

*National Museum of the Pacific War*

*Nimitz Education and Research Center*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

Interview with

**Mr. Nick Erdely**

Date of Interview: October 7, 2005

# **National Museum of the Pacific War**

## **Fredericksburg, Texas**

### **Interview with Mr. Nick Erdely**

Interview in progress.

Interviewer: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 7<sup>th</sup> of October of 2005, and I am interviewing Mr. Nick Erdely...

Mr. Erdely: Right, got it right.

Interviewer: This interview is taking place in Houston, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this sight. Nick, let me start out by thanking you for spending the time to describe to me some of your experiences in China/Burma/India. Uh, let's start by having you state your full name; when you were born; where you were born and things like that.

Mr. Erdely: My name is uh, Nicolas Erdely, go by Nick. I was born in a little ole community in, in uh, Tolick (spelling?), West Virginia. Its in Harrison County, north, north central West Virginia, near Clarksburg, West Virginia. We most children were born, reared in Angine (spelling ?), West Virginia, little mining community.

Interviewer: What was your date birth?

Mr. Erdely: Date of birth is August 22, 1922.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Erdely: And, uh, I went to the Rupert High School, lacked a year or two, uh, graduate.

Interviewer: What'd your dad do for a living?

Mr. Erdely: He la..., he worked in coal mines for many, many years, raised uh, 8 kids. And uh, he got his back broken and uh, one of the mines near Clarksburg, West Virginia, and uh, they uh, the medical profession wouldn't raise him and straighten him up, so he's humped over for the rest of his life, they called him "Hump Back Steve," which he didn't like that, but it's hard uh, for people to uh, ...

Interviewer: Was he able to continue working or...?

Mr. Erdely: Yes, he raised 8 kids after that...

Interviewer: After that accident?

Mr. Erdely: After that mine fall back breaking accident near Clarksburg, West Virginia. So uh, I went to uh, school, grade school in Angine, West Virginia, company school. I mean it wasn't company literature, but the company owned the building and allowed 'em to teach there freely.

Interviewer: So it's a company town and a company school.

Mr. Erdely: Company school, and yeah, the company store and uh, company office.

Interviewer: Just like in the songs.

Mr. Erdely: That's right. And uh, I peddled papers a lot. And when I was 11 years old, Dad had me clear some ground about a ¼ of an acre out of uh, mountains of West Virginia, and, and raised one of the best gardens we ever had. He was so proud of me that, that summer.

Interviewer: Hum!

Mr. Erdely: And uh, I tried to get a job in West Virginia, and they wouldn't hire me because I was only 17, but I wanted to do the outside work rather than go in the mines during the last year of uh, of uh, high school. But uh, they wouldn't of let me and Mom and Dad, they were, they were a little trouble with me because I wouldn't tell 'em I was 18 and 'cause they were struggling with 8 children.

Interviewer: Hum.

Mr. Erdely: But uh, after I got 17 I know Dad was the, was the, so I thought I would take, I more or less felt call to go to the service 'cause I was saw the writing on the wall. One of the papers I was delivering was somewhere we were beginning a war. And I said, "Well, I'd rather have a little of some experience." And the reason I checked the Air Force or the Army and joined the Air, Air Corps and uh, I was, I think I was uh, sworn in (unintelligible) Virginia or Richmond, Virginia. I think it was Richmond, but I'm not certain, its been awhile, over 60 year.

Interviewer: Yeah, it has been awhile. Back, uh, now when was that?

Mr. Erdely: That was in 1941...1940.

Interviewer: So this is before the war started?

Mr. Erdely: Before the war started, 1940. And uh, I believe I went in uh, seemed like it was September 11, 1940, and they sent me to air, uh, to Chanute Field, Rantoul, Illinois, about 125 miles south of uh, Chicago, Illinois. After going through basic training, I forget how many weeks where there were 4 weeks or 6, its immaterial now, but a long time ago.

Interviewer: It was enough.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, but then they sent me to uh, they sent a few others to the uh, Officers' Mess, and worked there awhile and then they come a order from Washington says, "All soldiers other than the main cook," we had to, had to be getting out of the armies and off, out of the mess hall.

Interviewer: Now why was that?

Mr. Erdely: Well, they, this uh, they, they saw the, the thing coming, so the soldiers, they wanted them free to be able to transfer anywhere rather than go in there take all of 'em. We were uh, waiting on the officers, see, in cooking and mostly waiting and uh, and, and KP actually...

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: So uh, this is why uh, they wanted us out there, and they then put me in the truck department. Worked there a little while then I can't understand well that, that was uh, oh yes, after that, after the war was declared, after Pearl Harbor, the rush was to go to the Pacific and go to Alaska. So, and they had me on uh, on a train going to Alaska, I mean, going to Washington State.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: Uh, Everett, Washington; I can't think of the name of the airports there – Air, Air Corps name. They, they named the camp or air for, uh, base but it wasn't too far out Everett, Washington which I think is just a little north of Seattle, Washington.

