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Interview With

HERB ELFERING

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

Interviewer: William J. Alexander

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Approved:

*Herbert J. Elfering*

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National Museum of the Pacific War  
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Herb Elfering

Interviewer: William J. Alexander                      December 6, 2001

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

Mr. Alexander: This is Bill Alexander at Fredericksburg, Texas, interviewing Mr. Herb Elfering. I'm interviewing Mr. Elfering in order to get his experiences while he was stationed at Camp Malakole with the searchlight/radar battery, 251<sup>st</sup> Coast Artillery Regiment during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

With that out of the way, Herb, I'm going to ask you when and where you were born.

Mr. Elfering: I was born in Watertown, South Dakota, on March 29, 1922.

Mr. Alexander: You were in the coal country.

Elfering: No, it's farm country, but, yes, there's coal there.

Alexander: What about your parents? Were they immigrants?

Elfering: No, they were U.S.-born. My mother was born in Minnesota, and my father was born in Watertown.

Alexander: How about brothers and sisters?

Elfering: I'm one of nine. I had five sisters and three brothers. There's six of us still alive--three sisters and my two brothers.

Alexander: Where did you fit into that?

Elfering: I'm right in the middle. I'm number five.

Alexander: Where did you begin your schooling?

Elfering: I went to school in a little country school south of Watertown--a little country school by the name of Foley--for all eight grades.

Alexander: Were there many students?

Elfering: It would vary from year to year. I guess the most we had was probably thirty.

Alexander: From that point on, how about high school? Did you go to high school there?

Elfering: We moved. We lost the farm in South Dakota.

Alexander: When?

Elfering: In 1932. The family was all split up. I stayed with an uncle, and my sisters stayed with another aunt and uncle. My mother stayed with a neighbor, and my father went someplace. In 1933, we heard that they were going to start the Fort Peck Dam in Montana.

Alexander: On what river is that?

Elfering: On the Missouri River, near Glasgow, Montana. My dad had a car. We obtained an old trailer and put what belongings we still had on it. The family that was left--there were five of us kids--got in the car and drove to Montana. I had a grandmother and an aunt and uncle who lived there, so we stayed with them.

Alexander: Was that your mother's father?

Elfering: It was my mother's sister and her husband, and my mother's mother. We stayed with them until the Fort Peck Dam was actually authorized. We got there in September, and I think it was authorized in October or November, 1933. My father was one of the first hired on the Fort Peck project. We moved closer to the project in a tarpaper shack. I finished my seventh and eighth

grades in a small country school in Montana, called Tiger Butte Grade School.

Alexander: There's something about Tiger Butte that brought up something. Is there a town around there?

Elfering: No, there was just a butte, or a great, big hill, that was named Tiger Butte. The school was next to the butte, so it was called the Tiger Butte Grade School.

Alexander: What about high school?

Elfering: When I graduated from the eighth grade, I went to Glasgow High School. Glasgow was the closest town to the Fort Peck Dam. It was, like, fifteen miles to the north. My father was working on the dam at that time, and we lived a ways away from the dam. So, I would ride to work with him, catch a bus, and ride to Glasgow for fifteen miles.

Alexander: Was this a school bus or just a regular bus?

Elfering: It was a chartered bus. I think we paid \$1.20 a week to ride the bus.

Alexander: Were there quite a few kids on the bus?

Elfering: Yes. I guess there'd be thirty, maybe. They were kids from families that worked on the

Fort Peck project.

Alexander: Did you finally graduate from that high school?

Elfering: I went to Glasgow for two years, and then they opened up a high school on the Fort Peck project. I went the last two years and graduated from Fort Peck High School

Alexander: And in what year was that?

Elfering: In 1939.

Alexander: So, what happened to you? What did you do after graduation?

Elfering: Well, I worked that summer driving a tractor for farmers. I had a brother in the Navy in San Diego. He was married, and his wife and he invited me to come to San Diego and go to San Diego State College. So, that's what I did. It just happened that there was a family moving from Fort Peck to Sacramento. I was seventeen at the time, and I drove their truck, which was loaded with their belongings, for them to Sacramento.

Alexander: By yourself?

Elfering: They accompanied me with a car, pulling a small trailer. Of course, this was before

interstate highways. We'd pull off to the side of the road and fix our food. I slept in the back end of the truck on a little mattress. I don't remember how many days it took us, but it must have taken five or six, at least. I went to Sacramento with them, and then I caught a bus down to San Diego, to my brother and his wife.

