I heard him coming, but he seen it through the window. Then he come in and worked me over for it. So I guess I could say I brought it on myself.

Marcello: What exactly did that guard do to you?

Benton: Oh, he come in there and hit me with his fist. Then he hit me with a rifle butt. That was about it.

Marcello: Did he hurt you very much?

Benton: Oh, not . . . well, he hurt my pride more than he did my . . . because I couldn't fight back. That's what hurts you. I mean, because I knew I could have tore him apart with my bare hand, but knowing if I did he'd stick that bayonet in me.

Marcello: Do any individual guards stick out in your mind for either a good thing or a bad thing that they did?

Benton: Well, we had some good guards, and then we had some bad ones. There's one guard that I remember real well. I was on a detail burying alcohol.

Marcello: You were burying the alcohol?

Benton: Yes, we was burying it. You know, the Japs was getting desperate for gasoline. They were burning a lot of alcohol in their trucks. We was on this detail out in this racetrack to dig a big hole, take these fifty-five-gallon drums of alcohol and put them down there, and cover them over with grass.

This guard was raised--born and raised--in San Francisco. He spoke the old slang just like I do. You could sit there and talk to him, and he talked just like we do. He was a real fine fellow really, but he was in a situation where he could only do so much.

He had a little guard with him, a lance corporal. He was just meaner than hell (chuckle). When he first came out there, he'd slap you around and this and that. The longer he stayed around us, the more mellow he got. Finally, after about a month, he got to be one of the best guys you ever saw. We just, I guess, won him over.

Then we had another little guard that stands out in my mind. He was from Formosa. You know, the Japs

occupied Formosa, and they taken them kids in, and they had some of them guarding us. He could speak real good English. I don't know where he learned his English, but he could speak real good English. He used to tell us that he's swap places with any of us. He'd come over and be a prisoner, and they could have his guard duty. But as far as I know he never bothered anybody. He was real good to you. He would let you do things you wasn't supposed to. Them things sort of stick out in your mind. I guess outside of them three, except one more that we will get to later . . . so that made four guards that I really remember more than any of the rest of them.

Marcello: Do you remember an interpreter by the name of Ishihara?

Benton: Definitely (chuckle)!

Marcello: You might comment about Ishihara.

Benton: Well, you know, Ishihara was known . . . we called him the "Beast of the East," is what he generally went by. He was mean. He was mean. He was raised at Honolulu, so I understand. He spoke real good English, used American ways. He seemed to get a kick out of trying to set you down, to make you feel inferior to him, which he was never able to do. That's the reason it irritated him, because he could never bring you down to his level.

Marcello: What were some of the things that he would do to try and make you inferior?

Benton: Well, of course, he'd rave and . . . oh, I don't know. He'd tell you how great Japan was and how it was going to kick us, all of that. But he did . . . Ishihara did punish quite a few guys pretty severely. He never had occasion to punish me, but he did put quite a few of them through the water treatment. I don't know. It's some of them Oriental tortures they put you through.

Marcello: Did you actually witness this water treatment being given on any occasion?

Benton: I never witnessed none of them, no. It was all . . . I don't suppose anybody witnessed it because when it was being performed or given to a man, he was the only man in the room. So the only witnesses you would have would be the Japs because he was alone.

Marcello: What was this water treatment? You might explain it for the record.

Benton: Well, they tied you down on this board. All it amounts to is that they would just keep pouring water down you. Finally, you just get so much water in you that . . . that's the way that it is given. I've heard that finally you get so full you'll throw up and, you know, pass out. It affects different people, I imagine, in different ways.

Marcello: I've heard from time to time they would even jump on you when you were full of water.

Benton: Yes, I've heard of that. But as I say, I have never witnessed it. So all of these things are hearsay and have been told by people that have gone through it.

Marcello: Now I think two of the commandants that you experienced here at Woosung were Colonel Yuse, whom we talked about a while ago . . . I think he died in the fall of 1942. Do you remember that occasion, or was it a very big occasion when he died?

Benton: I remember he died, but I don't remember them having a funeral or anything. Now I'm sure . . . you might through some of your other interviews have found out more. But my recollection is that I just recall that he died, and that is something I probably didn't want to remember, and I sort of blocked it out of my mind, I guess you would say.

Marcello: He was replaced then by a Colonel Otera.

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: You had a nickname for him. Do you remember what it was?

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: I've seen it written as "Handlebar Hank."

Benton: Yes, that's the nickname--"Handlebar Hank."

Marcello: Do you recall anything about Otera?

Benton: Well, Otera didn't spend as much time in camp as the other one because he was . . . the way I recollect, he had another civilian camp in Shanghai, and he lived in Shanghai.

Marcello: I've also heard he was a chronic drunk.

Benton: Well, I don't know. That's something I can't answer. But he would come out in the mornings, and he would leave very early. Right after dinner, he would generally go back into Shanghai. He left most of the details up to the "Beast of the East." He had a captain by the name of . . . oh, I know the captain's name. You wouldn't happen to have it there?

Marcello: No, I don't think I have his name. I have a couple of other nicknames among the prisoners. Have you ever heard of one called "Tiny Tim" or another one called "Popeye?"

Benton: Yes, well, "Tiny Tim" was . . . that was a little one. He didn't speak too good English.

Marcello: I understand one of his favorite recreations was running the prisoners through surprise drills and inspections quite a bit.

Benton: Yes, he come through quite a bit unexpectedly. They used to do that quite a bit. They'd come through in them surprise shakedowns and try to find our contraband.

Marcello: What were some of the items that you were forbidden to have?

Benton: We never did know. We found that the Japanese soldier . . . I guess our impression would be that they had a one-track mind. They're not like you and I. If you was out here standing or searching somebody and if you found a gun, you'd take it; if you found dope, you would take it; if you found something he'd stole, you'd take it. But they would run them searches . . . they'd be looking for one thing. If they didn't find that, you could carry a machine gun through there. That's the way we had them pegged.

Now it's possible that I could be wrong. I might be going to a little extreme by saying you could carry a machine gun. But the reason I say that is that we'd bring things in and get it through with them that particular day, and the next day they'd take it away from you because they would be looking for it that day. So we'd figure out, "Well, they was looking for this yesterday, so we can get by with it today." So the next day we'd try to get through with it. Nine times out of ten we'd make it, so that's the reason I sort of say they had a one-track mind as far as I was concerned.

Like, we used to . . . when we was in that alcohol burying detail, well, see we got to be the biggest bootleggers. We was the Al Capones of Shanghai.

Marcello: Shanghai?

Benton: Yes, we'd bring that alcohol in and swap it for rice and cigarettes.

Marcello: How did you bring it in?

Benton: In little bottles or little cans or something. That is one thing that . . . we was the biggest saboteurs you ever saw.

Marcello: What were some of the ways that you would sabotage Japanese property and equipment and this sort of thing?

Benton: Well, now in this burying detail, we would get a little nail or a piece of metal or something. Before we'd turn them barrels up, we'd stick a hole in it. We'd fill our bottles up. Then we'd turn them upside down. Then it'll all gradually run out--leak out. There's no telling how many thousands of gallons of that alcohol run out on the ground because we buried thousands of barrels of that stuff in fifty-five-gallon drums. It don't take many for . . .

Marcello: I gather that that detail where you were burying this alcohol was a pretty large detail because I've heard other prisoners talk about it.

Benton: Well, I don't remember now how many men. We had one of them double-decker buses--I'm sure you've seen them running around here--just like they had in Great Britain. It seems to me like we had two of them. Both of them was

full. So I don't recollect how many men there was, but there was quite a few of us.

Marcello: Was that a fairly long project in terms of time?

Benton: No, it was a . . . as far as time was concerned, it was comparably short. I would say two or three months--that's my best recollection of it.

Marcello: I think this project took place during the latter stages of your stay here at Woosung, that is, near the end of your stay there before you were transferred to another camp.

Benton: We had finished the mountain, which is Mt. Fujiyama, we called it. I'm sure you've heard of it.

Marcello: Yes, but now that didn't take place at Woosung. That occurred later on.

Benton: This was in the later stages of the war when they needed gasoline.

Marcello: I see. Well, let's just stay here with Woosung for a while yet because I haven't finished with my questions. What projects did you engage in while you were here at Woosung?

Benton: Well, it was mostly just cleaning up the ground around there where we lived. We really didn't have a set project. It was just pick up, and we went out and worked on the road and details like that. You never knew from one day to the next what you was going to be doing. We had no regular work schedule.