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Erdely: So therefore, we were going to ship out to the Aleutian Islands and from there, they changed the...we were there just a little while and they changed the order and said we were going to Panama Canal. And so uh, had to take the train back, so we ran up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and the uh, we just done a little detail there and then they put us through medical, everybody through medical. They stripped you down to nude but you wore your raincoat. So uh, I had a little trouble with my testicles ending up in, working for the Mess Hall up there, Officers' Mess Hall, and they couldn't (unintelligible) they couldn't tell me what it was and I know something was wrong. But this medical doctor, captain, he checked me out and didn't tell me what was wrong, said, "Stand over, over the side here, soldier." So after everybody went through, he double checked me says, "We're going to have to send you to the hospital." "What for?" I say. "Well," he says, "we think you got a hernia, I'm not sure, we had to have you a medical examination." So I went in there and, and this first lieutenant and maybe a captain examined me said, "You need to have this surgery." I said, "What for?" And uh, I'm sorta hard headed; I want to know what's goin' on. So said, "Well you really need a hernia, need a surgery here to, to uh, uh, correct that rupture." And I says then, "Is there somebody above you?" Said, "Yeah." Colonel come in and the colonel then, he didn't tell me that I had to have it, he told me what I needed to be done to correct it. I said, "Let's go for it." After that, see I'm supposed to be on ahead to the Panama Canal, so they kept me in there 2 months. And in a week I was ready to go. So I got so bored and told the head nurse, she and the head nurse running the

place, not the officers, very rarely seen the officer in, uh, medical officer in the hospital. They usually got 'em in surgery and so forth. So administrative work the uh, head nurse and basically she knows what was goin' on all the time. So I said, "I need to go to the, uh, the company and, and the camp, the base commander." Said, "What for?" And I say, "Well, ya'll have already done my surgery, said I'm well, and I said I'm, there's a war goin' on out there and I said I need to get in it." So I was young and full of pep and ready to go. And I went up there, and I knew I had to go through the first sergeant. I told him so, first thing, same thing and then he said, "Let's go and see the Colonel, uh, Commander." And I told him who I was, and "Commander," I says, "I've been down there 2 months and I said I'm well. I said there's supposed to be a war goin' on. I said I lost my outfit. I said I don't know where they are." He said, "Where they supposed to go?" Supposed to go to Tallahassee, Florida from here. Said, "Sergeant, you do the same orders," says, "Sergeant (unintelligible) cut this guy some orders." So the next day I was on a train goin' to Talla, Tallahassee, Florida. Well, I got there, I, they were already gone. So uh, they put me in this one outfit and put me back in the, in the can, uh, uh, in the trunk...uh, the truck company and attached to the Air Force. So, I was driving anywhere from a staff car to a, this 6 to 6, whatever needed, I was goin'. So finally one day Sergeant call me and says uh, "Erdely," says, "we see you hadn't had any uh, schooling in the Army, and the (unintelligible) asked me to go to radio school or go to uh, to Officers

Candidate School. And I, had to lookin' back at it, I thought it might be best to go to Officers Candidate School. (laughter)

Interviewer: Now that you think about it a few years later. (laughter)

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, but uh, I (unintelligible), and left uh, uh, Tallahassee, Florida, 78° there, about 3 days on the train, we's up to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 20 below zero, 3 foot of snow. Six months later I was back at the uh, same air base and I was uh...

Interviewer: In Tallahassee?

Mr. Erdely: In Tallahassee, and checking uh, checking these uh, uh, radios, radio uh, transmitters and receivers out between the plane on C-47s. The plane on the, on the ground to the uh, uh, uh, I don't know what you call it, the, the or the, to check the planes coming in and coming out...what do you call that?

Interviewer: For the control?

Mr. Erdely: Where the control, but its not (unintelligible)...

Interviewer: Yeah,

Mr. Erdely: Controlled, Control Tower.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: So, that's why I was checking that out, every, on every one of 'em coming out. I wasn't there 2 weeks and they said they needed some radio operators to, to go Signal Air Corps. So they sent me to, to Tampa, Florida. Went through bivouacs there, about several months, and several weeks. First thing you know was on the train, other train going up to uh, uh, Patrick Henry, Virginia.



Interviewer: You covered a lot of ground.

Mr. Erdely: And then they put us on a boat and 104-ship convoy. The reason they had to have uh, a battleships, and aircraft carriers, and subchasers and everything 'cause the fast, slowest ship could go 'bout 8-10 miles an hour. So this is why they had that, but we lost one of those in the Mediterranean Sea.

Interviewer: Oh, so this wasn't goin' to the Pacific then?

Mr. Erdely: We were goin' to the Pacific but you see, you went through the Mediterranean Sea and then through the Zu...Suez Canal to side track the south Pacific route, South Africa route.

Interviewer: Which was a problem, yeah.

Mr. Erdely: And yeah, that's right. So you see, that's the longest uh, that is the longest uhm, canal in the world that has no locks, 100 miles long.

