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Interview with

COLONEL JOHN E. OLSON

March 15, 1998

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

Interviewer: Bill Alexander

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Mr. Alexander: This is Bill Alexander. We're in Fredericksburg, Texas. It's March 15, 1998, and this is the oral history of Colonel John E. Olson. Colonel, would you give us your mailing address, please?

Col. Olson: It is One Towers, Number 510, San Antonio, Texas, 78209.

Mr. Alexander: Thank you. Tell us, if you will, where you were born and when.

Col. Olson: I was born at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, on November 27, 1917.

Mr. Alexander: All right, sir. If you were born in Fort Leavenworth, that sounds as if you're from a military family.

Col. Olson: I was an "Army brat." My father was then a lieutenant colonel in the U. S. Army. He was a career officer.

Mr. Alexander: What about your schooling?

Olson: I went to school pretty much around the country for short tours until I was ten years old, when my father died. My mother and I moved to a town in Mississippi by the name of Holly Springs. I went from the fifth through the twelfth grade in Holly Springs.

Alexander: What was your mother's name?

Olson: My mother's maiden name was Clara Carr.

Alexander: All right. And what about your father?

Olson: My father was born in Norway. He came to this country when he was eighteen. He worked on the Canadian Pacific Railroad and then migrated to Minnesota and enlisted in the U. S. 4th Cavalry at Fort Yates, North Dakota, at the time of the Spanish-American War [1898]. Subsequently, after the Spanish-American War, he was commissioned in the Regular Army.

Alexander: So, he was an immigrant.

Olson: I always regretted that he did not teach me the Scandinavian languages, which my mother very much wanted him to do. But he said, "My son is an American. When he's old enough, I'll be glad to teach him." But when I was old enough, he wasn't around.

Alexander: Well, that is too bad. What about after high school, now? What did you do with yourself?

Olson: Well, I wanted to go to the [United States] Military Academy [West Point, New York] because of my father being a Regular Army officer. I was too young when I

graduated to get into West Point, so I was given an appointment to [the United States Naval Academy] Annapolis [Maryland]. I went to "prep" [preparatory] school at a military school in Alabama, the Marion Military Institute, which has specialized classes to "prep" people who wanted to go take the the entrance examinations of the academies. I, because my congressman had no Army appointments, went through the Navy class, and in the spring, in May, just before we finished the year, Congress expanded the number of appointments that the congressmen had. My congressman offered me West Point.

Alexander: This would have been...

Olson: This was in May of 1935. I had to resign my Navy appointment--I'd already had orders to report on June 24 to the [United States] Naval Academy [Annapolis, Maryland]--and went on to West Point.

Alexander: Your life might have been different had you been in the Navy, right?

Olson: Yes. I would have had three less bathrobes (chuckle). It was a custom for [West Point] cadets and midshipmen [from the Naval Academy] to bet their bathrobes on the Army-Navy football game.

Alexander: Okay. So, you entered the Academy at West Point in 1935.

Olson: That's right. I entered on July 1.

Alexander: So, it obviously was 1939 when you graduated as a first lieutenant?

Olson: No, I graduated as a second lieutenant.

Alexander: Oh! I'm sorry. What was your first duty assignment after that?

Olson: You know, you select or ask for what branch or station you want. I asked for the Philippines because my father had had two tours in the Philippines--one in 1903 to 1905 and the second from 1907 to 1909--before I was born. My mother had been fascinated with this, and they had hoped that he would have a tour there before he retired, and I think he would have. Anyway, I took that, and I took my mother with me to the Philippines so that she could see what she had heard my father talk about.

Alexander: So, you were there in 1939, and that was under [General Douglas A.] MacArthur?

Olson: No. I sailed from New York one week after the Germans invaded Poland.

Alexander: So, that was in September. And this was under MacArthur's command?

Olson: No. The regular U. S. forces were under the Philippine Department. The commander of the Philippine Department at the time that I got there was Major General Walter Grant. He was succeeded in the spring of 1940, in May, by Major General George

Grunert. Grunert had been an enlisted man in the Philippines during the insurrection [1900-1902]. He was commissioned and had served from 1936 to 1938 in the Philippines as the CO [commanding officer] of the 26th Cavalry and then subsequently in the 23rd Brigade, which was the highest tactical command. He came back in May, 1940, as the Department Commander. He commanded all of the Regular Army troops. MacArthur, after he retired, was asked to become the head of the military mission to the new Philippine Commonwealth, which had been authorized to form an army by Congress in 1934, when they had announced that independence would be given to the Philippines in 1946.

Alexander: All right, I understand. Thank you for that. What was your duty like while you were there?

Olson: I was an infantry officer. My duty was very interesting. As you know, you've got two seasons in the Philippines--six months of dry season and six months of rainy season. In the dry season, we were out in the field a great deal of the time doing range firing, maneuvers, and so forth. In the wet, rainy season, we were pretty much confined to the barracks area doing classroom work and other types of work.

Alexander: What was the overall feeling of the people over there in 1940 in terms of the darkening war clouds made by

the Japanese and what they were doing?

Olson: As far as we were concerned, it was just a matter of time. We knew it [the war] was coming, or we were convinced that it was coming. Our first exposure to it was in June, 1940, right after Grunert took over, when the Japanese moved down into southern China, into Canton and opposite the New Territories. The British evacuated all of their dependents just overnight and sent them to Singapore, Australia, Great Britain, and a number of them, temporarily, to the Philippines.

Alexander: So, the British were there?

Olson: Their dependents were there. They evacuated their dependents, yes, as an intermediate stage of going back. But when I say this, it was literally overnight. The British were no fools. They anticipated that. So, my regiment was charged with putting up a tent camp on our parade ground for the care and cleaning of these civilians for two or three weeks.

Alexander: What was the time on that?

Olson: That was in late June, 1940.

Alexander: Didn't our Army also send some dependents back?

Olson: Yes, but not until almost six months later. The Navy sent theirs home. The orders were received in the middle of October. I was in a Navy destroyer coming back from Shanghai, where I'd been on leave, and the



message came to us about, I'd say, October 6 or 7, that all Navy dependents would be evacuated before the end of the year. Nothing was said about the Army. Then, right after Christmas, the word came that the Army would evacuate all of theirs.

Alexander: So, that's Christmas, 1940?

Olson: That's Christmas, 1940, and the Army started evacuating dependents in January, 1941.

Alexander: So, the dependents were gone by when?

Olson: The first ones were sent home on regular transports in the end of January. All of the American officers and enlisted men were frozen except for a few officers who were going to key assignments back in the States. The rest of us were frozen and had no idea when we would be released to go home.

In the meantime, Grunert had asked for the division to be brought up to full strength. The Congress did authorize the doubling of the strength of the Philippine Scouts, and they also sent a number of replacements to the other units.

Alexander: What were the Philippine Scouts? That's the Philippine portion of...

Olson: ...the American Army. They were Regular American Army. The only difference between the Scouts and my regiment, the 57th Infantry, and the 31st Infantry, which was down in Manila, was that the 31st enlisted

men were U. S. Army and white. Ours was Filipino. The Scouts only got half of the pay of the equivalent grade, which at one time, while MacArthur was there in the early 1920s, led to an attempted mutiny that was agitated by some subversives. It involved just a few, actually, of the recruits but none of the NCOs [non-commissioned officers]. The Scouts were absolutely loyal, and they performed well.

Alexander: We've been hearing that.

Olson: Well, I'm an unabashed supporter of the Philippine Scouts.

Alexander: That's nice to hear. So, as we were getting more into 1940, and this whole thing was beginning to come to a head, did this change anything that you in the Army were doing or expected to do in training? Were you becoming better trained, or was that possible?

Olson: Well, we regulars had a regular training schedule which was intensified. We got new equipment and weapons, so we had to get familiar with them.

Alexander: What kind of weapons?

Olson: Well, we had the 1903 Springfield [Model 1903, Springfield rifle], which was replaced by the [M1] Garand in the spring of 1941. We got an increase in the number of .50-caliber machine guns and mortars. When I went out there, we had one weapons platoon in the headquarters company. We had one .50-caliber

machine gun, one 3-inch Stokes mortar, and one 1917-vintage 37-millimeter antitank weapon. It was from World War I. It had spread trails. In the spring of 1941, we got the mobile M3 [37-millimeter tank]. Incidentally, we had 37-millimeter guns, and the Japanese had 47-millimeter guns. Our tanks in the National Guard units that came out had the M3 tank with a 37-millimeter gun, and the Japs had these 47-millimeter guns.

Alexander: We found that in Germany, too.

Olson: Yes. We learned the hard way (chuckle).

Alexander: Okay. Let's fast-forward a little bit here to the...well, "non-attack." There was that period of time after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor when they didn't attack you.

Olson: That's true. Well, yes and no. As you know, the equivalent time [of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor] was about 2:30 in the morning of December 8 [because of the International Dateline] out in Manila. The word was received at MacArthur's headquarters and passed down through the chain of command. It got down to the regiment at about 5:00 that we were at war and that we should get out.