Alexander: Where was he stationed? Was he on North Island?

Elfering: Yes, he was on North Island.

Alexander: What kind of duty was he doing?

Elfering: He was in an airplane squadron that was, at that time, testing blind flying techniques and gear. He was in the ground crew. He was a petty officer, but I don't know what class anymore.

Alexander: He was a mechanic?

Elfering: Yes, he did mechanical things.

Alexander: That would have been in 1939.

Elfering: It was 1939 and 1940. Then I started at San Diego State. I had been in the National Guard in Montana, just to make a few extra bucks. I joined the Guard at sixteen in

Montana. When I was in school at San Diego, I didn't have a chance to make much money, and by going to Guard drill once a week, I made an extra buck, so I rejoined the National Guard. I went to camp in Chehalis, Washington, that summer with the 251<sup>st</sup> Coast Artillery Regiment, National Guard. We spent two weeks up there. It wasn't very long after that when the National Guard was activated. On September 16, 1940, the National Guard unit that I was in was activated.

Alexander: And that means that you went on active duty.

Elfering: Yes. We were ordered to Hawaii in the first part of November. We landed in Honolulu on November 5, 1940.

Alexander: So, you were in the Army.

Elfering: They called it "The Army of the United States." It wasn't the Regular Army. We were not classified in the Regular Army.

Alexander: How many of you went?

Elfering: It was the entire regiment of eight batteries and the headquarters battery. I was in a searchlight battery. Our job was to



illuminate airplanes so the guns could fire at them at night.

Alexander: What kind of training did you get? Was that the training that you got when you got over there?

Elfering: Yes, and that's the training we had when we went to the National Guard camp, too, up in Washington before the unit was activated.

Alexander: Where were you stationed?

Elfering: We went to Fort Shafter to start with. Then we were transferred to a location called Camp Malakole, where we were in tents. At the same time, we built our own barracks, so we turned into a construction unit for a while until our barracks were completed.

Alexander: How were you liking it at that time?

Elfering: At that age and at that period of time, I just felt fortunate to have a job. It was a job. I was brainwashed into the Army system, I guess. I went in as a private at \$21 a month.

Alexander: So, you got over there in December, 1940.

Elfering: It was in November, 1940.

Alexander: Was there anything unusual going on at that

time?

Elfering: Just our own maneuvers, which meant setting up our searchlights. The Air Force would fly planes for us to illuminate, and then the antiaircraft guns would shoot at a towed target.

Alexander: At night?

Elfering: Yes.

Alexander: You never shot down the planes, though?

Elfering: We never shot down our own planes, because that's what we were practicing with.

Alexander: So, that's what you were doing, I guess, up to about the time when the attack came?

Elfering: Yes, until the attack on December 7, 1941.

Alexander: Where were you then?

Elfering: I was in camp, and I was standing at the corner of our barracks reading the bulletin board when the first Japanese plane came over to strafe the camp. The line of bullets only missed me by about fifteen feet. It went across and into the other barracks. The fellows were still in bed because it was Sunday morning. One guy was shot in the stomach, but he lived. He was still in his

cot.

Alexander: Where was this? This wasn't Schofield.

Elfering: Camp Malakole is around the shoreline from Pearl Harbor in a westerly direction. Schofield Barracks is inland; Camp Malakole was on the shoreline.

Alexander: So, they were just strafing you guys, then.

Elfering: Yes. I assume that it was a plane that had dropped its bombs and was just looking for a target. It had some ammunition left and was strafing any Army installation.

I was in charge of a radar at the time. I got my squad together, and we got to the radar. Even though it was a radar that had limited range for detecting airplanes, it was our guard position.

While we were there, another Japanese plane was coming at us. We all jumped down underneath the radar. Just before the plane opened fire, I could see that it seemed to swerve. The line of bullets went between the radar and the power plant that supplied the electricity to the radar. So, I got barely missed again, and the line of bullets severed

the power cables between the power plant and the radar.

Those were the only two planes that came over our camp, but each one of them came awful close to me.

Alexander: There was nobody manning that radar installation, then?

Elfering: No, the radar was closed up for the day. It was designed only to operate at night, really, because our searchlights were tied to the radar. We would illuminate the airplanes, so our duty was night duty more than day duty, you see.

