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Interview with
ROBERT M. SINKS

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Oral History Collection

Robert M. Sinks

Interviewer: William J. Alexander February 18, 1999

Place of Interview: Kerrville, Texas

Mr. Alexander: This is Bill Alexander, and I'm interviewing Robert Murray Sinks. We're in Kerrville, Texas, on February 18, 1999. Mr. Sinks was a member of the U.S. Naval Group, China, during World War II.

Let's start off our interview with you telling me where you were born, and when.

Mr. Sinks: I was born on June 20, 1923, in West Frankfort, Illinois. I was given the name of Robert Murray Sinks--Robert Murray, because of my grandfather, who was a Scotsman who really liked the name Robert because of Robert the Bruce. My father's name was Harold E. Sinks. My mother's name was Myna, and she was often called "Minnie."

My father's family had been in Illinois since 1800. We're an old family there, established from that time. I am a graduate of the University of Illinois in the Class of 1947. I met my wife, Dolores, there.

Alexander: What we're going to do first is get your primary and secondary education. Where did you go through grade school and high school?

Sinks: I went through grade school at the Lincoln School in West Frankfort. I went through middle school at Central School, and high school at Frankfort Community High School.

Alexander: And you graduated from high school?

Sinks: I graduated from high school in 1940.

Alexander: And what were your plans at that point?

Sinks: I went over to Carbondale [to Southern Illinois University] to go to school. I was a Naval Reservist.

I remember Pearl Harbor as if it was yesterday because I was being taken back to school by my dad, along with my best friend, Sam Hancock, when we heard about Pearl Harbor on the radio. We got back to school, and I remember that night very well because we all

gathered. A lot of my roommates were fellows from German communities in southern Illinois. We all talked about this, and we figured: "Well, we'll be going." I remember registering for a new trimester the next day, and they said: "Don't worry. You're a Reserve, and you'll be able to finish your education." The next thing I knew, I was in Corpus Christi, Texas (chuckle), going to basic training.

Alexander: Was that a boot camp at Corpus Christi?

Sinks: It was at boot camp at that time. We had to wait thirty days to get uniforms. They didn't even have uniforms for us then.

Alexander: And this was in 1941?

Sinks: Well, it was 1942 now.

Alexander: In what month?

Sinks: As far as I remember, I think it was March or April. I don't remember the month exactly. But I do remember that winter because I got my experience with my first "blue norther" [swiftly-moving cold weather front] in Texas.

Alexander: It can be pretty cold down in Corpus Christi. How long was basic training in those days?

Sinks: Basic training there lasted about six to eight weeks. I was hoping to become a pilot, but I had trouble with seeing colors. They also said: "You'll get off the carrier and make the strike, but you'll never find the carrier again." (chuckle) So, I ended up becoming a meteorologist.

Alexander: Let's start back when that happened. You finished boot camp. Did you sign up for aviation?

Sinks: Yes. Because this was an air base, I thought I would have liked to get into that.

Alexander: And they did all the tests and so forth.

Sinks: Yes. They said I'd make a good pilot, but I got lost the minute I got in the air. Apparently, I suffered from some kind of disorder, and I am dyslexic.

Alexander: So, then they said: "Well, you can't fly, but we can use you somewhere else."

Sinks: They decided, because of my background, to make me a meteorologist, and I liked that. So, that's where they put me. They trained me in meteorology right there in Corpus Christi. I stayed there and qualified. I

was taught how to take a plane up with an adiabatic chart on it. I usually took off early in the morning. I took off before they started flying the training missions to check out the weather. We used what were called idiobatic [?] charts. They were to check out and find inversions and that kind of thing.

Alexander: You left boot camp, and you came out a seaman second class. You're now in training for meteorology.

Sinks: Yes. I became an aerographer in early 1943. I got promoted rather quickly. I was still in Corpus Christi. I was a meteorologist, and a fellow came in, and he asked for volunteers for a special assignment. We'd probably go to China. They needed meteorologists to go to China, and I volunteered for that.

Alexander: You were an isobaric expert at this time.

Sinks: Yes.

Alexander: That was the best thing that they could give you at that time.

Sinks: Right.

Alexander: So, you volunteered for that.

Sinks: Yes.

Alexander: Did anybody else go for that?

Sinks: I was the only one selected for that.

Alexander: How many were in your class? Do you have any idea?

Sinks: There were only two of us in the meteorology class. That's why we were really well trained. We had it better than the guys at Lakehurst, New Jersey. Also, both of us had experience from our education that we had been given at universities. I had some training there.

Alexander: You had taken some meteorology?

Sinks: Well, enough that I knew a little bit about it.

Alexander: So, you volunteered, and you were going to China. How did you get there?

Sinks: I volunteered, and I ended up going to Washington, DC, first. There I underwent a lot of further training.

Alexander: In meteorology?

Sinks: In aerology, but also in code. I also had to learn cryptography. When I volunteered for this duty, I was brought into China, and I

came into what was called the Interior Control Board.

Alexander: Did you know that this was going to be part of it? Did you think that you were going to be a meteorologist, sitting on a rock in China?

Sinks: Yes, but when I got in there, they said, "You have to do more than one function." I went through a lot of examinations--just all types of examinations--to find out what I was qualified for and what I could do. I learned cryptography; I also learned further instrumentation.

Alexander: So, you're into a situation now that was not what you volunteered for.

Sinks: Well, I volunteered for whatever was to be done.

Alexander: But they didn't tell you about all the rest of this stuff.

Sinks: All that I knew was that I was going to China. But once I became a member of this, I had to undergo some further, special training in cryptography and coding. I also became an expert with a submachine gun. We were also

told at the time: "When you go to China, you'll be doing other functions besides meteorology. We'll be training people." And, ultimately, that took place. I remember that I went through quite a lot of training at that time in code work.

Alexander: Training--doing what? Any kind of physical training?

Sinks: Yes. We were sent out to various camps. We were sent to the Marine camp [Quantico, Virginia]. We had to be isolated. We had to go through a psychological test to see whether we could be isolated by ourselves. I proved that I could do that.

Alexander: How did they do that?

Sinks: We were sent out to spend some time by ourselves for a couple of nights. It was near Quantico somewhere. They dropped us out there, and we spent the night and a couple of days by ourselves.

Alexander: Did they give you food?

