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Interview of
Abel Ortega
Pacific War Theatre
Prisoner of war in the Philippine Islands

Interview of Mr. Abel Ortega

Martha Lane Good Morning Mr. Ortega.

Abel Ortega Good Morning madam.

Martha Lane Today is the 15th of July, 2002. And first I would like to ask you where you were born?

Abel Ortega I was born in El Paso, Texas.

Martha Lane And what year was this?

Abel Ortega It was August 22nd, 1919.

Martha Lane Where did you go to school?

Abel Ortega Well, after birth my family moved to Austin, Texas and I had my schooling the in Austin public schools.

Martha Lane When and where did you enter the military? What part of the military did you join and what year?

Abel Ortega Well, I was drafted in March of '41. And I did my basic training in Ft. Knox, Kentucky, and from there I took advanced training in Camp [REDACTED] Louisiana. I was there when they were having maneuvers, an organization the 192nd tank were on maneuvers. They were from Gainesville, Wisconsin. They received orders to go to the Philippine Islands. When I was young I always envisioned the Pacific, the Japanese, the Chinese and I loved the Orient even in these difficult times, so when they asked for volunteers to be sent overseas...all the older men in the tank company were sent home. They wanted the younger ones to go. So I volunteered to go into the unit from Gainesville, Wisconsin who knew very little about Mexican-Americans.

Martha Lane Where were you stationed?

Abel Ortega We landed on Thanksgiving Day 1941 at Manila. While we were at sea our ship sighted a fleet of ships, so they went into investigate these ships while we were in the middle of the Pacific. We assumed that these ships were the ships that were heading for Pearl Harbor but we continued in our voyage. Since I was just a private I didn't have any knowledge of what conspired out at sea or any of that.

Martha Lane Where were you on December the 8th?

Abel Ortega We landed Thanksgiving Day at Manila and then we went to Ft. Stassenberg and we had not had our buildings built yet, they were in the process. We landed there on Clark Air Force Base in the Philippine Islands.

Martha Lane And what was your job?

Abel Ortega At the beginning the Captain of our company took a liking to me because I was the only Mexican-American among all the soldiers of Anglo descent. And he was curious about chili, I don't know why but he wanted to know. I told him I didn't even eat chili, I didn't even like it. That was all the information he had about the Mexican-Americans, they loved chili. I never liked it, I still don't.

I was a half-track driver. I drove the command half-track, in other words when we were not in action I drove the captain. He selected me. I had a religious background, my parents were Christians, my dad was a preacher it was his work, so I was knowledgeable of scriptures and the Bible. I was always in prayer because that was the way I was brought up and so I used, I assumed that it was the favor of God that put me chauffeuring the captain of the company.

Martha Lane Did you take part in any of the action of the surrender in Manila?

Abel Ortega Oh, yes! Our tanks met the Japanese at the Lingayen Gulf where they landed and we fought a retreat battle all the way from Lingayen Gulf all the way to the Bataan Peninsula. So we engaged the enemy as protection of the infantry as they pulled back. As it pulled back we held the enemy back until they pulled back and then we came back with the retreat battle.

Martha Lane It was a rough job. What were the living conditions like?

Abel Ortega Among our unit...we were only engaged in our own company, in our limitation. We had food. The tank company travels with the trucks that have all the...we don't have a can. We have a truck that supplies all of our breakfasts, and all our needs. They travel with us.

Martha Lane You had plenty of medical supplies, etc?

Abel Ortega Well, we had medical supplies while we were in action in the retreat but once we got into our fixed position in the Bataan Peninsula that's when everything ran out. We could not be supplied with any medicines or any food from the outside that is from the United States because Pearl Harbor was bombed. Their ships could not supply any of our needs. So we ate all the snakes, all the water buffaloes and we ate all the cows to sustain us.

Martha Lane What was the overall conclusion of the retreat in general?

