

John R. Ahlgren Oral History Interview

JAMES LINDLEY: This is Dr. James Lindley, this is the seventeenth day of June 2011 at 1400 hours Central Daylight Time. I am interviewing Mr. John R. Ahlgren, A-H-L-G-R-E-N; he lives in -- at 125 Parkway Drive, apartment 120--

JOHN AHLGREN: Parkway Road.

JL: Parkway Road, Parkway Road, I misread. Parkway Road, 120-- apartment 1206, Bronxville, New York, 10708. The purpose of the National Museum of the Pacific War Oral History Project is to collect, preserve, and interpret the stories of WWII veterans, home-front experiences, the life of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and the Old Nimitz Hotel by means of audio and video recordings. The audio and video recordings of such interviews become part of the Center for Pacific War Studies, the Archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, and the Texas Historical Commission. These recordings will be made available for historical and other academic research by scholars, members of the families of those interviewed. We, the undersigned, have read the above and voluntarily offer the National Museum of the Pacific War full use of the information contained on the audio and video recordings and/or written text of these oral history research interviews. In view of the scholarly

value of this research material we hereby assign the rights, title, interest pertaining to it, to the National Museum of the Pacific War and the Texas Historical Commission; and if you agree to that, please affirm that you do.

JA: I do.

JL: All right, and at this time I'd liked begin the interview and ask you to please start out by telling us your full name, where you were born, tell us a little bit about your family, your parents and brothers or sisters if you have any, where you grew up, and where you might have been or how you learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December the seventh, 1941, and then tell us your story, beginning with your entry into the Navy and your experiences. So, at this time I'll let you start talking and if you'll begin by telling us a little bit about yourself.

JA: I am John R. Ahlgren, A-H-L-G-R-E-N, and I was born in New Hampshire in 1920, and my folks were immigrants from Sweden and I luckily got a scholarship to Dartmouth College, graduated there in 1941, and entered Cornell Law School in September 1941. When the war started I got into the Navy as -- went to [submarine?] school, became an ensign, and in

19-- late 1942 was assigned to Admiral Nimitz's staff in Hawaii at Pearl Harbor.

JL: Let me just interrupt a second and ask you, what do you remember about December the seventh. Do you remember --

JA: Oh, December the seventh, yeah. It's an interesting day because it was a bright, sunny day on a Sunday, and I was living as a guest in the house of a English professor at Cornell who in turn his guest was the Chinese ambassador to the United States, and so we had an interesting conversation there, and then (inaudible) of that before I left Cornell, the American Council of Lenin Societies gave a course, a three-month course in Russian, free of charge, and they didn't say why. And I'm good at languages so I took it, and that became interesting later. So I got on Admiral Nimitz's staff as an ensign in late 1942, and then was there for two years and then the Navy understood that I knew Russian, the Russian language somewhat, so they sent me to the Naval Intelligence Language School at Boulder, Colorado, where we had seven months of Russian morning, noon, and night, for seven months, and --

JL: Right, let me interrupt you just a moment and have you back up and talk to us a little bit about your experiences on Admiral Nimitz's staff --

JA: Oh yes, I was the communications officer --

JL: -- and tell us --

JA: -- and we worked with these decoding machines to send messages back and forth all around, Pacific and all around the world, and --

JL: Did you have personal interactions with the admiral?

JA: No, I didn't have it while I was there but when I left he gave me a signed portrait of himself and he was -- my impression of him was very clear, he was a very calm, not excitable about anything, it seemed, very, very rock solid in his integrity and I was very -- his picture is one of my favorites, so he was a very fine person, but from day to day I was not in a position to interact with him.

JL: As a communications officer what was a day like for you? What did you do on a routine day?

