

National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with
~~Col.~~ Joseph A. Russo (~~USAF Retired~~)
December 10, 2002

Interview with
Lieutenant Col. Joseph A. Russo (USAF-Retired)

Mr. Hoshiko Today, Dec. 10, 2002, and I'm interviewing Mr. Russo and this is taking place in I guess this is Alton.

Mr. Russo This is actually, we're in Godfrey.

Mr. Hoshiko Oh, Godfrey, Illinois. And this is in support of the Center for the Pacific War studies, archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information. So, this is all we're going to say right now.

Mr. Hoshiko First of all, please say your name and where you were born.

Mr. Russo I am Joseph Anthony Russo. I was born October 16, 1909 in Boston, Massachusetts.

Mr. Hoshiko What was the name of your parents?

Mr. Russo My father's name was Joseph S. Russo, and my mother's maiden name was (Spelling) Juvanna Dimilla. (Spelling) Juvanna could be translated in English as Jenny.

Mr. Hoshiko Okay. Where and when did you first enlist?

Mr. Russo I enlisted in Chicago and I can't tell you exactly when.

Mr. Hoshiko Okay. What influenced you to join? Were you in the Navy?

Mr. Russo No. I'm too colored blind for the Navy, and _____ getting into the Army.

Mr. Hoshiko Oh, I see. And where were you on December 7, 1941?

Mr. Russo I can tell you exactly where I was. I was a printing salesman. I was traveling on a train from Dixon, Illinois, which is where our plant was, to a state school in Iowa, someplace, I don't remember exactly. I was going to interview the editor of the yearbook there, as a printing salesman, in the yearbook printing business.

Mr. Hoshiko Oh, aha. And what was your reaction when you heard of the news, December 7th?

Mr. Russo Well, I was speechless.

Mr. Hoshiko Do you remember anything else at that moment?

Mr. Russo No, I was wondering how a thing like that could possibly happen, but I realize that there is a certain amount of uncertainty in this world, sometimes we learn as we go along.

Mr. Hoshiko Okay, well, tell me something about the training you took after you got in.

Mr. Russo Several months later it became obvious that a single man, I was a widower at the time, as a single man that I wasn't going to be out of the Army very long, so I enlisted in Chicago, and after a day or two, they got a bunch of us together and put us on a train and took us to signal corps training camp in Missouri. I should be able to come up with the name in a hurry, but I don't. Anyhow, we were there for awhile, and then they shipped us by train to New Jersey to a signal corps training camp to learn how to make

signal corps splices, trade secrets, and eventually they put us on a long, long train that took us from Camp Crowder, I think its Camp Crowder in New Jersey, or is that. Well, I'm ninety-some years old and my memory is a little bit shaky. From New Jersey to San Francisco where we got put together to go on a ship and then we were eventually loaded on a ship and after awhile, well I got to ???west bulk??? as far as I know on the ship, I found out why. Some of the other people must have had some experience because I was up against where I could feel the water washing against the hull. That didn't bother me, I had some experience on the water anyway. In Boston, my father owned a small recreational sailboat and we did some sailing. Anyhow, we sailed for maybe a week or so and stopped in ??Belgium??? got some more fuel and then went on to Bombay and then we were shipped to New Delhi where there was a barracks that were out in the middle of a city, we're not exactly in a camp, but in a barracks. I got a job working for the supervisor of the signal corp. And I got a signal corps job, the first one was driving a jeep, which I did for a year or so, and then the season was changing, it was going to be hot again, and I felt what seemed like cool air coming out of the radio room, so I put in to be a radio operator and I discovered that after you were in the radio room for awhile, that was warm too. But that was alright, I liked the work. I worked what was called in those days high speed automatic, I say again high speed automatic which is nonsense. What happened was you punched a tape and then the tape was put through what was called a keying, and that was dots and dashes, and it was set them pretty fast. And it was received by similar equipment at the other end, dots and dashes, and you could run this tape through a keying unit, and it could run as fast or slow as your dexterity prevented. So after awhile, I think it was the first of July, the last year of the war, we came to work and discovered they had put in teletype machines. The teletype machine was just marvelous. It did most of the work for us and it allowed us to handle a great deal of traffic. I happen to have somewhat, uh, some skills as a photographer, and so we have a, I

