

The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Nimitz Museum)

Center for Pacific War Studies
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Interview with
Eugene T. Wilkinson
USS-Houston
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ORAL INTERVIEW
MR. EUGENE T. WILKINSON
U. S. NAVY
USS HOUSTON

This is Eddie Graham. I am interviewing Eugene T. Wilkinson, U. S. Navy, for the National Museum of the Pacific War. We are in the Hilton Hotel in Houston, Texas. Mr. Wilkinson, where were you born?

MR. WILKINSON: June 23rd, 1922.

MR. GRAHAM: Where were you born?

MR. WILKINSON: Trinidad, Colorado, that's the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains.

MR. GRAHAM: What was the name of your Mom and Dad?

MR. WILKINSON: My Dad was Arthur Logan Wilkinson and my Mother, Nettie Laura Wilkinson.

MR. GRAHAM: And do you have any children?

MR. WILKINSON: Two.

MR. GRAHAM: Two. What were their names?

MR. WILKINSON: Tom and Debs

MR. GRAHAM: Where did you go to school?

MR. WILKINSON: Montrose, Colorado.

MR. GRAHAM: Was it a high school there that you graduated?

MR. WILKINSON: Grade school through second year of high school. I finished my high school after I got back out of the Navy.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you then. Where were you and what were you doing December

7th, 1941?

MR. WILKINSON: I was aboard the USS ARGONNE, an old Navy World War I transport on my way to the Philippines. I was seven days out of Pearl Harbor.

MR. GRAHAM: How did you find out about Pearl Harbor?

MR. WILKINSON: It came across the public announcing system aboard ship that what was happening, the Japs were bombing Pearl Harbor. This was December the 7th, and we were seven days out at sea. We left Pearl Harbor the first of December.

MR. GRAHAM: So you were out approximately a week before it happened. Okay, let's go on back. You've gotten out of high school, how did you end up getting into the United States Navy?

MR. WILKINSON: Well, I needed a job for one thing.

MR. GRAHAM: What year was this?

MR. WILKINSON: It was 1940. Somewhere along the line about that time I heard that Uncle Sam wanted men. The reason I took the Navy because I sure didn't want to walk. I wanted to ride. During the service I wanted something where I wasn't gonna walk. And so I joined the Navy.

MR. GRAHAM: Where did you take your basic training?

MR. WILKINSON: San Diego, California.

MR. GRAHAM: How many weeks was it then?

MR. WILKINSON: I think, I am not real sure, but I think it was eight weeks.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, after your basic training, what happened to you?

MR. WILKINSON: We were allowed to pick a ship or location where we wanted to go, and five of us turned up from Denver that all joined the Navy at the same time. We went together

and asked for USS CHICAGO. It was a heavy cruiser.

MR. GRAHAM: Where was it berthed at that time?

MR. WILKINSON: In Pearl Harbor.

MR. GRAHAM: How did you get over there?

MR. WILKINSON: Some transport. I really don't know what it was.

MR. GRAHAM: Did you have any special training before you boarded the CHICAGO?

MR. WILKINSON: No.

MR. GRAHAM: All right. Tell us what happened when you went aboard the CHICAGO.

MR. WILKINSON: Well, my special interest was photography. How they picked me for F Division, Fire Control, I don't know, but this was what I turned out with Fire Control Division, F Division. My brother, Claude, we joined together--my brother, Claude, and I joined together, and he went into engineering. He was more mechanically minded than I was.

MR. GRAHAM: He wasn't aboard the CHICAGO with you, was he?

MR. WILKINSON: Oh, yes. We were both aboard the CHICAGO. There was four of us.

There was Tim Timmerman, Jack Waite, my brother and myself.

MR. GRAHAM: You weren't all from the same home town, were you?

MR. WILKINSON: No, we were all from Colorado.

MR. GRAHAM: So you're in the photography business. Tell us what happened then?

MR. WILKINSON: Well, actually I didn't get into the photography business. They put me in F Division, fire control. Fire control is control of the firing of the guns. And it was my understanding that in my battle station, oh, this is aboard the CHICAGO, wait a minute. That was I was in the plotting room, about four decks down below the main deck. And our responsibility was to take in information that was coming from the topside from the range

finders and from the lookouts, and transfer it into information for the plotting room so that it could go back to the guns, the range and whatever the enemy was doing at that time.

MR. GRAHAM: And how long did you do that?

MR. WILKINSON: I did that for about a year and a half.

MR. GRAHAM: Did you continue to stay on the CHICAGO at that time?

