

INTERVIEW

of

JOHN REAS

USS HOUSTON, CA-30

Mr. Cox: November 17, 2000. I'm William G. Cox representing the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, and I will be doing an oral history today with Mr. John Reas. We are in the Bush Gallery of the national Museum of the Pacific War. Mr. Reas served onboard the USS HOUSTON CA-30. He was on board the ship when it was sunk by the Japanese on March 1, 1942, just off the coast of Java. If you'll tell me a little bit about where you were born and your family and names of your parents, your school children and that sorta thing.

MR. REAS: To start let me get it in my mind.

MR. COX: That's okay.

MR. REAS: Want me to tell where I was born?

MR. COX: Yes, sir.

MR. REAS: And lived on a farm...

MR. COX: Your Mother and Father and your, yes, your words.

MR. REAS: I was born November the 9th, 1917, in New Albany, Indiana. We lived on a farm north of New Albany and my Mother and Father divorced when I was nine months old. My Grandmother and my Aunt who never married we went to live with them until I was about nine years old, eight or nine years old. We later moved, my Father and three brothers, older brothers, as I was the youngest, Frank, the oldest, and two twin brothers.

Frank was born in 1914, twin brothers in 1916, and I was born in 1917, November the 9th. We lived for quite a few years in this old log house that my Great Grandfather built in the 1800's. I don't remember when and we lived there until I was about 15. I went to live with my Mother in Cleveland, Ohio. That was around 1935 or about that time. In 1938 I joined the Navy, October the 4th, 1938. I went through boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island, and after that I went on boot leave for two weeks and then went back. And beings as I had schooling in typing and shorthand they kept me up there to work in the office at the Newport boot camp until January. And at this time they were forming a group to go aboard the HOUSTON, which was President Roosevelt's last trip on the HOUSTON. He took off and went back to Washington. I was in Charleston, South Carolina, we boarded her the following day, went by train from Newport to Charleston, South Carolina. And from there we went through the canal around to Long Beach, California, and in the meantime, before that I was deck hand and they needed a yeoman in the aviation unit. And my records showed I had all this experience in boot camp and they assigned me to that. I was with the aviation unit from then until the last battle, February 28th, I take that back, March 1st and the last battle was Java Sea. And there all of our ships were old and we were fighting the Japanese who had two fleets, modern fleets, and all we had was just about 20 or 30, 28 ships composed of the Asiatic Fleet composed of the Dutch, American, Australian and British. And during the battle of Java Sea, which was a night and day, all that remained of Asiatic Fleet fighting against two modern Japanese fleets, were the PERTH and the HOUSTON. The two ships took out and out of the battle was over to Batavia, Java, to try to refuel and get out of there because the modern Japanese ships, battle ships and so forth, it was clear to them and Dutch reconnaissance was trying to

refuel at Batavia. We got to Batavia to refuel and they had abandoned the refineries to refuel the ships. And we took over and filled the ships, both ships with what we could, and we had about maybe half or two thirds supply in fuel and we took off from there about 8:00 o'clock that night, February 28th, 1942. In trying to get through the Sundra Strait between Java and Sumatra, and behold, when we got up there at 11:00 o'clock that night, we ran into a landing fleet of about 60 troop ships that had come in there and 28 warships of the Japanese which was beyond the other two fleets that I mentioned. And the first thing we saw was a destroyer, Jap's destroyer, and we knew somethin' was going on. Tried to get in and then we couldn't get out in Bantam Bay in Sundra Strait, and they had us surrounded completely. The troop ships had already passed by and landed the troops on Java. The warships, they had us surrounded and quite a few, about two battle wagons, an aircraft carrier, and quite a few destroyers. The PERTH got two torpedoes from the Japs and she lasted about 20 minutes in the battle and she went down. We lasted about another 30 minutes, I believe it was. It was midnight, the 28th of February '42. And they had us completely surrounded and was so close the destroyers were hittin' us, the anti-aircraft was hittin' us, even 50 caliber machine guns, it was that close. And the battle was on the starboard side, which is the right side, and I was on lookout on flight deck in the communications supplying information to the bridge from what I see from that point as were other lookouts in the battle. And luckily for me, I was in a position where there wasn't any firing coming from the port side. And as I said, the battle was on the starboard side between the Japs and our guns. I'm sorry you ought to excuse me because I'm 83 years old and I am trying to remember.

MR. COX: You're doing fine.

MR. REAS: I'm trying to remember. I'm trying to give you the story as I can remember, so you'll have to bear with me on this in order to get the story out of my experience at that time. The first thing we got was an 8-inch shell from the Japanese that went to the engine room, luckily it didn't explode, and we kept on going, firing at this close range. And I was on station doing my part in communications. I don't recall the exact time, it was around a little after 12 when we got the second torpedo and both engine rooms was blasted with the torpedoes, so that left us without any movement. And the ship was taking on water, and it was already filled to the point where it was tilting to the starboard side. A call to abandon ship, and I said that was one time I didn't hear that, and numerous others didn't. And the skipper, they hit the bridge where Captain Rooks hit the bridge and the shrapnel got him. And he didn't make it any farther and Roberts took over, and he announced abandon ship again. So we started abandoning ship. I threw the rafts over, what we had left and wasn't torn up from battle, and I dropped my phones and took out. I was two decks above the main deck and I wasn't getting any firing on my side, as I said, And I had my life jacket on and I got down to the main deck on the fan tail I jumped overboard. When I jumped overboard, I landed right in aviation fuel and fuel oil from the ship. I took water from my latch top down my throat and went down to my stomach and that started burning inside. I kicked off my shoes and started swimming toward a raft. I hear a crew of survivors hollering, "Over here, over here", and it was about 300 yards out. And I managed to swim to get to them before the ship went down because if you don't get away from that one when the ship went down, it would suck you under as it went down. And then that would be it. I got away far enough that it didn't pull me down. I