forget what we called ourselves, it was some kind of New Delhi Photography Society, or something, and we the Office of War Information was kind enough to lend us some darkroom equipment, developing tanks, retractors, equipment we were really pretty low on. And the Army had no trouble finding any, uh, well, anyhow, a place with running water, so we could have water for the solutions that we needed, latrine is the word I was looking for. Anyhow, we were well set up and I got to know interesting people through the picture process. And I got to meet a couple of ladies that were correspondents from Life Magazine, and as the war was obviously approaching the end, I saw a couple of things that were interesting. It turns out, they said to me Joe, we have, Life Magazine has stacks of photo equipment in a closet here that we don't even know who the photographer is, they're just piling up, we'll have to use it some way. So I happened to have met a man named Ron sp. Gopal sp who was a dancer, an Indian dancer who performs for the officers and ladies of the military there. I gave him some prints, so he knew who I was. And I suggested maybe we should try to get some pictures of him, maybe we could get them printed in Life. Well, I discovered that the photo gear that the Life ladies wanted me to use wasn't 35mm at all, it was professional stuff. But they didn't know what the photographer was. So I knew what it was, and I knew someone in the other collections office, who said yes, I could borrow the speed graphic which is a professional machine. I happened to have had a speed graphic of my own at home. And, no problem. But it happened on the day that we were going to take his picture, the news came through that the Germans had surrendered. And it was... borrowing a picture, camera that was ridiculous. Because, someone in the public relations office was out taking pictures of people whooping it up, so there I was, the day I was all set up and no mechanism. So, I went to the public relations office on foot, and as I was going in, this lieutenant, I don't think we had any second lieutenants at this time, came out and I flagged him down, and I told him the story, and that I would very much

appreciate if I could borrow a speed graphic for awhile. And he said you go back in there and you tell them I said you could borrow a speed graphic. Now, it's been out that's how indifferent the Army is to people's desires, but that isn't the way I found it. And so I took the speed graphic and I used my own camera and so forth, and I took some pictures of this guy, and developed them, and that's the last I saw of them for awhile. Well, someone said what was your happiest day in the Army, well it was six or eight weeks later then the first sergeant said to me, Russo, pack your duffle bag, you're going to take the airplane, a trip to the airport at four o'clock. Well, I knew what that meant. So we got to the airport, and loaded it up. I don't know what the title of the airplane is, it was a passenger plane. I was flown to Karachi along with other GIs, and then we were parked for three weeks until the ship showed up. As far as Karachi, there wasn't very much of anything to do, I just did a little sightseeing. And, eventually the ship showed up and we got to line up in marching order and go tramp, tramp, tramp into the ship and that was just marvelous. People would have those things like milk or something or other, stuff that you could eat without having to boil everything. And so we went up the sp Suez Canal and we got some fuel at Cairo, and we went through the sp Korenian. And across the Atlantic, and from day to day we knew where we were, it was posted on the bulletin board, and one morning, the word came out that we would be docking in a couple of hours, so everybody went up on deck to look at the skyline of New York City coming up and the middle of it was the Statue of Liberty and it was my birthday. That was my Army experience.

Mr. Hoshiko

Now, I remember you said something at one time about being a paymaster, carrying money back and forth in India. Could you tell us something about that?

Mr. Russo

Not so much paymaster.

Mr. Hoshiko

I think you took money from one place to another, or something.

Mr. Russo

Well, I get garbled a little bit. I had to carry things back and forth, whatever it was that was required, I carried messages, I was a message carrier, to deliver things. Well, this is kind of funny. The person who was doing this work before me, and was scheduled to be going back stateside, I was taking his place, showed me what to do. And what you do, you get a handful of traffic, and you put it underneath the seat, the front seat of your Jeep, and what you did was you stopped for, say the RAF was four cornered, and you lifted back the cushion and you picked up the RAF traffic, you put the cushion back down and then you got up and you went into the building, which might be big, and you might leave the Jeep alone for a half an hour, but maybe I'm exaggerating, maybe 20 minutes. All the time all this sensitive traffic was underneath the cushion in the parked Jeep. Sometimes, okay, the receiving stations and the sending stations were off at a distance from New Delhi, and then every now and then for example you'd have to take traffic to the station because someone had cut the wire. Someone digging a ditch, cut an underground cable, and so until the wire was repaired, you had to take this physically. So, anyway, minor thing that had happened was since I was about the only person in the company that had a driver's license, I was asked would I mind driving a reference carrier with half a dozen or so soldiers who wanted to see the Taj Mahal. I had already seen the Taj Mahal twice, only I had gone by train. I said, oh, I'll go over there. So the idea was we'd drive all night, and after they did their sightseeing and I had a chance to sleep, we'd be driving back. So, we were at a halfway point between New Delhi and _____ when the truck stopped. Luckily we had technicians on the truck, they practically took it apart and put it back together again, and it still wouldn't start. So, the word was we would stay there, and one of us would bum a ride to sp. Heidelberg and let them know that we were in