MR. WILKINSON: No, the CHICAGO was one of the ships that was among the ships that went to Australia on a good will tour in 1940-41, and we spent about three months on this good will tour. And once we got back into Pearl Harbor, I wanted to be transferred because my brother and I, he couldn't have a good liberty with me along and I couldn't have a good liberty with him along.

MR. GRAHAM: Too busy watching each other.

MR. WILKINSON: Yeh, and we didn't like each other to drink, and so to get out of that position, I asked for a transfer. After three or four times I finally got transferred.

MR. GRAHAM: Was this after December 7th?

MR. WILKINSON: No, this was before December 7th. I finally got my transfer and I was to report aboard the transport that was gonna take us to the Philippines. We left Pearl Harbor on the first day of December, 1941, and we were seven days out at sea when the Japs struck Pearl Harbor. From there, the ship turned South and we wound up in the Fiji Islands.

MR. GRAHAM: How did the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor change conditions aboard ship?

MR. WILKINSON: Well, it didn't change conditions much except for the surprise and anxious sailors and people. Mostly it was quite calm although we did practice a few abandon ships and everybody was sure to have on their life jacket. The ship's name was the ARGONNE, an old

World War I Navy transport, the full speed nine knots.

MR. GRAHAM: Was that loaded or unloaded? (Laughter)

MR. WILKINSON: Loaded or unloaded, either way. Anyway, we got to the Fiji Islands and we were there for just a couple of days. And the USS PENSACOLA and an Australian Man of War picked us up at the Fiji Islands and took us into Australia. And from there we went up to Darwin, Australia, where I met the HOUSTON. I had my opportunity to go aboard three different ships, the HOUSTON, stay on the old ARGONNE, or there was a French ship. The Blue Fontaine was the name of the French ship. I could go there or the HOUSTON.

MR. GRAHAM: Was the French ship manned by US sailors?

MR. WILKINSON: Yes. I took the HOUSTON because I felt in my own mind that it could either fight or run, whichever it had to do. That was in December around Christmas time of 1941 when I went aboard the HOUSTON.

MR. GRAHAM: What were your first duties aboard the HOUSTON?

MR. WILKINSON: My first duties aboard the HOUSTON was Forward Rangefinder in F Division Fire Control. And my first duties were the Forward Rangefinder just above the bridge. I was a JV talker giving information back to plotting room, whatever the Rangefinder Operator found on the ranges and whatever was happening on the horizon.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, what action took place from that point forward?

MR. WILKINSON: The first thing we did was convoy duty. Of course, the HOUSTON had come out of Manila and it just narrowly escaped the onslaught of the Philippines and escaped to Darwin, Australia, just a few days before. Our convoy duty was to take American soldiers that had come across Pearl Harbor with me on other ships that was in the convoy that I was in and we were taking them to different places in Asia in the Pacific, like Timor Island, which we

tried to get a convoy to Timor at one particular time. We got about half way there between Darwin and Timor and we had Japanese air strikes. I think it was on the second day that we were out that we had 15 to 25 Japanese planes attack us. And what they were after was the HOUSTON because it was the largest ship and they could see that it was a man-of-war.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you something. How do you spell Timor?

MR. WILKINSON: I don't know.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, that's good. I'm sorry to interrupt you.

MR. WILKINSON: We were in and out of the convoy like an old mother hen and her chicks. This battle lasted for an hour and a half or more and the Japs made several different runs on the convoy and with the actions the Captain put our ship through, the HOUSTON through, kept the Japs away from the convoy and after us. They finally dropped all their bombs and left. And at that time, we were informed that the Japs had already landed on Timor Island and we returned to Darwin. We spent two or three weeks taking convoys in and out and our last convoy that we took out we brought back to Darwin and left Darwin almost immediately and just a few hours after that was when the Japs hit Darwin and destroyed the whole city of Darwin, the whole town of Darwin, and sank almost all the ships if not all of them that was anchored in Darwin harbor. So we managed to escape that one.

MR. GRAHAM: During that first time you said the Japs were after you, did you all get any hits or anything from them?

MR. WILKINSON: Not a hit.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, so you're still clean sailing.

MR. WILKINSON: Clean sailing. The next thing I remember is that we were in and out of harbors on Java, the Island of Java. I remember this particular day we were anchored in the

Surabaja Bay outside of Surabaja in the Java Sea.

MR. GRAHAM: Surabaja.