When the dependents were sent home, they put us two or three officers to a set of quarters at Fort McKinley, which was right on the edge of Manila. I

was the S-1 [Staff Officer for Personnel] of the regiment, and I was living with the S-3 [Staff Officer for Operations] and the S-4 [Staff Officer for Logistics] in a set of quarters. The morning that the word came--Monday morning out there--the S-4 and I lived on one side of the house, and the S-3, Harold K. Johnson (later Colonel Olson's chief of staff), was on the other side. The S-4 and I shared a bath. He used to regularly get up, wake me, and then go shower and kick me out again when he was ready to go to breakfast.

Well, he woke me up that morning, and I said, "Okay." He said, "Come on! Get up! Get up! There's a war on!" I said, "Okay, okay." So, I finally got up, showered, went into the dining room, and said, "What's this business about the war being on?" Johnson, who was the S-3, was reading the newspaper, and he threw it over in front of me. The headlines--that size [gesture]--said "JAPS BOMB PEARL HARBOR!" I still was about half-asleep, and I said, "Boy! They're sure making these alerts realistic, aren't they?" (chuckle) We'd been having alerts frequently, and Johnson, who loved to needle me anyway, said, "This is no alert. It's the real thing, and you'd better get up, and let's go to headquarters." So, we did.

But we were so keenly trained that by the time that we got to headquarters, the field equipment was all taken out of the barracks. It was going into the field and loaded on trucks. The barracks items that were to remain were being inventoried and so forth. We'd gone through this many times, so it was automatic. So, by 8:00, we were ready to roll.

Now, you spoke about the Japanese attack. The Japanese initially, on December 8, struck by air Aparri and Vigan--two airfields, or strips, I should call them--and the idea was to clear them so they could bring in airplanes to cover the landing that was to take place later. So, they then also struck at Camp John Hay in Baguio, which was the rest center of the mountains. And that was it, before noon.

By the time that I got to the office, somebody--the sergeant major, I think--had gotten a radio and put it on my desk. We were listening to Don Bell broadcasting over the radio and giving us these reports. They spoke about Baguio, Aparri, and Vigan being hit.

Our regimental commander went over at about 10:00 to a meeting at the division headquarters. He came back and said that we were to go out and occupy part of the perimeter of the post.

Alexander: So, you're right out in the middle of this?

Olson: Yes. We had gone through this before. We had a sector on the Manila side that was allocated to my regiment. This was for possible paratroop drops, so we were positioned there. So, we went out and dug in. A little after noon, we heard about them raiding Clark Field. There was no indication of the intensity of the raid or the damage that was done, but we very shortly began to get a picture that it wasn't looking good.

Alexander: Were you aware at any time that General MacArthur was requested to send some bombers to...

Olson: I think that it was to Taiwan, to Japanese bases on Formosa, as it was called then. No, I didn't hear about that until later. That was strictly up in the higher echelon.

Alexander: Right. He turned them down.

Olson: Well, I've done a lot of research trying to find that. Nobody has ever...

Alexander: That's why I'm asking the question (chuckle).

Olson: Okay. To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet produced viable information on what went on. [Major General Lewis H.] Brereton claims that he immediately went to the headquarters and asked to send the B-17s over to Formosa. Of course, as you know, the Japs were "socked in" [had their air operations canceled by foul weather], and they could have caught them on

the ground. Lieutenant Colonel [Eugene L.] Eubank, who commanded the 19th Bombardment Squadron, went to Manila. Half of his B-17s were down at Del Monte in Mindanao. They had been sent down the Friday before by Brereton. MacArthur claims that he sent them down, but MacArthur, I don't think, was privy to that. Anyway, we didn't hear about that, as I say, for some time.

Alexander: It's inconclusive, then.

Olson: Yes. No one kept any written records. MacArthur's secretary is about as close as you'll get, and even he didn't write too much in his calendar.

Alexander: Okay, we'll go on from there. I'm curious if anybody does have any kind of information, but it doesn't sound like anyone does. I don't think it's a big controversy. It's just the fact that it was a bit unseemly.

Olson: I think it was important from the point of view that it illustrated MacArthur's ethereal removal of himself from the facts and realities of life. And [MacArthur's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Richard K.] Sutherland made sure that that was the way it stayed until Leyte [the site of MacArthur's return to the Philippines in October, 1944, during the U. S. invasion].

Because I was an "Army brat," my mother had known

a number of the people that were in a higher echelon in the Philippines, so I had an exposure to more of the hierarchy than would normally have been the case-- not because of me, but because of her. Also, on the transport going over to the Philippines was an officer by the name of William Dunckel. Bill Dunckel was going to take the slot that [Major (future General and President) Dwight David] Eisenhower had on the advisory group. He had his mother-in-law with him, and she and my mother became friends.

So, I got to know the Dunckels, and when we got to the Philippines, they had a house downtown to which they invited us occasionally. It was really my mother that they wanted to see; I was just tagging along. But I got, at least, exposed to all of MacArthur's advisory group--Sutherland, [Major General Charles] Willoughby. I had known Willoughby before; in fact, I played tennis with him frequently at [Fort William] McKinley before the war. But the others, I got to know casually.

Dunckel was very unhappy about what was going on, and his job, as I say, was that of taking over for Eisenhower, who was a planner. Eisenhower and [Major James B.] Ord were the planners before Ord was killed. Eisenhower went home on the same transport that we came over on.



Now, again, my family and the Eisenhowers were close. My father was in the National Guard in Denver [Colorado], and Eisenhower was in the [Army] Reserves. We lived out in Fort Logan [Colorado] in 1922 and 1923. So, my mother and father used to play poker with the Eisenhowers, and they were good friends. I didn't see them because I was busy settling in, but my mother was invited down before they left--to a farewell party. But, as I say, Dunckel was not happy with what was going on, and ultimately he went home in the spring of 1941. By that time, he was a lieutenant colonel. He was a major when he went over, and he got his lieutenant colonelcy in early 1941. You will find references to him in things about MacArthur's advisory group. He came back later and was in command of the task force that assaulted Mindoro in 1944. He was on the bridge of the flagship in 1944, and a piece of shrapnel hit him and blinded him in one eye. So, he was evacuated. He was a major general at that time.

Alexander: That kind of eye-witness insight is always interesting.

Olson: Well, as I say, I didn't get it because of my merits (chuckle).

Alexander: I understand. We take anything that we can get when we get it (chuckle).

Olson: Sure (chuckle).

Alexander: What were those first few hours like? You alluded to what you were doing. The air attack came the next day, I think, did it not?

Olson: Well, the next day, yes, but at 2:00 in the morning on Nielson and Nichols Fields. Nielson was a civilian field right next to...well, [Colonel Olson referring to and gesturing toward a map of the Philippines] here was McKinley, and here was Nichols, and Nielson was right here , past Nielson going into Manila.

Alexander: But Nichols was a military base?

Olson: Right.

Alexander: It was right in the middle of town, practically.

Olson: No, it was along the waterfront south of Manila.

Alexander: Okay.

Olson: [Colonel Olson referring to and gesturing toward a map of the Philippines] If this is Manila, the road to Cavite comes down along here, and Nichols is right here. It's where the International Airport is today in Manila. But Neilson, which was then the civilian airport, had nothing for operations, really--just a tower. It was taken over by the Far East Air Force--Brereton and his crew. That's where they were when the war started.

Now, what you don't very often hear is that they started in the fall building a secured CP [command post] for the Far East Air Force by digging a tunnel

underneath Fort McKinley. That tunnel was supposed to have been completed by about the end of December, and the Far East Air Force would move from Neilson into there. I was out in Manila last year, and I saw that the tunnel is still there. In fact, the Japs expanded it greatly. I didn't go down into it because my wife suffers from claustrophobia, and she didn't want to go down in there (chuckle). But, anyway, all I'm saying is that that was to become the Far East Air Force headquarters, and, had it been in operation, the Japs couldn't have touched it by bombing at all.

Alexander: How large was this? When you're talking about the tunnel, are you talking about somewhere where they could store equipment?

Olson: Well, I don't know exactly the extent of it. From this glance that I got last year, looking down it, I don't know how much of that was planned or how much was added by the Japanese. I'm sure that the information is available.

Anyway, the Japs came in with, I think, something like a dozen bombers at about 2:00 on Tuesday morning. They hammered Nielson and Nichols for about forty-five minutes, maybe. They damaged planes at Nichols, but not much was really damaged at Neilson. And that was it. There was nothing on the following day, Tuesday.

Then, just before noon on Wednesday, we got an alert. Sirens in Manila were going off, and the Japanese came in in force. I think it was fifty-four planes. They hit Nichols again, and they hit Cavite Navy Base. That's when they hit some of the ships at Cavite and inflicted a lot of casualties there and also at Nichols.

That afternoon, at around 1400 hours, a report came in that the Japs had landed paratroopers on Mount Arayat. Do you know Mount Arayat?

Alexander: No.