Interviewer: That's just a ditch.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah. So was (unintelligible) and stayed there 'bout a week. I mean this is over in North Africa, 'cuz me. We stayed there about 3 months, on dock duty, loading ammuniton going to uh, the troops in Sicily and Italy. Then after that, we uh, went British, British troop, 3,000 men on the British troop transport.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Mr. Erdely: Well it wasn't, uh, it was (unintelligible), he, he had to go one end to the next uh every day to get the bread. So I forget how many days you had to (unintelligible), so many people would try to put 10 people to a, to a uh big

table. And that's a platoon. And then the uh, the bunks went up about 7 high, see?

Interviewer: Boy, they had you crammed in there.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, so then when we got over there, it was a day or so we got of there and we on the, the train, (unintelligible) train cross India...

Interviewer: So you, so where did you land in India?

Mr. Erdely: Bombay, India.

Interviewer: Bombay.

Mr. Erdely: Bombay, India.

Interviewer: So now you got across India.

Mr. Erdely: And, then, we landed there uh, 29<sup>th</sup> day of uh, 29<sup>th</sup> day of January, 1944, and Dec...February 1<sup>st</sup>, they put us on a boat; and I remember getting a mail call. It was either that day or the next day. 11 days took us to get across uh, across India.

Interviewer: That's a long...

Mr. Erdely: The reason for that is they had many side tracks and the supplies had the priority, and they had to get the shifts, supplies to the deal. Then after we got up there in Dibrugarh, Assam is where our headquarters were and its northeast India. Why uh, they send a 10-men team down, they had about 30 or 40 teams up and down Burma, 10-man teams. That's 3 ground observers, 3 uh, radio operators, a cook, and a medic, and uh, uh, crew chief and maintenance man. And lot of times you see the TV you thinkin' it's a big deal advertising 24/7; they didn't start here, it started in World War II. (laughter) We were 24

hours a day, 7 days a week doing duty only 3 operators. Code, nobody else could do it.

Interviewer: Yeah, now when you were doing this, tell me this Signal Air Corps, now that, there was numbers associated with this and you were in what Army unit and ...

Mr. Erdely: Okay, I was in the 76...759<sup>th</sup>, uh, SAW, means Signal Aircraft Warning Battalion, Company D. Now, only way we can get our approve was to aircraft dropping to the C-46s and C-47s. Now we had the Q signals. QBP1 was that "All was Clear." QBP6 was "Rain or Fog," and so this is know how they know how to come in and, and drop our food. Its the only way we can get our mail.

Interviewer: Hum.

Mr. Erdely: And then we had to send a carrier out in a couple of days to get to a place to send the mail.

Interviewer: So how did you get into this location? I mean, were...

Mr. Erdely: We walked. One place, when we first started, we walked 3 days. One place walked 3 weeks. And uh, the uh, coming back we had a second lieutenant was he loved to walk the woods. Course the leaches, leaches almost ate him up.

Interviewer: Um!

Mr. Erdely: And so damp and everything in the swamps and he had loved to try a new trail and so forth, and he found a trail, and we'd get of there in 4 hours. It was almost a run, up one mountain and then another. And the thing he knew

where this little airport was. And so we were glad to how he stayed, stayed up in front of us, I don't know, but he did. But anyway, uh, we went to this first place, we went up there, it seemed like we went and brought a truck because it was just a, it wasn't far. What I mean we went over to by plane from the airplane to (unintelligible), from India to Burma, Assam. And uh, had a very large airport there. And then from there, they could go to trucking. And he still had a, a lot of, uh soldiers in there repairs and so forth. And so we took that one truck and made a tent, we had tarpaulin and so forth, we made a camp there for it, and we used these uh, uh, uh, what do you call 'em, uh hammocks?

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: But they were screened in, had to be screen, man, or you be uh, eaten to death to try to sleep.

Interviewer: Yeah, you'd never...

Mr. Erdely: You had to uh, uh, get a sleep, sleep pattern on that uh, uh, don't know how, get a sleep pattern on that uh, in that 24/7...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Erdely: And its hard thing, and you can't, you go to Commander and there weren't no Commander to go to, to try, try to get a sh...uh, uh transfer or anything.

Interviewer: So how many were in the group?

Mr. Erdely: Yeah.

Interviewer: How many guys were in...

Mr. Erdely: 10.

Interviewer: 10.

Mr. Erdely: 10.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Erdely: See, and the 3 radio operators, we had to, we had to go 24/7. Well, the others they done basically, there the cook, he just uh, uh manic during there in the daytime shift, and the maintenance shift and the, and the crew shift. Uh, you see, as squad leader, uh, and of course the observers they take the phone that we try to find a (unintelligible) a, a tree out here, highest tree we could find, a hundred or more feet away from the radio shack and then string uh, uh, wire in there. And then, of course, only uh, there at last, for last few months, they saw the, the defeat, or the enemy going back to China because we took the purp...the whole purpose of this is this what you got to understand, the whole purpose of this is we were able with our ba, uh, enemy battalion and so forth, is control 3 million people, 3 million Japanese soldiers from going into the sou, southwest Pacific; that's the reason we call ourselves "unique."

Interviewer: Yep.

Mr. Erdely: See, this organization was just formed for World War II veterans...