finally got to the raft and I was so sick. Nobody was inside of the raft except the ones that were wounded bad survived, the rest of us were hanging on to the ropes from the raft swimming with the other end to an island. See an island over in the distance swim in that direction. That was from the time she went down about 12:10 or something like that, I can't remember, and we swam all night long, and in the meantime I had to get in the raft to vomit. I tried to get all that stuff out of my stomach that I swallowed, oil and gasoline. And I stayed in there until I got to feeling better, and I got out and started hanging on the rope on the raft and swimming like the rest trying to get to that island. And, luckily, we didn't make the island because later the Dutch told us, prisoner of war Dutch, it was a good thing you didn't make it because that island was covered with snakes and everything else, poisonous snakes. So, about two hours after midnight, after the Japs had landed the soldiers from these 60 or so transports to take Java, about two hours after midnight, I mean after daylight, they came out to our raft and picked us up. They were nice, as Jap troops, on this landing barge to come pick us up and they took us on board this. There wasn't any flooring in it, you could see the groaters. It formed the bottom of the landing barge. Lo, and behold, I looked down on the groaters and what was imprinted on those groaters "US Steel". _____ just like it did the rest of us. There was about 28 or 30 of us, I don't remember the number now, survivors on this raft. They took us over to Java, this island was out in the distance quite a ways away from Java. They took us over to a little school house and put us there. And I was burning inside. And what they did the first thing the Japanese surrounded it, it was about 6 or 8 of 'em had guns, and they had us sit on our knees upright looking out to the sea. There was quite a few palm trees around, and I was in the second row back where all the survivors are wrapped and started light

rain falling, I was burning inside. You didn't dare move, you didn't dare do anything 'cause you didn't know what you was in for. But I was on the end of this row sitting there and there was a big palm leaf hanging just above my head. And I was burning so bad. With the rain falling, I reached up and twisted my body in the direction of that palm leaf. I tore off gently and moved slowly in case the guard was looking at me seeing what I was doing, there wasn't any confusion or anything at all. I took this palm leaf in one hand and I pulled it down where I could get my other hand on it, I tore off I guess about two foot square or something, and cupped it where I could catch the water from the rain. As I caught about a cup full in the way I had formed this place where I could catch the water in this leaf, I took the front end of it so I could drink it, pour it down my throat. I did this a second time and started feeling better. So I gently laid the palm leaf down not looking at anyone, not looking at the guards or nothing. (_____ could not understand). At that time I twisted my body around my knees having been in the same position as I first was put there, you know, which we were all all in these two rows. And we sat there for several hours just like that and no one had water or anything else. Finally, they let us have a pump to a well there in their (_____ could not understand) let us drink some pump water out of the well. Eventually, they let us go into the school house. Of course, there was nobody there. Dutch had already just passed, had left there before the battles and everything else. They let us sit in our chairs for awhile, no food, no water except what we got there, and the next day they brought in a barge. They put us in this barge and took us out to a ship that carried ammunition and oil drums and all that stuff. I don't what you call it, it's a transport. They put us on deck for a couple of hours and that was in the morning. We stayed on that ship three days. And what they started doing was putting oil

drums over a crane into the water and had us get down under water one on each end of the drums swimming 'em to the beach for three days. Then they took us back to the we stayed on the ship that night, those nights, down in the hole, crummy, dirty, you couldn't hardly breathe, and they, after the third day, they let us shower off with some water and the hose they had. They had us out on deck doing that rinsing ourselves off in salt water and for some reason I was the last one to finish. I knew what I had to do, turn the water off, put the hose back against the gunnel and go downstairs. So as I started toward the ladder to go down into the hole, the captain of the ship, Japanese captain of the ship, I had to pass close by the ladder that came down from the bridge that controlled the ship. He had a cup in each hand. He couldn't speak English, put 'em into motions, he handed me a cup and kept his cup and I took the cup and drank it. It was warm sake. Boy, that felt good. And I went on back down to the rest of the gang and stayed there all night. And next day they took us back to the beach and school house and later they took us to Serang in open bed trucks, army trucks, you know. And at that time it took (____ could not understand)of these trucks to put us in the Javanese which was the natives not to touch, which controlled why touch is a control issue in Netherlands Indies. They came out there and made motions, they were for the Dutch and white people all this time and then the Japs took over coming in. They made motions for the Japs cut their throats, threw their hand across your throat, said "Kill 'em, kill 'em!" Of course, they didn't do that, they were fairly nice to us, took care of us. I mean there wasn't any beatings or anything else of survivors. And at Serang they put us in a movie house that they had already ripped seats out of. In the meantime, before we got there, some survivors from the HOUSTON and survivors from the PERTH, the Australian ship, in there already. And we stayed there

about a week or so I think. First, they gave us once a day a little loaf of bread which would amount to about three inches by four inches which they had the Javanese make. A couple of days later they started giving us about a cup full of rice and it had the god awfulest tasting stuff on it, a syrup of some kind. I found out later it was snail shells, (could not understand)they had poired over the rice. You ate it no matter how bad it tasted. That was once a day. We stood there, I guess, with Japanese up in the balcony with machine guns trained on us. We laid on the concrete. Your buddies next to you had to lay down on the concrete and one next to him has his head up looking for the room involved. You couldn't all do the same thing, you know. One peculiar thing, you've got to decide if you don't want it in there, had built a had 'em dig a slit trench to use toilet, you know, and the porch over it. One night one of the guys had to go out and use it and he slipped off wet ramp, boards they had put over this trench to sit on to eliminate. He slipped on that and fell right down in it on the secretion. The Japs took him down to the river, put him in the river and let him wash off and brought him back and resumed what he was doing, just laying there. And I think we stayed there about a couple of weeks and more and they took us down by truck from Serang to Batavia and put us in the barracks that the bicycle troops, rode bicycles, the troops did, Dutch troops rode bicycles instead of walking or trucks or whatever. Our concrete floors separated by partitions enough for normally two Dutch, it was I guess about four foot wide enough for two Dutch troops to stay in, you know, sleep in or bunks, course they wasn't anything there like that, they was just bare, and barb wire all around each one of those huts. I guess it's about 100 foot long and on each end there was extended part of offices, I imagine for the non-coms. In the meantime, Lance and Harris and Jo Bush and I which was in the aviation unit together, we