Sinks: No.

Alexander: That's what I figured. Did they prepare you for that?

Sinks: We were prepared. I found out that you can eat cattails (chuckle).

Alexander: This is pretty important for when we get into some of these things. So, you had survival training, basically.

Sinks: Yes, that was survival training. Plus, there were also psychologists and psychiatrists who questioned you a lot.

Alexander: Did you have expertise in any arms beside the submachine gun? What were your weapons?

Sinks: I was taught with pistols and rifles. We were also taught to use hand grenades. That was taught to us by Marines. We also learned how to parachute jump. All of these things were part of the training that we went through.

Alexander: Did you get any training with Japanese rifles? I have a reason for asking this.

Sinks: No, we didn't. It was quite an experience that we had in Washington during that training. Also, I was promoted while I was there. I became a first class petty officer.

Alexander: First class meteorologist?

Sinks: Yes.

Alexander: How long did you stay at Quantico?

Sinks: We weren't there but a few weeks. I remember that they moved us to some other places. Some places we didn't even know where we were. We'd just take off. But we had to be around northern Virginia or Maryland-- somewhere around Washington, DC. We also had to learn communications.

Alexander: How many were you?

Sinks: Maybe two or three--no more than three.

Alexander: Did you get involved in getting into some places where people couldn't even recognize who you were? Did you ever get into the chow line, by stealth, in front of somebody without their knowing it? What I'm trying to say is that this is very much the same training that you'd get if you were going to be in the 6th Army's Alamo Scouts, who were very much in that same area.

Sinks: While we were there, we were taken out of uniform. A lot of times, we traveled strictly in civilian clothes. I recall that one time we went by rail out to a city. This had to have been somewhere in Pennsylvania.

We had what were called "SSTR-1s," which were radios in briefcases. You had a charger with a hand crank, and you'd throw the antenna up. We had to be able to communicate, but we couldn't be identified. We had to communicate back to a special number, probably back in Washington, DC. We had to make contact with that and do some code work, and then everything was okay. That was one of the tasks that we had to do.

I remember that three of the fellows were sent to Chicago, all the way from Washington. We were supposed to be able to communicate as far as 1,500 miles with this. This was quite a setup. I remember that they checked into what is now the Hilton Hotel in Chicago. They threw their antenna out the window, sat down, charged the radio, and then somebody ordered room service (chuckle). They got picked up by the FBI, and they had to stay in jail for three days before somebody from Washington vouched for them (chuckle). They taught them a lesson! They called for room service, and some guy brings it up, and

here's a guy sitting over here with this radio and having on earphones! How stupid could you be? That was one of the fun times. When we get together, which we do now once a year, it's good to hear the stories back and forth.

I went into China in 1944. I had to go down to...they were shipping all the troops out of someplace in Virginia. I think it was Norfolk. I remember being shipped overseas on a ship that had Merrill's Marauders on it. [Editor's note: Major General Frank Merrill was the commander of the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), or "Merrill's Marauders," a commando unit that operated behind Japanese lines in Burma.]

Alexander: How did you know that?

Sinks: They were identified. I remember that what was most impressive was that the officers stayed right with their men. They did not have special quarters or anything else. It was a very, very tough outfit.

Of course, being a Navy man and this being a troopship, we were given chores. We had to

work the charts for the ship because we knew how to do this. There were nine of us.

Alexander: What charts?

Sinks: The navigation charts. When the captain found out that he had nine Navy people on the ship, he pulled us all up and put us to work. We had to do the charts because he found out that we were capable of doing that.

By the way, the nine that I was with...I remember that before we left Washington, DC, we were brought into a room. I remember Admiral [H. E.] Yarnell being there, along with a lot of "brass" [high-ranking officers]. They told us that the job that we were to set out to do was extremely important, and that six of us would not make it out of the nine. All nine of us survived.

Alexander: That's incredible!

Sinks: To this day, when I think back on this, I think it was because of the training that we received. When we went to China, I was a member of U.S. Naval Group, China.

Alexander: Before we do that, now, where did you land?

Sinks: We landed in Bombay, India. We were

immediately taken off. We were the first to get off the ship. We were taken off the ship and taken to a British barrack in Bombay and put in British uniforms.

Alexander: Did Merrill's Marauders get off at Bombay, also?

Sinks: I don't know if they did or not. I really don't know.

Alexander: I don't know, either.

Sinks: I don't know if they got off, because we were immediately taken off and put into British uniforms at the British barrack. The "Brits" thought that we were "Canucks," as they called Canadians.

Alexander: Because of the way that you talked?

Sinks: Yes.

Alexander: What kind of insignia did you have, as far as your rating was concerned?

Sinks: We didn't have any ratings on. We had British uniforms. The amazing thing about it was that the uniforms were wool (chuckle). You talk about miserable!

Our first night there was quite an experience, because they introduced us to the

rations that they had. We were allowed to go to the British officers' club. So, we were something better than just the "riff-raff." We found out why they call them "limeys," because we really got introduced to gin (chuckle). We got picked up by a British patrol that night (laughter). Fortunately, we got out of that really easily, but that was quite a night that I'll never forget! We were nineteen years old or so.

Alexander: Have you drunk gin since then?

Sinks: Well, I did develop a liking for it. Then we traveled by rail across to Calcutta. That was an experience on that railway because, boy! The temperatures were something else, and we were in those uniforms. Plus, there was no such thing as air-conditioning.

Also, I could not get myself acclimated to Indian food at the time. I remember one time stopping at someplace, and they came up with what looked like liver. It was green. I didn't eat it. The amazing thing was that it was good for weight reduction. I think we all lost about ten pounds each just going

across India. Mind you, we had been told: "Don't drink the water!" That was one of the things we had been put through.

Alexander: Gin again?

Sinks: Well, we learned how to drink the tonic with the gin.

Also, I just remembered this. We were given Chinese lessons back in Washington, DC. There was a woman who taught us the Chinese language. We had that for six hours a day, learning Chinese phonetically. Amazingly, it came in handy. I had the ability, when I was in China, to get along all right. I did end up traveling across China part of the time by myself.

After we were in Calcutta--I wish I could remember the dates for this--I flew over the "Hump" [Himalaya Mountains]. My assignment was to Chungking, China. I remember flying over the "Hump" in a CNAC. It was not a military airplane. It was a Chinese National Airways plane, but it was the same thing as the military plane.