MR. WILKINSON: Surabaja. In the Java seas we were transferring bread to the smaller ships because they didn't have a bakery aboard ship. And also at the same time we transferred their mail. In the process of this transfer, we had a raid coming in to Surabaja. The Japanese, several squadrons of 15 to 18, 20 planes in a squadron, that was attacking Surabaja, the actual harbor of Surabaja with the City of Surabaja. We thought we were going to get bombed at that time, but they left us alone. They had their mission, they did it and left. Immediately after that we got information that the Japanese were coming down through from Japan through the Makasar Strait into Java Sea with a convoy of transports, cruisers, destroyers, etc., several 50, 60, 80 ships in all.

MR. GRAHAM: Makasar. Did they have a pretty big fleet of ships coming through there?

MR. WILKINSON: They had a large fleet coming through towards Java. We had three Dutch ships, De RUYTER, the JAVA, and the TROMP, I think. And we had the HOUSTON, and we had the Australian ship PERTH. We had the English ship EXETER, and I think there was two other English ships, I'm not for sure. Then we had a squadron of destroyers, the number I don't know off hand, anywhere from 3 to 7 and we had a few submarines. And then we had the MARBLEHEAD. I think a total of 27 ships. Where I come up with that number I don't know. Anyway, we called ourselves the ABAD fleet that was made up of Australian, American, British, and Dutch. The first time that the four nations had fought together and language between ships was very, very poor. We were actually beat before we even started, but we were bound and determined to give it a try. And as the Japanese fleet was approaching, after a couple of days, we finally met them in the Java Sea somewhere. I'm not really sure. But as they

approached, we approached them and formed a battle line and I'm not sure who fired first.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you before you get started. Was the HOUSTON in real good shape? She didn't have any gun turrets knocked out or anything like that, so it was ready for action?

MR. WILKINSON: No, the after-turret was hit sometime in February.

MR. GRAHAM: So you weren't full-fired?

MR. WILKERSON: No, it's gun power was lost by at least one third. That was large guns, eight inch guns that was lost at the after-turret. Anyway, we exchanged salvos in, I think it was in about 16-18,000 yards, and one of the first ships that was hit was the EXETER. It had it's own battle line of about 18,000 yards. We were about 16,000 and we were in a straight battle line instead of the smaller ships being in closer. The battle lasted for a good eight hours and towards the afternoon of the battle, the EXETER was hit and it was pulling out of line and some ships gave it a smokescreen so it could get away. We had hit a couple of Jap light cruisers or heavy cruisers and they had pulled out of line. This was in the late afternoon we run into a submarine or torpedoes from Japanese destroyers and one little Dutch ship, little small corvette that was on our port side and we were doing about 30-32 knots. All at once the Dutch corvette swept across our bow and headed towards our fantail about three hundred yards off to the starboard side and took a torpedo intended for us. Now this is my belief. I think it intentionally took the torpedo to save the HOUSTON.

MR. GRAHAM: Now was this a British ship?

MR. WILKERSON: A Dutch ship.

MR. GRAHAM: That saved the American ship?

MR. WILKERSON: Yes, that's my thoughts. We don't have a lot of thoughts for the Dutch Navy right now but that's my thoughts. That it intentionally gave them the port side about 300 yards ahead of us, swim across our bow about two hundred yards off our starboard bow and took a torpedo that was actually meant for us. And it would have hit us if they hadn't taken it. Everybody was going in different directions. The momentum of the battle was going down and all at once it was dark and we regrouped ourselves. Two Dutch ships, by the way the Admiral Glassford, I think was his name, was in charge of our fleet and that evening he was in the front ship, the forward ship, and then I think it was the RUYTER, the JAVA, the HOUSTON and the PERTH. The four ships that were left after the battle that day. We maneuvered around in the dark for quite some time and finally we came into battle formation where we were to come up to a certain location and come to a pretty well dead stop so that we could take dead aim or something, I don't know exactly what it was, into the Japanese fleet so we could fire directly into the Japanese fleet. Well, as the two Dutch ships in front of us came up to that point, they were blown right out of the water, both of them, one right after the other. We took off to the right and the PERTH right along with us which we almost collided, and we took off and later that evening we got back together and Admiral Glassford had given his last orders for the remaining ships to return to Batavia and refuel.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, the Admiral had told the ships to return to Batavia and refuel?

MR. WILKINSON: Return to Batavia.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, that's B a t a v i a.