Alexander: What about the rest of the day? Did any other planes ever come over you?

Elfering: No, just those two planes, that I recall. There might have been more, but that's all that I recall. I guess it was because they strafed so close to where I was.

Alexander: What was it like to be there on that Sunday, then? You had to have heard a lot of the commotion.

Elfering: We could see in the direction of Pearl Harbor that there was an awful lot of smoke coming

up. We could hear the bombing noise, and we thought, "Well, they must be on maneuvers over that way [or something]."

Alexander: The planes that shot at you, you didn't recognize at all?

Elfering: When the first plane that I described strafed, when it pulled up, I saw the red [rising sun] insignia on the fuselage. I knew right then that it was not our plane, and it was a Japanese plane.

Alexander: So, when you saw that smoke on the horizon, you must have known that they must have been hit.

Elfering: Then I tied it together that we were being attacked. Of course, it was just a couple of minutes after that when the word did get out. The alarm was sounded in the camp that we were under attack.

Alexander: What did that mean, as far as you were concerned? Did you have to do anything?

Elfering: Well, everyone was ordered to a battle station who had one. My battle station was the radar, so that's where I got my squad out to. I was a corporal at the time.

Alexander: The rest of the day, what did you do? Did you have to stay at your station?

Elfering: We stayed there for a while. I don't recall just how long. Then we were recalled back for General Quarters. We were reviewed on what was happening. Of course, everything turned from peacetime to wartime conditions. There was more security immediately. There were more people on guard duty. The lights were out at night and that sort of thing.

Alexander: I'm sure that you were on alert most of the time during the night.

Elfering: Yes, we stayed on alert.

Alexander: For how long?

Elfering: Well, I don't recall for sure just how many days we were still on alert mode. It would have been a few days, until it was obvious, I guess, that there was no Japanese fleet in the Pacific near Hawaii and that things could get back to a little bit more normal in terms of issuing passes to go to town and that sort of thing.

Alexander: In any part of the period, say, up until January, 1941, was there anything unusual

that you had to do, as far as security was concerned, or was it just what you normally had to do?

Elfering: As far as security went, why, people were checked closer, especially the ones who would be entering the camp for any reason at all. Not just military people, normally, would be coming to camp because of supplies and that sort of thing.

Alexander: These were civilians who would be coming in?

Elfering: Yes.

Alexander: How long were you there at Hawaii?

Elfering: I was in Hawaii from November 5, 1940, until we were ordered to go to the Fiji Islands in June, 1942.

Alexander: So, you were there for quite a while.

Elfering: Well, that would be a year and eight months.

Alexander: What did you do during that period of time?  
Coastal watch?

Elfering: After we were attacked, then my squad was ordered to Kaena Point on Oahu, which was in the northwest part of the island. We went out there and set up our radar and searchlights. We operated there until we

were ordered to the Fiji Islands in 1942. When we went to the Fiji Islands, our mission was to defend an airstrip that had been built there for future attacks in the Pacific.

Alexander: Where are the Fijis?

Elfering: The Fijis are southwest of Hawaii.

Alexander: It isn't very far. It wasn't like going to the South Pacific.

Elfering: Well, it's below the Equator. It's northerly of New Zealand.

Alexander: So, it's pretty much in the Southwest Pacific.

Elfering: Yes, and it's very near the Solomon Islands, near Guadalcanal.

Alexander: Were you there at that time, too?

Elfering: Guadalcanal was in...

Alexander: August, 1942.

Elfering: We were ordered to Bougainville [Solomon Islands]. On the way to Bougainville, in 1943, we spent some time on Guadalcanal, but that was after it had been secured. We were ordered up to Bougainville to defend an airstrip up there. Bougainville was being attacked by Japanese planes from Rabaul [on



New Britain Island]. So, we were on Bougainville from the summer of 1943 until December, 1944.

Alexander: You were on Bougainville that long?

Elfering: Yes.

Alexander: In the early stages there, there was some interdiction from the Japanese.

Elfering: Yes. The Japanese were on the other side of the island, and they launched a counterattack. We had two infantry divisions on the island. We had an unusual mission with our searchlights--to set them up and shine the searchlights on the clouds. They would reflect down on the front line, in order for our infantry to do some night fighting on the front line.