Olson: [Colonel Olson referring to and gesturing toward a map of the Philippines] Well, here's the Philippines. Here's Luzon. Here's Lingayen Gulf, where the first major Japanese landing was made, and this is the second landing down here [at Legaspi on southern Luzon]. The idea was to pinch in Manila. Manila was the objective. The Japs thought we were going to defend Manila the way that they did later.

Alexander: That's what they expected.

Olson: Yes. Anyway, they should have known about Bataan because we'd been going there for years, doing reconnaissance and so forth. Anyway, they came down and bombed there. Mount Arayat, as you can see, is right here [gestures toward map]. It's an extinct volcano right opposite of Pinatubo and right opposite

of Clark Field. That would have been the objective of the paratroopers--to seize Clark Field.

However, my regiment was told to go up and clean them out, so we moved out. One battalion moved out about 2:00 in the afternoon by road. Now, one thing that's seldom mentioned--you practically never see it, as part of our preparedness there--it had been practiced for years that the bus companies, the taxi companies, and any civilian organization that had vehicles were all listed and incorporated into a transportation reserve. They had two big bus companies. The buses carried about forty people and had running boards on the sides and so forth. The companies were Pambusco and Pantranco. Pambusco was around Manila and that area, and Pantranco was up north. But the minute the war started, they were sent out to various units to supplement us because we only had enough transportation to carry our equipment and so forth, but not for the personnel. I forget how many vehicles, but each company, I think, got one of those things. Anyway, we became mobile, so the 1st Battalion moved.

Alexander: That was pretty good thinking.

Olson: Yes, it was. Everybody knew what to do; they had gone through this routine. Most of the officials were Reserve officers. They were mainly Americans; I was

only aware of one or two Filipinos. So, it worked beautifully. The 1st Battalion took off, got up near Arayat, and they discovered that there weren't any paratroops. It was the antiaircraft fire from Clark Field--puffs of smoke. They had civilian air warning people who would call in, so they were calling in and saying, [imitates Filipino accent] "Paratroopers coming down," and so on.

Alexander: So, they saw the white puffs of smoke?

Olson: Yes. In fact, this was the day that [Colin P., Jr.] Kelly was killed when he was coming in to land. [Editor's note: Kelly was the pilot of the first B-17 shot down in World War II. He held his stricken B-17 steady so his crew could bail out successfully and became an early American war hero.] They mistook him, and they were firing. They thought he was a Jap.

Anyway, after they got up there and found that out and reported back, then the whole regiment was ordered to go down to an area south of Clark Field as USAFFE [United States Army Forces, Far East] reserve. The rest of the regiment moved out after dark, and we closed in over several little *barrios* south of Clark Field. We remained there until December 29.

The Japs, of course, landed on the 23rd and started pushing down. The only opposition that they had was from the 26th Cavalry and the Philippine

Scouts. There were four divisions of the Philippine Army up north, but all that they did was fire and fall back. That's no reflection upon them. They were a bunch of kids that they had, and, unfortunately, the leavening of instructors that we Americans could provide were rather limited. I mentioned yesterday [reference to Colonel Olson's presentation at the Admiral Nimitz Museum Symposium], it hurt our combat effectiveness. We still got along okay, though. The Philippine Army--and this was the whole thing--the Japs got to know them, and they looked for them, and that's where they put their pressure. If they ran into Scouts, as they did with my regiment right after we got into Bataan, they got their noses bloodied, and they went the other way.

Alexander: How interesting. How long did it take you to move into Bataan, as far as the defenses were concerned?

Olson: Well, if you want to say road-wise, it was about 125 miles. We ran convoys at a speed of about twenty-five [miles per hour], average.

Alexander: When was this, now? In early January?

Olson: Well, we moved from Fort McKinley on December 10, after the bombing of Cavite and after the paratrooper scare. First, one battalion went up and found out that it was a mistake. It was then sent down south of Clark Field, and the rest of the regiment joined them.

We sat south of Clark Field from January 11 until January 29, at which time we were moved down to Bataan and put astride of the only road down to the port of Mariveles at the base of the peninsula. We were the "right of the line," as the old British expression goes. We had two Philippine Army divisions to the left of us. You see, the Zambales Mountains run from the Lingayen Gulf down along the west coast to the Bataan Peninsula. So, our lines on Bataan were bisected by mountains. [Colonel Olson referring to and gesturing toward a map of the Philippines] We were over here, and there was a road coming from Manila, first up to San Fernando, the town where it turned south and came down. It split right here at a place called Layac Junction, and one went over to Olongapo, which was a Navy base. It became subsequently known as Subic because it was on Subic Bay. But Olongapo was the Filipino town, and the Navy base was called Subic Navy Base, just as over here with the Cavite Navy Base. [Referring to the commander of the Japanese assault, Lieutenant General Masaharu] Homma had two divisions when he landed. He had a total of about 42,000 combat troops and then about 15,000 or 20,000 in support.

Alexander: What was your strength?

Olson: Well, with the Scouts we had about 10,000 Americans on



Bataan and between 8,000 and 9,000 on Corregidor. The total American strength in the archipelago was around 25,000, but on Bataan, as I say, it was around 10,000, and the rest were on Corregidor. Do you want a digression here, or not?

Alexander: Sure! We can digress a little bit.

Olson: Well, after the surrender we had the so-called "March of Death," which was from down at the base of the peninsula up to north of Clark Field to a place called Camp O'Donnell. It had been, actually, the bombing and artillery impact area for Fort Stotsenburg. But before the war, when the Philippine Army was created, it was designated to have a division--the 71st Infantry Division. The 71st Division was raised down in the Visayan [Islands], on Leyte and Samar. The division headquarters and two regiments came up in late September, and in the meantime this camp had been partially built. They moved into that, and then when the "balloon went up" [the Japanese landed] they left. The Filipino civilians got in and tore up a lot of the plumbing and so on and so forth.

When the Japanese were planning for the final drive in March, Homma had his chief of transportation made responsible for the handling of POWs [prisoners-of-war]. They were to be sent to this camp, which was recommended to him. There were 9,300 Americans, I

think, who came into that camp in the next two weeks after the surrender. About 1,500 of them died in the next four months. These were Americans.

The Filipinos were marching, too. There's never been an accurate picture of the numbers of Filipinos that died because the Filipinos were fortunate. We weren't. They could take off everything except their skivvies [underwear] and disappear. The Jap couldn't tell if this was an ex-soldier or not. So, nobody knows how many of them did that, but a lot of them were captured and did make the Bataan Death March. They progressively started trying to escape from the march, and a lot of them were shot or bayoneted by the Japanese. Again, the figures are not known, but my estimate has been that the Americans were around two to three hundred...

Alexander: Killed on that march?

Olson: Yes, on the march. They were either killed or took off and were lucky enough to get up in the hills. Of those that did come on the march and endured--the Filipinos--around 54,000 or 55,000 came into the camp. That includes those who were sent in from Corregidor after Corregidor fell. I don't know what their exact, ultimate figure of deaths was. It's rounded off at about 26,000.

Now, the bulk of the Americans were taken out of

Camp O'Donnell six weeks after we went in. We were sent to another prisoner-of-war camp at Cabanatuan built for the the 91st Infantry Division. It was about forty miles to the east of O'Donnell.

Alexander: Did you walk there, too?

Olson: The march ended at San Fernando, where the rail was. We were put in boxcars--the old French "forty-and-eights"--and they put a hundred men in a thing about this size, not much more [gesture]. [Editor's note: The term "forty-and-eight" was developed during World War I, and it referred to the capacity of European-style boxcars that could carry either forty men or eight horses.] We went then to a village by the name of Capas. There was a station there, and that was the detraining point. We marched then about seven kilometers into the camp.

I was made the personnel adjutant of the American group. They separated the Americans and Filipinos, and I had to report to the Japanese every day on the strengths of our units. They let us retain our unit integrity and let the Americans pretty much run our own interior things. So, General [Edward] King had his staff and so forth. But then, they pulled the generals and colonels out on May 10 and sent them to a town north of there called Tarlac. They put them in what had been a Filipino school.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Olson: Right after the generals and colonels were sent away, the Japanese started calling for details of men. The Japanese started sending details out to do work, the bulk of which was in absolute violation of the rules of land warfare--repairing the bridges that we had blown during the withdrawal, repairing the airfields (Clark Field and so forth), building roads into areas that were strategic to their own activities, and so forth. Many of these details lost personnel heavily. The statement was made in the [Admiral Nimitz Museum] Symposium yesterday that Guadalcanal was the worst malarial area in the world. I'd defy the speaker to prove that. Bataan was--it was notorious for malaria and anopheles mosquitoes. I know it because I spent a lot of time there.

The lack of food, or the paucity of food, that we got, plus the fact that a large percentage of the men had malaria at the time that they got out in the march, and that many of them had dysentery with other side-diseases, meant that they just weren't up to the physical exertions that were put upon them by the Japanese. As a result, the death rates out on these details were quite high. In some instances they were buried right where they died, and no records were kept. For others the men were brought back in a dying

mode, and they died in the camp.