Abel Ortega In our case we destroyed all of our equipment when we were ordered to surrender. Our officers ordered us to destroy all of our equipment so we had the opportunity to destroy all of our equipment before we encountered the Japanese.

Martha Lane How did you hear about the surrender?

Abel Ortega We were called by our captain and he told us that we were going to surrender, that the officers were going to surrender to the Japanese. That's the way we heard.

Martha Lane How did you feel about that?

Abel Ortega I was very sad about his announcement. What I did, I never missed church services so I knew all about the Bible, all about faith, all about Christianity so what I did, I went to my half track and got down on my knees and told the Lord that I didn't want to die and told him that I was too young to die, but if he would prolong my life and let me live I would

use it to help my fellow soldiers in whatever lies ahead for us. And then I had a big cry there myself. I cried and after I finished crying I got up and I was ready to resolve to faith whatever was going to come about.

Martha Lane Do you remember what happened the days after you and all your comrades surrendered?

Abel Ortega Well, some decided not to surrender. We were in the jungle and it was very easy to escape and go in. But I had made a commitment in my prayers to God that I would help my fellowman in whatever lied ahead, so I escaped for one day but decided to come back, because it was a commitment I had made to God. So I came back in order to face whatever we had to face, So we finally met our Japanese...and it was a horrible incident. We didn't realize that the enemy could be so ferocious, so mean, so unlovable, so un... they didn't know... they had a different religion. They worshiped the sun. So in the evenings they would bow down to the sun. Actually they had no mercy in their vocabulary, so they rendered whatever they desired upon us, any kind of atrocity. We had to put up with it. As a Christian I had to take all of that too. There was no divine intervention other than Him keeping His word to me. "I'll be with you always even until the end of the verb", that's what scripture says. So, he would be with me. I would have to suffer but he would be with me.

Martha Lane When you were walking, would you like to describe what happened? Where there any special incidents or events that took place that you would like to share with us?

Abel Ortega There were so many very atrocious things that happened in the prison camps during my incarceration. Being hung up, being bayoneted while you were strung up. In one instance I was doing a march, I was incarcerated in a camp overnight and there was a Filipino that started a little fire right next to me. He wanted to cook some rice, he was hungry. So, he lit a little fire. A Japanese guard saw him and he came over and he took his rifle, the Filipino was bent over, and the Japanese stuck his rifle through his back all the way through and then he pulled it out and had a grin on his face, as if it were something to be laughing about. He wiped it off.

In many instances the officers were older men and they couldn't keep up with the younger soldiers. Often the march had to stop and they would fall down the side of the

road the Japanese would try to make them get up and if he wouldn't, he would make the American soldiers beat this man to make him get up, and he would force you with his bayonet. He tried to make his own men to club him. If he didn't get up he would be shot there. They were all shot there. If they didn't get shot and the Japanese had a sword he would cut his head off. It was atrocious and that was happening all over in the marches. If some of the Filipinos tried to help some of the soldiers the Japanese caught them they would cut their fingers off. Things like that, it was awful, especially for someone who always went to church and had the love of God in his heart and to see such things like. It stirred me up quite a bit to realize that there was very much evil in the world.

Martha Lane Do you know where you marched to and from?

Abel Ortega Yes ma'am I did. Marivellis all the way to San Fernando.

Martha Lane How much time after the surrender lapsed before you started the march?

Abel Ortega Well it was just...the surrender was on the ninth. I would I say a few days later we went to Marivellis. We got into a two and half ton truck and we drove to Marivellis because it was the place where we were all to congregate, all the prisoners. All those that had surrendered at **Pongi Gate**.

Martha Lane Can you describe how the march went? Were the prisoners three or four abreast? How large was the line, was it single file?

Abel Ortega Well, there are a lot of estimates from I personally saw in my own mind there were more or less 100 groups there might have been more, four abreast and they had to march. There were different estimates of how far, 70, 80, some say 90 miles. Depending on where you started marching.

Martha Lane When you all met for the march were you provided food, water?