Alexander: A C-47?

Sinks: Yes, or a DC-3 or [whatever]. [Editor's note: The Douglas C-47 Dakota transport plane was modified into the DC-3 for use in civilian passenger travel.] I remember flying into Kunming, and from Kunming we landed in Chungking on some river bottom. Chungking was on top of a mountain, and, of all things, rather than me climbing that mountain, they had a sedan chair for me. To this day, that fascinates me. I thought: "I'm not getting in that thing! They're going to drop me!" But that was the only sure-footed way to get you up there. They had been doing that so much, so it was very fast.

Chungking was an experience. We had a special camp outside of Chungking, and it was called "Happy Valley." That was for the U.S. Naval Group, China. That was my group. I remember being taken to this camp, and I was in that camp for, oh, a good three to six months.

Alexander: How many others were there besides you?

Sinks: That camp was maybe a hundred or 150,

maximum.

Alexander: All of them had the same reason to be there as you?

Sinks: Some of them were doing some other things. This was for the last phase of our training. In the meteorology place there, there must have been twenty or twenty-five men. There might not have been 150 altogether at that camp because altogether the size of the total SACO organization at its full peak was about 3,000 men, of which, I'd say, the majority were logistical people. [Editor's note: SACO, or the Sino-American Cooperative Organization, was a joint effort between the U.S. Navy Group, China, and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's secret police, the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the National Military Council, which was run by Lieutenant General Tai Li. SACO was established on April 15, 1943, to train Chinese guerrillas, gather intelligence, and to conduct insurgency operations behind Japanese lines in China.]

But Chungking was where we really had a

learning experience. There were a lot of things to train you for going out to where you would be assigned to. While I was there, I got malaria and dengue fever at the same time. That was an experience I'll never forget because there are two weeks of my life that I can't even remember. I lost over sixty pounds. I remember that there was a Captain Tayloe. He was a Navy captain and a doctor from El Paso, Texas. He took care of me--they said--during that time. I remember that when I got over it, he said, "You know, there's no diseases left in your body because they all burned out. You had a temperature of about 105 degrees." They were concerned that I was going to drop into encephalitis, which would have affected my brain. But he took care of me. I remember that when I got over it, he said, "I want to show you something." He took me over to a mirror, and I could hardly recognize myself because I was so thin. But, I'll tell you something, I was in great shape (chuckle). I think I was at 200 pounds before that, and I was now at 140-

something. Well, I got back in the swing of things, and about three months later I was up to 164 pounds.

Alexander: That's fighting weight.

Sinks: Yes. I was in the best shape that I've probably ever been in my life. I got called in by Admiral "Mary" Miles. He got that name because, when he was at Annapolis, there was a very popular movie star by the name of Mary Miles, so they named him "Mary." [Editor's note: The given name of Admiral Miles was Milton. Miles was the director of U. S. Navy Group, China, and shared the directorship of SACO with Lieutenant General Tai.] I would have literally gone through hell for that man [weeping]. That fellow...I mean, he was one-in-a-million. He told me what I was going to have to do, and how important what I was going to do was--how much the fleet depended upon the weather information I was going to get.

Alexander: That was one-on-one?

Sinks: Yes, with an admiral. I was a first class petty officer. How many people have had that

experience? He made me feel that that war was my responsibility and that I was going to be a big factor in helping the war effort. Boy, I took that really seriously!

I remember leaving there. One thing about Miles is that, while I was behind Japanese lines, he wrote to my mother. He sent her silks and things like that. My mother had a big picture, when I came home after the war, in her living room of him. It was signed by him: "To a SACO mother." That's quite an experience. That's why I'd go through hell for someone like him.

Well, I then took off. I was put on a plane with about five tons of gear [facetious comment] and sent down to Kweilin.

Alexander: Were there several of you?

Sinks: No, I was by myself. We flew to Kweilin first. Kweilin is in southern China. It was a big Air Force base, which earlier on had been lost to the Japanese.

From there we went to Kan-chou, which was another Air Force base. From there I had to travel by sampan. I had to take this gear.

That's when I learned to travel by myself. I had thirty days by myself. The only skill that I had was the Chinese. If I heard the word "friendship" in English, I knew that the Chinese who said "friendship" was one that I had to follow. There would be all kinds of Chinese around.

By the way, I did not have a uniform on. I was dressed pretty much as a Chinese, except they could tell. I had taken enough Atabrine that I was almost the same color as them (chuckle). [Editor's note: Atabrine was an anti-malarial drug used by Allied troops in the China-Burma-India and Pacific Theaters. A minor side effect of taking Atabrine was that the drug gave the user's skin a yellow, jaundiced appearance.]

I recall that I had all this gear, and I had coolies with me. One time I had to go across this mountain range. I had new coolies come in, and every one of them was a woman. I thought, "This can't happen! This is a lot of equipment!" I was also carrying some boxes of .45-caliber ammunition and

carbine ammunition. My gosh! They put that on "yo-yo" poles and took off, and I was going with them! [Editor's note: The "yo-yo" pole was a common means of transporting goods in Southeast Asia and China. It consisted of a basket or cloth slung below the end of a pole, which would be carried at either end by two bearers who chanted "yo-yo" or "yo-ho" to stay in step while carrying the load.] By the time we were up these mountains...I was carrying a submachine gun, a carbine, a .45-caliber pistol, and a .38-caliber pistol because we needed to take as many arms as we could with us. One of these girls with the "yo-yos" had my carbine; one had my submachine gun; and they had given me a staff to carry (chuckle). Here I was, nineteen years old and strong, but they could go! We'd stop and have some rice--I mean, just some rice.

Finally, I got to the destination where I was going. I remember that I got to this place, and there I was met by, of all things, a fellow that I had met out of Houston,

Texas, named Cy Morris, who was the architect of the Astrodome. [Editor's note: Morris was a member of the architectural firm Wilson, Morris, Crain, and Anderson, which, along with outside contractors, contributed to the design of the Astrodome.] This was in 1944.

Alexander: Where were you now?