Two weeks after the colonels and generals departed, the Japanese alerted us that the bulk of the Americans would be moved to another camp, which they said would be for just Americans. They wanted to get us away from the Filipinos because they were--and rightly so--suspicious of the liaisons between the Filipinos and the Americans.

I was required to prepare rosters of the people to go. Now, our doctors came out strong [protested the conditions of our POWS] because we'd already lost close to 1,000 men in the brief time we'd been in the camp. They said to the Japanese, "If you send everyone, we guarantee that a good percentage of them will arrive as corpses." So, the Japs finally relented and permitted us to keep 750 of the worst cases with a detail of fifteen doctors and about forty corpsmen and a work detail to do needful things around the camp.

When the bulk moved out, they went out on June 2, and 4. There was a total of about 5,000 that were moved to Cabanatuan. They were trucked to Capas, put on the train, and they went around to Cabanatuan.

I was left. I'd been the personnel adjutant, and I was made the adjutant of the camp with the departure of that group. The officer who had been the adjutant

was an AG [Adjutant General Corps] officer and had been sent to join the colonels and generals.

The next month, I watched as the 750 gradually dwindled [died]. Then, apparently, Tokyo had gotten the word, and a party was sent down to check on what was going on in the camp. The word had gotten out. Filipinos spread it, and it apparently got to [the International Red Cross headquarters in] Geneva [Switzerland]. The Japanese were worried. So, they came down, and the upshot of the visit of this group was that they said that they would...and they were particularly interested in the Filipinos, because they were the ones they had come to liberate from the "American imperialists" [sarcastic comment], and this didn't look too well for their propaganda. We had two general hospitals on Bataan during combat--General Hospital Number One and General Hospital Number Two.

Alexander: Were these located below ground?

Olson: No. They were above the surface and received some shelling and bombing during the combat. Hospital Number One, which was the surgical hospital, was commanded by an officer by the name of Duckworth. Colonel Duckworth was a feisty gentleman who ran a tight ship [efficient operation] . When the Japanese came into his hospital with tanks on the day of the surrender, Duckworth didn't even bother to go meet

with the commander of the tank group. He waited and let the Japanese general come to him.

The Jap general's first demand was to be shown the Japanese that we had in the hospital. We had fifty-five who had been captured. The bulk of them were wounded--some severely--and they were in a little compound right next to a part of Hospital Number One's camp. He went down there and, much to his amazement, found out that the treatment of the Japanese prisoners was the same as that of the Americans and the Filipinos. The food that they had was the same and the medicine that they had was the same.

So, he came back and gave Colonel Duckworth a letter to anyone who came into the camp to leave them alone and to protect them. So, the people there--those who were patients and medical corpsmen--were fairly well-treated. Well, then they were faced with the problem of how to stop the ever-increasing number of deaths--not just the Americans, but also the Filipinos. Whereas we were losing forty or fifty a day, the Filipinos were losing 300, 400, and up to 500 a day.

Alexander: Were all those deaths?

Olson: They were deaths, yes, sir.

Alexander: So, they weren't leaving.

Olson: Well, for the Filipinos, I cannot say. I am sure that

some of them sneaked out. They could do that. They disappeared into the scenery, and we couldn't.

But I do know that after this hospital was moved in in the first week in July, they "policed up" me [commandeered my services] and some of the service group and some of the doctors that were already there and sent us to Cabanatuan. The last day that I was there, which was July 5, I was up on the porch of the Japanese headquarters waiting to give my report. The adjutant of the Filipino portion of the camp was next to me. We were forbidden to have any intercourse or dialogue with the Filipinos on the pain of death, but we managed to exchange numbers. This was July 5, and he had 19,000 and some-odd Filipinos that had died. That's what he was reporting on that day. I had about 1,200 Americans that I was reporting. The ultimate figure, according to the Philippine Army's records, is 26,000.

But once the Americans got into this Hospital Number One and went to work, then the death rate dropped off. Further, the Japanese brought in a medical officer as the camp commander. He was a colonel, and he and Colonel Duckworth got along quite well. So, things did improve, and then, ultimately, they got all of the Americans out--less those who died in the interim. The last man died on November 2, and



he was 1,565 out of the 9,300. As I say, in the interim a hell of a lot of others had died on details. And of those who went to Cabanatuan, for the first month they were in Cabanatuan, they were losing men at ever-increasing rates. As our doctors had told them, they were sending corpses there. So, that's just a little background.

The Filipino Red Cross did their best to try to get in, but the Japanese turned them away. At least in O'Donnell, anything or any traffic with us was forbidden. At Cabanatuan later, they were able--as you mentioned at Santo Tomas--to get packages that were delivered and sent to an individual by somebody. For example, I got a package from a family that I had known in Manila. They were civilians. It was very beneficial.

Alexander: I bet it was. So, that's pretty much where we are at the end of the first year.

Olson: Well, as far as the Philippines were concerned, yes.

Alexander: So, what happened beyond that? How long were you there?

Olson: I was taken out on November 6, 1942. They detailed 1,500, loaded us into a cattle boat, and sent us to Japan. We were nineteen days en route. Fortunately for us, that was a period when it was still a Japanese [-controlled] sea. Our submarines and so forth had

hardly begun to attack that area.

Alexander: If they had, they would have missed anyway, so it wouldn't have mattered (chuckle).

Olson: That's true (chuckle). In the camp in Japan, I had a Navy submariner. He was an enlisted man, and he told me things I'd never heard before. When I came down from China with the Navy, they were telling me, "Oh, boy! We've got an absolutely infallible plan! We're going to go in, and we're going to blow them all out of the water!" I know that they were sincere. They thought that they would, but they didn't.

Alexander: But you were safe because there wasn't any interdiction on the seas.

Olson: That's right. As you know later, beginning in the fall of 1944, there were sinkings all over because none of these ships had any markings. They were supposed to put red crosses on them. On the ship I was on, there were 1,500 of us, and, I'd say, there were at least 1,000 Japanese troops and a few civilians, diplomatic corps personnel or what-have-you.

Alexander: How long did it take you to get to Japan?

Olson: It took nineteen days.

Alexander: And you went where?

Olson: We went into Moji [Kyushu]. They unloaded us, fumigated us, and put us in a launch. We went across

to Shimonoseki [Honshu] and got on a train and went to Osaka [Honshu].

Alexander: This was before the end of 1942, then. How many people did you leave behind in Cabanatuan?

Olson: I have no idea for the simple reason that there were details, as I say, that were sent out. It was a turbulent situation. I would say probably, at that stage in the game, there were maybe 7,500 Americans still left in the Philippines. Well, if you take out my 1,500, that would bring it down to 6,000. Well, I take that back. We had 9,300 at O'Donnell, and Corregidor had--what--10,000. So, we have to add that, so the figures are not what I just gave you. I was thinking only of men at O'Donnell.

Alexander: As far as you know, the 10,000 at Corregidor were still there.

Olson: Oh, yes. They started losing people in about the second or third week. They were in Cabanatuan. They had them in three separate camps there--Camp Number One, which was the main one, and two others. Navy and Marines were put in Camp Three. That's why I don't know. Later, at the time that I went to Japan, they moved them down to Camp Number One, and they stayed there. Number Two was just in operation briefly in June for a week or two. So, that was the base camp.

Now, in Bilibid Prison--the civil prison in

Manila--they did have doctors, nurses, and patients from Cavite. Those were wounded in the bombing of Cavite on December 10. Then Bilibid became kind of a transit point when they were sending a detail out. For example, when they sent a big detail down to the Bicol Peninsula here to the southeast to build a road through swampland there, they stopped over in Bilibid, and then they went on. So, details were then going off on ships out in the harbor. Why we didn't do that, I don't know. I guess, maybe, we were too large to be handled. We just marched off of the train, through Manila, and went right on board the ship.

Alexander: When you got to the new prison camp was it pretty full when you got there?

Olson: Yes, because they had all of the Corregidor people in by that time. Then there were our people--the 5,000 that had moved out before I did in the first week in June. So, you had about 10,000 coming from Corregidor and 5,000 from O'Donnell. There were 15,000 when we started this. The death lists are up in the Army Historical Center at Carlisle Barracks [Carlisle, Pennsylvania].

Alexander: What did they assign you to do or what did they make you do when you first got there? How were you treated?

Olson: Well, we got to the camp in the morning off the train

from Shimonoseki. We went up in railroad passenger cars, and we got the first real meal we'd had since we were prisoners. It was a box lunch-type of thing. Everybody said, "Oh, boy! This is good!" But it didn't last.

The camp I was in was in a steel factory. What it consisted of was an old warehouse where they stacked metal and so forth. The factory was called a steel factory, but, actually, all that they put out were fifty-five-gallon oil drums and fifteen-gallon aviation gasoline drums. The process was all handled. They'd bring in rock and put it through the smelter and then pour it out and run it through rollers and so on. Then they'd weld the tops and the like. That's what the bulk of the work done in the camp was. The bulk of the people who were workers other than the Americans were a few aged and over-the-hill Japanese. Beginning right after we got in there, there were young Koreans.