JA: Our job was to translate, I mean, excuse me, use these decoding machines to decode into English both messages we were sending out and messages we were receiving, and as you probably know they changed the code machine every day so it was to make it secure, and we had no problem with being secure. As a matter of fact, I later found out after I -- many, many years later, I met a fellow from Ohio, a small town, who was decoding the Japanese code at the same time I was there, and that was a very top-secret place; even though they were right in the next building, we didn't know

they were there. But, I later met this fellow and he told me about -- the interesting thing about that was he's a young fellow from Urbana, Ohio, who had no particular training in decoding but -- and I still don't know how they did it, but I know they took masses of information and put them in the computers and digested it and somehow broke the code and we also know the Japanese didn't know it. And he was specializing in Japanese oil tankers going into Tokyo. He said they were sinking Japanese oil tankers right and left, it was extremely successful, so that was my experience there. But, anyway, then I was sent from there to Boulder, Colorado, where we had seven months of Russian, I was the valedictorian of the class, and was sent to Moscow after that as a translator and an attaché of our embassy in Moscow, and I was there for two years, and --

JL: When you were there, and on the embassy staff as a translator, did you wear your uniform or were you in civilian clothes?

JA: No, that was strictly civilian, strictly civilian. I worked with -- there was a service financed both by the British, Americans, Canadians, and Australians and every day we would translate every single thing written in Russian, and produce a document about an inch thick or so every day, and we'd send it around to foreign embassies who

wanted to pay for it. So, we were able to -- by using analysis because we didn't do it, but the analysts that took this material could deduce, make deductions, for example, if they produce so many automobiles they know they had so much steel, and they had to have that steel someplace, so they just traced -- it was a way -- we got 80 percent, I think, a large amount of intelligence from printed materials, because they had to communicate with each other. So, when it was written in Russian, we translated it, and that was part of the Cold War.

JL: Yes, what was Moscow like at that time?

JA: At that time Stalin was alive as you know, and it was very, very crude; just for example, my second [story?] had a little room in a building where to have a room by yourself, you had to pay extra for it, and when I went down the corridor to go to the bathroom the toilet, instead of being porcelain had rotted so much it was completely black. In other words it was very primitive, everything was very primitive. And the best Moscow restaurant, the [Arrivi?] Restaurant, they took me they were so proud to show their restaurant to an American, they took me to the kitchen, a huge room, was just a big, huge stove on top of which the chef would pick up the meat with their bare hands and turn them over, so everything was very crude there.

JL: Yes.

JA: And the Russians didn't drink to get happy-- get, they pass out. I was in a small town outside of Moscow, [Vincing?]- something, and stayed overnight, and at three o'clock in the morning there was a loud, loud, loud radio blasting out. So, I finally traced the radio down to where the room was, pushed the door open, and there was a Russian with his head down right next to the radio, this thing blasting, he had just drunk enough to pass out and he was -- that made him content, he was -- the life was so grim there, but that just gives you an idea of what it was like. So, and I was there for two years, and then when I came back to Washington they wanted me to join the CIA but I said -- there are two things problem with that, I said, number one, I find it hard to keep secrets, and secondly, I do want to get back to the business world. So, I went down to New York and started working on Wall Street, and I've been that way ever since, so --

JL: When you were there in Moscow, did you ever attend those May Day parades, the military parades?

JA: Well, I saw them, yes, they were pretty fancy, and it was just the way you saw it on television, all the military equipment, and but people lived -- I visited a family outside of Moscow when I was there, I met a girl on the

train and she invited me to stay for dinner at their house, and there was a mother and father, and two daughters, one of which I knew, and they stayed in a room that was about the size of about let's say 10 telephone booths, there were two beds, each one of them a single bed, but two people slept on each bed. And, there was only a space of three or four feet between the beds, so the four of them were there in a very, very small space and then no television, no radio, nothing. There was a loudspeaker in the ceiling that would just be turned on by the authorities; and then when I asked to go to the bathroom, they said just go -- it was wintertime -- they said you just go to the front door -- they were living in a Quonset hut, a big Quonset hut, so just go to the main door and walk out into the snow about 30 feet and do your business, there's no bathroom at all. So, it was very crude, they lived in very crude quarters.