Sinks: I was near a place called Huaan, China, which was back from the coast about sixty, seventy, or eighty miles--something like that. That's where we were given the mission to set up a camp for training guerrillas, and also I had to set up a meteorological station there to send up these radiosonde balloons and "pie balls" because the B-29s [Boeing Superfortress heavy bombers] were going to begin raiding. [Editor's note: A radiosonde is an instrument carried aloft, usually by balloon, to gather and transmit meteorological data.] They wanted the weather from down there, and, also, they were going to make some attacks on Japan, and, also, they were going to make strikes on

Formosa [now Taiwan]. So, I had to get that weather station set up.

I got that under way, but the amazing thing was that, before all this happened, we had to get the camp established. We took over an old Chinese temple. Cy was an architect, and he designed how to make this thing into a base. It turned out to be a really fascinating place.

Now, mind you, before we got that, we had to find a place to live, and the only place where we could find quarters was the place over where they dumped the "honey pots" [chamber pots]. Now, the "honey pots" were the way that they fertilized their fields back then. It was nothing but pure dung. We had to live there for a while until we took this temple over, and that was something! Gosh! What an experience that was! That's something I'd just as soon forget.

Cy and I got together two years ago. We got to reminisce a lot about things. That place that we built was really quite an operation.

I had to go down to the coast at one time.

Alexander: Now, right now we must be somewhere around--
what?

Sinks: We're now into Fukien Province. We were in
this place called Huaan, and camps were being
established up and down the coast of China.
This was later to be known as "Camp Six." It
was to be the one for training guerrillas.

Things were beginning to happen out in the
Pacific, and I received orders to go down to
the coast. In reality, that was pretty
dangerous down there because the Japanese...

Alexander: You were on the coast of what?

Sinks: We were on the coast of Fukien. This was all
Japanese-held territory that we were in.
Now, understand something. The admiral had
been out there long before, and we'd stick to
certain areas. Huaan was right in the middle
of nowhere. There were no roads leading to
it. The only way you could get to it was by
coolie or by river transportation. The
Japanese had never been there for the entire
war. To give you some idea of how isolated
it was, when we started working with the

guerrillas, we promised never to take a guerrilla more than twenty-five miles from his home. Also, if something happened to him, his family would be taken care of. He was going to be paid; he was going to be fed; and he was going to be trained; but you never took him far. The biggest thing was the guarantee that his family would be taken care of if something happened to him. That was it. If you promised to pay money, the Japanese would probably outbid you. So, we strictly had to work with the people there. Mind you, can you imagine that most of these people had never been ten miles from their home in their entire lifetime?

Alexander: And maybe for several generations.

Sinks: Yes. In fact, I found out that in Fukien there were ninety different dialects. I've been back there since then, and the world's entirely different; but back then it was like that.

I remember traveling out from there one time, and all I had with me were Chinese. For two weeks I traveled out of there. That

was a two-week period when I didn't have anything to eat. I ended up killing a dog. We found this Chow dog. I always remember that it had a blue tongue.

Alexander: Then it must have been a Chow dog.

Sinks: Yes. I shot that dog, cooked it, and ate it. I remember killing a monkey, because there were monkeys down there, and eating that monkey. That never bothered me. I tell people about it, and I say, "No, because you'll find out that when you're hungry, you'll eat anything. I'm not kidding you!"

After that, I experienced a run where there were bananas growing. My God! I ate bananas like you wouldn't believe--until I was sick (chuckle)! They were little, bitty ones, but they were delicious! I've never found anything like them. But you can overdo it.

Things are coming back to me that I haven't thought about in a long time. I was ordered to go down to the coast to set up weather stations right across from the Japanese naval base at Amoy. I really thought that that was dad-gummed dangerous.

Alexander: Was it a pretty good-sized base, with warships and so on?

Sinks: Oh, yes! It was a big naval base. Also, I was to set up places along the coast where I'd have some Chinese with me. I trained them at each of those five places. Each one was equipped with a radio. There would also be an American radioman who had to be at each one of these places. They were for coastwatching. We had coastwatching stations all the way almost from Shanghai almost to Hong Kong.

Alexander: You were a coastwatcher here?

Sinks: Right. I was in charge of the ones across from Fukien.

Alexander: And they had some others?

Sinks: Yes. Like, another fellow, one of the nine fellows I was with.

Alexander: How far away would they be?

Sinks: Oh, good heavens! We would cover several hundred miles. After all, the coast there is about a thousand miles long; I don't remember exactly how long it is. But I had weather stations set up at these things, along with

American radiomen.

Alexander: How did you set up a station that doesn't get found or get caught?

Sinks: Oh! We had portable equipment. The Navy had portable anemometers for wind; we also had things for pressure. They gave us all the things that we needed for weather. Then, at the main place where I was at, I had quite extensive equipment. I had mercurial barometers.

Alexander: You were talking about sending up some balloons there.

Sinks: Yes. I was in charge of the balloons. The only man who had balloons was myself.

Alexander: But you were across from the naval base.

Sinks: I did it at my station at night.

Alexander: I should have thought of that, shouldn't I?

Sinks: I couldn't do it during the daytime because they could have shot them down.

Alexander: And they would come to find you.

Sinks: Let me tell you--at any time, we figured that the maximum amount of time we had was probably an hour. I got the balloons up at night.

Also, in the daytime, I would send up the small "pie ball" balloons. I sent them up twice.

Alexander: What are these "pie ball" balloons?

Sinks: You merely watched that balloon to see how it was going, and you had a theodolite. [Editor's note: A theodolite is a surveying instrument used to measure horizontal and vertical angles.] If you take it mathematically--the base times the height times the tangent of θ [the angle between the base or the height and the diagonal leading to the balloon]--you could figure out which direction that thing was going. That's what you were trying to do--find wind direction. That was very important.

Alexander: How big was that balloon?

Sinks: Not very big, but with the instruments you had for seeing it, you could see it at up to 20,000 feet. It was visible. But after it left my area, they couldn't have shot it down.

Now, the big balloons I sent up at night. I have pictures. They were big. I made my

own hydrogen. I didn't use helium. I made hydrogen by taking iron filings, along with caustic soda and water. I had a tube, like a cylinder for selling gas, and I'd put that down in there. The last thing I'd do was put in the caustic soda, and then I had a Chinese fellow standing there with the cylinder, and he'd twist it. By the time that was fully tightened down, it would build up to 1,500 pounds of pressure. We made hydrogen. Now, that was dangerous to fool around with, but that's the way we did it. Later on, I ran out of iron filings, and I found some planes that were shot down. There were some American and Japanese planes. I had the Chinese file metal up into powder, and that made it faster.