Alexander: Are these your guards?

Olson: No, these were workmen.

Alexander: What were these over-the-hill Japanese doing?

Olson: They were workers in the factory--gang foremen and things like that. They had women there, too, doing various things. The factory was falling to pieces. People used to ask, "What about sabotage? Did you

sabotage anything?" No, the Japanese were doing a much better job of that than we could have done (chuckle).

Alexander: You didn't need to (chuckle).

Olson: That's the truth. I think that on one occasion one group did some sabotage, but it was treated by the Japanese as an accident.

Alexander: How was your treatment now? First of all, this sounds like a dumb question, but I have a reason for it. Did you have a choice of not going to work or going to work?

Olson: According to the rules of land warfare, officers are not required to work. Now, in the details that were formed out of the prison camps in the Philippines, the Americans set them up. The work detail officer drew on the different units that were sent out--"I want ten men for [this]"--according to what the Japanese have set as the criteria."

We had a situation that was unusual, and it posed a real problem for the Japanese and for us. We had an inordinately large percentage of officers compared to the normal group because we had so many advisors to the Philippine Army--staff officers and so on and so forth. So, with all those extra officers, you couldn't have done these details with the approximate numbers that you'd like. Some details had officers

who agreed to work just to get out of the camp. But the Japanese, as I say, left it up to the Americans to decide who was sent.

But the result was--tragically, for the Americans--that as time went on, the percentage of officers in Cabanatuan kept going up and up to the point that when we started coming back in in 1944 [referring to the retaking of the Philippines under the forces of General Douglas A. MacArthur] the Japanese got panicky. After the Leyte invasion, we were threatening a landing on Luzon. The Japanese got panicky, and they then tried to clear out Cabanatuan. Again, it was a matter of the doctors fighting and managing to hang on to about 500 of the worst cases. But the rest of them went.

Alexander: Why did they want you out of Cabanatuan?

Olson: They wanted us back in Japan as hostages for bargaining, and also they feared that we might break out. Well, by that time, we were too weak to go anyplace, really. Anyway, as I say, I wasn't there. Our American group staff, on this detail that went to Japan, had about about a two to one ratio of officers and enlisted men. There were about 500 officers and about 1,000 enlisted men on that detail. From a personal point of view, I lost a lot of good friends on that ship.

Alexander: Are you talking about a particular ship?

Olson: It started out as a particular ship called the Oryoku Maru, which had 1,000 enlisted men and 500 officers. It was attacked off of Olongapo in Subic Bay by American Navy dive-bombers. There was no identification; it was just another ship. They were accurate and put a bomb right down one of the hatches, so about 300 of the 1,500 were killed.

The Japs beached the ship, and the others wallowed ashore in whatever fashion that they could. They were put on a couple of tennis courts in Olongapo and held there for three days without any food and very little water.

They were then put on trucks and taken up to Lingayen Gulf and put on another ship and sent up to the southern end of Formosa. They were in this harbor--Takao Harbor--in southwestern Formosa. It has very narrow entrances, and the ship almost scraped its side. Anyway, the U. S. Navy was right after them. They came in and bombed them and strafed, and a lot more were killed. Then they put them on another ship. It got out of there and went on up to Japan. Finally, they were torpedoed but not sunk. About 380 out of the original 1,500 went ashore in Japan and were farmed out to a couple of already existing prison camps. Subsequently--this is early January, 1945;



they'd left Manila on December 15, I think--some of them were sent to Korea and some to Manchuria. Some of them died there, and that's where they were when the war ended.

Alexander: You were liberated in September, weren't you?

Olson: Well, the surrender was on August 15, 1945.

Alexander: That's when they stopped fighting. But the signing...

Olson: It was not until September 2.

Alexander: So, that was the official surrender.

Olson: That's right.

[Editor's note: In accordance with the terms of the Yalta Agreement of February 11, 1945, and the subsequent Potsdam Declaration of July 26, 1945, the Allies insisted that Japan must accept terms of unconditional surrender. On August 6, 1945, following a barrage of messages demanding immediate and unconditional surrender, the first atomic bomb was employed against Hiroshima, Japan, without any official Japanese response. On August 9, 1945, a second atomic bomb was employed against Nagasaki, Japan, again without any immediate response from Japanese officialdom. On August 12, 1945, the Japanese responded that they would consider a surrender with the proviso that their emperor remain in power. During the period from August 6 through August 14, 1945, American warships and aircraft

continued to be exposed to suicide Japanese *kamikaze* attacks. The battleship Pennsylvania was torpedoed on August 12, 1945, and twenty men were killed, and ten were injured. She was sent to Apra, Guam, for repairs sufficient to make the trip return to Puget Sound, Washington. The largest B-29 raid of the war against Japan was launched on August 14, 1945. Following the destruction of their last oil refining plant, the Japanese agreed to the Allied terms of unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945. The formal surrender was signed aboard the USS Missouri on September 2, 1945, in Tokyo Bay.]

Alexander: And you were released?

Olson: No. The group I was with was over on the west coast of Japan in a camp. The bulk of the men were working in a nickel mine near the camp, and the officers were working in a garden, raising vegetables and rice for the kitchen. Other men were at a port nearby, named Miyazu [Honshu], where they were unloading ships bringing food and other things from Manchuria. The day of the Imperial Rescript, August 15, just before noon the officers...

Alexander: What's the Imperial Rescript?

Olson: It was the emperor's recording [and broadcast to the Japanese people by radio]. It wasn't live; it was a recording, telling the Japanese that the war was over

and to cease and desist [hostilities].

We officers, just before noon, were called back into the perimeter of the stockade--it was like a "Wild West" stockade--and told to go into our barracks. We were told to go in, to pull the air raid curtains, and to stay there until further orders. So, we did.

Of course, we had one guy who was peeking out of the window (chuckle). He was reporting to us that the whole Japanese camp staff was coming out of the kitchen and other places. They formed in front of the office, which was right across the path from our quarters, and they got together and went through their bowing and scraping for the Emperor. Then they all went in the office. They were in there for about ten or fifteen minutes, and then they came back out, formed again, bowed to the emperor, and took off in all directions. Pretty soon they were coming out with their bikes loaded with stuff.

Alexander: Some of them had gone away?

Olson: Well, they told us a little later that there would be no work for the rest of the day. A little later, they said that there would be no work tomorrow.

Then the enlisted men came back from their workplaces, and their stories were similar. They had been put off to the side with one guard, and the

Japanese had gone through the same thing. Then after they went back to work, one or two of the Japanese clasped their hands and said--in Japanese, of course--that the war was over. They were beaming. The Japanese public was ready. They were fed up with the war.

Alexander: They had to have been.

Olson: They were! Of course, the B-29s had just been the final straw. The ironic part of that is that last week, we had a discussion group at the Towers in San Antonio. We had two of the [General James A.] Doolittle Raid pilots talking to us. I don't think that either of them had been aware that, understandably, psychologically the Doolittle raid was ultimately extremely damaging because when it happened the Japanese military said, "Oh, well, they just came over and bombed the shrines and schools. It was [considered by the Japanese as] a non-military attack. It didn't hit any military targets, and they were all shot down and captured. So, yes, they can come in, but it's not worth it. We are increasing our defenses." The months went by and then into years, and there was nobody coming from anywhere. Then, all of a sudden, here came the first B-29 raid, and then shortly thereafter another and another and another. The Japanese just couldn't believe it. They'd look

up, and they'd say, "Okii!" which means "big." They'd never seen an airplane of that size. The first ones that I saw came on January 11, 1945. Thirteen of them came steaming over Osaka, right over our heads, and we turned our heads [gesture]...

Alexander: "Don't drop the bombs on us!" (chuckle)

Olson: "Oh, no! Not there!" (chuckle). But the ack-ack [antiaircraft fire] was going off way below them. The fighters and interceptors were making passes way below them. In the three-and-a-half years that we were prisoners, those who were lucky had received a total of three-and-a-half Red Cross parcels. Now, in the European camps, each individual got one a week. There was a box about this big [gesture] with medicine, powdered milk, and so on and so forth. We got three-and-a-half of them in three-and-a-half years. Well, we'd gotten about half a box for Christmas in 1944, so this was about three weeks after Christmas.

I was in command of the camp in the factory, so my job, when an air raid alert went off, was to bring in the details from the parts of the factories, form them up, count them off, and send them inside. We were in this big warehouse, and they built a second deck to it out of old clapboard wood, and we were all up there. Originally, there were 400 of us in that.

Alexander: A direct hit on you would have been bad news.

Olson: Yes, it would have been. But by that time we were down to about 250 who were left.