Marcello: How tough or hard was this work here at Woosung?

Benton: Well, the work never hurt us. As young and tough as we were and as healthy, we could have done the work with no strain. It was the starvation that was our problem. You can't work if you don't have something to eat.

Marcello: How much contact did you have with the Chinese during this period here at Woosung?

Benton: Very, very little. Personally, I didn't ever have any contact with them.

Marcello: I know that in a lot of the prisoner-of-war camps from time to time there would be a lot of black market activity taking place. Did any of this ever take place here at Woosung?

Benton: I don't recall any of it in Woosung. Later, yes, but not at Woosung. I don't recollect any. I'm not saying it didn't happen but . . .

Marcello: What sort of recreation was available here at Woosung?

Benton: Well, we had some balls and bats, and we did organize softball teams. I don't remember whether we played ball in Woosung that first summer. I guess we did. That's one thing that I can't remember. I can't remember whether we had a ball diamond at Woosung or not.

Marcello: Did they ever have any reading facilities or anything like that here at Woosung that you could take advantage of?

Benton: Not in Woosung. We did later; we got some books. But I don't think it was in Woosung. Those are things I can't . . . those are dates that are fuzzy.

Marcello: I gather that most of your work that was done here at Woosung was road repair work like you mentioned awhile ago.

Benton: Well, it wasn't very much at that. I know there was quite a bit of talk about it when they carried us out there to work. We was griping about how we was having to work on war-related projects, which would be war-related by fixing highways, which we considered war-related. Of course, there wasn't a whole lot we could do about it, but we didn't like it. Later, we was also working on war-related projects, which we'll get into when we get on down to Kiang Wang down there.

Marcello: Now I gather there may have been a danger of having too much idleness here at Woosung. Could this have been a danger at times?

Benton: Well, in Woosung I think that was one of our biggest problems, is that we didn't have . . . we never was organized in a regular working details. I think that was one of our main problems. You had more time to sit around and think about how hungry you were getting and starving to death. You had more time to think of yourself, which I always considered bad. That's one

of the gripes of your service today, is they've always got you doing something that you don't see no reason for it. But the reason for it is to keep you busy. You don't see why, but that's the purpose.

Marcello: What sort of outside news did you receive while you were here at Woosung?

Benton: Well, now this is something else now. I guess it was in Woosung . . . I know it was now because it was in 1942. That was right after they come out with these . . . I think they got them pictures. They brought us some radios. That was when they was winning the war. They wanted us to hear it. They wanted to get our morale down. The reason I remember it was 1942 is because that was the year that the St. Louis Cardinals played the World Series. We got the results over the radio, but I don't remember who they played. But I do remember the Cardinals because I was a Cardinal fan. I always have been through the years, ever since I was a kid. So that's the reason it had to be '42. That was when they brought the radios out. We kept the radios until sort of the war started turning, and then they took the radios away from us.

Of course, we had a radio all during the war. The radio . . . we have the radio up there in a museum now. It was turned over at the reunion of '72 in

Dayton. A guy by the name of Kelly from Washington had the radio. He'd had that radio all of these years. He brought it down and gave it to Beeman. Beeman took it and put it in a museum out there at Dayton. They have a POW museum out there. It was put in the museum, I think, there in Dayton.

It was a makeshift affair. It had a couple of tin cans on it and I don't know what all. See, we had some real technicians in there--radiomen, smart people. The radio was built. The radio was brought down piece by piece. It was disassembled, and every man had a part. They got back down there, and they taken it and reassembled it.

Marcello: I'm sure that only a few people really knew when the radio was being played.

Benton: There was only two who knew when it was being played. The radio originally was . . . we had a lieutenant by the name of Newton, who originally had the radio. I believe he was a second lieutenant at the time. He had the radio originally.

Well, things got hot, so he decided it was getting too hot for him, so he got rid of the radio. They was going to throw it away and a guy by the name of Cirrachi had taken the radio. So he kept the radio. He took the radio and took it up to the sickbay. We had a kid

by the name of . . . I know his name, but I can't think of his name. But, anyway, he had asthma. He took that radio up there, and he stuck it under his mattress. He said, "If the Japs come in here, you have an attack," and they was scared of him especially when he was having an attack. They was afraid they would catch it. So they took the radio, and they kept it up there a few days.

Then they found a place to hide it. They'd go out in the john out there and play the radio. They'd get up in the attic and tie it into the electricity up there. They done that about once a week. We kept up with the news. It was rumors. Everything was rumors, but it was mostly the truth as put out as rumors. The radio was . . . well, the radio made it all the way back to the States. We just kept taking it apart and carrying it up and reassembling it.

Marcello: During this stay here at Woosung, were you ever able to write any letters or receive any mail?

Benton: Yes, we could write letters--I don't remember the exact amount we was allowed--and we did receive a few letters. Some seemed to get more than others. Myself, I received very few letters. They was written. I found out after I got home there was lots of mail I never received.

It seemed like some of them . . . there was one kid in particular. He stands out because he was a

bunky of mine. We shared everything. We was bunkies. We shared everything. He'd get a whole handful of mail. Each one . . . he'd have a letter, and the next one would take up where the other one would leave off. They was only allowed to write so much. They'd just write about ten or fifteen letters and just continue where they left off on the other one.

Then half of it would be cut out. Censors was pretty scissor-happy. You might get a letter that'd have two or three words in it. That'd be all it'd say. Everything else was cut out. By the time the Americans would get through with it and then the Japs would get through with it, you didn't have much left.

And it would come in spurts. To give you one example, I wrote my mother a card. I was allowed to write my mother a card the first day of January, 1945. It was mailed. I got home October 4, 1945, and in November, 1945, my mother got that card. I beat it home. So that gives you an idea how slow the mail was--ten months for a postcard.

Marcello: How important was the maintenance of discipline while you were in these prisoner-of-war camps, whether it be Woosung or one of the other camps? Well, first of all, I suppose I should ask this question. Were you still maintaining military discipline while you were in those camps?

Benton: Well, to a certain extent. We were still . . . our NCO's and our officers were still more or less giving us orders. Of course, they were restricted to what they could give us. Well, what I mean is we were still more or less under their rule. Even though we was under the Japanese, we were still considered being under their control even though we were prisoners-of-war. Discipline wasn't strict in the sense of the word that you would . . . if you asked whether it was strict, and I would have to answer, no.

Marcello: But a certain amount of discipline, I'm sure, was necessary for survival. I mean, you couldn't have every man for himself. There couldn't be mob action.

Benton: That's right. So that was one thing. We kept our morale up.

Marcello: Were you still required to salute your own officers?

Benton: We wasn't required to, but we did it out of courtesy for our own fellow officers.

Marcello: By the same token, what sort of respect did you have to show for the Japanese guards or the Japanese officers?

Benton: We had to salute the Japanese officers. We didn't have to salute their enlisted men. I don't remember. Wait a minute. It seems to me like we had to salute their NCO's. We didn't have to salute their privates. Now I could be mistaken about that. The best I remember

is that we did have to salute their officers. That was definite. The NCO's . . . I say I think we did salute the NCO's. The privates, I'm sure we didn't. Now somebody else might remember that different. I'm just not sure.

Marcello: At this time, that is, while you were still at Woosung, were you basically living from day to day, from month to month?

Benton: No, the best I recollect, not in Woosung. We wasn't living day to day then. We were still . . . our morale was still pretty high even though . . . you say, "Well, how could it have been high?" We was young. We knew we was going to win the war. In our minds we knew we was going to win the war. We thought it would be over quicker than it was, which I still know that it would have been if they hadn't been concentrating on Europe. See, that's the reason the war lasted so long over there. They was concentrating on Europe. So we figured it would be over in at least two years, which it drug out there for about forty-four months. But our morale stayed up. We could always find something to laugh about. Now this happened in Woosung, I do believe, when Story and Brimmer and Stewart and Battles made the break. This was after the civilians tried to escape. This was the four Marines. I'm sure it's been mentioned in there before.

Marcello: Now where did this occur?

Benton: Well, now I'm trying to say it happened in Woosung.

Marcello: What were their names?

Benton: Story, Battles, Stewart, Brimmer.

Marcello: I knew that there was an escape later on when you were on that train.

Benton: This was later in the war.

Marcello: Yes, that was much later, yes. Do you recall this particular escape at Woosung?