JL: Now, at that time, were they rebuilding Moscow, because --

JA: No, not much, no, there was no -- this was 1946 and '47, they were surviving but they were doing no -- I think they had one or two new hotels, but they were -- the construction of them was so bad that the toilets -- even the toilet facilities didn't work properly, so in other words you couldn't find -- I couldn't find -- and we never -- in two years I never saw anything that really worked



well in Moscow. Meanwhile, we lived pretty well, I lived with the naval officers, and we had chauffeurs and we had housekeepers and we had, and but they were all very primitive, I would say, so... One time I took a girl home to her apartment and as we got off the bus to go into her apartment a fellow who was always following us got off the back part of the bus. I stayed in her room a couple of hours and came out, and he was waiting for me there to get on the bus on the way back. So, they followed us everywhere, so it was not a happy place, but we made the best of it, the American embassy had a lot of food and canned foods, but it was a very primitive existence. And in Moscow at that time they had what they call drying-out stations around the City of Moscow where when you got drunk and couldn't find your way home or something you just go into this room and flop down and pass out and you get up in the morning and leave again. It was a very, very primitive existence at that time.

JL: Yes, now did you fly into Moscow, is that how you got there?

JA: That's right, as a matter of fact I was assigned to go there and General Walter "Beetle" Smith, who was our ambassador to Moscow, was going at the same time so he took me over in his own bomber -- he had his own bomber. And so

we stopped in Paris, and he's a general and diplomat, so the Army, Navy, Army and the Foreign Service came out to meet us and so he was a great guy, very gruff guy but a very good-hearted guy, General Walter "Beetle" Smith.

JL: Right, right. So, during the time that you were there in Moscow, were you able to travel aside from just short distances away from Moscow, did you go to Leningrad or anywhere?

JA: Oh, no, we didn't go to Leningrad but we did want to go down to Gorki on the Moscow River, Volga River, and we asked and asked and asked over and over again for permission from the Russian authorities to go down -- just to go down to Gorki and stay a couple of days and look around, and they never came through with an answer, so we finally the hell with it, we just bought some tickets on the boat on the Volga River and got off in Gorki and went, we asked someone at the dock where is the best hotel? So, they told us, we went to the hotel and came to register, and they said, "Oh, yes, you're the group from Moscow," they knew all about where we were. So, anyway, the picture is just what you would expect it to be, very primitive, backward country; the people were very nice, but in other words, I was able to meet girls and visit their families and take them out to dinner and so forth but the physical

conditions for living were quite primitive. But, then as far as Russia goes, when I came back to the United States, about five years ago I wrote a speech on how the Cold War was really won, I made a speech about 20 pages, and showing how President Reagan did this almost singlehandedly. And you may not remember this but at the time when Reagan got elected, he was determined since he'd had trouble with the communists in Hollywood to break the Soviet Union, but in the meantime all of the well-known commentators in the United States said, oh my god he's going to start a war and he should realize that the Soviet Union is going to be there forever, it's just too big to defeat without a war. But Reagan said no, to make a long story short he pushed, as you know, what they call Star Wars missile defense. And when he went to the final meeting with Gorbachev at Reykjavík, Gorbachev offered him all kinds of things if we would just stop this Star Wars business, because Gorbachev knew that we, the United States, could theoretically build a missile defense system and they didn't know how to do it too well and they didn't have the money to do it, so he actually broke the Soviet economy. And so the reason I wrote the speech is I read -- you know the name George Kennan?

JL: Yes.

JA: Well, he was the so-called expert on Mos-- on Russia, and when he had his hundredth anniversary, when he was -- he just passed away, and General Powell said at his funeral that the Cold War was won just the way George Kennan said it would be. I knew that was completely wrong, so I wrote this speech about it explaining what really happened. I won't give you the whole speech now, it would take too long, but that's what happened there. So anyway, I had my fingers or my toes in both the ending of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, so it's sort of interesting time in history.

JL: As a young person there in Moscow during that time did you have any -- what was your impression of the Russians and the Russian government and how our relations with them were heading in the wrong direction, or they were heading in the wrong direction? What did you think about all of this as they had been our allies during the war but as many of the generals they were very concerned about them, right, as we prosecuted the war there?

JA: Yeah, well, I --

JL: What was your thoughts at the time that you were there in Moscow, can you remember what you were -- how you were thinking about them?