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Erdely: From uh, from uh, Pearl Harbor Day to March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1946, just in that area there. Outside of that area you, you not a, CBI World War II veteran.

Interviewer: Right, absolutely.

Mr. Erdely: If you went before, like a World Tiger, uh, Flying Tigers, they were, see, but basically af, over and above that, well you see that demarcation line, so to speak.

Interviewer: Uh-hum, uh-hum. So here's this group of 10 guys,...

Mr. Erdely: Yeah...

Interviewer: They're out in the woods, in the middle of nowhere and are advanced warning for, well I guess you're tracking aircraft flights enemy and allied...

Mr. Erdely: Right.

Interviewer: And providing that information back by radio...

Mr. Erdely: Back, by, by radio...

Interviewer: Through your headquarters or to wherever...

Mr. Erdely: Headquarters back in uh, back in the Sam, uh, in the Sam northeast advocate, northeast India.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah.

Interviewer: And uh, so you basically scratched out a location just right in the middle of the jungle.

Mr. Erdely: That's right.

Interviewer: And you put up your little tents with uh, with uh...

Mr. Erdely: Hammocks inside a, inside a big tarp.

Interviewer: Okay and that kept the insects off of you.

Mr. Erdely: Yes.

Interviewer: And with the 10 of you, you worked 24/7.

Mr. Erdely: 24/7. Now we, all of 'em were basically 24/7, but the radio operators specifically, we had to check in every hour on the hour, 24 hours a day. And if you couldn't be contacted, they go come and find out why.

Interviewer: What happened, yeah.

Mr. Erdely: And of course, our number one uh, order was, is if the Japs or the enemy attacked us, take, we had uh, uh, hand grenades under beneath the radio.

Interviewer: To blow it up...

Mr. Erdely: Blow it up. That's first duty. We also, we had a decoder machine. We sent 5-letter words and instead of trying to send a message, every 5-letter word, but you had to have that decoder and in order to uh, decipher, decoder.

Interviewer: So this is for incoming messages and you,...

Mr. Erdely: That's right.

Interviewer: You coded everything that went out, too.

Mr. Erdely: Well, we, we'd use the sa, the code to, to send. Every, every message had to just go everywhere just had to be 5, 5 letters.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: Regardless how long or regardless how uh, uh short.

Interviewer: Hum.

Mr. Erdely: See? So that's uh, uh, it's a more or less of time situation but it was decoded and processing that the normal people, well, you had to have some intelligent people just intelligence, the Americans that made the code up.

Interviewer: Yeah, well. So uh, tell me about some of the communications then that you had back with your headquarters. I mean you ...

Mr. Erdely: Well...

Interviewer: Any (unintelligible) that stand out to you, uhm, things that interesting that happened.

Mr. Erdely: Basically, we would uh, send all of the messages back, and that they every, every aircraft we reported, we, we'd report that on the code, all day long.

Interviewer: You reported the kind of aircraft?

Mr. Erdely: Yes.

Interviewer: And so, did you do visual sightings, or did you do...?

Mr. Erdely: (unintelligible) visual, visual sighting. That's what the uh, observers were doing.

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Erdely: Ground observers, they called 'em. But then you had binoculars and everything, and they, they goin' to school and tell whether it's a fighter plane; whether it's a bomber; whether its uh, uh, uh, cargo plane.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: Basically the 3, ...

Interviewer: And whether it was Japanese or whether it was...

Mr. Erdely: Oh yes, and if it was Japanese, they, they want to know all about it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Erdely: See, but when (unintelligible) wasn't able to report any. The others one when they had the station up, if they went near (unintelligible) other post, where they could report it, see what I mean?



Interviewer: Excuse me just a second. Okay, so let's continue, I'm sorry for the interruption.

Mr. Erdely: So uh, the last ti, time, we went out, we went up to the mountains.

Interviewer: Okay, so how many times did you, how many different sights did you work at?

Mr. Erdely: Basically two.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Erdely: In about 7 months, last sight was short of 8 months. I believe it was just in, short of uh, las, last of uh, well it round fir, last of uh July or the 1<sup>st</sup> of, 1<sup>st</sup> of August, 'cause I was goin' back on home, home by in the middle of August. But uh, we, would uh, report the aircraft all day long. Then if there's any messages come in from the uh, headquarters, why we decode it and give it to the sergeant, and he'd uh, uh...

Interviewer: Okay, so you were operating the radio.

Mr. Erdely: Beg your pardon?

Interviewer: Were you operating the radio then?

Mr. Erdely: Yes, yes, we, we...

Interviewer: So you had the observers; you got the radio operators and uh, then who else was in the group?

Mr. Erdely: The, the cook, and the medic,...

Interviewer: "The medic..."

Mr. Erdely: And you had the, uh, a maintenance man...

Interviewer: That's 3...

Mr. Erdely: To keep a, and you had the crew chief...

Interviewer: That's 4.

Mr. Erdely: That's 4; 3 observers, and 3 radio operators; 10-man crew.

Interviewer: And how long were you out on that first assignment before you...

Mr. Erdely: The first time was about 7 months and the last time was a little better than 7 months. Never saw a white man or a white woman.