Benton: I definitely recall it. Brimmer was my bunky. We was . . . a guy by the name of Caster, myself, and Brimmer was sleeping right . . . I slept between Caster and Brimmer. We was gathering stuff to take on an escape attempt that we was planning--us three. We was the only three in on it. Well, in the meantime, Story Battles, and Stewart was planning an escape.

So Brimmer found out about it. How he found out they was going . . . because I didn't know it until after they'd left--the first I knew about it. But Brimmer found out about it. He told them that if they didn't let him go with them he was going to report them. Well, there was nothing they could do. So Brimmer took our supplies that we had stashed away for our escape and took them with him and left us with nothing. That's the reason I remember it.

Marcello: So what happened? Did they make their break?

Benton: Yes, they made their break. They was recaptured and taken down to Shanghai and spent the rest of the war in the Ward Road Jail with the exception of Story. Later in the war he did finally make an escape and got free.

Marcello: Now you mentioned they were kept in a jail down in Shanghai?

Benton: Yes, what they called the Ward Road Jail.

Marcello: They were lucky they weren't executed.

Benton: Well, yes, I guess they was. Story is now writing a book. I don't know when it's going to be out. He has been a very mysterious man. Nobody has been able to find out too much about his life.

A guy by the name of Thomas, which is a good friend of mine . . . and he's dead, by the way. He died about two years ago, which . . . we've seen each other about twice a year ever since the war. I miss him quite a bit because him and my wife was real good friends. Well, Thomas was a very good friend of Story's. He had went to see him. He was living down here in Mississippi, down there on the river--him and his wife in an old rundown shack. They was living like hermits. He could never get anything out of Story. Story wouldn't ever tell him nothing. He was

drawing a check from the government. As far as Thomas could tell, he didn't retire and it wasn't a disability check. Thomas said that he thought it was from the underground. When Story made his break and got free later in the war, we believed that he went back into China as an undercover man working for the, I guess, CIA or whatever they called it back in them days.

Marcello: OSS, I think it was--Office of Strategic Services.

Benton: OSS--and we always figured that's who he was working for. We have no proof. As I say, he would never talk about it. He is writing a book now. I'm hoping that this will all come out in his book. He was one of the boys that didn't want to talk about his past. He'd never talk about it even to his friends.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that you were seriously contemplating escape. Where did you plan to go if you escaped?

Benton: Well, there was only three ways you could go. You had to either cross the Yangtze River or across the Whangpoo River or go through Shanghai. Then you had the Pacific Ocean on the other side. Our best bet was . . . we was going through Shanghai. That was the . . . the river . . . crossing the rivers was . . . you might say there's just no way you could swim them rivers, especially the Yangtze which was very swift. At that point it was

about a mile wide. The Whangpoo wasn't that wide, but it was awful swift. It had an awful swift current. That's the way they went. They went through Shanghai. That was where they was caught. They never did know exactly where they was caught.

Marcello: Did the Japanese ever threaten you if you tried to escape and were captured? In other words, did they tell you what the consequences would be?

Benton: Oh, yes. They said you would be shot. In the Philippines them stories . . . true stories . . . I know them to be true. They did shoot people. When people would try to escape, they'd take two or three out and shoot them. That's true. That's a true story. I know it to be a fact, not actually from seeing it but from people that know it really happened.

Marcello: Now while you were at Woosung, I gather that you didn't lose very men to death here. The unit stayed pretty much intact.

Benton: We didn't. In fact, we didn't lose many men in the whole camp. In Woosung I don't remember losing any. I don't recollect any of our group dying in Woosung. There might have been some civilians, but I don't remember that it was any of our group.

Marcello: Okay, then, in December of 1942 you moved on to another camp. What was the name of this camp?

Benton: Kiang Wang. You're going to get different pronunciations out of that. I think everybody pronounces it different.

Marcello: And this, of course, is where you began work on the so-called "Mount Fuji Project."

Benton: Well, that's when we really . . . see, while we was in Woosung, we still had hopes of going home even up till . . . see, we heard of the Gripsholm--the Swedish ship Gripsholm--is the one that come into Shanghai and picked the diplomats up. That was in June of 1942. Most of the time we was in Woosung, we still had our hopes up. We never did give up hope until we heard that boat going down the river, and we knew it was over. See, we had four or five men that come out there and got out of our camp and put on that boat. About four Marines that was left in Shanghai was repatriated. They was out there with us. They come out there and got them and put them on that boat. That's the reason . . . our morale was still pretty high up until, you might say, June. We never did give up until we knew it was over.

Marcello: Okay, so I think you marched from Woosung out to Kiang Wang.

Benton: Yes, we marched.

Marcello: I believe it was about five miles. Did anything eventful happen on this march?

Benton: I don't recollect anything.

Marcello: What were your living quarters here at Kiang Wang?

Benton: They was the same as in Woosung--the same kind of barracks except the barracks were a little bit better. They was a little better built--more weather . . . well, actually, they was a newer barracks.

Marcello: Describe the "Mount Fuji Project" because this is basically what you worked on during most of the time that you were here at Kiang Wang.

Benton: Well, when we first got to Kiang Wang, it was that spring. We cleaned up the grounds, leveled all of the grounds, and we made some baseball diamonds. That was sort of in February and March. I don't recollect really when we started at "Mount Fujiyama." I don't recollect. It was in '43. I do know that.

Marcello: I think at first they told you it was going to be a park or something, did they not?

Benton: Yes, I think that was what they said it was.

Marcello: And what did it turn out to be?

Benton: It turned out to be a rifle range.

Marcello: Well, describe what the work was like on this "Mount Fuji Project."

Benton: Well, we had little cars. I guess you could say they would hold about a third of a yard of dirt. They was on a railroad track. We would fill them cars up and

push them up and dump them. Of course, it just started building this mountain, hill, or whatever it was. Of course, when we first got out there, the loads . . . I don't remember how many loads we started out with.

Marcello: In other words, they gave you a quota?

Benton: Yes, they said about four or five loads a day, and they kept raising it and raising it. I think it finally got up to about thirty-five loads a day. Thirty-five times a third of a yard would be, oh . . .

Marcello: Well, we're talking about almost twelve yards of dirt.

Benton: Yes, we're talking about twelve yards of dirt a day. We first started out with four men to a car, and we was pushing about five loads a day. We ended with two men on a car pushing about thirty-five loads.

Marcello: Just to go back here a minute, I gather this was all pick-and-shovel-type work.

Benton: Every bit of it was pick-and-shovel.

Marcello: Okay, now where were you getting the dirt, and where were you taking it? How was this procedure working?

Benton: Well, it was just a field when we went out there.

Marcello: A field?

Benton: Just a level plot of ground like you walk right out here and start digging. Well, we started digging in one spot and started hauling it to another spot. That's all it amounted to.

Marcello: In other words, it was a matter of the pile of dirt getting higher and higher.

Benton: In my recollections it was twenty-five meters high, which would be approximately seventy-five foot. It was 125 meters long and fifty meters wide, which amounts to a whole lot of dirt any way you look at it. After we finished it, then we built seven . . . I believe it was seven smaller ones down each side--one in the middle and then one on each side. Then that's where they fired down through at the range. The big one was the backstop for the bullets.

Marcello: How long did it take you to construct that "Mount Fuji Project?"

Benton: It seems to me like . . . my best recollection was eighteen months.

Marcello: How long was a typical workday on that project?

Benton: Well, I don't know. I don't recollect. It was about ten or twelve hours from the time we left the barracks till we got back. Somewhere between ten and twelve hours.

Marcello: Normally, what time would you start to work on that project?

Benton: It seems to me like we'd move out about seven in the morning. We had to walk out there. It was about two or three miles. I don't recollect how long it'd take us. The reason I don't recollect is that about this

time things was getting pretty rough. We was getting down to pretty well skin and bone. I have heard people say, "Well, I just blocked that out of my mind." I don't know. I never really believed in it. But I actually believe you can do it because there was lots of days when I would come in and I wouldn't even remember working.

Marcello: I would assume that while you were here at this "Mount Fuji Project" there was no time for recreation, and even if there was time, you were so tired that you couldn't use it for recreation.

Benton: Well, most of us that . . . see, the whole camp wasn't working on the project. We had about 1,200 men. In my recollection there was about 600 of us on this project.

Marcello: Were you working on the project?

Benton: Yes, I was working on the project. And that's the reason I say that the longer we worked on it, the more it was getting rougher and rougher. As I said before, we could have done the work with the proper food. I have done just as hard a work here in the States with the proper food.