JA: Well, at that time I didn't have the perspective on it that I had later, so I didn't -- my work didn't require analyzing that sort of thing, but all I knew was that I was living in a very primitive country and of course they were very tough. Now, we had as you may know, in the 1930s, a lot of Americans who were for one reason or another decided they wanted to live in Moscow because we had such unemployment in the United States, they thought they would be better off in Russia, and it was so bad over there that they would try to come into our embassy to get back to the United States, when I was there, and it was very sad to see our military guards in front of our embassy turn them back, because they had no papers, they had thrown away their citizenship papers and so but they were so desperate and so unhappy at the decision to live there that they still tried to get out. It was a very sad situation, but I didn't have, at that time, I didn't have an analysis of the whole inter-- whole world picture of Moscow and Russia, which I did later on when I made a study of it, and wrote my speech.

JL: Yes, now when you were there and when you were doing this - - all of this translation, did you have any inkling about how it was that a country that was this primitive was able to mount such an enormous military effort and how that all

might have come to pass, how they had stripped their economy of everything but their military?

JA: Well, that's exactly what they did, they had a lot of brains, I mean, you know, they had some very brilliant scientists and so they -- and of course and you probably know, they stole the atomic bomb plans (inaudible) that they had, so but they did have brains and they knew how to use the material and the information they got, and built some good missiles. But, in the end, as I said, Reagan understood very clearly planned it out and executed it, the plan, to make them go broke, and I could tell when I did my research that after the Cold War was over we sent some people over there to help them build up their economy, so we'd -- they'd go to a big plant and they'd -- our guys would say, "Well, let's go down to your accounting department and we'll work on your finances and see how that's going," and they said, "Accounting department?" They didn't have an accounting department, it was a kind of an economy where they'd say, you've got to produce so many shoes, they just produce the shoes, and sent them out, they didn't, they had really no accounting records, as a regular thing there. So, it was -- once we got inside the picture we realized how weak they were, but they had enough brains left over from before the revolution to get some military

power going, obviously, which they -- but Reagan overcame that by pushing him to the wall on the missile defense thing, the SDI Star Wars.

JL: Right, well Reagan had difficulty to begin with because the leaders kept dying off, I think they went through three, two or three I can't remember now how many, but they went through several of them.

JA: I think [Andrappo?] was the last one, and but no, he that was one of his many jokes, he said, "I don't know who to talk to over there, they keep dying off on me."

JL: I remember him saying that.

JA: Yeah, but he, anyway, he had a clear picture. See, in Hollywood, he got his education on the communists because they tried to take over the movie industry, they wanted to have a big influence there so they could influence the propaganda in the United States, and Reagan was advised when he went to the studios, don't sit upright in your car, bend down below the height of the door so they can't see you, or shoot you. He said, to hell with that, he sat up straight through the whole thing and they never dared to shoot him. He was president of the Actors Guild and so he knew first hand how the communists operated and that's what got him started on this whole anticommunist understanding, so he was the perfect man for the job.

JL: He was a remarkable president.

JA: He was clear as a bell, and everybody thought he was a warmonger, and he knew the Soviets, they had the muscle to do it, to start World War III, but he knew they would never do it and so he'd call their bluff and he won that war just about single handed.

JL: Yes, yes I think he was a remarkable individual because of his kind of clear thinking about what to do and how to bring that to pass.

JA: Yeah, he said, everyone said, you can't do this you're going to start World War III, he says no, and he was absolutely right.

JL: Did you ever have an opportunity to meet him?

JA: Never did, no, but I feel as though, I've read so much about him, that I feel like I know him better than a lot of people who may not have understood what he was doing.

JL: Right, well let me ask a couple of questions back to your time at Pearl Harbor, were there any episodes during that two years that you were there that were particularly challenging or were there any episodes that were particularly humorous that you were involved in?

JA: Well, not particularly, we -- watch officers, and the communication officers were given the authority to form their own watch -- someone had to be there 24 hours a day,



in receiving and coding these messages, and so we lived in a bachelor officers quarter, an [open-sided and always?] very hot. So we had a watch system where every four days we'd work almost all night and then have the next day off, so but we had to sleep during the daytime in this tremendous heat, so we learned how to sleep under all conditions, but there was no big [turn of?] the war, it was just at the time that we were -- we had turned the war -- after the Midway battle we had turned the tide and we were going to win it sooner or later, we knew that, we just kept grinding away. And it's interesting the change in technology since then, when we would have a meeting, for example, of all the officers on the staff, because an important message was coming through from Washington, a coded message, so on the wall it showed the decoding machine's decoding this message, and typing out one letter at a time on wall; and today, of course, it wouldn't be one letter at a time you'd get the whole damn message in one shot, but whatever we had it was good enough for what we needed, quite primitive compared to what we have today.