trouble. So we just stayed there that night. Long about daybreak, a truck shows up to tow us to Heidelberg, and this was an exciting thing because the guy was not, well, he had a lot of respect for my ability as a driver, because he drove the thing about 40 miles an hour and there I was at the end of the road, and so we got there, and we were cordially treated by the mess sergeant, yes sir anytime, and so forth, and meanwhile the mechanics down there worked on the truck, and finally everything looked good, so we piled into the truck. We got as far as the gate of the camp and it quit again. So we go through the whole thing again. And this time was chow time and the mess sergeant didn't act as enthusiastic as he did when he welcomed us for breakfast. So we stood there and watched him once, and there was the sergeant in charge of the automobile repair, was standing there scratching his chin and finally he got an idea. He goes to the filter cap on the gasoline tank, and there was a little hole in the filter cap as you know, and air goes in as the gasoline goes out. And that was plugged up. And that was all there was to it. Got rid of a piece of straw or something and you were in business. So, by this time we were going again and we decided we had to see Fatepursikhli, an ancient cave, all these ruins there that was wonderful to see. And so we saw it, and I drove them back and everybody was carefully handled and that was quite an adventure and the enemy never new a thing about it.

Mr. Hoshiko

Do you remember who was in charge, the commanding officer?

Mr. Russo

No, well, we had a captain Fettig, F-E-T-T-I-G, I think. I don't know his full name. Oh, I want to tell you one more about this Indian dancer. One time, 16 years later, I read in the paper that this Indian dancer was coming to Washington University to put on a performance on a Sunday afternoon. Well, Virginia and I decided to go and see this guy, so I happened to have all his pictures that had been rejected by Life Magazine, and had saved them for 16 years. And I sat near the front of the row of the chapel and we

waited and waited and waited and waited and waited and what happened was the ???? on a railroad train which he was traveling on had some kind of problem and that was the reason he was late. So I gave him the bunch of pictures, he was ecstatic. And he said that's just wonderful and the next time your in Bensontown, come and see me. Bensontown is a little town just south of Indy, where we lived. Well, I haven't been there yet, but who knows I might some day.

Mr. Hoshiko Ah, that was an interesting story.

Mr. Russo That was interesting meeting the guy after 16 years.

Mr. Hoshiko Yeah!

Mr. Russo And then, there's no relation, just on vacation. What else can I confuse you with.

Mr. Hoshiko Have you kept up with any of the fellas you were with at all?

Mr. Russo None of the people, they scattered all over the place. I did keep in touch with a person I knew in training camp. Probably because I was in the printing business in Dixon, Illinois, a town about 10 or 12 miles away called Prophetstown, Illinois, there was a printing business and its run by a guy named Berrin, he and I were kinda buddies being both in the printing business, but we occasionally corresponded. Then he got married, and he eventually had a child, and one thing another. I think he was eventually stationed one some island in the Pacific. Doing what, I don't know.

Mr. Hoshiko What kind of attitude did your parents have about you enlisting and that sort of thing.

Mr. Russo Oh, they thought it was fine. They didn't encourage me to do it, but if I want to do it, that's alright.

Mr. Hoshiko So, you were never really involved in any sort of battle engagement or anything like that, you never fired a shot at anybody?

Mr. Russo Well the first thing I did in the Army was target shooting. I discovered, this is when I discovered that I'm left eyed. That was a big discovery, I enjoyed target shooting.

Mr. Hoshiko Is that right, uh, is that the only weapon that you used?

Mr. Russo Oh, no, oh we had a short one, I forget now what it was, what it's called. I think it was actually a carbine or something that we actually were issued, but I don't remember. Oh, I think I was called the ???armline??? They had a table of assignments and I think I was at the bottom, one of the least useful members of the company is an armline. Anyhow, they won the war without me.

Mr. Hoshiko Um, lets see. What happened when you got home.

Mr. Russo Well, let me see. I tried to find a job as a photographer, but that only lasted a week or two because that type of work required specialized training, like taking pictures of, this is in Providence, Rhode Island, and they specialize in making jewelry there and they take pictures of cards and jewels, and I hadn't had the experience with that and the people who hired me didn't want to take the time and money to train me. It was amicable all around, so I tried something else.

Mr. Hoshiko So, what did you do next?