Alexander: Weren't they mostly aluminum?

Sinks: I used mostly aluminum after I ran out of the iron.

Alexander: And that worked?

Sinks: Oh! It worked wonderfully, because aluminum had more of a reaction to caustic soda to create hydrogen. That was very successful.

Alexander: How did you get a measurement off of your balloon?

Sinks: Instruments were in the balloon, and they sent radio signals. I had a receiver, and I was able to plot out the temperatures, pressures, and different things. That was what was called back then a "radiosonde."

Alexander: So, you got the reading, and the balloon was gone. You didn't have to worry about it being sighted or anything like that.

Sinks: No. The amazing part of it was that fishermen off the coast of Taiwan brought in two of the boxes from the radiosonde one time. They knew that we Americans were in there, and we gave them a little something for doing that, which highly pleased them. But that showed us that those things were getting all the way over to Taiwan.

I ran out of caustic soda one time. This is a good story here. I needed that caustic soda, and, eventually, when the Philippines were taken, that's where I started getting supplied. They started parachuting supplies to us. But I ran out of caustic soda, and

there was no way they could parachute it in. They had to bring it in another way. They'd even have the 14th Air Force or somebody try to get it to us. It ended up that I needed caustic soda. I got 120 pounds of caustic soda from the Japanese naval base.

Alexander: How did you get that?

Sinks: Through barter with a guard. The Chinese were trading with the Japanese all the time. There was some crooked guy down there. We figured out that that probably cost the American taxpayer about \$8,000 to get that caustic soda (chuckle). That was a lot of money back then!

As the war progressed and the Philippines were taken, we were able to get penicillin dropped to us. We had a lot of guerrillas who were killed, and we had some who were wounded. They sent us penicillin, but we had no way of keeping it. We didn't have refrigeration. We found that Standard Oil had a boat in Amoy, and we bought that boat. A Chinese trader bought that boat from the Japanese and brought it up the river. We

took the refrigerator off--it worked on our auxiliary generator really well--and then they took the boat back and sold it back to them without the refrigerator. A crazy world we were in (chuckle)!

Also, some things took place that you just wouldn't believe. China is a great citrus fruit grower, and they grow some of the best satsumas, which are like tangerines. We were down buying satsumas one time, and the Japanese were not more than fifty yards over, buying some, too (chuckle). They were doing the same thing! Everybody ignored each other! Now, I think: "Gosh almighty!" But I've heard incidents during World War I, when, on Christmas night, troops got together.

Alexander: You're more than a meteorologist, though.

Sinks: Yes.

Alexander: They had you working to gather intelligence.

Sinks: Yes. I was working on code and things. That's an interesting thing here. The submarines were progressing [in the campaign against Japanese shipping]. As the war

progressed, we took the Philippines; and as we were moving along, the Japanese ships were moving closer to the coast. They were trying to bring their troops up from down in south China and the Dutch East Indies [now Indonesia]. They were trying to bring them back to the Japanese homeland. They always had to come into the harbors because they would not be out at night. The continental shelf out there is such that a lot of submarines could not come up because the water level was too low, and because of the tides and so forth. This became a very important thing--the ships reporting--and we were accountable for a lot of ships that had been sunk there.

One of the most important things that took place was that a group of ships one night was spotted by a Marine sergeant by the name of [William M.] Stewart. He saw them moving along the coast, and he immediately radioed this back to us and said that they were probably going to go up to [a certain place]. They were probably going for the harbor.

That message I remember coming in very well. His radio message was in code, and I'd have to take and rework that message and put it into code, and it was relayed then to Chungking by our radio place because we had much stronger transmitters. It was relayed back to them, and they, in turn, sent it out to the fleet.

It was picked up by the U.S. submarine *Barb*, whose skipper was Eugene B. Fluckey. He then moved his submarine in there. He had to fire his torpedoes on the surface. He immediately sank a ship; in fact, he sank three ships and damaged three others, but he only got credit for only one ship. But he fired his torpedoes on the surface, and that was quite a thing to be done.

He then had to get away. In his getting away from the Japanese--mind you, this is at night, and he was being chased by a Japanese destroyer--and, of all things, he went down [submerged], and that Jap destroyer ran itself into a reef. It ended up that the skipper of the *Barb* got the Medal of Honor

for that incident.

It took us several weeks to get Stewart back out. The Japanese were now making it rather difficult. It took maybe three or four weeks, as I recall, to get Stewart back. I remember a radio message saying: "If you hear from me, let my dad know I'm still alive," you know, jokingly. Well, we got him back, and it was decided that Stewart had done his job. He had risked himself so much by being where he was and everything else, so it was decided to get him out. Now, that could be done, but it took time to do it.

Alexander: At this point, we're going to pause to turn over the tape.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Sinks: Anyway, they realized that Stewart had done his job. He had done a fantastic job, in fact, because we were able to find literally thousands of bodies that washed ashore from that ship. That was because of what Stewart had done. Mind you, he had been out, doing this for about a year. That's taking a lot in your hands. That's a long time to be

isolated. That's something else.

So, he got back, and they decided that he would be sent back to Chungking. Above all, we thought that he should have been awarded the Silver Star or something, but, because of certain circumstances, SACO was not allowed to get medals. We did not receive any medals.

Alexander: Did you know that going in?

Sinks: Yes. Well, pretty well, because of the work that we were involved in.

Anyway, the most amazing part of this story is with Fluckey. I live in the area where the Nimitz Museum is located, and they had a symposium. They had a symposium on submarines, and when I was at that symposium at the high school, Admiral Fluckey was brought up. I got up, and I told him: "Admiral, you actually got credit for only one ship, but you really sank three." He said, "I know that. How do you know that?" I said, "Because I was there. I was a coastwatcher there. When Marine Sergeant Stewart did that, we were able to verify it."

I signed a document, notarized it, and everything else, but once something's in the Navy's archives, there's no way that you can change it.

Anyway, he had been trying to validate this. He even spent six months in Japan, studying their archives. There was one way he could do it, but he was never allowed to get back into China because he had been a member of our intelligence setup. There was no way he could ever get into China, and he had tried.