Interviewer: That's a long time to be in the middle of the jungle.

Mr. Erdely: That's right. (unintelligible) Now we didn't, we didn't have any rel or natives or anything at that first base, first station we would.

Interviewer: You must have gotten to know those 9 other guys pretty well.

Mr. Erdely: Oh, yeah. I, I'm the only one living.

Interviewer: Is that right? Isn't that something?

Mr. Erdely: Only one of the ten. And I communicated with most of 'em. Is one or two that, well, I tried to get hold of this one guy and he became a, a, from a medic he became a uh, policeman up in South Dakota. And uh, at was 15 years ago when I got into the CBI. I didn't realize that it exist.

Interviewer: Yeah. So your first 7 month tour out there in the jungle was over and then you went out again on a second 7 months...

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, they came, they give us about a month's rest back in India.

Interviewer: So, how did, so where did you do your resting? I mean back in headquarter area or where was that?

Mr. Erdely: Well, they let us go to another island; I don't know why (unintelligible) I didn't go, but I was just a kid and I uh, uh, they run a trip train, a run a train

from, from Dibrugarh to Lahore, Lahore, India. I don't recall how long, how far it was. Seemed to me like they said it would be a day. But I was on a troop train, so I was, come on up there 11 days. I don't know why, they, they had to turn me back.

Interviewer: So you just weren't interested in any more troop trains.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, wasn't. So I just stayed up there and we played cards and visited and things, and relaxation for about a month, and they sent us back. This time we went up in the mountains. That's where they had to go, and go for 3 or 4 days. I believe it was 3 days to find the uh, because went up 6,000 feet.

Interviewer: Oh, so this is way up in the mountains!

Mr. Erdely: In the north India, the north of Burma.

Interviewer: The first time you, in your first assignment, you were...

Mr. Erdely: Down in the jungles.

Interviewer: Down in the jungles.

Mr. Erdely: (unintelligible) right there the river and swamps and everything. And so, coming back, he was able to find a way to get us to this other little airport and we come back in, in less than, less than 5 hours. So I, we, were very, we were, he was running us long, up and down those mountains, but we were glad (unintelligible) to get enough (unintelligible) could have spent 2 more nights on the road, on the jungle or on the mountains or whatever.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Erdely: See what I mean?

Interviewer: So tell me about this second, uh, assignment then when you were up in the mountains.

Mr. Erdely: The mountains, the, the natives were very, very friendly. The uh, Army allowed uh, to give 'em uh, uh, a rupee a day. But to give 'em silver rupees instead of the paper rupees. So that was, uh, they liked that, 'cause that was...

Interviewer: That's a real thing.

Mr. Erdely: That's a real thing, which you, wouldn't sweat up; and it wouldn't...it couldn't...it was water cure, and everything else.

Interviewer: Water-proof.

Mr. Erdely: So, they uh, we, we had 'em bring the water up, but it had, made all these, made the Mess Hall; made the latrines; made the uh, uh, complete, uh, house where we slept in; and we just put those uh, uh, ma, ah uh, can't think of the name of 'em, to sleep in.

Interviewer: Hammocks?

Mr. Erdely: Hammocks.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Erdely: Hammocks – screened in, and to uh, so we went, went to bed there. And the radio shack was built up, you see. But, but they, after they found out that we had a receiver and music, every Sunday evening, those women from all around, and the whole families come up there and set down on the floor and listen for an hour or so on the music, as long as it wouldn't disturbing our transmissions, see what I mean?

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: Viola, head, head chief and so forth, and he made, messages uh, communications says, "We'll let you family listen to the music as long as it won't interrupt our uh, uh, our duty in any way.

Interviewer: So they enjoyed that music?

Mr. Erdely: Oh, did they! But just the women came. They women, they wrapped themselves in, they didn't, they wrapped themselves differently than, than the clothes, than, than, than the Indians. The Indian used the Sari method. But these is just heavy, like, like heavy burlap uh, uh, sacks. But they very car, colorful. Now they rolled all that material, see? So uh...

Interviewer: So this is up in the northern reaches of Burma...

Mr. Erdely: Yes, far northern region of Burma...

Interviewer: So, these Burmese or are they more like China, Chinese?

Mr. Erdely: More, more like Burmese; so Burmese. All we could, one of 'em would speak very good English. He's been, went to English school under the British.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: See, this was all under British...

Interviewer: Right, these are British colonies.

Mr. Erdely: In fact, India was under British until 1948, and uh, the British almost went to war with America because they paid, uh, their workers in India a rupee a day. And they were pre, previously were uh, paying 'em a half a rupee. (laughter)

Interviewer: See what I mean? So we raised the salaries there, and ...

Mr. Erdely: Oh yeah, everything (unintelligible), and the women would go to, uh, 8 times a day, they'd go out and uh, and uh, pick tea on the plantations.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: And uh, they wouldn't be gone a day or two from pregnancy, and they're back in there carrying their little baby.

Interviewer: My goodness.