Mr. Russo

Well, about then I corresponded with some of my friends from Godfrey, because I didn't know most of the people ??? I got a letter from someone who was working for ??? and she said what are you doing in Providence, then one thing led to another and I got offered a job. So, I took it and got some experience with it and long about that time, Virginia and I had been corresponding and we decided to get married. So I guess it was about 1946 or so was in June we got married, in Knoxville, Tennessee. Then we came out here and we lived in a house on Grace Street and I can show it to you ??? which we didn't think much of. Then, we went to an architect in St. Louis, whose name I forget, but he indeed became famous, and we moved some of ??? fire company ??? architect and we were wondering if he would design a house for us, and he came back and he said he couldn't because he was so busy, but he'd give me a name of a student. So we got the student, showed him the plan we'd want ??? and when the house was built we lived in it for 50 years. And a funny thing about that was, we kept in touch with this architect, he had a couple of kids, and one thing or another. Three or four years ago, I go to Cambridge every spring to go to the Harvard Commencement. I'm invited and I have relatives in the area so it doesn't cost me anything once I get there. All it costs me is the transportation. So, it was the day after commencement, and my sister, Louise, said well what do you want to do today, it was the day after commencement. I said I'd like to go to the art museum. So she takes me to the art museum, and she's a busy person, and said I'll put you in this room and I have some errands I want to do, and I'll be back in a few minutes. Well, there were other people in the room, and somehow, I got in touch with him, and it turned out to be my architect, his wife and his kids, and his son who had received an advanced degree of some kind from Harvard the day before, but I didn't know anything about it. So it was an interesting meeting, completely unprovoked. So now we continue to exchange cards, Christmas cards and so forth. But it was an interesting thing to have happened. ??? As far as Harvard is concerned, I was and

am a member of the St. Louis Harvard Club and for something like 18 years, I interviewed candidates for admission to Harvard. It's a very satisfying job because they have vast numbers applying, and only a few getting in. But, uh, anyhow, it's been interesting. What else do you want to know.

Mr. Hoshiko Well, tell me a little bit about your family, your father, your mother and what you did and how you fit into that family and so forth.

Mr. Russo Well my father was a real estate agent, and my mother was a homemaker.

Mr. Hoshiko Where did you live?

Mr. Russo Oh, we lived in Newton Highlands in Massachusetts, which is 90 miles from Boston. That was, I discovered when I was in college, the busses and railroads lead to the ticket agent in the evening shift and Newton Highlands station, so I applied then because I was always looking for money. And they gave you a pass to go to Springfield, Massachusetts for ??? And right off I flunked because they gave me a color vision test, and I didn't pass. That was the first time I knew that I was color blind. So that took care of that, and I discovered the Navy had the same decision. They had the test. The first thing they give you before you unbutton your shoelaces is a color vision test, and if you don't pass, you're out. Then I was an assistant and ????. There were two or three guys on a ride, they didn't seem to think it was a bright idea to settle in the St. Louis area, but on the other hand that was my decision.

Mr. Hoshiko Now, did you elect to go to Harvard?

Mr. Russo The first place, I was a fairly good student, and Harvard, the tuition was \$400 a year and I could live at home. In those days, the bare minimum

expense if I recall correctly, the tuition, boardroom and tuition, was only like \$1200 a year. Well, my father was uncertain anyhow, and six kids and couldn't come up with the money, so I went there for four years, and the last three years, I went on scholarships. In some cases I got scholarships. On my last year, I qualified for a scholarship, and I didn't get any cash. The result was a, we had a financial panic, and banks closed and all that, so I tried to make money, but no great amount. So for the next year, I applied again and this year for some kind reason, they allowed me a \$100 scholarship. Previously I was getting \$400 scholarships, which takes care of the tuition. So, with that as an encouragement, and borrowing from relatives, and so forth, I did manage to get through. I still was poor. Also you can borrow from your university, which I didn't know, until the last minute. So I borrowed from the University. It took a few years to get that disposed of.

Mr. Hoshiko What did you major there in school?

Mr. Russo English literature.

Mr. Hoshiko Did you have any ideas of what you might be doing after you finished?

Mr. Russo Well, I thought I'd have something to do with writing, or whatever, I don't know. Well, my high school classmates got himself a job in a magazine in New York, and he had no trouble getting a job. I would think that might happen to me. But, it was something, even though it wasn't enormous, it was a start.

Mr. Hoshiko And now, you came to Louis and Clark before it was a girl school.