MR. WILKINSON: Return to Batavia and refuel and try to get back to Australia. We returned to Batavia and then about midday, the Australian ship PERTH and the HOUSTON, and refueled. The Dutch had capitulated at this time Java and there was nobody around to help

us get the fuel and we had to take the fuel ourselves. And while we were taking fuel, one of our own SOC's who was out scouting...

MR. GRAHAM: What's an SOC?

MR. WILKERSON: It's an observation plane that we had aboard ship. We had four observation planes, SOC's aboard ship, pontoon type. One of our SOC's was coming back from a scouting trip, we opened fire on our own ship, on our own airplane, but no harm was done. And our Captain told the SOC to go back to Australia and the ship would pick it up at a later date. While we were in Batavia taking on oil, we had enough time for some of us to take a shower and clean up which was since the first day I was aboard the HOUSTON that was a real privilege to have time to take a shower. For three months we were under general quarters almost all of the time. Late afternoon, we finished up and was going to go through Sunda Strait back to Australia. That was our plan. There was a small Dutch ship with the PERTH and the HOUSTON. The HOUSTON and the PERTH took off together, the small Dutch wasn't ready so she stayed behind and would come on later. The HOUSTON and the PERTH proceeded to go through Sunda Strait which was the closest route to Australia. About sunset, it was still light, a Japanese destroyer was spotted between us and the coast of Java. It scouted along with us for an hour or so and finally we hit the Sunda Strait and we ran into a landing party of 50 to 80 ships, a total of transports, aircraft carriers, motor torpedo boats, cruisers, light cruisers, just about everything they had.

MR. GRAHAM: Was this Japanese?

MR. WILKINSON: This was Japanese. They were making a landing on Java, and they picked this particular spot to land and we ran right into the middle of it. The Dutch had already that afternoon flown over Sunda Strait and reported that it was clear through there which it couldn't

have been. Anyway, the PERTH opened up, the PERTH was challenged. The Japanese challenged the PERTH. The only thing the PERTH could do was to open fire. By the way, the PERTH was in command of this forward position and it was in command because Captain Waller of the PERTH was commanding over the HOUSTON. And right after the PERTH couldn't answer the challenge because it didn't know. It answered by opening fire, and all hell broke loose from there on out.

MR. GRAHAM: How do you spell PERTH? Is it P U R T H or P E R T H?

MR. WILKINSON: PERTH. They opened up fire and, well there we are right in the middle of the Japanese fleet and the fire is coming from all around us, 360 degrees around us seems like. We was giving them all that we had, and the PERTH was giving all she had, and PERTH lasted about forty-five minutes. She was the first one that went down. And aboard the HOUSTON, I was at my general quarters station, the Forward Range finder, and the first thing that happened that I saw was that the forward focsle, the shells went across the wooden deck and caught it afire. I reported it three different times and each time nobody acknowledged me, and I didn't know what was going on. And then the next thing that happened is a Japanese shell went right through the face plate of number 2 eight-inch gun which right below me, about ten feet below me. It exploded and right underneath me, it was a terrific explosion. Right after that, our Captain, Captain Rooks, gave an abandon ship and within just a few minutes it was recalled, and I understand that between the first and second abandon ship that he was trying to get the ship closer into the shore to help save lives. Between the second and third abandon ship Captain Rooks was killed by an exploding shrapnel. As each abandon ship, I got about half way down from my range finder, and then it was recalled I had to go back to the rangefinder. And on the third one, I got all the way down to the communications deck, and my life raft was

#13 life raft on the starboard side of the forward funnel on the communications deck. That's where I went and when I got there, the life raft was gone, and where it would have to go over, was supposed to go over, was the starboard side. So I went to the starboard side and looked over and I couldn't see it. I went to a ladder that goes down to the catwalk, and looked over the side and saw a life raft #13 overloaded with men. And all at once I looked up and saw a torpedo bouncing across the water headed right for my location and life raft #13. I turned around and went back to the ladder which had been hit by a shell or something by the time I came down it and when I went back, and I couldn't get up it. It was twisted metal and I couldn't get up that ladder. I turned and went back towards the well deck and the torpedo struck. The next moment I picked myself up, how or what happened I don't know. I picked myself up on the inside of one of the pom-poms for a three-inch gun, a four-inch gun, six-inch gun on the communications deck. I wasn't hurt. I picked myself up and started to the port side. As I passed by the radio shack there was a young fellow standing in the hatchway and he was hurt. During this time the public announcing system was telling sailors, the crew, to go aft on the port catapult to the fan tail, and there was a line. I took this young fellow and put him in this line and my abandon station was to be from the port side and life raft #14. And so that's where I went and when I got there, there was a young fellow, Demoen, was standing at a life-line stanchion with his foot pulled up against it, a rope, he must have been standing in a coil of rope, the line, when something was thrown over the side, probably the life raft, and it had pulled his foot up against this stanchion and had trapped him. Between the two of us we got him loose and tied the one end of the rope to the stanchion and threw the other over the side and we climbed down this rope into the water. The ship was dead in the water at this time having completely stopped. And, of course, the best thing to do when you're in the water at that