got together and that was after a week or so. We saw what these were, so we the Japs didn't bother us. They was there, they issued rice for our cooks to cook and things. We decided we're gonna try to move in with them, and get away from the crowded condition in the barracks. And we crawled through the barb wire and moved into there. We had nothing except what was on our back. Australian POWs was in the next barracks. They gave us quite a bit of their clothing and what they could 'cause when they took them prisoner they had all of their gear. What they had, that's clothing and shoes and stuff of that nature. And one of them gave me a not a raincoat but a mackinaw that slips over your head and down your body in case of rain. One of them gave me one of those and one of gave me a pair of pants another gave me a shirt and no shoes. Later I got a pair shoes someplace, I think it was from the American National Guard, US National Guard, 131st Field Artillery. They was on Java already and I got that pair of shoes from them. And later on, do you want all of it?

MR. COX: Yes sir. Go right ahead. Everything that you feel like you would like to tell me about. It's all important. So just continue. If you want to rest a little bit that's okay also.

MR. REAS: No, I want to go ahead and get it over. The story here, the Dutch officers were separated from all the other troops, enlisted or of course we had our own officers at that time with us. The 131st. Field Artillery, Second Battalion, as well as the survivors' officers, officers' survivors with us. I recall there was about six or eight or ten officers plus the 368 survivors of the HOUSTON which was the survivors out of 1,068 on the ship, 700 went down or was straffed or killed by the Japs or the current was strong and you couldn't swim against that. Current got 'em especially the ones that didn't have a life

jacket and didn't get a life jacket in time before they get off the ship went down so 700 even. We stayed in Batavia there which was called, I can't remember the name of it, or what the Dutch called it. It'll probably come to me as I go along. Bicycle Camp, yes, Bicycle Camp was what it was called that the Dutch troops were in. And, as I said, we were in there and as we, I guess I was it was about the middle of March that the Japs put us down there, middle of March '42. As they had things going everything was all right, guards didn't bother us much at that time but later on in the future, I better not give you that until I reach that point. I'll stay back from Burma. I'll stay back in there. At that time the Japs wanted a detail of each man survivor so John Harrell and I and me set up an office in the extended part to the barracks which put us in non-com quarters supplied the typewriters and the necessary information. Our supplies to make records of all of the survivors, a card for POWs. Nobody else was in the office which was just composed of John Harrell and myself, John Reas. I for some reason or other the man upstairs is the one (____ could not understand) me to. I made a copy 8 1/2 x 14 of all these survivors all I put on that first one. I made a second one later. The first one I put on was the name and stuff and rank of the survivor, course I didn't stay in the office. I was back with the other guys most of the time. John Harrell was doing the office part, and I went back in later on and I noticed that the Japs were, I'll go back first, I missed something. All these records they had us put down, all the details I put whether they were born, raised and all that stuff and what's their occupation was before they joined the service, the Navy (____ could not understand) and we got wind the officers said don't give them too much information. Put down student. You can put down what you want to but I advise you, so I put down "student" on mine which most of them did. Some of 'em put down their true occupation,

like electrician, welder, etc. Of course, we made out on those cards just exactly what they had, what they put down. And as they started separating 'em, pulling out these technicians but not the students. The students, they didn't want anybody that was a student. They pulled 'em out together like the technicians and all that stuff, and most of 'em was sent on to Japan to work in the steel mills up there, coal mines, and what have you. But that was, I think, the first was about in October of '42. And somethin' told me to make a more complete list of the survivors. I did that, and I kept both lists folded in my wallet which I carried all through prison camp there, the prison camp in Burma, Thailand, and I kept records on number two list as the ones that died or wound up dying from beating and what have you, and malnutrition, malaria, all the tropical diseases rampant up there in Burma. We went to Burma by the railroad from Singapore, oh, wait a minute, I'm ahead of myself there. We gotta get from Java to Singapore. They put us on these ships, what do you call a ship that's...

MR. COX: Transport?

MR. REAS: No, it wasn't a transport, it was to carry material from one place to the other.

MR. COX: Barge? Was it like a barge?

MR. REAS: No, no a regular ship, regular transport, not a transport but a...

VICKIE: Cargo ship?

MR. REAS: Yeh, Cargo ship. And they took us there and put us in the British, they didn't have barracks there, they had regular brick barracks, some of 'em two stories high. The British was in control of Singapore and they had 40 I think they had 40,000 or so troops in there all the time before all this war even started before the British had taken

over most of Singapore and all the other country in the Malayan Peninsula. And they took us up there, we stayed there quite some time. Anyway, I spent 58 years ago I'm trying to recall, so a lot of it and I'm 83 years old and I'm trying to pull out what I know took place. And I skipped, did I tell you about the second list?

MR. COX: Yes sir, you did.

MR. REAS: Okay. So I had that all in my wallet, the original of the first list plus the onion skin of the first list, and in the second list, for what reason or another, I made two copies on bond paper. Don't tell me how or don't tell me why but the man I think was responsible, the good Lord. In January of '43, I'm picking up where I started to pick up too quick, they got our group together which Commander Thorpe was the, let me get my mind straightened out here again, I think it was in January of '43, we went to Burma.