Mr. Erdely: So the uh, the back in the India, (unintelligible) India, for, for example, but back in North Africa, when we were in on the docks, uh, and we ate out of the mess kits, there was natives there in North Africa fought each other to get the uh, uh, get the scraps out of, in the garbage cans, the scraps we'd throw it in. That's how destitute they were.

Interviewer: That's how hungry they were.

Mr. Erdely: Now, same way in India, they would uh, fight each other to carry our barracks bags. Sometimes you had to go over a long narrow bridge, get from the boat. And went up on a boat in India, Burma (unintelligible) river, 3 days and 3 nights, and uh, they had to keep a guard to keep the gamblers in the middle to keep from uh, capsizing. Gotta keep 'em in the middle 'cause its so heavy loaded that they had to uh, top heavy, if it go one way or the other.

Interviewer: Oh, my gosh.

Mr. Erdely: But uh, the uh, the being out there and not being able to communicate; not able to see any, any TV, or, or, moving show of anything of this nature, you're practically isolated from the world.

Interviewer: You got a lot of time to think about uh, the world and its problems, and its...

Mr. Erdely: Yeah.

Interviewer: What about disease, did you, you were right there in the middle of these jungles and...

Mr. Erdely: And I got a lot of uh, uh, I never did come, I come down with a slight case of malaria.

Interviewer: You did?

Mr. Erdely: Yeah. And they didn't quite declare it enough to be a disability.

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Erdely: But when I came home, shortly after I came home, before I went to work in uh, uh, in the mines...I worked in the mines, coal mines seven, seven years before I, anything from apprentice miner to section foreman, before I came to Texas.

Interviewer: Okay. So, were you with the same group of guys on this...?

Mr. Erdely: Yes, all the way from uh, uh, from basic training on.

Interviewer: And so, the first 7 months, you were with that same 9 other guys and then all 10 of you went to the second ...

Mr. Erdely: Yes, same platoons did not change.

Interviewer: Uh-hum, uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: At least ours didn't.

Interviewer: So at least the weather must have been a little cooler then in this...

Mr. Erdely: Oh yes, in a, in a mountains, it was much cooler.

Interviewer: And less, fewer insects, and...

Mr. Erdely: Yes.

Interviewer: So that, must have been a little more pleasant than the...

Mr. Erdely: Little more pleasant than the other 'cause you didn't have any leaches uh, over, uh, down there.

Interviewer: Tell me about the leaches.

Mr. Erdely: Well, the leaches is black, uh, black, gray and brown, and they just git ahold of you and they, they just stays. Sometimes if you could uh, if you, if you uh, took a cigarette, sometimes it make 'em crawl out, they crawl out of your skin.

Interviewer: Let go.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah.

Interviewer: How long were they?

Mr. Erdely: Oh, they be, now, they're about 2 inches long.

Interviewer: And they just be all over you then?

Mr. Erdely: Well, basically, they get on you, when you going through wet brush and everything, water and everything. Basically, they, they, uh, they attach you legs from you feet up to you knees. Sometimes you go above if you don't get a chance to get, clean 'em off.

Interviewer: So when they attach on to you, its hard to get 'em off.

Mr. Erdely: That's right.

Interviewer: And they leave a wound then?

Mr. Erdely: Uh, yes, uh, the wound its uh, it takes awhile to heal.

Interviewer: So after your second 7 month assignment, what, what happened? How did it feel to come down off the mountain after 7 months?

Mr. Erdely: Well...



Interviewer: Tell me what was going through your heart and mind.

Mr. Erdely: You was, uh, you always feel that uh, that the other people going to relieve you are going to treat the natives. I think every one of us had a concern for the natives. The uh, goodness that they (unintelligible) us. Because the first night we arrived up there and was left in uh, on top of a mountain in sleeping bags, and they had to uh, the women and the men come up on Christmas Eve 1944 and to uh, uh, to uh, sing us Christmas carols.

Interviewer: Really.

Mr. Erdely: In their native language.

Interviewer: That is incredible.

Mr. Erdely: And invited us to church. They had a nice church up there; it was all bamboo and everything. You know you cut the roots of bamboo and you, (unintelligible), boil 'em, slash 'em, and boil 'em, and you can't hardly tell 'em from uh, French fries.

Interviewer: Is, is that right? (laughter)

Mr. Erdely: See, and a many people were in the jungles, particular the pilots, they crashed in the jungles. That's where they got the water, between the cane, the cane, like from the fishing pole, old cane...it had water in there.

Interviewer: Really.

Mr. Erdely: And they purify water although it was a little bitter, but it was pure and that's how they survived in that respect.

Interviewer: So these uh, native Burmese were Christians?

Mr. Erdely: Well, to a great extent, I'd say they were.

Interviewer: So, but I mean they had a church, and they sang you Christmas carols, and uh...

Mr. Erdely: We listened to them, the music and the preachin' there, and you, you didn't have to understand the language to know he was trying to preach something to get through to ya. But the lieutenant told her, he was a great guy in many ways, but he was an opium smoker.

Interviewer: Oh.

Mr. Erdely: Yes, he went to all those villages. So, uh, he'd, we'd try to get him involved in this, but found out he'd died many years...