moment from getting off the ship is to get away from it as far as possible, so when it goes down you don't get caught in the suction. And from here, I swam out around the fantail of the ship and, of course, you could hear people calling out to their mates and confusion of the abandonment of the ship. I never run into anybody else from there. Maybe an hour, hour and half later Ensign Smith, who was a very powerful swimmer. Ens. Smith was a very powerful swimmer comes swimming up alongside me and we had a few words together. I told him who I was and he told me who he was and then he said, "Well, I'm going to swim on" which he did. We were both headed for the same spot and in the meantime I had picked out a spot that was the darkest to me which I thought would be the closest. In the processes between the abandoning ship and hitting shore, the Japanese were patrolling the waters, shooting people in the water. I never saw the ship go down. Others from the HOUSTON crew did see the ship go down. Then the following morning, the sun was just almost up, I came to land and found Ens. Smith and several other crewmen off the HOUSTON on this small island. Ens. Smith decided that we'd better not swim in the day time. We found that we were on a small island just off the coast of Java, we thought it was the mainland of Java that we were on but it wasn't. We still had a mile or so or two miles, maybe a half mile, I don't know, from this island to that mainland to swim. Ens. Smith said that we would wait until that evening and then we would proceed on to the mainland. And a little later on that morning, a rain squall came up and it got very dark and Ens. Smith said, "Well, it looks like this is going to be as good a time as any." So we all jumped in that morning and started for the mainland. The only clothes I had on was a khaki shirt. I was completely nude other than that. I got half way across when I decided that this shirt was interfering with my swimming and I couldn't tread water enough to get it off, so I swam back to the island, took the khaki shirt off and tied it around my waist. Then I turned

around and swam the distance over to the mainland. When I got there, of course, the rest of them had already left and I didn't know which direction they went, whether they went left or right, North or South. At that moment, I saw a group of natives sitting up underneath some trees around a little campfire. So I went up and talked to them with hand signals and pidgin English, and finally decided that they said that the men that just came ashore went to the South which would be to my right. So I went back to a little road, track, trail, and continued on this trail for another thirty minutes or so and I could see the other fellows over to my right.

MR. GRAHAM: Did you have any shoes at that time?

MR. WILKINSON: No shoes. When I approached them they were in a little village, I guess you could call it, there was a couple of little shacks there and they were inviting the local little natives to climb the coconut trees to get us coconuts to drink the water and the fruit from the coconuts. By the time I reached there, within the next thirty minutes or so, somebody hollered Japanese, and I turned towards the track and I could see the Japanese flag floating above the sugar cane between us and the trail. So everybody turned towards the ocean and started running. I wound up in a bamboo grove. Most of us was in this bamboo grove and we pretty well hid ourselves because the bamboo was very thick and heavy. During this time, there was a monkey or gorilla or something up in the trees. We heard him coming and by the time he got to where we were, he was right above us sitting up there making a lot of noise and looking down at us. We thought sure that he was going to alert the Japanese to where we were, but we could hear the Japanese all the way around us, and as their voices faded out, we could tell they were going away from us. So we stayed there until that evening, and then we went up into the mountains. The mountains are razor-back mountains there, steep and sharp to the point. And from standing on the ridge, you could look from one side to the other down into the valley from