Mr. Russo It was founded in like 1835 or something, and it was called Monticello Seminary, a guy was Captain Godfrey, the man for who Godfrey is

named. He was a trader on the river and he had about eight daughters and wanted somewhere to educate a daughter, so he started this thing. He acquired the principles of Thomas Jefferson, which is why he called it Monticello, around here it's "Montichello". Along about then, its funny how these things all fit together, along about the time I was hired to come out here, it turns out that a guy I knew in high school, who was specialty advisor to student publications, and who knew me as an editor of the sophomore. He had quit teaching high school and had gotten a job as president of what was then called Monticello College. He quit high school teaching. And he was a guy who offered me a job, not much pay, but it was something. And after a couple of years, he decided he wanted somebody else in that work, and so he said consider myself at home and find myself some other work. That was tossing me out in the cold. But I did find a job. That was how I got in the printing business. Someone knew of a printing firm in ??? that could use a salesman, so that was the lead I got, and I had that job when I quit to go into the Army, for four or five years.

Mr. Hoshiko

Is that right? So what would you consider the best part of your life?

Mr. Russo

I would say, oh, the last 50 years when we were living in this house in Godfrey that was designed by Lawrence Barrin, the St. Louis architect. We enjoyed the country and along with my wife's income and my income, we did do some travel. We went to Alaska three times, Italy three times, and Yugoslavia once, we were in England one time, and it's been an interesting life. And also, I had some modest success as an amateur and I had pictures which I sent to exhibitions here and there and in many cases they were hung.

Mr. Hoshiko

Did you win some prizes, awards?

Mr. Russo I don't recall, if there were any awards they didn't amount to anything.

Mr. Hoshiko Now, tell me about your copy there, you got into amateur radio.

Mr. Russo Oh, yes, yes. Well I've been in the amateur radio, and I have a good place to put up antennas, and as a result of being in the radio communication work during the war, I was involved in something called MARS, Military Affiliate Radio System, and we have amateurs scattered through the country, who are members of MARS, and we handle most of the day to day war overseas, Vietnam war or something. There were a lot of people in the Army and they could send messages home. And we had them ???, we could get 25 or 30 dollars a month for postage for sending messages from soldiers on active duty. So we were busy with MARS. And it was just part of being with the radio.

Mr. Hoshiko Did you contact any people from the war?

Mr. Russo I don't know.

Mr. Hoshiko I guess they taught you Morse code in the military?

Mr. Russo Oh, for some reason I refuse to examine to closely, the outfit I was with at Camp Carter went off without me and a couple of other guys, we weren't good enough for them, see. So for awhile, we didn't even have a company, we were on our own in the camp. Well, we kept our own kind of signals going, training stuff, such as Morse code, so I taught myself Morse code. And I even learned a little French. They requested French, to do things around the camp to keep busy. And then one day, I don't know why, I found myself on the go again, and I had quite an interesting experience.

Mr. Hoshiko Anything else you have that might be of interest.

Mr. Russo Well, I don't know.

Mr. Hoshiko Now, with MARS you would send messages from people in the military back home?

Mr. Russo Yes, from where ever it was. I don't recall if it went back from here to there. They come from overseas.

Mr. Hoshiko There were a lot of messages from overseas, like some of Nimitz or something like that?

Mr. Russo Oh, dear no, never saw anybody important.

Mr. Hoshiko Do you have anything to say to a young man that might be interested in the military?

Mr. Russo Do whatever they want.

Mr. Hoshiko Do you have any thoughts to tell a young man who might be interested?

Mr. Russo I would tell them to get in there do his duty and take his chances.

Mr. Hoshiko Oh, laughs.

Mr. Russo There's all kinds of possibilities, especially with the military discipline you have all sorts of opportunities to go after.

Mr. Hoshiko You learned some things in the military that I'm sure came in handy or interesting.

Mr. Russo Well, after awhile you get used to the military and I found myself at home there.

Mr. Hoshiko How was the food in the military.

Mr. Russo Pretty good, pretty good. As a matter of fact, in our outfit they have problems because the officers wanted to eat with us. You see the officers live in separate quarters, and they have servants and they have their own chef and cook, and they prefer food we got, they were very good. They ate with us on one or two occasions until they cracked down on it, unless they decided to get together for a spaghetti feast or something and the cooks would hide away two cans of this and two cans of that, so we'd have a good feast when the time came. Eventually, management caught wind of that and that was stopped. But I can't complain how I was fed in the military.

Mr. Hoshiko That's pretty good. In a way I guess you enjoyed the military without being bothered too much and didn't get hurt or anything.

Mr. Russo Well, considering all that happened and how much storm and strife existed and many people got involved in it, I have no complaints.

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