Marcello: Who supervised this project?

Benton: Well, that was Ishihara's pet project (chuckle). That was his project. He would get out there on the mountain, and he would scream and holler and rave.

Marcello: Did you ever have any way to sabotage the work on this project?

Benton: Oh, definitely (chuckle).

Marcello: What are some of the things you would do?

Benton: Well, not actually sabotage. There wasn't too much you could actually in the sense call sabotage. But when we was getting up there and getting thirty and thirty-five loads a day, Ishihara would turn his back, and you would hear him holler, "Run a short one." Well, you'd throw a shovelful in there and away you'd go. You'd get by with a shovelful of dirt in there and get credit for a load, see. It happened quite frequently because he wouldn't stay on that mountain all day long. He'd come up there and stay just as long in that hot sun as he could stand it, and then he'd have to come down and go get in the shade and cool off. Well, everytime he would turn his back we'd run a short one. It was a big joke.

Marcello: I'm sure that this did wonders for your morale, that is, when you were able to pull a fast one over on the Japanese.

Benton: Oh, yes. Well, we'd just laugh. It was a big joke--laugh! Boy, we'd keep count. "Man, we got by with five fast ones today, or six or maybe a dozen." You know, it depended on . . .

Marcello: Did you ever throw rocks in there to take the place of some of that dirt?

Benton: No, there wasn't too . . . we was in mostly dirt. It was not too many rocks in there. It was mostly old . . . just sort of sandy loam. And it was very, very seldom you ever had to use a pick.

Marcello: As a prisoner-of-war, were you getting paid for the work you were doing?

Benton: Yes, we was getting paid, if you want to call it paid. I could show you my last paycheck.

Marcello: In addition to whatever skimpy pay that you got here, I think it's also true, is it not, that you worked for so many days and you could earn so many cigarettes, or maybe a small loaf of bread or something of that nature?

Benton: No, I don't remember it that way. We was allowed four cigarettes a day. That was our regular allowance. That didn't mean you got four cigarettes a day.

Marcello: Did you ever see people trading cigarettes for food?

Benton: Oh, definitely, yes. That was a very, very common thing.

Marcello: It seems incredible to me that somebody would actually trade cigarettes for food.

Benton: Well, see, you don't realize what traders we had in camp. If you would care to hear an incident, I can . . .

Marcello: Okay.

Benton: We had this fellow who was off a merchant marine ship. He was a Jewish fellow. He come in there. He didn't

have nothing. He come in there and borrowed an article. He took that one article and started trading, and finally he traded around and go that article back plus a bunch of other stuff and give it back to the guy he borrowed it from, and he was on his way. He wound up, I think, with 90 per cent of the money in camp before we left there. There is really no way of even knowing how much he got out of camp with. He was very shrewd. He didn't smoke. He was the type of guy that could get by with a very minimum of food because he never had to work, which made a whole lot of difference. He turned out to be, I guess you could say . . . put it this way. He was the millionaire of the camp even though he didn't have a million dollars. But speaking of the articles and things he had, it would be like being a millionaire out here.

Marcello: Was there ever a chance to do any trading with the Japanese?

Benton: No, very little with the Japanese themselves. Sometimes some of them . . . some of the guards would give you a cigarette or something and maybe do a little trading with you. But it wasn't what you would call on a large-scale. I'm sure there were incidents that did happen that I'm not familiar with.

Marcello: Now I think it was during this stay here at Kiang Wang where you witnessed the first American bombing raid. Is that correct?

Benton: No, that was later in the war.

Marcello: That would have been back in the winter of 1944, perhaps. Is that right?

Benton: Well, the first B-24's that come over . . . I don't remember. It was in the latter part of '44. The first day that they come over . . . they were so high. We was told later by pilots that had been shot down that they was cruising around twenty-five or thirty thousand feet. That's what their altitude was. They didn't come over in squadrons. They come over . . . a lot of them was just one lone plane by themselves. They'd fly over and maybe drop a bomb and maybe not. Of course, when we seen them our morale really built up because we knew when they was getting bombers that close . . . even though the B-24 had quite a range, we knew they were getting closer. Of course, when the P-51's come in there, well, we knew they were getting closer because those were fighters. We knew they didn't have much range.

Marcello: What would be the reaction of the Japanese when these raids would take place?

Benton: Well, the bombing raids, the B-24's that come over in the daytime, they didn't pay too much attention to them because they were so high, and they wasn't really bothering us. But then later when . . . they

used to bring a P-38 in there. We were told that's what they was. They would be so high you couldn't tell. You could hear them. Every once in a while you could see the sun reflect on them. We knew they was up there, but the Japs never went up after them. I don't know where . . . them Zeroes . . . I don't think . . . I think they was out of the Zeroes' range. They'd stay up there all day long. We never did know. It probably wasn't the same plane. They'd take pictures. That night, dang it, here they'd come. Them bombers would come up that Whangpoo River there. It sounded like all hell broke loose, which it was breaking loose. Well, we was about two miles from the Whangpoo River.

Marcello: Now you were still here at Shanghai?

Benton: Shanghai. And we laid there in our bunks and watched the fireworks. Of course, they were shooting tracers. Man, that air gets to be . . . all up that river it'd just . . . them old tracer bullets and these bombs blowing up and a big flash. Our barracks were just sitting there rumbling like an earthquake. It was pretty to watch, but never knowing what maybe the next night they might drop one on you, it didn't make you feel too good. Then the first P-51 raid we had was after we finished "Mount Fujiyama."

Marcello: Now would this be perhaps in the spring of 1945?

Benton: Yes, this was in the spring of '45, and we had finished "Mount Fujiyama," and I was working in a foundry.

We had a Jap there. He was a real . . . this was another guard that I should mention. He spoke good English and was a decent sort of a Jap. He had lived in the States. We was working in this foundry. Of course, when they sounded alarm, we had a foxhole to go to in case of an air alarm. Well, the first day that they come in there . . . well, they was there before they ever . . . when they blew the siren, the P-51's was already there. I run out of the foundry. About the time I run out of the foundry, this P-51 come right over this foundry, and I guess it was about fifty feet off the ground. Now I know it couldn't have been any higher because the old boy had red hair and blue eyes--the pilot (chuckle).

There was an AA gun sitting down there on an old racetrack that had been bombed out but still had part of the grandstand still standing. They had an aircraft gun on it. From where I was standing you could see it. It was about . . . I guess about 300 yards down there. This P-51, that's what he was after. About the time he got over our building, he

he let loose of them .50-calibers. I understand they carried four .50-calibers, and he let loose with all four of them, I guess. You could just see them Japs flying off that. He blew every one of them and knocked them plumb off that thing. He knocked that gun out.

Well, after that, then, we got quite a few bombings from the fighters. We set . . . they had three airports there. Our camp . . . them airports was sort of in a triangle. We were setting more or less right in the center of them.

Marcello: I assume that the Japanese never designated or marked that camp as a POW compound.

Benton: No, it was no markings on the camp that showed it was a POW camp. One day we was out . . . we had a fence around this. Part of it was a brick wall and had an electric fence on top of it.

Marcello: Now was this at the foundry?

Benton: No, this was in our camp.

Marcello: I see.

Benton: And we was outside this wall working one day. I don't remember now why I wasn't . . . but anyway, I was in camp that day, and we was working outside the camp. I don't even remember what we were doing. There were three of us. And this P-51 dove on us.

Well, by the time we saw him and he started diving on us, well, it was too late. We couldn't run. You know, them things fly about 500 miles an hour. They're the hottest thing . . . well, he dove and he come down, I guess--it seemed to me like--ten feet off the ground. Of course, it was higher. Well, we knew we had had it, but he never did let loose. We never did know whether he recognized us.

They knew there was a POW camp in that vicinity, but they didn't know exactly where it was at. In other words, on their map it wasn't designated, but they knew there was one there. The only thing we could figure out was that he knew there was a POW camp, and he recognized that we were the Americans. Otherwise, well, I think I wouldn't be here today.

Marcello: How did the reaction or the conduct of the Japanese change as a result of these raids?

Benton: Well, they'd go wild. When them raids come on they'd get in the barracks there, and they would shoot out the windows. That's what always scared us. They'd be in the barracks, and they'd stick their guns out of the barracks and shoot, see. We was afraid that they'd spot one of them and come down and strafe our barracks. Man, they'd go wild! They'd run through the barracks. We had several guys that got bayonetted

when they'd just be running through there wild. If somebody was in their way, they'd just stick a bayonet in them. They didn't ever kill anybody, but some of them got pretty bad cut.