Okay, now you're gonna have to bear till I get this together. As I said, right now I don't recall when we went to Singapore, but in January '43 they combined Commander Thorpe from the 131st Second Battalion National Guard and put us with them. We went together. They put us on board troop ships, no, it wasn't troop ships, it was cargo ships at Singapore. They took us, no wait a minute, we went from Singapore to Pynang by train. At Pynang they put us on these cargo ships. They had two ships, one composed of Americans and some British, and they were loaded. "We're going to take you up here to work in Burma" They didn't tell us what they were gonna do or what we would have to do. Well, the second ship composed of Dutch and Javanese, that was native troops, rather natives of Java and of the Netherlands East Indies and the Dutch troops. And they were in the front part of the ship and a hold in the back compartment contained 600 Japanese technicians, not technicians but engineers, to design and everything, everything that had to

be done to build this railroad from Mulmane, Burma, to Rangoon, all across the mountains, the swamps, and the jungles, and all this which we had no knowledge at that time. Well, one day on these ships there was two liberators came over and looked the situation over. The ships were not marked with any nationality, prisoners of war, or anything else. And the next day they came back and started dropping bombs. We were lucky. The first ship we was on they're firing at these, the Japs were firing with their small guns at these liberators which they could not reach, 'cause they were without any anti-aircraft guns which just about 3" diameter shells and one of 'em turned in front of that bridge, he wheeled around and shot through the bridge, almost killed the captain of the ship. The next ship, the second ship, it was loaded, as I said, and in addition to that had a locomotive engine, all the equipment to build a road bed and build the railroad. They was gonna build a railroad from Mulmane to Rangoon. Then they got a direct hit in the after hold where the Japanese engineers were. Of course, they lost a lot of, they lost most of the prisoners of war also when it went down. And our ship picked up all that they could find of the survivors and we went on to Mulmane with survivors and ones we had on our ship and unloaded up there. We stayed there for a few days in a jail which was occupied by Burmese lepers, so, at that time, we didn't know that. We were lucky none of us came out with leprosy. And we started working with pick and shovel starting to make the road bed for the railroad. You started out in groups, they called 'em "coomies", of 20 POWs and a sergeant and a Japanese guard. And our sergeant or an officer, American officer of a "coomie" group they started out assigning you a half cubic meter of dirt either to level a road bed off or to bring dirt in to build it up to make the road bed level. You had a guard over this group, Japanese guard or Korean guard, one or the other, they had the Korean

guards up there with the people to build the railroad. As I said, they first had to do this in group, they had a gunny sack, not a gunny sack but a rice sack, with two bamboo poles sticking to it, one POW on one end and one on the other. They'd carry and another POW filling with dirt carrying the other two, hauling, carrying it over to where they dumped it to either fill up the holes or level out the road bed or make a or they had to dig dirt to level off if it was higher off the road bed, dump it over to the side. This we did for all that time. They had bamboo huts built where we stayed in, they were made about three foot off the ground because of the animals around and snakes or whatever. They split the bamboo poles, separate them so they would lay flat on top of the bamboo poles that were used like we have two by fours. You had nothing to lay on except what little clothing or what have you had accumulated from the other troops, Australian and American in Batavia. We did this all of this time for 15 months to build that all the way through the jungle, the swamps, and all that. You had to clear all that away and start deep going, you know, making the road bed all the way to 105 kilo. We had our camps, we built huts that was just about 100 foot long and built with a platform at each camp. It was work 20, 10 kilometers back, you'd build your huts, what you'd call 'em was apartment, that kilometers, we called 'em kilos. You'd work back from the camp building making the road bed 20 kilos back and 20 kilos forward. You understand?

MR. COX: Yes

MR. REAS: And by the time you got that done, your groups would move and make huts forward about, they'd send a group up ahead where they were going, and make these huts. I told you what, and the roof on it was a cover instead of shingles or anything, was attap, which is reeds that they made into 3-foot length, and they'd be to the length of the folded

reeds and stuff, what they folded over, used that as roofing until, oh, that comes later.

Yeh.

VICKIE: Why don't you take a break, baby?

MR. COX: Let's take a break.

MR. REAS: And I broke it off, I think. See, what I've got, I just went threw sleep study, and the sleep study originated from the fact that my therapist, which I've had about a year and a half, and during the therapy, I would fall asleep while she was giving me, and she told me about this. I would fall asleep during the therapy, I'd start coughin', gurgling, and all that kind of stuff and she wrote this letter I needed a sleep study.

VICKIE: We're gonna get back to this.

MR. REAS: Okay.

VICKIE: Or we'll never get through.

MR. REAS: Well, anyway, I broke down, rolled down, after I took this letter to the doctors and they put me through sleep study. And I took the last deal the other night and I've got to oxygen don't get to my brain, don't get to my body enough, and that's what...

VICKIE: That makes it hard for him to concentrate sometimes.

MR. COX: That's fine because that's really, you know, part of your experiences in the war has, this is a fallout as a part of that plus your accident you had. So I think that's a very important part of what I was gonna ask you sooner or later is in your experiences when you came back home later in life, how has your wartime experiences affected your life? So you're telling me.

MR. REAS: I will send you a copy of her letter. Anyway, so now after going through this deal on the sleep study with this breathing machine, they found I've got to use one for

the rest of my life. Just like my doctor told me, I've got to keep taking this dope to keep from having the pain the rest of my life.

MR. COX: I understand.

VICKIE: Can we get back to the...

MR. REAS: I told you, they gave us a half cubic meter, we had to move dirt one way or the other. Now that went on like in the afternoon, the harder we worked the quicker we got done. But, as they saw what we was doing, in the meantime, there was at 30 kilo there was a spring feeding a pond of some sort. We'd go in that pond, cool off, and go back to camp. But they saw what was happening so they increased our amount of dirt we had to move. First they went to $\frac{3}{4}$'s and finally went to a whole cubic meter and finally went to a meter and a half, cubic meter and a half, which was ten to twelve to sixteen hours a day and bonfire light. You want to put that in there?

MR. COX: See, it's going right now.

MR. REAS: Oh, first our group, we went 20 kilometer and then to 30, that is before they started and beginning kilometers, and we went 80 kilometers. We skipped all that into some other groups was doing from 30 on to 80. Our group went all the way to 80 kilometer through the jungle, you know, to work from there. And then at 80 kilometer, the people the men was having medical problems, weakness, not getting enough food, and all this stuff they still give you that one cup of rice a day, sometimes two, one for breakfast and one for night. Sometimes they'd send some out at noon on the job. And every time you got a scratch from bamboo, it usually developed into tropical ulcers. And those tropical ulcers nothing to treat 'em with, we managed to get salt and warm water and salt heated, dissolve the salt and put it on dip it in a spoon in it, and put it on that sore as it got

worse. I had four. I managed to get a cure. Many others lost limbs and other things because they couldn't treat it. They didn't treat it enough and they wound up with gangrene and they when they got down to that point, as we moved up farther up the line, we had it at 80 and then why we moved to 85 I don't remember. And they would move on to a 100 all this same thing transpired all the way through. The guys kept getting worse, still having to go out, still having to push to work, and at that time I was 100. And at 100 they went to a whole cubic meter of dirt to move whether you went through rock or gravel, and, in this doctor's letter, I won't go into detail because I'm gonna give you a copy of it, okay?