Anyway, after we had the head count and so forth, then the Japs went down to their office, which was right next to the building in a small space, and I had to stand at the door going up to the stairs to be ready to respond to any orders that they gave me. There were a couple of guards there, and one of them was kind of a know-it-all-type. He said, "Why don't they drop their bombs?" I said, "Because they have not reached their targets or the bomb release point." And he said, "No, no, no! You're all wrong. Do you know why they didn't drop any bombs?" I said, "If that's not the answer, then I don't know." He said, "Because they don't have any metal to make bombs. All that they can do is come over and *miru, miru*. In Japanese *miru* means "look." I said, "Is that right?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, I don't understand. How can they send us this food in tins if they don't have metal for bombs?" His jaw dropped, and he looked at me, and he said, "You damned fool! Get upstairs!" (chuckle) So, he never brought up that subject again.

Alexander: I would think not! Obviously, your guards just left you after saying goodbye or whatever, and then they were gone.

Olson: Oh, we're back to the surrender? No, there was a

skeleton force. The Army sent in a detail, and the civilians went home.

Alexander: Whose army sent the detail?

Olson: It was the Japanese Army. When we first got to Japan, our guards were from the Jap Army, but after a couple of months in the factory, they turned it over to the factory, the civilians. They furnished the guards. The overall guard commander was a Regular army sergeant, but their other guards were men who had been wounded in Manchuria, China, and so forth. Japanese reservists, is what they really were.

But, anyway, after this ceremony, why, most of the civilians who were around left, and the army stayed. We supplied our own cooks; they didn't interfere with our mess. So, they told us the next day will be *yasumi*, which means "holiday" or "rest" in Japanese. This went on and went on, day after day.

Alexander: Did you see any sign of any American ships or any American forces at that time?

Olson: Well, I was just getting ready to say that after about a week, the camp commander told us, "I have orders that you are to stay in this camp. Someone will come and get you, though. Please, I need your cooperation. Men, do not go out because the Japanese are very angry, and if they see you, they will kill you." So, we complied for a while.

Then he told us that there would be some airplanes coming over to bring some food and supplies to us the next day. And, sure enough, we were down in a valley, and we heard this roar [Colonel Olson imitating the sound of overhead aircraft], and there was this B-29--wingtips scraping against the hills on both sides (chuckle)--and you looked up and you could see the bomb bays open. They looked like they had bombs in them. They made a pass, came back, and on the second time it came through, it let go. Well, we were out in this peninsula with water on three sides, and the spit of land was right here. They had orders to put the things in the camps and not to drop them promiscuously. So, they were doing their damndest to do that, but, anyway, they let go.

Well, they had welded two fifty-five-gallon drums together and had them loaded with all these canned goods and everything else. They were just like bombs! Well, half of the parachutes opened, and half didn't. So, we didn't know what to do--to run or not (chuckle)! There was really nothing we could do! There was no place to go! Well, we were fortunate in our camp that only one barrack was hit.

We had in the camp, incidentally, British and Canadians from Hong Kong as well as the Americans. Among the officers, we had two Australian officers,



about five British officers--some from Singapore, some from Hong Kong--and then about eight or ten American officers from the Philippines. Then, there were five Norwegian naval officers from a Norwegian tanker that had been sunk by a German raider off of Montevideo [Uruguay]. They picked up the survivors, took them around to Singapore, and from there to Nagasaki. The Norwegians thought that since Norway was occupied by the Germans, the Japanese would turn them over to the Russians, and they'd send them across Siberia back to Norway. Not so. The Japanese slapped them in the "pokey" [prison] with us. They were civilians.

Alexander: They had no business being incarcerated at all.

Olson: No. They should have been treated as civilian internees. But you read the Japanese mind, and you don't get much...

Alexander: I understand that. How long was it before you saw relief or American forces come to help you out?

Olson: You really don't want me to tell you all that, do you?

Alexander: Well, I'm afraid that I do.

Olson: Well, we took over the radio in the camp, and we started listening to Saipan and Tinian [both in the Mariana Islands] broadcasts. They told us about the surrender ceremony that was coming up, and we listened to it. Still, nothing happened except that we'd had these supplies.

The senior officer in the camp was an Australian major out of the 8th Division in Singapore. So, we talked him into going in and demanding that somebody be permitted to go. The camp commander said that he took his orders from Osaka, which was a regional headquarters. Finally, we said, "We want to go! You've been telling us to hold the men. We can't hold the men unless we've got something to tell them." So, he finally agreed, and because I could speak Japanese better than the others--or at least nobody confessed to being able to speak it--I was delegated to go.

So, I was given an escort of one of the guards and one of the interpreters. The interpreter was a *Nisei* [first generation Japanese American], who was a graduate of the University of Washington, Seattle [Washington]. We had three *Nisei* in the camp. Anyway, he was the interpreter. So, we shouldered our gear and paddled out of the camp. We got on a train and went into Kyoto. We were heading for Osaka, but there was no train that went through. We had to stay overnight in Kyoto.

So, I told the *Nisei* if there was a *Kempei-tai* [Japanese military or secret police] booth in the railroad station. When we got into this station, the train came in, and it poured troops out. Some of them took a look at me, and I said, "I didn't have a chance

to fight a war, but I'll do it now!" (chuckle) Anyway, I told him to ask this *Kempei-tai* about a place we could stay. A young lieutenant, who spoke good English, came over and saluted me and said that he didn't know about whether there was a place. He said, "There's one hotel that might have a place for you to stay. It's called the Miyaku Hotel." I said, "Okay. How can we get transportation there?" He said, "You can get a taxi."

Well, I have to go back. The one thing that the Japanese did was that they paid us [for working] while we were prisoners. Well, that started in September, 1942. Up until September we were "captives"; we weren't prisoners-of-war. As captives, they didn't owe us anything, but as prisoners-of-war then they made this token adherence to the Geneva accords. We were paid the same pay as equivalent Japanese. So, as a captain I got 120 yen a month. Well, a yen-dollar exchange ratio had been four-to-one before the war. Anyway, 50 yen of that went for our rations, to pay for our food. Twenty yen went to something else; I've forgotten for what. I think that we got 20 yen, but it wasn't worth anything because there was nothing to buy. Everything--what little there was--was rationed. Fifty yen went into the bank, to the Japanese account for the prosecution of the war for Greater East Asia.

That was our contribution [in taxes, so to speak, their war effort]. We were contributing.

Well, after the surrender was announced, somebody said, "Well, why don't we get the camp commander to see about our pay?" So, lo and behold, if the damned guy didn't go and withdraw the sum! So, I had the large sum of 1,500 yen. I was wealthy [facetious comment], but, as I said, what can you spend it on?

But when we got in the taxi and went to the hotel...have you been in Kyoto?

Alexander: No.

Olson: Well, the Miyaku was a beautiful hotel right up on a knoll that surveys all of Kyoto. So, we pulled up there, and I told the *Nisei* to go in and arrange for a room for us, so he went in.

[Tape 2, Side 1]

Olson: Okay, I was sitting out with the guard in the taxi, and two Caucasians came out of the door of the hotel and started to get into the taxi. They saw me, and they pulled back and said, "Oh! Sir, we're sorry. We didn't that know that you were in here." I said, "That's all right." Well, they were a couple of POWs who were there, and they said, "Are you coming in here?" I said, "I hope so. I'm trying to get a room." They said, "Oh, just tell them that you know us. They'll give you a room." I said, "Are there any

other POWs?" They said, "Oh, the place is full! We've taken it over!" This was the largest hotel in Kyoto, so I said, "Okay." They went on and got another taxi.

The *Nisei* came out with what proved to be the manager, and he said, "This gentleman's the manager, and he says that they have no rooms. They're filled with *horios*. That's Japanese for "prisoner." He said, "They have got all of them." I said, "I've never been in a hotel anywhere that the manager didn't have at least one room that he could rent." So, he translated that to the guy, and then the manager, kind of, pulled him around behind the car. Then he came back, and the *Nisei* said, "He says that he has one suite, but it's very expensive." I said, "How much is it?" He said, "Oh, it's going to be about 200 yen." I said, "Tell him that we'll take it." So, we got off and went with the manager ushering us up to the penthouse. It was the emperor's suite. So, we spent the night in the emperor's suite. I don't know whether I slept in the emperor's bed or the empress's bed, but it was beautifully laid out.

Alexander: It really was the emperor's suite?

Olson: Yes, it was. So, anyway, I told the *Nisei*, "Tell him we'd like some beer." He said, "Oh, no!" He said that beer was rationed. And it had been; everything

in Japan was rationed. I said, "They've got beer. Tell him to bring us some." So, the *Nisei* went out, and the next thing we knew, a chambermaid came in and took a look at me. She then looked back, and the next thing is that in comes this Caucasian. Well, it turned out that this was the captain of the [USS] Houston's yeoman.

Alexander: He was part of the "Lost Battalion."

Olson: Well, the "Lost Battalion" was the Texas unit [2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, Texas National Guard]. But the cruiser Houston was sunk in the Sunda Strait [off the coast of Java], and these people were picked up. A lot of the crew...you're right in that they got in the same prison camp in Singapore, Changi, with the "Lost Battalion," and they later worked on the [Burma-Thailand Death] Railroad.