I don't mind telling you. If you've never been through an air raid, I hope you never have to go through one because I was scared. I was so scared I couldn't put a cigarette in my mouth. I'd finally get a cigarette in my mouth, and I couldn't light it. I was shaking that bad! That's all you could call it. I wasn't a bit nervous. I was scared. I wasn't the only one that was scared. That's the trouble. When you're frightened of something, if you've got something to fight back or put up a defense, it's a whole lot different than being helpless.

Marcello: In other words, you had to look at these air raids with mixed emotions. On the one hand they certainly did boost your morale, but on the other hand there was always the danger that they could cause your death, also.

Benton: Absolutely.

Marcello: What other particular type of projects did you work on here at Kiang Wang after the "Mount Fuji Project" was finished?

Benton: Well, we had a detail that worked down in a garage, which was called the garage detail. This is where we

did lots of sabotage. You'd be surprised what a few men can do. They'd take them wrenches . . . they had quite a few American wrenches and machines and stuff. Well, them old boys would take them wrenches, and they'd put "cheaters" on them and break them.

Marcello: They put "cheaters" on them?

Benton: Yes, well, you know, a wrench . . . when you've got a wrench and the handle's that long (gesture), well, it ain't supposed to have more pressure on it than you can get on that wrench. Well, we'd put a piece of pipe way out there (gesture). Well, you could get a whole lot more than the wrench will stand. Well, when you put the "cheaters" on there, you just popped the heads off. They'd break them good wrenches. Well, they finally got wise to it and quit letting us use them.

They'd take the truck in there, and they would overhaul it. Then it would be in A-1 condition. Just put the head on it . . . they'd take and put a little . . . you know, it don't take much valve grinding compound stuff to put in there on top of the cylinder and then put the head on. Man, it'd run like a top. In about three days they'd drag it back in there with the motor burned out. Little things like that.

Marcello: Surely the Japanese must have known what was going on.

Benton: Well, we always wondered. They never did get wise to it. Now I was working in the foundry down in this compound. They had foundries and they had garages. They had machine shops. They had all kinds of things.

Marcello: All of these details were coming out of Kiang Wang? Is that right? This is after the "Mount Fuji Project" was finished?

Benton: Right. This was out . . . well, now the garage detail was the first detail. They went down there while the "Mount Fuji Project" was going on. But after "Mount Fuji" is when I went down there and started working in the foundry. We'd have to get up there on top of that old furnace and throw that old scrap iron in there. Man, that was hot work working up on that old blast furnace and working up on top of it feeding that stuff. Man, it gets to be 100 degress up there . . . 150 degrees where you was working up there. Well, we'd get this stuff all melted down, and then we'd have molds. We was mostly pouring pistons. We'd get our molds all set up, and just before we'd start pouring it, we'd throw a little rock or something down in there.

Marcello: Down in the mold?

Benton: Yes. Then when we'd pour it and take them out, you'd always have a bubble or something. Then, well, they'd have to scrap them, see. We done hundreds of them

that way--little sabotage things--and they never did really get wise to it. I don't know . . . at that stage the war was going against them, and they either didn't care or they wasn't smart enough. Now I never could figure it out because they'd taken . . . see, we was moving back up the Pacific at that time. We was taking island after island. Their morale . . . we could see it. We could sense it. Their morale was really getting lower and lower and lower.

Marcello: Now was it during this period when you were also working on the detail that was burying those alcohol barrels . . . those barrels of alcohol?

Benton: This was along in the same period, yes.

Marcello: Okay then, I think it was in about May of 1945 that you were moved again.

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: This was the beginning of that relatively long train trip.

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: Now you might describe that trip.

Benton: Well, this is something that . . . when we left Shanghai, we went back to Peking--outside of Peking.

Marcello: This was a little town called Fengtai.

Benton: See, now this is where I'm not going to be able to help you much. While we was working up there in Fengtai,

that's when I come down with the fever. I was running 104 and 105-degree fever there for several days. If you've never run that kind of fever, you don't know what it'll do to you. It's rough, especially when it runs that long. Of course, I had dysentery with it. I don't remember just exactly how long we stayed in Fengtai because, as I say, I was sick, and about half the time I didn't know what the heck was going on. I was running a high fever. I was just delirious, I guess you would call it.

Of course, after we left Fengtai, then, that's when we got on the train, and we went up through North China and into Manchuria.

Marcello: Let's back up here a minute and go back to May of 1945 when you first left Kiang Wang on the first leg of this trip to Fengtai. What sort of a trip was that? Were you crowded in boxcars most of the time?

Benton: Yes, we were in the boxcars just like we was when we come down. But, of course, when we left Shanghai, well, that's when we had the . . . this was the only successful escape we had out of our camp. This was during this time when we had the five officers. There was a Lieutenant McBrayer, Lieutenant . . .

Marcello: McAlister, Kinney, Huizenga, and Bishop along with McBrayer.

Benton: No, those are not the ones.

Marcello: I think those are the five officers that escaped here on the trip. This is what Colonel Devereux says in his book.

Benton: Well, Colonel Devereux is wrong. I've got the five names. They're in that book that I . . . I wish I had the book. But Colonel Devereux is wrong. Bishop was an NCO. Bishop was not an officer. The only people that escaped was officers. I hate to dispute the colonel's word, but I know it's not the truth.

Marcello: What do you remember about that escape?

Benton: Well, it was very simple. Lieutenant McBrayer, now I seen him last summer. He was at the reunion. He retired as a colonel. He was at our reunion last year, and he told us all about it. They had a window in their car. We had a can that we used as a john that sat over in the corner--just a big old can. Well, they talked the guard into letting them put a curtain around the john. Well, they went to the john one at a time and pried the bars off the window, and they left the train one at a time, and then they left the next day. They wasn't very far . . . they were only about ten miles from the Chinese lines at the time. In fact, they met up with the Chinese the next day. I wish I could remember them officers' names.

There was two of them of our outfit. Lieutenant Huizenga and Lieutenant McBrayer was the two officers that was in our group.

Marcello: What was the Japanese reaction after that escape took place?

Benton: Oh, they was running around there, but there wasn't really as much commotion as you would think because this was in the latter part of the war. This was in May and things was going bad for them. I don't think they really cared, personally, even though they hollered and screamed a little bit. But I think they were just doing that for the show, personally speaking.

Marcello: How tough a trip was this from Kiang Wang up to Fengtai?

Benton: Well, I don't remember the trip too much.

Marcello: Now were you sick during the trip itself?

Benton: No, during this trip I wasn't sick.

Marcello: You didn't get sick until you got to Fengtai.

Benton: Yes, but I don't remember too much about the trip because, you know, as I was saying awhile ago, we was in such a bad condition of starvation at that time that we just tried to block that stuff out of our mind. I think that's the reason that I don't remember . . . can't recollect a whole lot of things. It's just blocked out of my mind.

Marcello: Well, I don't think you were at Fengtai for too long. Just a couple of weeks, maybe?

Benton: A couple or three weeks, yes.

Marcello: And I gather that conditions there were pretty bad.

Benton: Well, yes.

Marcello: Do you remember very much about them, or were you so sick during this period that you really couldn't tell?

Benton: Well, when we first got there, we didn't get any rice. We got what we call a millet here. I don't know, it looks more like chicken feed. That's what we had to eat. It wasn't really too good, and it really didn't stay with you. It'd sort of go on through you. It didn't digest. It'd just go in and come out like it went in. You wasn't getting no nourishment out of it.

Of course, we had open ditches for latrines, which was a very bad sanitary condition. At night we couldn't go out there. We had buckets outside of our doors and things like that which made sanitary conditions very, very bad. If we'd have stayed there very long, well, man, we'd have all been dead.

Marcello: What sort of barracks and so on did you have there?

Benton: It was just a big old warehouse--no barracks. It was just a big old warehouse, and we just slept out there on the concrete floor.

Marcello: What sort of gear and belongings did you still have with you at this time?

Benton: Well, our belongings was beginning to fade out. We'd wore out most of our clothes. We didn't really have

too much left because, see, all of our belongings consisted mostly of clothes, see. So they was getting pretty skimp about this time.

Marcello: Was there any work that was done here at Fengtai, or was it kind of a transit station?