MR. COX: Okay.

MR. REAS: And because it tells everything in there in this letter. It's a three-page letter. At 80 kilo, I was up at what was called a hospital where they had the guys up there that couldn't do anything. This evening around dusk there was three or four of us up there sitting on a log by a little fire heating the water and treating the ulcers on our legs or whatever with the salt water. And here come a Korean guard "ook ook ook", I turned around and looked he was "Hip up", he didn't say get up, but said wait a minute had to use his tongue, we understand what he wanted. He lined us up because we didn't bow to 'em, salute 'em, bow to 'em far enough to satisfy 'em. He lined us up in his row. He went down the front of the line hitting you in the chest with butt of his rifle, and he come around the back and hit you in the back. He got me in the back of the head instead, and I saw fire, almost passed out and staggered forward and I didn't know much for awhile and a couple of days even. When I got back to Dallas after the war, what shows up on the x-ray, residue of a fractured skull. I had nothing from that, it's not even in my discharge, it's

in a VA write up when I applied for VA compensation and nothing was related to that, fractured skull. Because the people that was with me, I didn't know them because they was in the second 131st. Field Artillery. So I had nobody to verify the fact that this happened, so I can't file for, what do you call it?

MR. COX: Compensation?

MR. REAS: Compensation or purple heart. You have to have all these information from a doctor, a pharmacist or somebody who saw it. Or somebody like one of my buddies, he's trying to get his wife, and he passed away about four months ago, and she's trying to get a purple heart for him. But because he called me, I said because of all the beatings he got I didn't know, I wasn't in there. So I couldn't give her anything but she is getting it from the others, some of the others.

MR. COX: Was the railroad we've been discussing, was that the only project the Japanese put you working on during your internment?

MR. REAS: No, we worked in the first at Singapore and at Batavia, they had a work party doing this or that or the other out on what benefited them, the Japanese, gardens or something like that or working on the ships and things of that nature.

MR. COX: While you were interned, were you allowed to do anything that you had been maybe taught in your training in the navy or your duties in the navy?

MR. REAS: Oh, that was just work, nothing in the Navy of that nature. I didn't do anything but yeoman work in the Navy, that's, you know, office work.

MR. COX: The clothing...

VICKIE: Tell him about the shirts and stuff, Daddy. Tell him about the shirts.

MR. COX: Did you do some sewing or some of that to your clothing? How did you repair your clothing? Or were you requested to do any work like that with the Japanese in the way of clothing?

MR. REAS: Well, the thing is when in Friday the 13th I was out on the road on the railroad. That morning I didn't have any shoes, but that morning my buddy who had grown up with Barry Berry he couldn't go. He was one of them that got Red Cross shoes. On the day that they distributed I was down with my legs and stuff. I didn't get any shoes. They had these Japs that kept all these Red Cross drop ins, clothing and shoes and what have you. They'd use that themselves. And when they decided to put out the shoes, I didn't get any. So that morning, I asked him if I could use his shoes that day. He said, "yeh", so I had 'em on. When the truck pulled up out there on the job on the work area on gravel, they hollered at me get in the truck we're going to headquarters down at 73 kilo and type up records, death records for the Red Cross. There, we were assigned red, John Harrell was in the office and I was on the road at that time up there. As I said I only after Batavia I was never in any office which was in the bamboo shacks. Anyway, I got in the truck and I hollered at a ranger, "Get Parrish's shoes, I'm taking 'em off. Take 'em back to 'em." So I was back barefoot like I was before and went on down to headquarters and made arrangements to we had a Korean office worker in charge of us two to make up these records. He was fluent in English, fluent enough that we understood. And he was good to us and treating us and he was, I guess we was there about three weeks doing this. And the plan was that one of us stay there, no mention who remain who, but on the morning we was almost finished with it, in the morning one of us to go back to honored camp. I was in the office by my desk and he was out there talking

to Kanakowi, which was the name of the Korean who was working with us. I walked out there to the steps which is about three feet off of the ground where they was out there talking. What Harrell said to him I don't know, but what he said in fluent English, he saw me talking and he was facing me from the steps outside. He said "No, Reas is going to stay here. You're going to go back to the office at hundred, at the camp, because if he had to go back he would go back on the railroad, you go back you'll be in the office. I think it would be better for me to keep him here." I stayed then until August 13th, '43 until December, no I think it was around January of '44, yeh it was. And at that time, or in the meantime, after I finished the work on the records for the Red Cross, they had a sewing machine, a White sewing machine which we had at home. And I was about 12 years old, when I made there on the farm, we had no, just us four boys and my Dad, and I was the cook, cooking food and everything and taking care of the house. So I cut up an old bed sheet. I made handkerchiefs and hemmed 'em. That's the only experience I had on sewing anything. I told 'em "Yeh I can", the Japs asked me if I could sew. I said "Yeh, I'm experienced on 'em, yeh", so they put me on the machine, sewing machine, and patching their clothes. I did that, I guess, for about a month and a half until I broke all the needles sewing these thick Japanese clothing, the pants. After that I stayed there until they broke up that camp, the headquarters. And I went back to another camp more like a headquarters but it was a more relaxing place. In other words, we didn't have to do any work there, and I don't recall how long I was there, but August 13, 1943, and I want to put this in which I had left out. My buddy four days after we got down there to type these records they gave me a note to pull Otto Harris' records and put him down as deceased

and buried where they got 'em and that's the end of that. And going back to where we were...

MR. COX: You were sewing but you had finished that time and that's the same time you were in the office where you were typing the records.