Abel Ortega No. There was no food I never saw any food or any water...

Martha Lane How many days did you march?

Abel Ortega It was a seven day march. Nothing was provided.

Martha Lane Did you have any kind of communication with the Japanese?

Abel Ortega No, not in the march. There were several times during my interment in captivity that we met sometimes, we met soldiers, Japanese soldiers that were in Brazil, and they were called back to Japan to fight in the war. And at least I could speak Spanish to them and I could understand them and they were more accessible to speak with and find out why some of the guards were so mean to us.

Martha Lane Did you witness any acts of sacrifice by the prisoners?

Abel Ortega There were so many prisoners, so many things happening. Sacrifice, well. There were sacrifices, if you had a friend or someone you more or less buddied up with, it was more or less soldiers grouping themselves either by one or two and they stayed together, steal together, sacrificed together.

Martha Lane Who did you steal from?

Abel Ortega Well we stole whatever we had the opportunity wherever we worked. Any place to live, to supply food. We had to take food, but it wasn't because we were thieves. Once the war was over we didn't do that any more. It was just a survival technique that we used to keep alive.

Martha Lane Did the native Filipinos helped?

Abel Ortega Oh yeas, oh yes. God bless them many Filipinos risked their lives because as we were marching they would throw food at us and sometimes the Japanese would catch them and they would cut their fingers off or somehow or another injured them for doing that, it was not permitted. Some that disregarded Japanese orders were tied to haystacks and they were brutally beaten. Many times they were bayoneted.

Malaria and all the diseases were rampant, because we lived in the Tropics. All the mosquitoes and all the wild animals... malaria, yellow dunbait, all of those tropical diseases that little by little would take over our bodies unfortunately. I was very well adapted by my prayers, and I made it very well.

Martha Lane Can you describe the route of your march?

Abel Ortega All I know it was from Marivellis to San Fernando. That was the march and then from there we rode the train. A train that was packed by the slaves of war. I don't know how to call them, the American prisoners of war. Especially if they were in Japanese captivity, they were slaves. We were never treated as prisoners we were treated as slaves. And these boxcars were so tightly filled that when we arrived at our destination many just died. You couldn't breathe in there.

Martha Lane When you arrived at your destination did the Japanese had barracks for you?

Abel Ortega No, I slept on the ground. There were so many of us, this camp was the first camp went to...when they surrendered, the camp just a group of shacks. Of course everybody got into the shack it kept you from the sun. But there were so many of us we had to lie down on the ground there was no other place. And we had no...one little water faucet for thousands of us. So we had to line up and wait to get the water.

Martha Lane Did you have work detail?

Abel Ortega Well yes, after a while they came and they got some of the men to do work in different parts of the Philippine Islands. I really got into some of the detail...the bridge building detail, rebuilding some of the bridges that were blown out during the war. And the Japanese had prisoners help them rebuild some of the bridges but only the healthy prisoners were allowed to go. The others were so sick, they just couldn't.

Martha Lane The one that were unable to go, did they get medical care?

Abel Ortega We had doctors but we had no medical supplies. They did the best they could with what they had. If there was any medicine confiscated a lot of times the soldiers kept it to themselves. There was a lot of greed, envy. All the ungodly things that could happen to a person.

Martha Lane Were there any attempts to escape?