JL: Yes, yes. Now, were the receiving stations, radio receiving and transmitting stations there where you were or was all of this coming to you over a landline?

JA: I think it was mostly landline, I didn't see any huge antennas in our building so either landline or underground, (inaudible) our antennas were much bigger, there was really not much sign of antennas at all, but they had a way of transmitting it to us and sending it out. But it just went quite slowly, and very successfully, I was just amazed how smooth it was, and they say how -- because I didn't speak much to Admiral Nimitz when I saw him, you know, walking around the headquarters, and he always seemed extremely calm, never excited, and just as wide awake as possible, amazing guy. And he had a good way of when you left, he had a picture of himself, and underneath the picture he would say, "thank you for your services, lieutenant," I was lieutenant senior grade when I left, and just a very pleasant fellow to work for.

JL: Well, are there any other stories that you might like to relate?

JA: Well, the main dramatic thing is that we won the war in 1945, as you know, and but the developments in the Cold War, I was much more involved in that because I understood it and could write this speech to correct the impression that most of the people in the, what I'd say the people who speak on television, the commentators, did not understand much as I did.

JL: Now, in 1946 when you were there in the embassy in Moscow, the CIA had not been formed, is that correct? Or when did --

JA: Well, I think then it was still the OSS, and --

JL: Did we have a number of OSS officers there, I suppose?

JA: Well, we had some, yeah, we never knew the exact number but we knew they were there; and of course a lot of famous people came through there at cocktail parties and everybody who wanted to run for president came through there, so it's an interesting time and --

JL: You were telling me about the important people that came through the tmbassy.

JA: Yeah, everybody who wanted to run for office or president or anything would always want to say, "I was in Moscow and met so and so," but I certainly enjoyed working with Walter "Beetle" Smith, he was -- you know, he never went to WestPoint, as you know, he's a very rough and ready guy, and but very warm-hearted fellow.

JL: He was a very smart man.

JA: Yeah, but he had terrible ulcers, he'd been through an awful lot of tough times in his own life, but he did his job.

JL: When you were there did you attend all those embassy parties that are so commonly held?

JA: Yeah, we went to a lot of those because that was -- we had parties almost every other day, so a lot of parties. So, we met an awful lot of people. I was glad I did all that because I got a better picture of what the world was all about.

JL: Right, right, well we certainly appreciate you taking the time to share your story with us, and we --

JA: I'm glad to do it.

JL: -- and we certainly thank you for your service to our country.

JA: Well, thank you so much, I admire what you're doing, too; you're spending your whole time on this.

JL: Well, it's, I think a project worthwhile doing, and I'm very happy to do this. What I will do is I will make a copy of this interview and I will put it in the mail, it'll be in the mail to you in the next few days, if it doesn't get in there today it'll be in there next week and you should receive it shortly thereafter. So, sometime in the next few days you should get a copy of this interview, and what we will do is, as I mentioned to you earlier, the team of people who are doing the transcriptions will get to it at some point in the future, I don't know how long it will be, I know that they're several years behind just because of the nature of this, but I will have a copy of the

interview to you. Now, let me just tell you, this is, this copy is an MP3 file, so if you put it in your computer you want to click on the MP3 format, so that's what it will play.

JA: Okay, all right.

JL: And it will say this on the label, it'll have your name on the label and it will say that this is an MP3 file.

JA: Okay, good, all right. Thank you for doing this, I enjoyed talking to you and I wish you all the best and hope you can get to complete --

JL: Well, we're going to work on this and do our very best to collect as many as possible, and again thank you for your time and for your service to our country.

JA: Well, thank you very much.

JL: Yes sir, you have a pleasant evening.

END OF AUDIO FILE