MR. REAS: Okay, while we were sewing, I didn't know all of this until after I contacted Harris what took place. What took place is that morning they brought two Dutch cooks to take place there which not at this place, but at a main camp rather while the troops prisoners main camp across from headquarters. They brought these two in, one a Dutch interpreter and the other one who couldn't understand English or speak English who was a cook. I couldn't figure out what was going on, but Araia, which was a guard, Araia Korean guard, he said something to the Japs sergeant which was just across from me at about ten feet in front of me to the left side. My back was to the wall in front behind the sewing machine. I was standing there sewing and as I said he talked to the guard, I mean the sergeant, supply sergeant, said something to him. Of course they had it all relayed, they knew what was going on. I didn't. He got this Dutch man, who was the cook, and the Dutch interpreter and that Korean, which was Araia, which could speak broken English and understand English, and he was brutal. He talked to this Dutch interpreter to get him to tell what took place. I didn't know and I didn't know nothing was said to involve what was taking place, why he was there. I knew he was going to get beaten because the Jap sergeant had already taken off his shoulder strap to get ready to start beatin' him. He couldn't get the, the Dutch man couldn't understand and wondered why he couldn't get it over to 'em, the Dutch cook what the situation was. Anyway, they came down to the fact the Jap sergeant drew blood on his back with about four strikes and

no search, you know. And I just couldn't, because the sergeant was gettin' anxious to start beatin' again, and I saw it. Of course, he was about ten feet in front of me in the aisle doing the beating. I couldn't see him getting more beatings. The Jap was over here, the Dutch man was over here. I said, looking straight at the Dutch interpreter, I said, "What they want to know why what he understands that he did something wrong." Of course, I didn't know what he had done wrong, so I said, "They want to know did he understand that he did something wrong." At that the Jap wheeled around with that strap and I thought he was coming after me, and I continued to look at the Dutch interpreter. I didn't, I could see what he was doing out of the corner of my eye. I didn't give in. And that's all I said. And finally he realized what I did, why I said it, because at that time he understood, the Dutch interpreter understood, what I wanted him to get over to 'em because the Korean couldn't get it over to 'em either. They just couldn't get the interpreter, the Dutch interpreter, to understand. But after I said that, he understood. So he got it over to the cook who had done something wrong and he got it over to that and the cook said, "I understand and I apologize.", or words to that effect. At that then, this Jap guard understood and he went back to his desk and sat down (___ didn't understand) about ten feet in front of him on to the side and everything settled down. So it was all over. Everybody in the office was watching me, of course, I didn't know what was gonna wind up, so now that was, as I said, I was doing the sewing at that time when this transpired.

MR. COX: At what time, did you always work on the railroad?

MR. REAS: Yeh, I always worked on the railroad except...

MR. COX: For the breaks that you did the office work...

MR. REAS: The office work was in Batavia. I didn't do any office work there except down there at the Jap headquarters on the Red Cross deaths.

MR. COX: Did you see the railroad completed? Did they ever finish this railroad?

MR. REAS: Oh, yeh, what we were doing, our group and the other groups, too, was making the road bed. There was other groups, prisoners, laying the ties, the cross ties, and putting the rails down, you know, supplying, making it a finished product, in other words up to the bridge on the river Kwai. And we was up there when they broke up the headquarters camp, I went to this other quarter, relaxing camp for the people except for a few that had to go like Harris, Nacon Harris, haul supplies, rice and stuff, to the different camps, to our camp.

MR. COX: You were working on the railroad when the war was over?

MR. REAS: Yeh, no, no, no, I'm going to that now. There, they sent us, there was some Dutch men already down in Thailand to Ratbuery which they was making a landing strip for their fighter planes to land on. When they finished that, oh, in the meantime during that the American planes were coming over bombing everything around. In this camp down there at Ratbuery, we had a couple of thousand or more working on the landing strip which consisted of Americans and some other nationalities, too, Dutch and Australian. And when they was gettin' too close, for some reason, the planes were bombing around there, we didn't know where they was gonna bomb or what they was gonna do 'cause they didn't know, no markings, who was in this camp. Finally, we had to dig trenches behind the barracks to get into when the planes, American planes, come in and jump in those to keep from being hit by shrapnel or whatever hit, but they never did

bomb the camp. We didn't know that they was not going to. One day, course in the meantime, Harris and a few of the guys were working on the building from the camp to headquarters camp where the trucks were and working on the trucks and driving and what have you each day, and come back at night. And he got a Javanese, a native, got back with Harris down there, Nacon Harris, and told him, making motions, and showed him a Marine gun and scabbard and such, and a second time he showed him a picture of a parachute. And Harris didn't know what to do. Harris was bunking next to me in the camp at night and going to headquarters to work (____ didn't understand). He told me about this one day. He said I don't know what to do, whether to go with him, I understand what he is trying to tell me, and they made arrangements to take off and escape. The night before he left, I gave him a copy of the list, the original, as I said I had two of the same thing, put number two list with the names and the recordings of the deaths as you will see on what she has over there. And I explained it to him, he knew I was doing it, and didn't know in what detail it was because nobody had seen it. I gave it to him and explained it to him. He took that and the paratroopers were in the hills, our paratroopers, commander Major Bartlett and some of these paratroopers, and this is what that Javanese, Harris had seen him in camp several times, and he had seen him in camp down there but until that what he did the reason he'd went out in the jungle during the lunch hour when the Japs there weren't any guards around there where they were working on the trucks. He went there where the abandoned banana plantation, he'd get some of the bananas and bring 'em back in and there was another guy there working with him. And he'd eat those. And the next time he went out, there was two natives, island natives, grabbed him. He didn't know what was going to happen, finally, he had a gun. The next