Fortunately, the ambassador from the People's Republic of China at one time was a fellow named Han Chu. I knew him, and I also knew the ambassador to the UN [United Nations] from China. Han Chu came to Dallas, and I had lunch with him because I was a member of the American-Chinese Friendship Society. I got to know him through that, and I got arrangements made. I said, "Admiral, I can get you to China, but you have to do it the way I tell you to do it." That was because I'm involved in agriculture, and I've

spent a lot of time in China because that's their number-one, critical thing.

Anyway, in 1991, I got a call, and he said: "Bob, they're finally going to give me a visa, but it's only for fourteen days." I said, "Take it!" Mind you, the Tiannamen Square incident had happened. I said, "Take it!" He said, "But only for fourteen days?" I said, "Believe me, take it! We'll get you more when you get there." To make a long story short, I got him into China. I got him to the place where all of this actually took place. My oldest son went with him, and they actually found people who had remembered the incident from more than forty-five years ago. That was in 1991.

They got him out to the spot, and, mind you, the Chinese salvaged everything, but they found the other ships there. They found parts of the ships and got the story of the whole thing. Of all things, the University of Illinois wrote the story about this.

I could not go with the admiral, so my son went out with him. I had to play politics

back in Fukien with the governor and with the agricultural people. The fellow who had formerly been in charge of the UN for China came down, also, and we had nothing but big kam-pei parties. It was really worthwhile. When we left there, we had to go to Beijing. Han Chu had then been sent back from the United States to try to resolve all of the troubles because of Tiannamen Square [referring to the massacre of pro-democracy protestors by Chinese troops in Beijing on June 4, 1989]. He had been alerted that I was coming to Beijing, and when I checked into the hotel, I hadn't been there for an hour when here came a message from Han Chu: "We're going to have dinner tonight. There's a well-known restaurant in Beijing. We'll be there at [such-and-such] a time, and you're to be my guest." Well, we got to that place, and, sure enough, the first thing I said was, "Your Excellency, he needs to have his visa extended." We got it done like that [snaps fingers].

But what floored me was the admiral going

over to the American embassy to register. He walked in, and there was a Navy captain there who saluted him. He said, "What in the hell are you doing here? You can't be here!" He said, "I'm here because of an American sailor. You couldn't get me in here, but he got me in here!" The captain said, "How?" He said, "I'm part of an agricultural group." (chuckle) That's one of his favorite stories.

Getting back there has meant so much to me. I adopted a little girl when I was in China. I tried like anything to find her. I left enough money to send her to a school. They tried like everything to locate her, but, my gosh, that was over fifty years ago.

Recently, last February, I got a call from a fellow who said, "You know, you saved my life fifty-three years ago." That was Colonel Ed Richter. I have not seen Ed since that time, but in February of last year, I was brought to Washington, DC, along with seven other fellows, who had rescued pilots, not only in Europe, but also in China and

other areas. This was after that pilot was shot down over Bosnia, and the government wanted to know how we rescued downed pilots during World War II. The government was running a thing on this. We had a setup like we're doing right now, and we just talked. They were filming a lot of things, too, for posterity.

That was in February, and I got invited back to Washington on Memorial Day for the dedication of a special plaque for SACO. When they found out that I was back in Washington, they said, "You're able to see this. We've now gotten this thing put together, and we're very proud of it, and very pleased because it's told us how you people did this." I said, "Well, good! I'd like for my wife to see this." They said, "Oh, no! It's been classified!" It was classified because of the incident in Bosnia, where they rescued that young pilot. Now, mind you, today we have all this sophisticated equipment to locate where pilots are; plus, they have transmitters.

But our only method during World War II was that we had to have friends on the ground. The Chinese could have made a lot of money to turn over an American pilot [to the Japanese], but they didn't do it because we were there to make sure that, if they did it, something was going to happen to them. There are things that I can tell you, but I'm not sure whether they should be on tape or not.

[Tape stops]

Alexander: We're back on the tape.

Sinks: I want to let you have an incident here pertaining to atrocities. At one time, one of the responsibilities that we had where I was was picking up fliers who were shot down. Altogether, I think we picked up something like twenty-six pilots, airmen, and so forth, whom we rescued and got into safe hands. But you were not always successful.

On one incident that we were able to find out about, the Japanese were able to pick up two fliers. What we found out was that they cut their hands off. They ran a wire through their scrotums and pulled them down the

street. We managed, through our Chinese intelligence brothers, to get the names of every Japanese involved in that incident. When World War II ended, we made sure that every one of those people were dead within forty-eight hours of the end of World War II. That is not a part of recorded history, but that's a fact.

We saw too many things that did not take place. So many things were excused--things that were totally uncalled-for. They were more than savage. We were prepared. We were told what would happen if we were taken prisoner.

One of our people was caught and made prisoner, a fellow by the name of Parsons. Parsons is alive to this day. The reason that he stayed alive is that, when he was taken prisoner...I was actually down on the coast when this happened. We thought that he had been bayoneted, because it looked like they had stuck something in his leg. Anyway, Parsons survives to this day, but he's an extremely bitter man because his life, after

he came back to the States, was not one that was pleasant. No one could comprehend what he'd gone through. We try to get him to reunions, but we can't get him to come. He's just a bitter man.

Also, Roger Bannister was the first man to run a mile in less than four minutes. I always said, "I ran the mile in four minutes in 1945!" The Japanese were shooting at us. I remember that there was a guy behind me by the name of Davis, and I was in front of him. He was trying to get around me. We were on a rice paddy, so you couldn't go any way but straight. Thank God, the Japanese were poor shots. But I always told everybody that I broke the four-minute mile, and I did it carrying a submachine gun and six full clips of ammunition (chuckle).

Alexander: And three inches off the ground!

Sinks: That's right, and with someone trying to get around me (laughter). Oh, gosh!

You know, I wouldn't want to do it again, but, also, it has left me with...you know, we did this. We were young. We were out of

high school. Few of us went to college. It did something for my generation. I learned that what we have is so precious that it's unreal. I'm concerned more about us losing it politically than by any other way.