Benton: Yes, it was sort of a transit station, but we went out on little work details. The day that I was taken down with the fever, we was out there digging a ditch or something. I don't remember exactly what. It was sort of a ditch or something. I don't even know what it was for.

Marcello: You mentioned that you had this fever. Was there any sort of treatment or medicine that you could really get for it?

Benton: No, not at this time. We still had small quantities of medicine but not enough to treat you like you should be treated. You'd just lay there, and either your fever would finally break or you'd die. That's about it. You'd just lay there. It was pretty miserable. I guess one of the most miserable times, as far as I was concerned, that I had was during this period from the time we left Fengtai till we got to Japan. That was one of the most miserable periods.

Marcello: Were you losing very many people yet at this stage?

Benton: No. We still . . . as far as the death rate, we hadn't . . . it'd been very small. Really our camp death rate

was, I guess, one of the smallest of any POW camp in the Pacific.

Marcello: Okay, then you stayed at Fengtai for a few weeks, and then once more you were put back on the trains. This time, I think, you were headed for . . . well, you actually went up through Manchuria, came down through Manchuria, and eventually ended up at Pusan in Korea. Is that correct?

Benton: Yes, we come all the way down. We crossed the Yalu River in North Korea and come right down through the middle of Korea--all the way down through it.

Marcello: What do you remember from that leg of the trip?

Benton: Well, that was during the time I was sick, and we was pretty well locked up in them boxcars. They'd stop and we could get out and have a rest period, relieve ourselves, because them cans in them boxcars would get pretty . . .

I remember that Korea, especially North Korea. Man, that was one of the most godforsaken countries I had ever saw. Of course, it was in the summertime, and it was hot and dusty and dry. It was horrible. I knew I never did want to go back there if I didn't have to.

Marcello: How did they feed you on this train trip?

Benton: Surprisingly, we got fed pretty good because we was eating the same rations the guards was. All through there, even plumb into Japan, plumb on up to the time we got to

Hakodate, we was eating guard rations which was pretty good. It was practically the same thing we was eating, but the quantity was so much greater.

Marcello: Were the guards right there on those boxcars with you?

Benton: Yes, they was in there with us. They sort of had a little wall deal that separated them from us, and they sat in the middle by the doors while we was in each end.

Marcello: In other words, these were boxcars. They weren't cattle cars with slats or anything of that nature.

Benton: No, they was boxcars. You couldn't see out of them. That's the reason I don't remember too much of the trip. You didn't see anything.

Marcello: I'm sure if people had dysentery those cars must have gotten pretty rank on this trip.

Benton: They did. That's what I say. When they'd stop and let us get outside and relieve ourselves, man, it was heaven. I mean, you'd just get out, and even though it was hot and dry and dusty it was still a relief to get out of them boxcars.

Marcello: Well, you finally ended up in Pusan, which is a port on the southern tip of Korea. I think you remained here for a couple of days, did you not?

Benton: A couple of weeks.

Marcello: A couple of weeks was it?

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: What did you do here at Pusan?

Benton: Oh, we worked a little detail. I remember one detail I went out on. We was loading salt on a ship. I remember that we hadn't . . . salt was one of the main things that was in very short supply all during the war. It was a treat to get a little of that salt even though it was dirty. We took it and put it in water and washed it down and then let it dry out. You'd be surprised. It come out a whole lot whiter. To us it was a real treat.

Marcello: Did you use it on your rice or what?

Benton: We used it on everything we had to eat. It was very . . . you don't realize how tastey salt will be after being without it so long.

Marcello: I would assume that loading these ships with these sacks of salt was pretty tough work, considering what your weight was and your physical condition.

Benton: Well, it was pretty hard work, but fortunately they didn't really drive us like they did, say, on the mountain and other places. You must remember this was, well, along in the last of June. It was in the latter part of June.

Marcello: It was in the latter part of June of 1945.

Benton: So, you see, the war was really going in our favor, and things was beginning to ease up.

Marcello: What were your quarters like here at Pusan?

Benton: Oh, it was just more or less a little old building out there, and we was just sleeping on the ground. There was no barracks or anything. It was just more or less what we would call in this country a mule barn or something, just an old building.

Marcello: Here again, would it be safe to say that Pusan was essentially a transit station, and they were going to send you on to some other place?

Benton: Yes, well, it was a stopover from . . . we was on our way to Japan, is where we was going.

Marcello: By this time did you realize that you were on your way to Japan?

Benton: Oh, definitely. We knew where we was going.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going to Japan?

Benton: Well, we never was crazy about it, but we really didn't have a whole lot of choice. So we just took it as it come. Of course, when we left Pusan . . . we left out of there at night. I remember this incident very, very well because I was one of the few that had taken a water bottle. The Japs was very funny. Sometimes they'd let you take that stuff and sometimes they wouldn't. Some of them would say, "Well, I'm not going to take one. I don't want to get a beating for having something." Well, I said, "To heck with it. I'm going to take me some water with me. I don't know where I'm going." So I

had this water bottle, and I carried it full of drinking water. Fortunately, we got down to the boat dock, and I got pulled off on a work detail. I had to load some baggage or something on the boat.

When I got back, I gave the water bottle to a guy by the name of K. R. Clark, which had been my bunky in Peking for two years. Me and him had been bunkies for two years in Peking. Now he happened to be standing there, and I said, "Here, Clark, hold my bottle till I get back." He said, "Alright." After we got on the boat we got down in that old hold and it was hot, and the humidity . . . man, it wasn't long till your old tongue was beginning to swell--no water. Well, I couldn't find Clark. The next morning when I finally found him, he had done drunk all of my water. That didn't set too good with me.

But it so happened that I was lucky in the respect that I had my bottle. It was raining and the Japs let some of us that had bottles, which I happened to be one of them . . . let us up on top. They had this tarpaulin catching this rainwater. I got to fill my bottle up. I got all the water I wanted to drink while I was up there.

I got my fill, so I filled my bottle up and carried it back down and shared it with the boys that

didn't get to get up there. It was a big old . . . it held about two quarts--about half a gallon. Well, we passed it around. We wouldn't let a guy have but about two or three swallows. The guys were suffering. They were desperate for water.

Marcello: Where'd you ever pick up this bottle?

Benton: Well, we . . . these bottles . . . it seems to me like I brought it all the way through from Shanghai. I'd had it all the way through. I'd been carrying it. There was several of us that had water bottles. That was one thing. We was trying to keep water because water is very important to a man's life, especially when you get without it.

Marcello: Well, describe what conditions were like aboard that steamer that you were going to be taking from Pusan over to the island of Honshu. Now it's not a very long way, but it probably took you longer than what it should have to get across there.

Benton: About a day. About a day. Well, it was very hot, as I say, and we was laying down there in the hold even though the food ration was very good. We got regular guard rations. But our throats and tongues had swelled up and you couldn't eat.

Marcello: How closely were you packed down in that hold?

Benton: Pretty tight. That's the reason I couldn't find Clark, because we was packed so tight you couldn't get around. That was where the trouble come in.

Marcello: Okay, so describe the remainder of that trip, then, by steamer across to the Island of Honshu.

Benton: Well, the trip itself was uneventful with the exception that we suffered quite a bit from thirst. As I say, after I got up on top and got the water, well, then I was in pretty good shape as far as water, personally, myself. Well, then we got on to Japan, which . . . the trip was uneventful--just crossing the bay. That's all it amounted to. When we got to Japan, I never did know exactly. It was somewhere in there. I never did know exactly what the name of the little old town was. It wasn't really important to me at the time.

Then we boarded the train again. That's when we found out what war was like.

Marcello: Well, when you landed in Honshu, were you able to see any of the damage that had been caused by the bombing raids?

Benton: Yes, when . . . see, we was on a regular passenger train. We had seats.

Marcello: This was on your train trip northward now.

Benton: This was on our train trip up through Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo, and up through there. That's when we found out what our country had done to Japan. Even though they had the blinds drawn, we could still pull them far enough to see what was going on. We would ride along

through them cities, and you would see nothing. For miles and miles there wouldn't be nothing standing higher than two or three feet--just ashes.

They were still bombing at the time. In fact, we had to stop the train. We had to get under an underpass and spend about three hours there while we was going up through there. You could see them Japs. They had them stacked up there like cordwood--dead. They'd just pour gasoline on them and burn them. I mean, there were just so many of them that you couldn't bury them.

Marcello: What sort of reactions or feelings did you experience when you saw the damage?