either side. We traveled at night and tried to hide ourselves during the daytime. On the fourth day, we were going along one of the little trails. We met a native and convinced him to go back and get us some food and water. And he did go back and he did show up an hour or so later with a whole tribe of his village, a lot of his people. They enticed us to walk into their village where we were fed with rice and fish heads. They took us to the main little house of the village which must have been the mayor or the spokesman for the village and this is where they gave us fish heads and rice. We had been sitting there for maybe forty-five minutes or an hour and then Ens. Smith decided that we should go on, but the natives wouldn't allow us to leave. We tried to leave several different times and they didn't want us to leave. So we decided, well, either we're going to stay, or we're going. So Ens. Smith said we're going, so away we went. We walked down through the middle of town. Outside the little town, and off to our left around a projecting little hill, we could see a squadron of Japanese soldiers coming up that side. So we all ran in different directions and I ran to the mountainside, and I ran for probably 20 - 30 minutes and then I was exhausted. So I hid under some bushes. And I could have been there maybe 15 or 20 minutes when a young Japanese officer came up over the ridge of this mountain and hollered for me to stand up. So I stood up and put my hands up. Red Huffman was right behind me and did the same thing and they took us. In his hand he had this little 38-caliber pistol which the barrel of it looked like it was an eight inch barrel. Anyway, they took us back down to the bottom of the hill, and they tied us together by a small string about 1/8th of an inch diameter and tied it just above the knuckles of our thumbs from one to another. And everybody was tied from thumb to thumb on the left side and, believe it or not, you couldn't get that string off of that knuckle. It was some kind of a knot. I don't know what it was.

From there, we went back to where the Japanese had encamped. It was in the evening, and we were put into a small closet-like affair which wasn't enough to breathe in, let alone eight of us. By the way, there was eight of us on the small island who had come this far together. And they put us in there not even enough room to sit down, hardly enough room for two people let alone eight. The following morning they gave us some hardtack, and they took us out to some large boxes about 4 feet by 4 feet by 6 or 8 feet long. And they were strapped with a rice rope of some kind and through the rice rope was two bamboo poles on each side of the box. And there was one guy on each corner of this box with a bamboo across the shoulder, and you'd walk down the road with this box between you. We did that for two days and we finally came to another outpost, Japanese outpost. And they put us aboard a truck and took us to a small town. From this they took us into stores there built on a lean-to affair, and most of the front was completely open. They took us inside one of these lean-tos and sat us down across the back wall of this little store which had been vacated some time ago. Then they took us by truck that afternoon from this little town to a small town called Serang.. But they put us in a theater. They put us with several hundred other people who had been there from the PERTH as well as from the HOUSTON. We were there for several weeks. The conditions were very,very poor. The food, to start out with, was a ball of rice about as large as a baseball once a day of dirty looking rice. And then after that it was a small loaf of bread about two inches by two inches by three inches long once a day, and then you had to boil your drinking water. We boiled it in five-gallon tin cans and as the guys, whoever was passing the water around, would pass it around and you would drink out of it. Like a Carnation milk can, one of the small ones, and you would get one of those small cans of water at least once a day, sometimes twice.

Our latrine was just outside this theater room which was a hole in the ground about 8 feet by 8 feet square and about 8 feet deep. And, of course, it didn't take long to fill it up, especially after a rain. One fellow fell in, an Australian I think he was. Anyway they took him down to a creek just a block or so away from the theater and let him clean up. Most of the guys were so ill with dysentery or malaria that they were unable to balance themselves on these logs that was across the latrine. And then we lost one young fellow there, a Marine, whose name was Hall. He died a pitiful death. He had Tetanus and there was several days that he went through misery before he died.

And from this theater, after a few weeks, they took us to Batavia, which we called the "Bicycle Camp" because it was Dutch-Japanese army and they used bicycles to get around on, so we called it "Bicycle Camp". This was a pretty good camp, the food was pretty good. The conditions of the barracks and so on and so forth were pretty good. And this camp was where we met the 131st. Field Artillery. They came marching in through the front gates one day and we thought, "Boy, we're liberated." But they were the 131st. Field Artillery that had been captured over in the vicinity of Surabaya, Batavia, and they just gave up. There wasn't anything else for them to do. Anyway, they came marching into camp there and they had all their clothes with them and quite a bit of money with them and medicines, etc. They certainly were a welcome sight.

I was there three or four months and they finally shipped us out on what they called the "Hellhole Boat", a ten-thousand ton cargo ship that was old and rusted and never been cleaned. They would stow us in these holds in the bottom of the ship worse than animals, and they took

us from Surabaya, Batavia, to Singapore to, I can't remember the name of the bridge. There was the base that the English had been there for years in the same place, and, of course, the English had already surrendered to the Japanese. I was there in Singapore again, Chaney Village was the name of the base. From there we were taken by train up to Malaya to a small town of Malang, I think was the name of the little town. And there we went aboard ship, another one of these hell ships, to Momaine, Burma. The trip was a week or so long and about two days out from Momaine, Burma, the Allied planes spotted these ships and bombed us good and proper. They sunk three of the ships. One of the ships that was sunk was loaded with Javanese, Dutch prisoners of war, and white Dutch and also one of Japanese soldiers.

MR. GRAHAM: Were there many casualties of the prisoners?