Interviewer: That opium's tough on you, isn't it?

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, he was from uh, up in New York. But uh, lost my (unintelligible)...frame of thought.

Interviewer: Well, we were talking about the natives that sang the Christmas carols came up...

Mr. Erdely: Oh yeah. So, so I got, ...the, the lieutenant, he said, "Now, they can have ever 7 or 8 different foods wrapped up in, in uh, in leaves. Leaves come out of bamboo shoots, they use the bamboo for everything. To make things, make thing..."

Interviewer: Furniture and food and...

Mr. Erdely: Yes, make the whole home from food, from that. So uh, he said, "Even if you don't like it," he said, "taste a bit of each one; otherwise you insult 'em." And said if we want to get out (unintelligible) (laughter)

Interviewer: You want them to be your friends. So how was the food?

Mr. Erdely: Well, its been awhile; I can't, I remember rice was good. I forget what kind of meat there was, or vegetables they were serving. As I say its been over 50, (unintelligible). In August, I left there over 60 years ago.

Interviewer: Yeah, isn't that something?

Mr. Erdely: So uh, my, my, I'm 83, my, so I was 23 when I left there.

Interviewer: So you were on good terms then with uh, the locals?

Mr. Erdely: Yes, we certainly were, but you ask me what about, thought about when I'm goin back. And I could, you could see how people wanted to take over (unintelligible), structure they want to treat somebody, and whether they were lower class of people were than you or not, but they want to look down on, on. But really, lot of times the lower class of people has your life in their hands and you don't know it. But after you get older, you get wiser, you recognize this, see what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah, they could have uh, made life very...

Mr. Erdely: I (unintelligible) type-written, 2 page letter on this many years ago and sent it out to all those boys that I knew at that time. One family was in Chicago and the other one was in California; the other was in Wisconsin; and the other was in Massachusetts; the other was in Baltimore...

Interviewer: So when you were coming down off the mountain, and you were concerned about your replacements and what they would treat the locals in a kindly manner like you did...

Mr. Erdely: Yes, yeah, we maybe, we treated 'em very nice.

Interviewer: And so did you have a chance to talk to your replacements?

Mr. Erdely: No, they were there; you never did see 'em again. They'd be up there 6-8 months.

Interviewer: But you didn't come down and then they'd go up?

Mr. Erdely: No, you weren't allowed; you were glad to get out of there. You didn't want 'em goin see how actually this thing turned out. You, the thing was, that you just uh, just hope for the best. You, you done your duty, you just hope that it, they do their duty, see what I mean.

Interviewer: So here you are coming down off the mountain, and glad to be back in civilization...

Mr. Erdely: Oh, yeah, yeah. We uh, came back through Calcutta, I believe. Yeah, we came down, back to Calcutta, and then, ca, camped south of Calcutta. And uh, it wasn't but a day or two I was in there that we had to, well most of 'em, everybody was lookin for points, points to get out to go home. And the points was you had one point for each month in the States and two points for each month foreign service, and I...

(end of Tape 1, side 1)

Mr. Erdely: and those that didn't have 85 or more had to go home by boat. So I was one of the fortunate ones to fly back from Dum Dum Airport, Calcutta, India. Its named Dum Dum Airport right today.

Interviewer: It still is...

Mr. Erdely: Still is here on the October 7<sup>th</sup> 2005.

Interviewer: So tell me what Calcutta was like. I mean that's a big city.

Mr. Erdely: Well, really I wasn't there much. I just in there this one little uh, few hours.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. I thought you stayed there for a day or so.

Mr. Erdely: No, we, we were camped south of there. And then when they trucked us up there, to, and you bivouacked, you, you had tents uh, next to the airport. You had tents there to, uh, so I slept there in a tent. Didn't seem like there was, oh, one or two of us in there in the tent waiting on the aircraft the next day. And rode back all the way uh, with a C-46, bucket seats. Know what a bucket seat is?

Interviewer: Well, I think I do, but you tell me.

Mr. Erdely: The, its not the bu, seats you have in the aircraft today. The bucket seats is made out of the aluminum right on the floor of the fuselage. And the purpose of that is that uh, the fuselage is flat like a deck or something or a bed.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: So you carry cargo in there and you may have room to let some crew members to sit down on the side of the, the cargo in the fuselage, see? Well, it took us about a week to get back. Went from Calcutta to uh, New Delhi; New Delhi to Karachi; Karachi to Bagdad, Iraq; Cairo, Egypt...

Interviewer: Yeah, he's headed west.

Mr. Erdely: And he said, and you, you uh, uh, they give us uh, leave to stay overnight in, in and, and look at the pyramids.

Interviewer: You got to do that?

Mr. Erdely: Yes. I went up there in the, in the pyramids on, one, one day. And we went to Casa Blanca. And then most of the times there was evening, but they wouldn't let us go out, see? And then went to the Azores Islands and to

Bermuda Island, seemed to me like it was 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning when we got in there and left probably about daybreak. And then when head out to New, New York City. I never seen some of (laughter) the people, the women, uh just looked gorgeous when I got back.