Abel Ortega Oh yes. There is always some one. And some one did. Two of them did try in our camp also, but they didn't make it. I did commercial artwork before I went to the service and these two that didn't make, gave me a little food if I would draw them a map of the Philippine Islands. But I didn't know what they were going to use it for, so I drew the map. They discovered their bag full of little food because they were going to make an escape. All I wanted was a little extra food. So there was a sailor that was across from my bunk and he lent me his map of the Philippines and I drew the map that he gave me and I gave it to these two fellows that were there in the camp. Well two days later the Japanese found because were worked in an airfield and they had some cement bags near a building and as they uncovered the cement bags for use they found the bags full of...one of them had my map, a little food. Two people were going to escape. When the Japanese found out about the map and the bags of food, they called me over because I was the camp artist. The Japanese made me kneel before him and he had his forty-five on my head and he wanted to question me about it. I guess he assumed I was going to try to escape and had drawn my own map. I thought within myself "I could lie and say I don't know about it". But one lie would always lead to another lie and that would only get me in trouble. So I decided to tell the truth. So I told him I had drawn the map for two persons that I knew there in the camp. I didn't know they were going to try to escape. After much time there he finally let me go and he had these other two fellows that I mentioned that I had made the map for to come forward. All I know is that they took them and put them on a truck and took them somewhere and I never saw them. Two weeks later they came back not the camp but they didn't put them back in our compound they took them somewhere else. There is always in our camp a ten man squad, and if anyone tried to escape from the squad they would shoot the rest. So these men were going to escape but somehow they didn't shoot the other eight that were supposed to be shot.

Martha Lane Do you recall any human thing that occurred while you were there?

Abel Ortega The American submarines were sinking a lot of the ships at sea. As the Americans approached the Philippines Islands in 1944 after they had gained quite a few of the islands in the Pacific, the Japanese started pulling out all their prisoners out the Philippine Islands. I was put aboard a ship, but before I went aboard the ship I saw a small can on the edge of the dock, in Japan made by prisoners. As I approached the can something told me to pick it up, and I looked to see who was speaking to me and no one was it was just an inner voice. So I just picked it up and I assumed in my Christian upbringing that it was the spirit of God or the Lord, or an angel or someone telling me to do it. So I picked it up and went aboard ship. By the way this little half gallon can was made by prisoners. We made all of our equipment there. The Japanese didn't give us anything. Anything we had we made by our own hands. I took this can aboard ship and we were so packed in the ship it was nailed down, all boarded up so you could not escape. The only escape was the ladder that was 18 feet high out of the ship. But it did have a wind tunnel that would let the wind down into the hull of the ship. It so happened that where I sat down was right under the end of the wind tunnel, it was very high you couldn't grab it. So when it rained outside I would take the little bucket to catch the water, and I was the only one that had water down on the hull of the ship. With this water by the grace of God I would trade it for a little bit of rice whenever they were fed. We were only given a little half cup of rice with just a little water that was just it for 38 days in the bottom of the ship. Quite a few were going crazy down there and they went out of their minds. They were shouting and howling like people that were crazy for 38 days. We had to throw over about 38 that died down there. They were dead there, we had more room if they were out of there. It was not a question of being unmerciful it was...

When we were working in the Philippine Islands hard labor there, one of the fellows told a friend of mine who was more or less more brave than the rest of us there. He told him to go over to the Japanese and tell them that we want a break, we are tired of working hard. But the Japanese would not let down, we had to keep working and working. He went up there and told the Japanese officer (words in Japanese) which meant "lots of work but very little rest". The Japanese...nobody said anything. But the Japanese told him to go back. After a while everybody started asking him to go back. Same thing, (words in Japanese) "lots of work very little rest!", the Japanese officer

looked at him and said "you men are right, you have been working hard you can now take a little break". But we didn't know the Japanese could speak English! SO Joe's size decreased when he heard the Japanese knew English. We assumed the Japanese was thinking about his girlfriend back in Tokyo and when just asked him for a little rest...