Benton: Well, we knew it was only a matter of . . . it couldn't be long because we knew a country couldn't stand that kind of pounding too much longer. The cities was wiped out. They mostly dropped incendiaries over there. They'd come in there and bomb it, and they could drop them incendiaries. They just burnt that country up. They didn't do it like Germany. They bombed Germany. But Japan, the buildings over there was a different type of construction. They burnt easier than a brick building.

Marcello: What sort of reception did you receive at the hands of civilians?

Benton: Well, when we went through the . . . we got to Yokohama. We got off the train and got on . . . you heard of that

electric railway they've got there. In Yokohama we boarded that electric railway. Man, that thing travels. Even back then it moved out.

Well, we got to Tokyo. Well, they had us divided into two groups. By this time there were only 600 of us left. They'd been splitting them up and taking them to Japan. There was about 600 left. We was split in two groups. Well, I was in the first group that went through. We got through pretty well. The second group, which was about thirty minutes behind us . . . and the civilian population worked them over pretty well. They was pretty well beat up. They would run along hitting them with clubs and throwing bricks into the crowd. You know, a brick can do a lot of damage if it hits a man in the head. There was quite a few of them that got banged up pretty bad. But personally, our group . . . we was lucky and got through without any incidents.

But as we went on up through the country, after we left Tokyo--we went through there at night--and, well, the next day we was sitting there at a station. There was quite a few civilians there on the platform. Somehow or another our shades was up. I don't remember why they was up. But the civilians would walk up to the car window and spit, you know. Of course, the

windows was down, but they'd spit on the windows like they was trying to spit in your face. It was quite a feeling to sit there and knowing people were trying to spit in your face.

Marcello: I'm sure it was very uncomfortable.

Benton: Yes, it was uncomfortable because you didn't know. If they decided to mob the train, we don't know . . . we didn't have enough guards to protect us--not from a mob--unless they would just start shooting. I don't know. We didn't know what would happen. Really, the attitude toward us was very bad, but it just so happened they couldn't get to us to do us any damage.

Marcello: Okay, so you finally get to the northernmost island, which was Hokkaido. I guess you landed in and around the City of Hakodate.

Benton: Hakodate.

Marcello: And, of course, it was from here that I assume you went to the coal mines.

Benton: Before we get to Hakodate, though, there's one little incident I do want to mention. We got there the first day of July, 1945.

Marcello: You were one of the last groups, then, to get to Hakodate. Is that correct?

Benton: I was the last group.

Marcello: I see.

Benton: I was in the last group. That was the first time they brought in the grasshoppers . . . give us grasshoppers to eat (chuckle). Even though I . . . as hungry as I was, I couldn't eat the grasshoppers. I just couldn't do it. I gave mine away. I just wanted to mention that. I still can't eat grasshoppers (chuckle).

But anyway, then that's when we got on a train there at Hakodate and went on up to the coal mines. This was the first day of July. Of course, we was only in Japan from the first day of July until the war was over, which was a very short period.

If we had spent a winter in Hokkaido, I don't think we would have made it because at this period I was still sick, and when we got up there into the coal mines, we were getting green rice. I could eat my share of it, and I'd have to go right to the bathroom. It'd just go right through me.

Marcello: What sort of work were you doing in the coal mines?

Benton: We was mining coal.

Marcello: Describe what it was like.

Benton: Well, actually we had a little of what we called then little air hammers. We'd get in them coal mines and just mine that coal, knock it down into little dump cars, and just send it out. It was just old coal mine work, but fortunately I only worked in the coal mine about two weeks.

Marcello: How safe were those mines?

Benton: I don't remember but I know they were pretty deep. We walked in and out of the mine I was working in. That's the reason, I guess, it seemed like it was deeper than it really was.

Marcello: How closely were you being supervised by the Japanese guards in these mines?

Benton: We wasn't being supervised too closely. I think they were afraid to stay in there to be honest with you.

Marcello: Were you still under military guards, or were these civilian guards?

Benton: We was under military guards but . . . this is where I got my other beating--up here. Before we went to the coal mines, they decided they wanted to plant a garden. Well, we was working on a hill . . . planting a garden on a hill. It had about, I guess, a good twenty-five or thirty-degree slope. I was leaning on my shovel there. This Jap come up and hit me across the head with his rifle butt. That's getting back to what we was talking about in there awhile ago. When the war was over . . . this happened about three weeks before the war was over. When the war was over, I went looking for him. If I had found him at that time, one of us would have died.

Marcello: How badly did he work you over?

Benton: Well, he hit me up the side of the head with a rifle butt, which don't feel real too good. He knocked me flat on my back . . . well, flat on my stomach actually because he hit me from . . . I didn't see him. He hit me and knocked me down front way. He walked up behind me. Now I would have killed him at the time. I say that now. I might not have killed him, but one of us would have died because I wouldn't have let him get away, and if he was man enough to kill me, well, it would have been the other way. But I would have killed him, and that was my feelings at that time. If I met the man today, I would shake his hand and think nothing about it. The feeling is still not with me in that respect.

Marcello: What were your quarters like here at Hakodate?

Benton: Well, the quarters were similar to Kiang Wang with the exception we had two stories. We had a double story. We just had one room like this. We didn't have a room on the other side. It was just one room and then a hall in the front. It went on down into just the one room, but we had a two-decker, in other words. It wasn't two-story. We had two decks of bunks. It was just similar to the others. It just had the wooden platform with the mattress on it.

Marcello: What was the climate like at that time of the year?

Benton: Well, this was in July when we first got there. It was warm even though we did wear a coat to work. I was working a night shift. We did wear a coat. It got pretty cool at night. The days was warm. But, see, we was only about fifteen degrees south of the Arctic Circle, so we was pretty far north. They said the snow got on the ground up there ten or fifteen feet deep in the wintertime.

Marcello: Well, of course, later on they held the winter Olympics on that island.

Benton: So you can see what kind of winter they have.

Marcello: I guess that was four years ago, in fact, that they held it there.

Benton: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less, I think, brings us up to the days immediately prior to the end of the war. What I want you to do at this point is to go into as much detail as you can in describing the end of the war and how you . . . let me just go back here a minute and ask you a general question. During this period, in April of 1945--this would be going back somewhat--Franklin Roosevelt died. Did the Japanese inform you about this?

Benton: Yes. Yes, we was informed that Roosevelt died.

Marcello: What was the reaction of the prisoners when they heard this?

Benton: Well, I don't think it affected us like some people might think because we knew that the United States wasn't going to fold because one man died. We had sense enough to know that the United States wasn't going to fold because one man died. We had sense enough to know that we had people who could step in and take his place. So it really didn't . . . outside of sorrow for the man, you hate to hear news like that. You hate to hear of any President dying.

Marcello: On the other hand, were the Japanese jubliant?

Benton: Well, yes, they sort of seemed like they was glad. I think they done it more to think it would lower our morale than anything. I don't . . . not knowing American peoples' minds. But as I say, we knew that just because President Roosevelt died that the United States wasn't going to fold up because we knew that we would continue.

Marcello: Well, describe the actual events leading up to the surrender and your ultimate liberation.

Benton: Well, I can make this pretty short. Of course, after we started work in the coal mines--I was working the night shift--and they come around one day and said there wouldn't be no work that night. Well, we knew something was up. Well, then we seen them all out there gathered around the radio. Well, this was when

Hirohito was announcing to the Japanese people about the bomb and the surrender and everything. Well, the next morning then they told the day shift that there wouldn't be no work. Well, that went on for about two or three days. I don't remember exactly. But, anyway, the next night it was the same thing.

Well, we knew something was up. We didn't know what, but we knew something had happened. Of course, then they told us . . . after Japan surrendered officially, then we had an interpreter. He come in, gathered us all up, and he told us that the war was over. That's when all of our guards disappeared.

Marcello: What were your feelings when you heard that the war was over?

Benton: Well, do you know that in our camp I don't think there was a man that hollered or anything. We had been waiting and praying for it so long that when it finally come we was relieved and happy. But we really didn't show the emotions like hollering and whooping. I guess we relaxed.

After they told us the war was over, then they brought us some food in there, which was still Jap food. But it was a whole lot better. Then that's when the B-29's . . . after the weather had cleared, the B-29's come in there and dropped us all kinds . . . they

scattered food up there. I guess some of it's still up there. It never was found.

Marcello: Where they dropped it in the fifty-five-gallon drums attached to the parachutes.