Alexander: Well, of course, this comes down to being one of the reason why we're trying to do what we're doing here. It's a very small thing, but the primary reason is that we want to inform the generation who now, even now, know nothing about World War II. They don't hear anything about it in the schools, and what they do hear about it is not usually factual, anyway. But these are chronicles, and these chronicles will go down in history as the chronicles of the world, which have been chronicled. Everything has been chronicled in one way or another. Your contribution to this is one niche in a very large piece of trail. It's going to be a strong one if we can get all of the people we can get. I want to ask you something. Tell me how you got back home. I want to get you home here.

Sinks: All right. I remember that when the war

ended, most of us got leave to go up to Shanghai. I was one who knew about airfields and airplanes, so I had to go over to the island of Amoy. A photographer's mate that we had, by the name of Reid, actually went to Amoy before the surrender. He went over there and came back. The Japanese knew that we were there. I was ordered to go to Amoy to meet with the Japanese to talk about restoring the airfield. The U.S. Navy said, "Appear as military as possible. Wear the best uniform that you have." Well, I didn't have any uniform left. I put a pair of khakis on, because we did have khaki uniforms, rather than the regular Navy uniforms. I went over to Amoy, and I had a white flag. I have pictures of this somewhere.

I was going over to this thing, and Japanese marines were standing there, and I stepped off. They had their bayonets on their guns, and all that I could think was: "What if one of them gets mad?"

But I had no problems, and we proceeded to

go to the commanding officer in Amoy. There was a Japanese who spoke excellent English. In fact, this fellow maintained that he was a graduate of the divinity school at the University of Chicago. He was supposedly a Presbyterian minister.

Alexander: There were those.

Sinks: The whole thing was: "We're happy that the war's over." I did take with me a couple of cartons of American cigarettes. We chatted, and I told them, "I've been ordered to come over here to get the airfield back into shape because there will be some planes landing here soon." We had a cordial session there. I offered the cigarettes, which they took. It ended up that I took back forty-eight fifths of Johnny Walker and White Horse Scotch.

It opened the door for me to go over there. I didn't have any Americans, so I had to use Japanese technicians to repair the field. I got a big truck and everything, and we started repairing the airfield so we could bring in some American planes.

Alexander: Were you still a first class petty officer?

Sinks: I'll tell you, rank didn't mean anything. It didn't mean a thing over there. You were assigned to do certain things, and you did them. I was also paid \$10 a day *per diem*, which I never did draw. I could have picked up a commission, but they said that if I picked up a commission, I would have lost money, because I was getting a uniform allowance. So, I said, "Forget it!" because it wasn't much more than I was making.

Alexander: How long was that period of time?

Sinks: I was able to get that field back in shape in about two weeks, more or less. I had a bunch of troops to use.

An incident happened, though, when I was with them. The driver of the vehicle that I had was a Japanese boy who couldn't have been seventeen years old. The Chinese have a feeling that there is a dragon that chases them, and they tried to run in front of the trucks to "kill the dragon." This boy was driving the truck--and I was actually in the truck--when a Chinese ran across, and we hit

him. We didn't kill him, but the guy was really hit. Immediately, the Chinese were up in arms about this, and they wanted to take this young Japanese boy and shoot him.

I got to thinking. They were going to have a little trial. I got before the Chinese and the Japanese, and I said, "You know, we just got through fighting a war. That was not his fault, what happened with the truck." This kid was scared to death. I said, "It's not his fault at all. If you go and shoot him and kill him for what he did, all that we've done is in vain. All the lives and everything else have been in vain. So, you can't do that."

I'm telling you, did I win the respect of the Japanese! After that, we were driving down the road one day. They were playing baseball, and, suddenly, they stopped, and all of them bowed. I thought, "Goddammit!"

Alexander: To think that you would have interceded for the enemy, basically.

Sinks: But wasn't that right, though?

Alexander: Yes, but, you know, this is an interesting

thing because of the cultures. We think that every life is precious, and they don't. They felt, I'm sure, that it took a great deal of courage to do what you did. Courage, they understand.

Sinks: Well, I'll tell you, it helped out like you wouldn't believe, because we got moved in there--I guess that there were about six of us at one time--and then later on we got more in.

The Australian fleet came in, by the way. We six Americans were there. The Australians came in and said, "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here." I said, "We're here, though." They said, "Where have you been?" I said, "All during the war, we were over [there], just on the other side of the strait." The Australians treated us great! We didn't have any butter or anything like that, and they started having us at their mess. We really got to eat some nice foods.

I'll tell you one other thing. Along with the forty-eight fifths of Scotch, which was

fantastic, we had not had any catsup. The Japanese had catsup and canned goods. I found some bottles of catsup, and I asked them: "Can I take this?" They said, "Oh, sure!" So, I took this catsup. We ate mostly eggs. Our cholesterol must have been sky-high! Rice and eggs was just about it. At one time, I lived on rice, sweet potatoes, and peanuts for three months. I didn't care for sweet potatoes for a long time. Rice and peanuts I can live with today. But sweet potatoes? I wouldn't look at them for a while, but now I like them. Anyway, we got this catsup, and every morning we'd eat, like, six eggs. Every one of us broke out with these huge sores because of the acid in the catsup (chuckle). I haven't thought about that in a long while!

Alexander: What else have you forgotten (chuckle)?

Sinks: Oh! I got up to Shanghai. The fellows there said, "Ol' Bob can out-drink anybody on kam-pei. [Editor's note: Kam-pei in Chinese means, literally, "Drink the glass dry!"] That's a typical thing for Chinese; you had

parties, and you had *kam-pei*.

We went out the first night. I hadn't seen a movie in a long time, and there was a movie at Shanghai at this theater. We had had a wonderful dinner at some place there called "Jimmy's," which, of all things, was owned by an American operating in Shanghai. We went to this theater, and I remember that we really did some *kam-pei*. I remember seeing the title--"The Road to Bataan"--and I remember nothing else after that (chuckle). The guys were all talking about the movie and everything. That's when I decided: "This drinking's gotta stop!" (chuckle) And I did stop.

There's something else you just reminded me of. I've never thought about these things for a long time. There are certain things and occasions that slip my mind. There's one incident that just shows how unusual things were. I'll tell you this story. We'd been taught Chinese, and it came in handy, except the dialects were so different. I would have given anything in the world to

have retained it, because when I left there I was able to get along really well.