One time in Osaka, Japan, we had our own set-up by that time, it had been a few years we already overcame a lot of the sickness and diseases; we were already used to be there. We were thin but we were still alert. We were working in the docks and we came to a warehouse and as usual our men arrived at a point, we were always spying and scrambling to see what was in all these buildings. If there was food there we wanted to make sure that we got whatever was there. We came to warehouse, the fellows went over to see if there was any food and there was these bolts of cloths lots of them stacked in that room. We had old filthy dirty Japanese uniforms we had no underclothes, so we decide to make some shorts. So 2 at a time we would pull some boards up, two at a time went in there while the others watched for the Japanese guards and we got the cloth and we turned around and wrapped ourselves around it and cut it. And then the next 2 would come through the boards and do their thing. Of course we put our uniforms back on. They couldn't see it but we were all stiff from all that cloth we had wrapped around. So we went back to camp after working the Japanese soldiers marched us back. We tried to march as normal as possible. But this time we went back to the camp, to the high school where we were quartered and we were all stiff. That day they didn't have anything on us we were walking back to the camp. When we got back to the camp they always inspected to see that that we didn't have any contraband or that we hadn't stole anything. Pretty soon everybody started making shorts. We didn't know how to make shorts. We cut two pieces of cloth and we found string and different things on the street and we used that to bind together, but some of them after they sewed them they couldn't even get into to them. They didn't make them right and the sewing was split and was all crooked you would laugh and everybody would laugh. But once in a while Japanese would come and check everybody out. So we had our own stand guard to see when the Japanese would come. So when they would come there would be laughter and all of the sudden there be silent, as if nothing happened, they would hide their color shorts. They were colored cloth, the Japanese love color. We had a big laugh. We would be looking at each other trying to make them and we would laugh, and laugh and laugh.

Martha Lane How long were you on the Philippines? How many months?

Abel Ortega Two and a half years in the Philippines and the rest of the time, a year, in Formosa and Hong Kong for a few days. Our ship went into Hong Kong and then we went into Formosa. It was 38 days from Manila to Formosa.

Martha Lane How did you become aware that the Japanese had surrendered?

Abel Ortega I was at a camp in a little town in Japan, Maibara, and it is next to lake Biwa, one of the largest lakes. We knew nothing about the war. We saw B-29 bombers come over and they would stay low but we didn't know anything about any invasion or anything like that. We were working really hard draining the big lake to make more farmland there in this little town of Maibara. One day the Japanese told us, we were working real hard labor there. And one day the Japanese in the morning said that we didn't have to go to work that day. Of course we wanted to know why, because always we worked so hard. So when they told us that late in the evening I went out to the yard and...I was more of less of a loner there in the Army among prisoners because I didn't associate with cursing and all the ungodly things that happened among the prisoners and so when they told we didn't have to go to work I was out in the yard in the prison camp and I looked into the sky and I saw a group of clouds coming towards our camp and I said to myself being from an artistic background I was used to draw clouds. I said to myself these are not normal clouds, they are different from other clouds I have ever drawn, I have never known these types of clouds and this puzzled me. The Japanese were still on guard they were still in the guardhouse, as always. And there was a Japanese guard standing next to me and I told him in Japanese and I pointed out to these clouds, and there were no other clouds in the sky but these and it was late evening, these clouds were coming towards our camp at about 35,000 ft. in the air and they were going into a bowl and pink clouds and that was not normal for clouds and I told the Japanese (speaking Japanese). This was just beautiful sight, to see these clouds and he turned his head away he didn't want to see these clouds that were so beautiful. I found later the Nagasaki bomb and these were the clouds that came over our camp. Now the Hiroshima bomb we went out to sea and I don't get to see that. But the Nagasaki bomb was when we didn't go to work. They started thinking about surrendering.

Martha Lane Were you involved in any war time trial?

Abel Ortega No. They...a lot of the officials interviewed me and asked me about different Japanese personnel that treated us unfairly or who committed crime against us and I gave them the names of some of the Japanese that had done that, and from there they took it on. I was never asked to go back to Japan to testify against anyone.

Martha Lane Have you ever met with any of the Japanese that you encounter during the war?

Abel Ortega No. I never met any Japanese that I met in WWII. They were either hung or gone to jail. There were certainly mean to us.

Martha Lane Did you have any after effects?