Benton: Yes. And they come in there . . . they killed several people dropping them drums in there. Unfortunately, they killed a couple of Marines in another camp that was in a group that come up with me. See, they split us up into two groups, and we was in two different camps. In the other camp there was a couple of Marines that got killed.

Marcello: Now at the time they dropped this food, had the guards disappeared?

Benton: The guards had already disappeared.

Marcello: Was anybody running the camp?

Benton: Now we was. We had complete control of it.

Marcello: Were you receiving any instructions from the outside?

Benton: We finally . . . there was a sergeant and another guy who come through there--the first Americans we saw--and he told us that they'd get us out as soon as possible. Well, we stayed up there . . . this was . . . see, we stayed up there nearly a month after the war was over. Of course, we had plenty to eat and plenty of beer to drink. We was living it up. We still wanted to come home, but we had free run of the camp. We was on our

own. We was roaming the country up there, and I was roaming the country still looking for that Jap guard (chuckle). We got out of there and got on a train--finally got transportation.

Then when we was going down to catch the airplane to go on down to Tokyo, well, we run across an interpreter that we'd had up there. He was a mean son-of-a-gun. He was one of the meanest . . . he was even as bad as Ishihara as far as being a . . . well, we stopped and there was a passenger train stopped alongside of us. Here was that interpreter on it. These guys fell out of that train, and they got him. They was going to kill him right there.

It just so happened there was a newspaper reporter aboard. I don't know where he even come from, but I know he was there. And he talked them out of killing him. They would have killed him right there. This reporter said, "Now we'll get his name and everything, and we'll get him later." I don't know whether they did, but anyway they let him go. He had a hard time talking them out of it because they were . . . he had beat the hell out of several of them guys.

So we got on down there, and we got on this plane. We went down to Tokyo, and they wouldn't let us land. They was bringing three hundred a day in there. Well,

we had to turn around, go all the way back up there and land.

Marcello: All the way back to Hakodate?

Benton: Yes. Well, we got up there, and we didn't have enough gasoline then to get back to Tokyo. We didn't have no place to stay. They'd done moved another group in. So there was an American destroyer, American aircraft carrier, and a British destroyer coming down the coast. They radioed them and they pulled into the dock and picked us up. I got on the destroyer and they treated us like kings. Man, I mean, we got everything we wanted. They even made ice cream for us, which was unheard of, nearly, on a destroyer during that time.

Marcello: I assume you got on the American destroyer.

Benton: Yes. I got on the American destroyer. They treated us . . . they give us so much money to buy cigarettes and candy. Of course, we was craving candy and stuff like that. Well, we did gat a little out of the B-29's, but our craving for sweets still hadn't been settled. I think I bought most of mine up in candy. At that time we had all the cigarettes we needed because they dropped them.

They dropped a bunch of shoes and uniforms and stuff. They piled them all up out there. I went out there, and I put one on my right foot and one on my left foot till I found one that felt good. I wore them shoes

all the way home. I never had looked at the size of them. I got to looking at them there one day, and one of them was a 7 1/2 and the other one was 8 1/2. I'd been wearing them about three months (chuckle). But they felt good.

Marcello: Did you rapidly regain the weight that you had lost?

Benton: Yes. By the time the war was over and the time that I got to Tokyo, which was a period of about thirty days, I was back up to 150 pounds, and I've been at that weight ever since. I've never gained or lost any since. I gained twenty-five pounds in about four weeks and that's it.

Marcello: As you look back on your experiences as a prisoner-of-war, what do you see as being the key to your survival?

Benton: Well, I think it's faith more than anything.

Marcello: Faith in what sense of the word?

Benton: Well, faith in the good Lord, faith in our country, and faith in myself. I guess . . . we prayed. I don't deny it. I said a lot of silent prayers during that forty-four months. I'm not ashamed of it. I still do that. Well, I guess that's about the extent of it. I never lost confidence in my country. I never lost confidence in myself. I never lost confidence in my buddies that was with me.

There's one thing I will say for our officers and our enlisted men. The morale stayed pretty high even

though . . . it was pretty high all during the war. I guess it goes back . . . we knew we was going to win. We never give a second thought that we would lose the war. We wanted to come home; we knew we would come home. It was just when--that was the only thing.

Marcello: Did you have any troubles adjusting to civilian life after you got back?

Benton: Well, I really can't answer that. I don't know whether I did or not. I do know when I first got home I was restless. I drank a lot, which I don't do anymore. But when I first got home, I . . . of course, I wasn't married. The first six months I was home, I drank quite a bit. I drank quite a bit, I might say, for a couple of years after I got home. But I seen that wasn't no good. That wasn't going to solve nothing. So I got off that stuff right quick. I didn't want to get hooked on no booze. I guess you might say I had problems.

I think my wife could probably answer this. She has, of course, been quite a help to me. Of course, I've been knowing my wife all my life. We married after I come home. She has been very understanding. She has put up with a lot of stuff that she probably shouldn't have put up with. I have gotten over it. You take the last ten years. I don't guess me and my wife have . . . we go for months and months and never have a cross word

anymore. It was different when we first married--not on her part but on my part. I was high-tempered. I had a chip on my shoulder. I didn't want anybody telling me anything to do. I'd been taking orders so long unwillingly that I just didn't want nobody giving me no more.

Well, I've overcome that. I knew I had a problem. I've still got a problem. I'm awful nervous. I'm still . . . I imagine you notice tonight that I'm pretty nervous. But I'm not this way all the time. What makes me nervous is you was a stranger. It doesn't make me nervous talking about this stuff. Strangers make me nervous. I can't help it. Now if you had been somebody I know, I would have been a whole lot more calmer. But strangers make me nervous, and there's a lot of strangers . . . I can't talk to strangers hardly. It's hard for me to talk to strangers.

Marcello: Well, despite your nervousness, I think we've got us a real good interview, and I really want to thank you for taking the time to talk to me. You've gone into a great deal of detail, and I think it's going to be very, very helpful to future scholars.

Benton: Well, I'm sure you can find . . . I have found . . . if you've got time for this little incident. Another friend of mine . . . he died a little over a year ago. He lived

in Bloomington, Illinois. He was a very good friend of mine. He was a first sergeant. At that time he made a retirement at a higher rank. So me and my wife . . . Beeman called me. We called him "Pop." He said that "Pop" had died. That was one night. Well, he'd lived in Frankfort, Indiana. And so the next morning I was working out at the airport. I told Ruth, I said, "I sure would like to go to the funeral." She said, "Well, why don't you go?" See, his wife and Ruth had been . . . during these reunions, they'd gotten to be very good friends. I said, "Well, if I go I'd rather for you to go with me. I don't want to go by myself." Beeman told me that he was going to go.

So I went on to work that morning, and I called Ruth, and I said, "Call the airlines. See if we can get a flight out." Well, she called. Well, we could get a flight out that night straight through. So then in the meantime, before I called her back, well . . . I told her, I said, "Well, tell them you'll take it." Well, then they'd done filled that flight up. So I called back in a little while, and she said, "We can get a flight out now. We'll have to go through Chicago and come back to Indianapolis." I said, "Well, go ahead and take it. We can get there in time for his funeral." It was the next day.

So we went ahead, but it so happened when we got out to the airport that we got on a flight that went direct to Indianapolis. We didn't have to go through Chicago. We spent the night there and rented a car and went on up to Frankfort the next morning.

Well, after the funeral, which . . . we come back to the house. We had a couple or three hours that we could spend before we had to get back to Indianapolis. They . . . Beeman, which is a very good talker . . . in other words, he majored in journalism. That's his . . . he's in civil service. He's in public relations. He's a speechwriter for generals and things that's in the Defense Department. He's a very good speaker. He had kept a lot of notes. Well, he wanted . . . they wanted us to tell some of the experiences that . . . see, before he died he got to telling his wife that the enemy . . . that she was conspiring with the enemy to get him, and he more or less went out of his mind and was rambling. They always figured that he went through a lot of torture and stuff, which was not true. He was never tortured to my knowing, and I was with him all during the war. Well, they wanted us to tell some of the tales.

Well, most people seemed to want horror tales, which I have none of these. That's the reason I say my

story is only one of starvation and hard work. That's the only horror I have. The hard work is not really a horror. It's just the starvation. I mean, that was my punishment. The cruelest thing that happened to me was malnutrition and starvation. People seem to think that everybody went through them horror tales. I have none to tell. I'm glad I don't.