time there was one of 'em had a gun on and he showed it to him and gave it to him hold it as they were not going to be, they were not going to hurt them. And that give him an idea that somethin's goin' on. He told one of the other guys that slept on the other side the situation. And the next day, he went out with him and he says this guy that got it over to 'em that he's friendly. He says "I want you get it over to him to escape" because he was the contact for Major Bartlett. Of course, Harris didn't know that. He knew there was somebody up in the hills but he didn't know what. That was close by our camp, main camp, which was near headquarters camp. And they had made arrangements if he passed this native getting him to escape, got it over to him, that if I come by here, which was planned for the next day, with a saw over my shoulder, we're going to escape. If not, I will pass by and without any thing. So he had this saw on his shoulder and smiling and they went running like hell out of the camp and hid 'em in a big bush because the Japs would come looking. So at that point, by dark, the Japs had settled down, and this guy came back with two other natives and took 'em out to their little village and they got to Major Bartlett's headquarters. And when they got near it, they heard a generator running and the generator was keeping electricity run to him to relay information to India to Calcutta to troops up there, the Army. And he did this and from that list, he got all of the names just like on the list. He radioed out and finally when he went back he got it to Washington. And we don't know who he gave it to, but anyway, that's why they had the records where when the war was over they knew where each American Navy man was that died on the railroad, 79 of 'em. They had the Americans out of there, the bodies, the remains into Calcutta within two weeks, flown to Calcutta, and we had thousands, they built thousands and thousands of cemeteries at (____ didn't understand) and two other

towns, thousands and thousands of people that died and they got them up there. And they're still there what hadn't deteriorated and all that stuff over these 57 to 60 years. And our boys was in Calcutta immediately after the war was over 'cause they located the graves from my list telling them what's the names and cemetery and the grave number of where they were. And that's how they got 'em out of there so quick.

MR. COX: How much longer after the escape with the list until the war was over?

MR. REAS: That was the mid of June of '45.

MR. COX: So it was a very short time.

MR. REAS: Yeh, it was about two and a half months. It was August 14th to 15th when the war ended. When they dropped the atomic bomb.

MR. COX: And how did you particularly find out about it, the time that you found out the war was over?

MR. REAS: We found out the war was over because they dropped, no, they didn't.

MR. COX: Did the Japanese tell you?

MR. REAS: No, the Japanese told one of the guys and from there it was relayed to all of us from this one guy.

MR. COX: And from where you were at the work camps?

MR. REAS: I was at headquarters, not headquarters, I was at S camp where all of us was and working on these landing strips.

MR. COX: Did the Americans come there and get you out?

MR. REAS: Now wait just a second, I want to put this back in there ahead of that.

MR. COX: That's fine.

MR. REAS: The landing strip that was finished, the next day it was finished after the roller had rolled all these rock and dirt we made this landing strip had rolled it down the day before the packet Japanese Zero came in and landed on that. The next day, there was a C-47 came in and see what the situation is was, and the next day three transports came, C-47's and C-46's, from Calcutta, landed, they come in and took all the Americans that was in that camp. And took us to Egypt and we stayed over night there and they come in with four motor jobs and took us right straight to Calcutta, the Army depot, not Army depot, I forget what number it was, American Army in Calcutta. We stayed there for about three weeks and give us shots and everything, outfitted us with Army uniforms, not uniforms just pants and shirts. Anyway, as I said, we left Calcutta and we was gonna go to Miami but there was a big storm in Miami, so they routed us to New York, put us in St. Albans hospital and we stayed there about two or three weeks to get us situated there and organized. They had the Waves was there and they had a get together, what did they call it?

VICKIE: Liberation Party.

MR. REAS: Liberation Party there at St. Albans dance and what have you. There I was introduced to one of the Waves, and her name was Ruby Walker. When we met eye to eye, that's all she wrote. Within an hour, we were engaged, two weeks later we were married.

VICKIE: Nine months and 17 days later.

VOICE: Nine months later...

MR. REAS: No, no it was ten months.

VICKIE: Nine months and 17 days.

MR. COX: Now, we're talking about a lady here, would you like to tell us what this lady's name is and relationship?

MR. REAS: Well, Vickie Elizabeth Reas.

MR. COX: And your wife's name?

MR. REAS; Ruby Venatta Reas.

MR. COX: I think that's a wonderful story. And you're also accompanied here by whom? It's the husband of the lady you just introduced me to.

MR. REAS: Well, he come along later.

MR. COX: Oh, really?

MR. REAS: Anyway...

MR. COX: But you had a wonderful marriage.

MR. REAS: A wonderful marriage, 50 years and four months.

MR. COX: Fifty years and four months.

MR. REAS: I didn't think she'd make it to fifty years, so I said "Please, God, fifty will you?" She suffered like hell and that 40 (_____ could not understand) when she was so bad, 49 years, that's when I asked for 50. He made it 50 years and four months. It was October 11th. We were married up there in a chapel of Hunter College where the Waves were being trained as medical Waves, you know, what do you call it, not nurses but...

MR. COX: But you had not been discharged at that time.

MR. REAS: No, no.

MR. COX: How much longer was it until you were discharged?

MR. REAS: Well, they give us 90 days leave, the whole group of prisoners. Of course, we had to get permission from the commander of the Waves for us to get married, and he couldn't see how he could give us permission to get married when she was making A's and B's in that training. I said, "Well," that commander, come up with his name Vickie. Commander, anyway, that's beside the point I'll give it to you later. The only thing I can really think of I met her, of course I've already given this story, that I met her in Austin on the 39 when the ship went up to Houston as a homecoming, not as a homecoming, but as a reunion and my brother, Norman Reas, was living in Austin. So I'd take a 72-hour leave up in Austin. My brother was going with a lady, at that time they weren't, yeh, they were engaged. He was up there because he was having a lot of trouble and they had to come down there to Austin where her Mother's sister was living to get in that atmosphere. He was having a lot of trouble with his sinus and everything. That's the reason he was there. He introduced me to his girlfriend. The girlfriend introduced me to a lady and it so happened in order for us to get married I had to give him something, we had to give him a reason why. Just meeting her two weeks ago and we wanted to get married. He wouldn't go for that, I knew, we knew. We had to give him something and the story we developed all the time from the time I met her, this lady, we had corresponded all the time up until the war from '39 to '44 and we put Ruby's name in place of this other lady.

MR. COX: My goodness!