Alexander: Yes, they were up there with them, and I think that they just considered all of those guys [as members of] the "Lost Battalion."

Olson: No, the "Lost Battalion" was the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery in the Texas National Guard [36th Division]. They were supposed to go to the Philippines, and they got put on the USAT [United States Army Transport] Republic in San Francisco [California]. The Republic got up to Brisbane [Australia], and they diverted the rest of the convoy

to Darwin [Australia]. Then they boarded a Dutch vessel, the Bloemfontein. The skipper of the Bloemfontein said, "I'm Dutch, and I have orders to go to Surabaya [Java], and I'm going." Which he did, and it was approved in Washington later. But he took with him on the Bloemfontein the staff of the 26th Field Artillery Brigade, which was destined for the Philippines, and the 2nd Battalion of the 131st, which became known as the "Lost Battalion" because it was left in Java when everybody else pulled out. They were left behind.

Well, anyway, this was the yeoman of the skipper [Captain Albert Rook] of the Houston, and he took one look at me, and he said, "Oh! Are you the captain that wanted the beer?" I said, "Yes, I am!" He said, "Well, sir, we've got anything you want. We took over the brewery. There's nothing but Americans here, and anything that you want, you just tell me what it is." I said, "Thanks a lot. Right now, all I want is a beer and to go to sleep."

So, the beer appeared immediately, and then I asked him about what officers were there. It turned out that the battalion surgeon of the 2nd Battalion of my regiment was one who was there. So, I called him up on the phone, and I said, "Hello! I'm glad to hear from you!" He'd been in another camp and had come

down to Kyoto. He said, "How about having breakfast with me in my room tomorrow?" I said, "Oh, that would be very nice." It was a short time before that I was even eating a little bit of rice, and that was it.

Anyway, I went down the next morning to have breakfast with him. We were sitting there having breakfast, and there was a knock at the door. He went to the door, and I heard a feminine voice. He turned around and came back, and here was the most beautiful girl I've ever seen in my life. She was Turkish, and it turned out that when the workmen from Wake [Island] were brought to Japan, they put them in a camp in Kobe. During 1942 and 1943, they let them go out-- they were civilian, you see; they weren't military-- and wander. So, three guys met these three gals, who were Turkish and whose families had moved from Turkey to Japan. I don't know what their fathers did. Anyway, these three American engineers and these three gals started going together, and then as things got worse [in wartime Japan], they threw the Americans back in the "pokey." These gals smuggled some stuff to them. When the surrender came, they went to Kyoto and got married. So, they were honeymooning there. This was the first white woman I had seen in three-and-a-half years, and that's the reason that I said that she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen



(chuckle). I've got a picture of the three of them in Manila a few weeks later. [Editor's note: Before U. S. entry into the Pacific War, and as relations with Japan worsened, civilian construction personnel were sent to Wake Island to enlarge the airstrip and expand the island's fortifications. These people became internees of the Japanese when the Wake garrison surrendered to the Japanese on December 23, 1941.]

Anyway, the next day my two companions and I went down on the train to Osaka. We were told that the American 8th Army Recovery Team had just arrived and was down in the port area of Osaka. So, we got there, and I said, "Let's go down." The Nisei said, "Captain, they tell me that the Chinese are rioting down in the port area, and it is very dangerous for any Japanese to go down there." I said, "Do you mean that you don't want to go?" He said, "If it's all right with you, I don't." I said, "Go on about your business." (chuckle)

So, I went on down and met the recovery team. I found out that they had just come in and were installed in the New Osaka Hotel, which was the largest hotel in Osaka and which, incidentally, had not had a bomb dropped around it, as was true of some of the hearts of many of the cities. I reported in to the senior Transportation Corps major. He said,

"Well, I want you to sit down here and give my people the 'poop' [information] on your camp. We'll be evacuating them shortly." So, I did and they gave me a room in the hotel. There were a bunch of POWs who had wandered in.

Then after they got my camp out, he said, "You speak Japanese, and you know the people. Would you mind staying around for a day or two to help me out? I'll see that you get a rapid trip home." I said, "Okay." So, I did.

About two days later, a Swiss civilian came into the hotel. It turned out that he was the International Red Cross delegate to Japan. His name was Fritz Bilfinger. So, the major was having a conference with one of the evacuees from one of the camps, and he said, "Will you talk with him and find out what he wants and what we can do for him? I'll see you as soon as we get through."

So, I talked to him, and he said, "Well, I am here representing ten camps down in southern Honshu and Shikoku. We don't know when they're going to get out [and so forth]. I'm trying to see if there's any way to expedite that." Well, what had happened was that when the surrender came, the 8th Army was the most available with troops, so the 8th Army was given the mission of providing recovery teams

for northern and central Honshu and Shikoku. The 6th Army was given southern Honshu and Kyushu to evacuate, but the 6th Army had been down in Leyte staging for the Kyushu landing, so they were caught completely off-base.

After the major had finished his conversation, he came out, and I introduced him to Bilfinger and told him briefly what the picture was. He said, "Well, how about you take him and go down and evacuate these camps?"

Alexander: He's asking you to do this?

Olson: Yes. He said, "I will guarantee you that you will get home sooner than anyone else!" (chuckle) I was pretty gullible.

Alexander: He sounds like a salesman. What about your guys back up in your camp?

Olson: Oh, they'd already been evacuated.

Alexander: I didn't know that.

Olson: Yes. That's what I did first. When I first got in, I worked with his people to get my people out. Then I was thinking that I'd just meet them at the station in Osaka, but he said, "No. Will you stay?" They were going to Yokohama to get on transports or hospital ships, as the case might be. So, when he said, "I'll see that you get taken care of," I thought, "Well, maybe he'll be able to do it."

Anyway, the next thing I knew was that a rail [special train] had been set up for us to go back down to a place called Onomichi, where Bilfinger had a couple of Navy clerks and a couple of other types from some of the camps around there. He had a little headquarters, and he was trying to keep these people in the camps from going over the fences. This major said, "I'll arrange for it."

Well, the next thing that I knew, I was on the train with Bilfinger, and a platoon of Japanese Army Signal Corps personnel commanded by a second lieutenant. He was under my command. They were my people to communicate with these camps and with the headquarters in Osaka. Talk about a fruit basket turned over! Well, this young kid--I think it was the first assignment he'd had--spoke very bad English, so he didn't argue with me. So, everything went fine. We got down to Onomichi.

Alexander: Had you gotten any kind of uniform?

Olson: Well, I had a pair of khakis that was donated to me by one of the officers. They dressed me up after they found out I was going to go out there. I had a Marine captain's shirt with sewn captain's bars, and I forget what else. I looked like something out of a costume shop (chuckle).

Alexander: Did anybody get a picture of you?

Olson: No.

Alexander: That's too bad.

Alexander: But, anyway, we got on the train and we got down there. Bilfinger then immediately contacted all of the camps. We arranged a schedule and set up the transportation. We had to get POWs from certain camps from these islands to come across on a ferry. I had three camps that were down by Shimonoseki and over on the west side, but I was forbidden to go through or to send anybody through Hiroshima because they thought it was radioactive. So, I had to arrange that.

The next day, we had the head of all the Japanese railroads in southern Honshu and his staff in a meeting. We sat down opposite of them at a table, and I read what I wanted--a train from [here to here and so on]. The strafing that had been done in the last few days of the war on the Japanese railroads had really thrown them. The Japanese railroads ran just like clockwork, and even with this strafing [by American warplanes] and so forth, they were very much close to schedule, if they were off-schedule at all.

Anyway, the guy got together with his people, and one guy said, "We can't do that." He finally turned around and had told the interpreter, who had been educated at Oxford [University] in England--a nice, gentle guy; I liked him. He didn't know that I spoke

Japanese. So, he told the interpreter what they could and could not do, and I listened. The interpreter turned to me and gave me the word. I listened to it, and I told him, "I want it just the way I gave it." So, he turned around and gave it again: "Can we do [this]?" So, the president conceded, and this went on a couple of times. Finally, it got down to--I've forgotten what it was--some incidental thing, and he started to open his mouth to say, "We can't do that." I said, in Japanese [Colonel Olson slamming his fist on table]: "You do it! I will see you after it's completed!" I got up and walked out. Everything went just like clockwork. Those trains were where they were supposed to be; the launches coming across the islands were there where they were wanted and everything.

The next day another Swiss, who was the international delegate to the Far East, came in. He had just been in Hiroshima. He and Bilfinger were good friends, so he spent the night with us and told us just what had happened down there. He had gone in there with General Farrell, the atomic weapons guy who took the first crew into Hiroshima, so he gave us the lowdown on things.

The first group that we evacuated was coming from an island in the Inland Sea. As they came up, we had

everything ready for them at the pier.

Alexander: Did you have a medical staff around?