Interviewer: Boy, after being all that time out in the middle of the jungle, that must have felt like you'd finally come home. (laughter). How'd it feel to fly into...

Mr. Erdely: Make you feel like you want to kiss the ground, like the tope, Pope had done.

Interviewer: Did you do that when you got out of the plane?

Mr. Erdely: I don't recall whether I did or not. (laughter) And then they sent us out to (unintelligible), I remember the one big thing after they got us over there. They said they'd, they'd send us over to I think its Camp Patrick Henry, I'm not sure. No, no that was in Virginia, excuse me. Its uh, Fort Meade for Maryland or but this place is in New Jersey. But they, they said, "What do you want to eat?" And they gave us ever, everything that they wanted to eat.

Interviewer: And you told 'em you wanted rice and fried bamboo. (laughter)

Mr. Erdely: I took a big steak. (laughter) Anyway, we were in Fort Meade in Maryland and I was discharged from there. And then given my (unintelligible), I'm not sure whether they give me a bus ticket or not, I don't recall. And 'cause I had to go down through Baltimore and its why I rode the bus and visit my sis over in Delaware. She worked in an amm, munitions manufacturing concern in Delaware all during the war.

Interviewer: Probably DuPont.

Mr. Erdely: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. So what was it like to get home?

Mr. Erdely: It was great.

Interviewer: Your folks were okay?

Mr. Erdely: Yeah, uh-hum.

Interviewer: And you went to work in the mines?

Mr. Erdely: Worked the mines 7 years.

Interviewer: And that was enough of that...

Mr. Erdely: And I thought I need to get out of there. (unintelligible) died in about a short of a year when I was in service. Dad was retired but uh, he wasn't getting along at all, and I just felt that I had to stay home, and my older sister stayed with him, stayed awhile. I stayed there 7 years. So, I told my older sister I think, no she left to go to Cincinnati a little while after that. She died a few years ago from cancer.

Interviewer: Hum.

Mr. Erdely: All in all, Dad had 9 children, and 4 of us left.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: I got 2 brothers and one sister.

Interviewer: Uh-hum. Well, that's an interesting story; I've never talked to a Signal Air Corps man who was in the middle of nowhere...

Mr. Erdely: But you see, it was the same time we was attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> Air Force.

Interviewer: Is that right?

Mr. Erdely: Yeah. Attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> Air Force. See I went in as a signal, on, and uh, uh, went to Signal Air Corps, I mean, Air, Air Corps. That's when it was Air Air Corps instead of Air Force.

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Erdely: See? A number of years after that it was changed to the Air Force completely separated from the Army. See what I mean?

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Erdely: But at that time, they were all inter-mingled together, so to speak. Is this mine? Uh, yeah. That's yours.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's mine. Well, that is interesting. Anything else that we can talk about while I got the tape recorder running as far as your World War II experience?

Mr. Erdely: Well, I was uh, I never give it thought that uh, that anybody had uh, formed this uh, organization you have being disbanding tomorrow...

Interviewer: Yeah, the CBI organiza...

Mr. Erdely: China/Burma/India World War II veterans. Now I didn't know about it until Dec...September or December in uh, 1989, and finally found 'em. My, had uh, was a member of the, uh, VFW as well as the American Legion. I called, I wrote to American Legion, and uh, headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana and asked 'em. Through the monthly magazine the VFW and American Legion, I was lookin for my outfit.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.



Mr. Erdely: And I was, come close, but I never did find a, the exact one I was wanting, 'cause I knew many of 'em were uh, having uh, reunions or get-togethers...

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Erdely: They practically every year. So, after about a week or 10 days, I got a letter from, and they said uh, "Yeah, you got some CBI people meeting up there in uh Tyler, Texas, spring meeting. And this uh, people that asked me to call up in Dallas or somewhere, he'd called, or Tyler, he'd called uh, the, the Ray Lent down here; we put out a Ray Lent award every year, had done about in 15 years...12, 15 years, in that respect. So, he'd called about that 30 minutes after you'd call him.

Interviewer: So you got connected again.

Mr. Erdely: And, and I uh, uh tried all these people I knew from the squad, try to get 'em involved, and no, and nobody wouldn't, couldn't get no, claimed they didn't knew, (unintelligible) was there in Chicago and one in Madison, 70 miles away from, uh, from Milwaukee. And that's where it began. I can't understand how I couldn't find out anything.

Interviewer: Hum.

Mr. Erdely: So its uh, I was uh, wanting sending a lot of literature and so forth and the wives usually uh, wrote something back and said uh, the one that died there in uh, Pennsylvania...2 in Pennsylvania. Uh, try to think of his name, but uh, he, uh, when he passed and the one that the sister from uh, the one from Baltimore said uh, David, his name's David Owens there, said, "David certainly did enjoy that information you sent to him."

Interviewer: Well, that's good.

Mr. Erdely: And every one of them.

Interviewer: That's good.

Mr. Erdely: But didn't take any effort to go to (unintelligible).

Interviewer: Yeah, they didn't take it to the next stage. Okay, well, thank you, Nick, for spending the...

(end of interview, Tape 1, side 2)

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