VICKIE: I hadn't heard this story.

MR. COX: Now we're finding out the truth, yes.

MR. REAS: Well, you haven't found it all yet.

MR. COX: You haven't been sorry about it all this time, have you?

MR. REAS: No.

MR. COX: This story you told to accomplish this, I think that was a magnificent...

MR. REAS: That's not the main reason. The main reason was he said it was hard for me to figure out how we can do this, to give her a discharge. I said, "Well, she can't stand the sight of blood." I don't remember what word he used, but he used one that you got a discharge.

MR. COX: So you came home then?

MR. REAS: No, after we got married I'll send you a copy of that picture of our wedding reception in the hotel, Waldorf Hotel, of the whole, there was the chaplain, his wife, the commander Sanders, and her lady who was in charge of the Waves at this party plus me, Ruby, her best girlfriend as bridesmaid and O. J. Hosea McManus was a good buddy of mine all these years as best man. That picture.

MR. COX: We would love to copy that picture, and we'll send...

MR. REAS: You don't have to copy it, I've got dozens of 'em.

MR. COX: Okay. You're prepared for all emergencies. That's the way.

MR. REAS: And from then, I come up with a re-occurrence of Malaria which was every month. I had to wait until the Malaria, which was about three days before we could take off. She had to go back to Hunter College where she was living with the Waves. This was in New York and we took off. She in her her uniform and me in mine, Navy uniform. We finally got Navy uniforms while we were still there that three weeks in St. Alban's hospital. We took off and got our train tickets, and there was only one vacancy. That

was in a swing hammock above the bed, so we slept in that what you call a hammock.

It's not a hammock, what was it?

VICKIE: A berth.

MR. REAS: It wasn't a berth. it was a berth classified as a berth but it was made like a hammock, or what do you call that?

MR. COX: Oh,

MR. REAS: The ones we sleep in outside.

MR. COX: I know what you're talking about but I always called 'em a hammock.

MR. REAS: Well, anyway...

MR. COX: Swinger, I mean it's kinda like but it's berth.

MR. REAS: And there we went to Austin, I mean Fort Worth where she was born. She was born in Dallas, and they were living in Fort Worth and had a grocery store. Her two brothers already in the service, one of 'em was on a oil tanker, the other was on the MISSOURI. He went to the MISSOURI went to Tokyo or wherever it was.

MR. COX: Tokyo Bay.

MR. REAS: No, he went into Tokyo to sign the peace treaty.

MR. COX: Yes sir. So when you finally got settled down and what did you find to occupy your time when you got out of the service and...

MR. REAS: Well, I didn't get out of the service.

MR. COX: Oh, you stayed in the service.

MR. REAS: Yeh.

MR. COX: Okay, you made a career.

MR. REAS: Two years. Vickie, we got married November 11, October 11, '45. Come on, wake up! We went to Louisville where my Mother was up there too in the wedding, and with her blessing. And we stayed down there I guess 30 days or more and we came back to Louisville, Kentucky, where her Mother was staying with her sister because, not my Father but not my step-father or anything, but he was overseas in the European theater and that's where we wound up for a few days before we went on to Fort Worth and was there for the time they got authorization for discharge. And we went back to Louisville. And had to drive back to Nashville to go down there and get her discharge. While we were there a re-occurrence of Malaria. They put me in a hospital and the only way they could understand that I had Malaria from these green horn doctors I wasn't drunk I had Malaria. And he came down, he and my Mother to Nashville, and they saw his uniform they settled down right quick. They put me in a private room and understood what I had. After I got out of there we came back, went back to Louisville, no, we come back, no went back to Louisville and had to come back to Tennessee to get her, come back to Nashville to get her discharge. We headed back to Fort Worth and started off. I still had more leave and we had to, in the meantime, I got duty at Naval Air Station in Dallas. I had two years shore duty(____ could not understand), damn guarantee shore duty for two years. Well, they was breaking up the Naval Air Station and as it was, so I switched over, instead I still had mostly two years shore duty and I was there recruiting for Navy. I had made Chief in the meantime, when two years was up and more than that I got Winslow. You know Winslow, he was in command of the distribution of us people. He got distribution for me at Maramar Naval Air Station with a squadron of PBY's that was going to Woodby Island. Well, I'd already had them out there in quonset huts, and I sent

them back. I had to go, my time was up, put me on the run light carrier and my ulcers, which I had had ever since I got out, kept getting worse. They put me in the hospital in San Diego and they kept getting worse. She got down sick and I had to get home. And we had a house in Fort Worth, we bought a house in the meantime there. She, I took 30 days leave and there the chief yeoman and distribution and to give me my vacation time. He said, "Look, now what you do, I'm going to give you all your records (____ didn't understand) it over, that put me in, I turned into Houston VA hospital and turned in there and laid there for six months. Of course, I was traveling back about every other weekend. And they gave me a medical discharge. I managed to get on out of General Dynamics having been a prisoner of war and what I do (____ could not understand), and they assigned me to a job which is a key job in ordering and supplying repair parts for all the machinery in the plant. I did that job 28 years at General Dynamics. In '77 my health got to the point I had to quit, so I had enough time in to draw retirement from General Dynamics. That was in March '77. My wife got sick in '66 from, what was it, Vickie? Bronchial asthma and that was rough and I I was lucky I was able to take care of her. And she finally got a doctor that put her on the app machine, which is a bronchial aspirator every four hours. From then it was touch and go. She passed away February 6th, four years ago.

MR. COX: Let me say this, on behalf of the Nimitz Museum I want to thank you for taking the time to come down and sharing your experiences and I thank you myself as well. Thank you and have a pleasant trip home.

MR. REAS: Can you put it back on?

MR. COX: It's on right now.

MR. REAS: Well, we bought a four grave plot in White Chapel Memorial Gardens in Arlington, why when we was living in Holmes City. Why did we buy it out there?

Because that's where we finally moved to from Flint River in '85, because Vicky was teaching then at the Chapelwood Junior High.

MR. COX: Thank you again.

Transcribed March, 2001, by Eunice Gary