Olson: I didn't have any medical people, no. The camps had their own. These camps had Javanese, British, Australians, Americans, and everything. But this thing came, and as they pulled up to the ramp and dropped the thing, out came four Americans in khakis with an American flag. Two of them were an honor guard, and they marched right on up. I guess there were six or eight in the honor guard. One of them was a captain. Anyway, we saluted the flag, and they marched on and got on the train and went away. We went on and finished all the things, and then I went back to Tokyo with Bilfinger.

He asked the major if I could come up and stay with him in Tokyo for a few days before I pulled out. So, I went up and saw Tokyo. The first person I ran into was a classmate of mine in Yokohama.

Anyway, the major fulfilled his promise, and I flew all the way to Manila. All these people I had evacuated were on slow boats, and I got to Manila and went through the processing there. Because transportation was not available, and we were down south, the Scouts rallied [to my rescue]. I had a Jeep at my disposal all of the time that everybody else was sitting at this old camp. They would take me

up to Manila. After I'd been there and gone through all the interrogation processing, nobody knew when we were going to get back.

I was at a party at the Manila Hotel one night, and who should I run into but a colonel who had been the supply officer in my regiment when I had reported to the Philippines two years before. He'd gone back to the States and transferred from infantry to AG [Adjutant General Corps]. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I'm just trying to get home." He said, "What do you mean, 'get home?'" Then, all of a sudden, he said, "Were you still here when Pearl Harbor got hit?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "My God! What are you doing for lunch tomorrow?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "Come down to the Admiralty. I guess you want to get home." I said, "Yes, sir!"

So, I went down, and we had lunch. He called the major over and said, "Major Olson [I had recently been promoted to major] needs to get back to the States as fast as possible." This major looked at me, and he said, "Can you be here by 4:00 at the field, ready to go?" I said, "I sure can." So, he got me out. I went my way on back to the States alone.

Alexander: Did you fly back?

Olson: Yes, I flew back the whole way in a C-54. There's



this one last punchline. We got to Hickam [Field, Pearl Harbor], and we were waiting there for a refueling to go on to Hamilton Field. I got paged on the PA [public address system] system. Some captain said, "Major, you've been delegated as a courier officer to take some classified material back to the States." I said, "Okay." So, I had to go out and check all of these footlockers that were there and watch them load it onto the plane. We take off, and about eight or ten hours later we landed at Hamilton. Everybody got off the plane and headed out, and I started to go. This sergeant says, "Wait a minute, sir! Will you sign for these footlockers?" I said, "Oh!" (chuckle) So, I finally got rid of the footlockers and went into Letterman General Hospital [San Francisco, California], where I was supposed to go.

Alexander: What field did you come into?

Olson: It was Hamilton Field.

Alexander: Now, where is Hamilton?

Olson: It's up northeast of the bay up near Travis [Air Force Base], in San Francisco.

Alexander: Okay. You're home. Are you married?

Olson: No, I was single then.

Alexander: So, what happened to you? You're a career Army officer. I just want to get us through where you get

through your career.

Olson: Well, I just went on. My first assignment, of all places, after being "out of the swim" [not up-to-date on new procedures] for three-and-a-half years, was the Pentagon. I was in the Infantry Assignment Branch. So, that actually turned out to be a bit of a blessing. I spent a year there, and then I went to where I should have gone--back to the Infantry School [at Fort Benning, Georgia] to try to catch up.

The Army did do a very smart thing. They set up what they called the Ex-POW Orientation Course, and they put us in groups of about twenty-five and sent each group to one of these five branch schools. I started out at Fort Benning, and I went to Fort Sill [Oklahoma], the Artillery School; to El Paso [Fort Bliss, Texas], the Antiaircraft [Artillery] School; to Fort Riley [Kansas], then the Ground General School; and finally, Fort Knox [Kentucky], the Armored School. At the end of that time, I was put on leave. But we had two weeks. As they said, "You'll know more about what went on in the war and what the status of the Army is than anybody around, because you're going to get the latest from each of the horses' mouths." So, it proved to be that way. They gave us leave and so forth.

Then I went on in the Army. I went to Fort

Benning. I was in a class there, and I was held on as an instructor. I was supposed to have a battalion in the 3rd Infantry Division to catch up on troop duty, but then I got ordered to Fort Leavenworth to the Command and General Staff School. So, I went there and got held on the faculty there.

Then I got hauled out at the end of my third year to go to Austria to command a mountain infantry battalion. That was the best assignment in the whole U. S. Army. We were buried way down in the heart of the Alps, and it was a great place. Then the Russians kicked us out of Austria, so I asked for [assignment to Headquarters, United States Army, Europe at] Heidelberg [Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)]. When that came up, I called up and said, "Is that still open?" They said, "Yes. Come on up."

So, I went to Heidelberg and was G-2 [Staff Officer for Intelligence] at Heidelberg for two years, through the Poznan Riots and through the Hungarian Revolution [1956].

I stayed there until my three-year tour was up. I was supposed to go to Berlin [Federal Republic of Germany], but then orders came up sending me to the Army War College [Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, Pennsylvania], which I did go to. Again, I got held on the faculty, which I did not want, but the

commandant had been the assistant commandant at Leavenworth, and I couldn't get out of it. Fortunately, he retired the next year. The only way that I could get out of there was to volunteer for a hardship tour. As the chief of the Infantry Branch said, "We wouldn't send you on a hardship tour if Hell froze over. But, if you really want to get out of here [and he knew well my situation], what you'll have to do is volunteer for a hardship tour. There are one or two places that are accompanied, so you can take your family if you want to go."

Afghanistan was one that I did toy with, but what I did take was Vietnam. So, I went over in the summer of 1959 to Vietnam. I was made the Chief of Operations in the Military Assistance Group in Saigon. That was the best assignment there. I was also the advisor to the ARVN J-3 [Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), Joint Staff Officer for Operations], so I had access to go all over Vietnam, which I did.

Then I was asked for in Hawaii, which didn't bother me one bit because I'd always wanted to go there--but not until I had children, so they could enjoy it. So, I got ordered back to Hawaii and spent two years in G-2 there. Quite a bit of that time, I was back in Southeast Asia. I was responsible for

intelligence training of the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] officers. Then when [President John F.] Kennedy decided to send the Special Forces into South Vietnam, my tour, which had been an unaccompanied tour, was fourteen months. If you were out in the field, it was twelve months, but if you were in Saigon, it was fourteen.

[Tape 2, Side 2]

Olson: Under the [1954] Geneva accords, we were allowed to have a MAG [Military Assistance Group] in Vietnam and also what was called an Equipment Recovery Team to get the French material out of there. The total American military that were authorized was about 370 or 380. They had what was called the International Control Commission [ICC], composed of Poles, Indians, and Canadians. Their job was to watch what we were doing, so anytime that a U. S. plane came in, military or passenger, they were down counting heads of how many were leaving and how many were coming back--to see that we didn't exceed the ceiling. But with Kennedy's wanting to put Special Forces in there, they figured out that by cutting some of the slots in the MAG, they could bring the Special Forces in.

They cut my tour by one month, so I went to Hawaii and was a G-2. I stayed there for two years. Then I was selected to command a battle group at

Schofield Barracks [Hawaii]. I took the first combat troops to Southeast Asia, to Thailand, in 1962. It was the 35th Infantry Combat Tea. We spent three months in Korat [Thailand]. I then came back and became the chief of staff for the 25th Division and then got hauled back to Fort Belvoir [Virginia] to participate in a [referring to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara] McNamara war game that was going on.

Alexander: Where are we in time here?

Olson: I came back in 1964 to Washington.

Alexander: McNamara had stayed on [and served in the administration of President Lyndon Baines Johnson], hadn't he?

Olson: Oh, yes, very much so. Anyway, I was held there in that war game and then was asked for, and I went to the Defense Intelligence Agency, where I worked for a very fine Navy admiral whom you may know or may know of--he's passed away, unfortunately--Fritz Harlfinger. He was a submariner who was out at Cavite and got back to Hawaii just before the war started. He was a hell of a fine guy. I spent two years under him.

I retired in July, 1967, and after a couple of years, I was the head of a war gaming group that was selected by Booze, Allen, Hamilton under contract to the Army at Fort Leavenworth. So, I was back in my old stomping grounds.

Alexander: This was after you retired?

Olson: Yes. Then I joined one of the largest consulting engineering firms in the country--Black and Veatch. It's a wonderful company. I became the Vice-President for International Development, so I spent twelve years traveling all over the world peddling Black and Veatch.

Alexander: That sounds like a pretty good duty.

Olson: Oh, it was, I'll tell you! They were great people. Then I retired in 1982 from there. Since then I have been doing research and writing, which I love. I love history.

Alexander: Well, we do, too, and that's why we're here.

Olson: I'm through, believe it or not (chuckle).

Alexander: I just wanted to let you know how much the Nimitz Museum appreciates your taking this time and doing this. It's very, very valuable, and it's going to be really valuable, probably, as the years go by. We know that people right now are looking at our oral histories, and as we get farther and farther down the line, and most of us or all of us are gone, the interviews will still be there, and they're going to be very valuable to future historians.

Olson: Well, I hope so.