MR. WILKINSON: Aboard our ship there was a few casualties, but on the other ships that were sunk, there was extensive casualties. The Japanese we saw jumping off the ship with a full pack and a rifle over his shoulder and just go under and never come up. I was up on the main deck when this occurred, and I was hiding behind the extension of a manhole, the hole that was covered, that's where we were let down into the holds of the ship. I accidentally just happened to be topside going to the latrine or something at that time when the attack came from the planes. There was a young man next to me, I think his name was Yarbrough, Jack Yarbrough, got hit by shrapnel and no doubt there was others that were hit by shrapnel, but I don't remember who it was.

MR. GRAHAM: Was the ship sinking at this time?

MR. WILKINSON: No, our ship was in bad shape, it was a near miss. The bombs had landed close to it and it injured the ship pretty bad. It limped on into Momaine. It's a miracle that it didn't sink. Okay, we are in Momaine, and they put us into an old convict prison camp that

was maintained by the British for convicts. And what the Japanese had done with the convicts I don't know, but we took their jail. It was full of lice and dirty and we were there for a week or so. And then we took off for our first station on the Burma railroad. That's why we were in Burma was to build a railroad between Momaine and Bangkok, Thailand. This first trip that we had from Momaine to the first camp on the railroad that I was on, which I cannot remember, was in the dry season and this was all desert land. And the group that we were going with was about five or six thousand men. That many men marching down through the middle of this desert, by the time four or five hundred men trampled over this desert land, it became powder, just like face powder. And as your feet hit why it would plume up in the air just like powder. Anyway, we finally got to our first camp. I think it was camp kilo 28 camp, I'm not sure. That was the start on the railroad for me. I went from there to 80 kilo camp, 85 kilo camp, 100 kilo camp, 105 kilo camp, back to 80 kilo camp and then I think it was back to 85.

MR. GRAHAM: That was building the railroad?

MR. WILKINSON: That was building the railroad. And 85 kilo camp was toward the end of the building the railroad. Building the railroad should have been five years to built it or more. The Japanese engineers said it would take that long. The Japanese command says you'll do it in two years, and then they said we'll do it in a year. And it was finally done in 15 months. From the time that we got there until the time it was finished was approximately 15 to 16 months that it took to build the railroad from Momaine to Bangkok.

Some of the injuries building the railroad were busting rock for the balance of the railroad and getting small cuts on your shins or hands or your body. You would get tropical ulcers that would grow from a pin point to a quarter size in twenty-four hours. It would just eat the flesh

right up. I had a friend, Frank Ward, who had them on his shins from small scratches he got from busting the big rocks into small rocks. He finally had both legs just eaten up by these ulcers, and he finally died a couple of months before the end of building the railroad. I was in camp 85 when this happened.

I was transferred from 100 kilo camp back to 80 kilo camp to pile rails onto box cars to move it up the line. While in this camp, when I went into it I weighed maybe 80 to 90 pounds. And we found a bunch of sweet potatoes that the Japanese had stored in this camp, and we would steal these sweet potatoes as we went back to our barracks at night. And in roasting the sweet potatoes each night for a few weeks, we looked like Irish potatoes with toothpicks stuck in them for arms and legs. We had gained that much weight by just eating one sweet potato each night.

Finally the railroad was done and they took us and brought us back into Tamapasai. We camped along the river Kwai a few miles from Bangkok Island. And we were there for a few weeks and then we were transferred to Saigon, French Indo China. There we worked on the airports, pillboxes, oil tanks, covering up these large oil tanks with earth, just all kinds of hard back-breaking labor. Although, this turned out to be Saigon, one of the best camps we had during the whole POW affair. We would load ships from on the docks, different work parties all over Saigon, airport, just all over. Then one day we had several air raids and the air raids got real heavy. This last air raid they had over in Saigon was coming in from aircraft carriers, they were dive bombers and fighters. Our camp was just across the street from the docks, so we were right in the middle of it. Our air raid protection facilities were out in the rice paddies in back of

camp. We could see these dive bombers diving on the different ships in the river. Well, anyway, one day we went out to the docks to work. And the Japanese guards told us that the war was over, and that there was no work that day. We went back to camp thinking that we're going to be free soon. and they moved us from this camp that we are in now to make impressions on the Allies or whoever was going to take over. And they moved us into some barracks that belonged to the French soldiers that were pretty good barracks, had nice kitchens, and no beds or anything like that. You slept on the concrete, but the buildings were clean and halfway useable. The latrines and everything were very good and we were there just a few days and a few weeks until we were put aboard C47's and flown into Calcutta, India.