Abel Ortega A few years after the surrender and I came back to the States, after 5 years I still had dreams about being in the prison camp. When I came home aboard ship I was coming home and I was thinking how nice it would be to get back home and see my parents, my mother, I wasn't married yet. They didn't know anything about me if I had died or what so when I got on the telephone, "I said mother" in Spanish, "this is your son Abel", there was a big pause there. She did not recognize my voice. When I went over there I was 21 years old when I left with the Army when I came back I was 26 years old, so my voice change she didn't recognize my voice. I said "this is Able you son". And a big pause and I said "when I get home mama I want you to fix me a big plate of tacos".

Before I was born while in my mother womb, she cried a lot for me. I had other brothers, when they were in her womb she never cried for them at all. She had a normal birth, but when I was in her womb she cried and cried and couldn't understand why she cried so much for me. When I was born and growing up I was the only one that made errands for my mother. All my other brothers were so busy playing ball outside, she would call them and ask them to go to the store and get her things. In those days you went to the store and got your own ice and all of that. They were so busy and then she would call "Abelito", that's me little able, I would always say "yes ma'am" and she would say I want you to go to the store for me, and I would say "yes ma'am" and I was

always obeying mama. If she wanted to dig a flowerbed I was the one who did all the digging. I never denied her; I guess she loved me more than the other children, because she didn't understand why she cried so much when she was pregnant with me. She had a special inclination towards me. When I came home I said "mother this is Abel" and there was pause and then when I told her about making the tacos and all of that then she said "oh, Abelito!", there was a pause of about 5 minutes, they only gave us 3 minutes to talk home when we arrived in the United States.

I finally got home and when I got home I had a Japanese sword that I had brought back and when I was getting down from the Greyhound bus somehow with my big bag the sword slipped out of the scabbard and hit the steps and the people where all lined up to get on the bus the sword hit the bus clank! clank! and it bounced all the way down the line, and everybody was jumping to get out of the way of the sword. I picked the sword up and put in the scabbard as if nothing had happened and I got into a cab there...I lived close by. As I got home my daddy was outside and as I got off he saw me and I climbed up the stairs to where he was, and he didn't want to embrace me he wanted my mother to get the first embrace, and he hollered to my mother that I was there at the house. My mother was in the kitchen with her apron on she came out, and I met my mother wiping her hands on her apron we embraced and we were there for a good while and she was happy tears were running down her cheeks. Her son was back, the one that was real fat. In our church there was a fellow that was there in the Philippine Islands and I knew him there and I even met him just before I went on the ship to Japan. He got sunk on a ship and he never came back. I was in Formosa on the ship and they put two survivors of that boat that was sunk. There were only about 4 survivors of thousands that were on that boat and they put these aboard the ship that I was at. They landed right next to me. I started asking them if they knew about my friend of Austin, Texas. And they said they did they knew him, his name is Joel Reese and they said could you please tell me whatever happened, or if they knew him. He worked in the same airfield with them under the Japanese. Yes he drowned at sea on the ship that the American sub had sunk. The Americans were sinking these Japanese ships where American prisoners were on, and I assume they didn't know there were American prisoners in them. I assume they had bad intelligence. I was in the last prison camp with these two fellows. I had a piece of paper and I wrote out everything where I met him, when I saw him and what happened to him. I even gave him the name of the Japanese ship he was on that was sunk by the

American submarine the whole story. Because they knew this fellow so when I arrived in Austin I met one of the family members and I gave him this sheet of paper. The US Army didn't anything of whatever happened to him.

Martha Lane Your mother had no idea where you were all those years?

Abel Ortega No, they didn't know anything about me. Once I left the United States...

Martha Lane No letters ever arrived home?

Abel Ortega You see I arrived Thanksgiving day of 1941 in the Philippines Islands. I think I wrote them a telegram just before the war started to let mother know that I was okay, and that everything was all right. But after that, that was it, the war started and I never made contact with them.

Martha Lane I want to thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

Abel Ortega You are welcomed.

Editor's note: Mr. Ortega has 3 Purple Hearts, Bronze Star, Presidential Unit Citation and numerous other medals and awards.

Transcribed by Martha E. Moreno
Sarasota, Florida
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