We were always being invited to parties, particularly when we went to these guerrilla camps. I was invited to one of those things one time, and these guerrillas had Chinese "generals" [warlords]. We called them "generals." They had to have somebody in charge of these things. Anyway, there were a bunch of them over here [gesture]. By the way, they could have twenty-six-course dinners. They really knew how to do it. But you only got a small amount of food. But this *kam-pei* with this *mao-t'ai*...you only got a thimbleful, but they'd say: "To President Roosevelt!," and down it goes. [Editor's note: *Mao-t'ai* is a Chinese version of "White Lightning" made from distilled sorghum.] Then, "To Chiang Kai-shek!" It was a little thimble, and if you had a drop...you weren't supposed to spill it. If a drop was to go on your wrist, then you had to drink another one. We were having these things, and they always started out

with the Chinese getting up and saying: "To President Roosevelt!" Then the Americans would get up and say: "To Chiang Kai-shek!" The next thing we knew, we were down to our mothers-in-law (chuckle).

At one of these parties, one time I wanted to say the old American saying: "Down the hatch!" I had enough Chinese to give me some idea of how to do that. I got up, and I said [imitates Chinese accent], "There's an old American custom. 'Down the hatch!'" The general and everybody started rolling on the floor. They were absolutely hysterical! I was thinking: "What the heck just happened?" The interpreter was laughing and said [imitates Chinese accent], "Mr. Sinks, you told everybody to go take shit." (laughter) I was so embarrassed! But I never thought about that until now. I'll never forget that. The interpreter's name was Sylvanos Tay. You know, this has been worthwhile to revitalize things.

Alexander: That's what I've found. I'm not going to be through with you until we get you back to the

States safely, but I don't want to rush you.

Sinks: I'll tell you what. Shanghai was an experience. I was there until November, 1945. I left there on a ship, but I don't remember the name of the ship. It was a case where I'd get on and get off. I had a lot of reporting to do to Admiral Miles when I came back, and then to Captain Birely. I had to go through debriefing on some incidents that took place. Also, it was due to the fact that I was always going to be part of what was called the "internal control." I was going to be a part of intelligence in some way.

I got on the ship and went to Treasure Island [San Francisco Bay, California]. I did not have a uniform. They gave me a uniform, but it didn't have insignia or anything else. I was also brought off the ship first because I had been overseas longer than everybody else. I was met by reporters. There was a beautiful girl there, and they asked: "What is it that you want more than anything else in the world?" I said, "I'll

tell you the second thing." (laughter) The second thing was to turn on a faucet and get a drink of water without having to boil it. Of course, they got a big charge out of all that. Then I went to Treasure Island.

I had an uncle living in San Francisco. I said, "I don't have a complete uniform, but I want to go there." They said, "We're going to give you [this one]. It's just a regular blue uniform." I went on liberty, and they said, "According to our special instructions, you get liberty."

I took off, and I went to San Francisco. Mind you, I had been paid a *per diem*. The amount of money that they gave me in Shanghai was about \$7,000, plus my regular pay. I had a wad of money! Most of it I had shipped home. But I got in to San Francisco, and darned if they didn't hand me more money that I was entitled to.

I went into San Francisco, and I remember going to a Chinese restaurant, of all things. I have a picture of some of us guys who were together. We had a "ball" [good time]! I

mean, I got to stay at the nicest place. Everybody wanted to treat you just royally. I didn't go back to Treasure Island until I'd had about a week in San Francisco. I went back, and they hadn't missed me. They didn't care. They said, "You're entitled to it." They told me when I got there that it would be some time before I'd be able to be discharged.

I remember getting on a troop train and having Christmas dinner on that train. We were coming across Arizona, and somehow we hit a car. The guys went out and painted a big automobile on the side of the locomotive. Oh, gosh! Finally, I got into Chicago.

One of the things I had a problem with is that I had teeth knocked out in China. I had to have a Chinese dentist put pegs in. When I got to Shanghai, a dentist said, "I can't do anything about this, but I'll make arrangements for when you get into San Francisco for you to see a dentist." That was part of my record and everything. When I got to San Francisco, the dentist said, "I

can't take care of this thing. I'm going to make arrangements for it at Great Lakes, Illinois." I got to Great Lakes, and the dentist took a look at it there, and he said, "Who's your dentist at your hometown?" I said, "Dr. Raines." He said, "We're going to get in touch with him on this." When I got home, I went to Dr. Raines, and he said, "Oh, yes! I received a telephone call from the Navy, and I got a message from them since then. There's going to be a fellow coming in from Saint Louis who's going to take care of you."

The oral surgeon got there, and they X-rayed a pocket above this tooth that had something in it. When they took this thing out, they broke it open and said, "If that thing would have broken, you would have been dead."

When they broke it open, it was the most foul-smelling thing I'd ever smelled in my life. What had happened was some cotton or something got up there, and it was inflamed. Nobody told me about it until it was all over

with. Anyway, that was part of getting home.

When I got home, I refused to take the "20-20." You got \$20 for twenty months, but I refused that because I came out with so much money. I came out of the service with more than \$10,000, plus I had won a lot of money playing poker. Back then, \$10,000 was a lot of money.

I then went back to school. I went back to the university, and there were seven fellows--all of us veterans, including my best buddy, Sam Hancock, who was with me on the day of Pearl Harbor. We went back to school, and he was my roommate again. We went back to the University of Illinois in 1946.

In November, 1946, I met the girl that I married. We got married in 1947. I then worked for a short time with National Cash Register. I told them that I wanted to come to Texas, and they wouldn't transfer me, so I quit in 1950 and came down here. I considered Texas an economic frontier, and this is where I have spent the rest of my

life.

Alexander: You're obviously involved in agriculture.

Sinks: Yes, I am. I develop biological materials. I've developed two things that I finally got through the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. They were the first items the EPA ever approved that were totally non-toxic for all crops. One of them is a control for nematodes. I've got others coming up, like, a fuel supplement that cuts pollution by up to 40 percent for both gasoline and diesel.

I always wanted to go to China. I remember, when I was a kid, watching a travelogue on it. I've even been to Tibet and Mongolia. It wasn't easy, but I got to Tibet after the war. This has been one of the best dad-gummed things I've done in a long time. I have things now in my mind that I hadn't even thought about.

Alexander: I have to tell you that the University of North Texas is very, very grateful for you doing this, and I am, too. This is a very special interview. With that, we'll close the interview. Again, thank you very, very

much.

Sinks: You're welcome.