MR. GRAHAM: So the Americans did come in and rescue you?

MR. WILKINSON: Yes, and we were there in an Air Force hospital for a few weeks. And from there they flew us back into Washington, D.C. and from there home. I got home in November of 1945, could have been November, the first part of December, but anyway I was home for Christmas of that year.

MR. GRAHAM: How much did you weight when you got home?

MR. WILKINSON: Oh, gosh, I don't know what I did weigh when I got home. When I got out of the jungle off the Burma railroad, I weighed about anywhere from 80 to 85 pounds.

MR. GRAHAM: What was your normal weight?

MR. WILKINSON: One hundred and sixty-five pounds.

MR. GRAHAM: About half as much weight.

MR. WILKINSON: Yeh. And most all POW's were in the same condition, a lot of them were in worse condition. I was one of the lucky ones. I had a little bit of dysentery and I had a lot of malaria and had a small ulcer right in here (pointed to wrist) which I cured. You could look in

this ulcer which was twice as big as a silver dollar. You could look down into it which was probably three quarters of an inch deep, and you could see the ligaments working back and forth as you wiggled your fingers, you know. And I would treat that ulcer with tobacco ashes or ashes out of a wood fire. I'd put the ashes down in there and then cover with banana leaves and wrap it with banana leaves. And how I actually cured it in the Jungle, I ran across somebody who gave me one sulfa pill. I took the sulfa pill and cut it into about 16 parts. And about every other day I'd take a very small amount of the sulfa and put it into the wound, and pretty soon you could see that the flesh of this ulcer was growing back. Little beads, like little mushrooms, was growing up in that wound. And it wasn't more than a month or so until I had actually cleared that tropical ulcer up with this one little tablet of sulfa. It was a miracle. That was in the jungle, of course. When I got out of the jungle, the ulcer I had was completely cleared up.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you, of all of your experiences from the time the war began until you were released, is there any particular incident or thing that happened that you still think about more than anything else?

MR. WILKINSON: Yeh, in 1943, we were working on the railroad in Burma, and I had a dream one night. And I had a dream that I saw, the first time I ever dreamed in color, and I actually saw the destruction of my brother aboard the CHICAGO. And in this dream, I knew that he had been killed and, of course, it was not really confirmed until I got back home. But he was killed aboard the CHICAGO on February 23, 1943. He was in the engine room, aft ward engine room number 2, I think, and I actually saw the instant when he was killed. I think that is what it was.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask one other question. Of all the different people you had contact with during this time, is there any particular one or two or three people that stand out in your mind for some reason?

MR. WILKINSON: Of the POW's?

MR. WILKINSON: Yes, of the whole experience?

MR. WILKINSON: That stands out in my mind? Well, Sgt. Lusk is one. He was a Marine Sgt. who when I got ashore from my first day ashore after coming from off the ship, Sgt. Lusk gave me a tee shirt. I was completely nude and naked, and what I had left before I got ashore was a khaki shirt which I lost. And he gave me his tee shirt. And another thing, he was the first man to die on the Burma railroad. What happened, he just literally gave up, and when you do that, you are gone. And another one is Frank Ward. He was a friend that I'd met aboard the HOUSTON that had tropical ulcers on both legs from the arches of his foot clear up to above the knee, one big massive open sore. The doctors could only help him by scraping out the dead flesh. And we tried, what do you call them varmints that come from flies?

MR. GRAHAM: Maggots?

MR. WILKINSON: Maggots. We even tried maggots but there was no medicines of any kind that you could use for any wound or tropical ulcer. You just had to do everything yourself. The doctors couldn't help you. They did cut off a lot of limbs, but most of the people that the limbs were cut off died from the shock. And there are quite a few that didn't. When Frank was well, we made an agreement with each other. He lives in Cedaredge, Colorado, and I in Montrose, Colorado, so we made an agreement with each other that if he got back he would go to my folks. If I got back, I'd go to his folks and tell them about it. And, any other questions?

MR. GRAHAM; Well, no. This is your story, and is there any one thing that you want to close

with or think you've pretty well covered it?

MR. WILKINSON: I think it's about all I can think of right now. There's no doubt a lot I've left unsaid but that's about it.

MR. GRAHAM: Well, on behalf of the National Museum of the Pacific War, I certainly want to thank you for this. This is a very interesting story, and I'm sure there will be people that will want to read it and read it over again. Thank you very much.

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