Alexander: It illuminated it?

Elfering: Yes.

Alexander: That was pretty close, then.

Elfering: Yes, it was pretty close. The searchlights' range was not all that great, really. But it was effective. It reflected light back down on the front lines.

Alexander: Did you ever have any situation...I'm drawing

this from another interview, in fact in Europe, so it doesn't make a lot of sense, but it does in one way. The fighting was at times where you weren't going to use your guns the way they were intended for. They wouldn't be going up. They could go level to the enemy. I don't know if that would have happened where you were.

Elfering: Our antiaircraft guns were used exactly for that purpose. We could level the forests and help clear out the Japanese. We did some of that.

Alexander: Did you feel that it was pretty worthwhile?

Elfering: Oh, it was very effective! Our casualties were very light, and it cleaned out the Japanese who were attacking. It was not a huge number, because they--the Japanese--had been pretty well isolated on the island.

Alexander: You were on the island for a long time. What was the reason for your not having been moved further up?

Elfering: It was a function of how many airstrips were built ahead of us, I guess. Once they built the airstrips ahead of us, then the

antiaircraft units would go in and surround the airstrip to keep any enemy planes away so our own planes could come in and go out.

Alexander: You had to have them there just about all the time, then.

Elfering: Yes.

Alexander: And you went from Bougainville to where?

Elfering: To Luzon, in the Philippines. We went to the north end of Luzon, a place called Lingayen Gulf. The place on Bougainville was Empress Augusta Bay. We landed on Luzon on, I think, January 10, 1945.

Alexander: So, it had been just recently recaptured.

Elfering: Luzon had not been recaptured in total, no. There were still lots of Japanese in Manila and around Clark Field.

I should mention, I guess, that on the way to the Philippines, our convoy was fifteen ships, in three rows of five. One evening, a lone *kamikaze* Japanese plane came over. Of course, all the ships in the convoy were firing at it. When it finally decided to come down, it picked the ship next to the one I was on.

Alexander: What kind of ships were these?

Elfering: They were troop transport ships. It must have been damaged somehow, because it hit just behind the stern on the ship next to me. It sank and didn't do any damage.

Alexander: It didn't damage it at all?

Elfering: No.

Alexander: You came close to danger several times, didn't you?

Elfering: Yes, I sure did.

Alexander: A lot of guys didn't get anything.

Elfering: Oh, yes! So, we landed on Lingayen Gulf on January 10, and then we worked our way down toward Manila. We set up at Clark Field to defend it.

While we were there, we weren't attacked, but there was a Japanese squad that was holding out near there. When it was discovered, some of our battery was ordered to search them out. They did, but in the process, one of our men was shot. I know what it is to carry a wounded man on a stretcher with plasma trying to enter his veins. It was all in vain, because he died.

Alexander: Was that your only casualty?

Elfering: That was the only casualty that we had at Clark Field, yes.

Alexander: Did you have some in other places?

Elfering: No. We were also ordered down to Manila. We weren't set up for defending an airstrip down there. It was a staging area for moving farther toward Japan at some time. The order never came. In July, 1945, I qualified to go home on points.

Alexander: You could get home on points, but you weren't going to get out of the service.

Elfering: No.

Alexander: You were rotated.

Elfering: Yes. I was home in August on leave, and that's when we got word that we dropped the [atomic] bomb on Japan. A few days after that, I was ordered to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for separation from the service.

Alexander: That was in August when you were getting out?

Elfering: Yes. I was home on leave, and I would have been reassigned after I reported back from Fort Leavenworth, but in the process I was ordered back for separation.

Alexander: Because you had been out there long enough, and you weren't going back. After you pretty well secured the Philippines--Manila, especially--there was a period of time...they called it "secure" in late January. [Editor's note: Manila was not declared secure until March 3, 1945.] Iwo Jima came along, and then Okinawa. You weren't involved in any of those?

Elfering: No.

Alexander: After Okinawa, we were getting ready to go to Japan. Did you have any special training or anything like that? Were you aware of anything?

Elfering: Special training in case we invaded the islands of Japan? No.

Alexander: So, in your particular case, you wouldn't have been set for the first few weeks of the invasion.

Elfering: No, we would not have been. Our training was strictly to defend airstrips.

Alexander: You wouldn't have had too much to do, then.

Elfering: Their air force had been decimated by that time, really. I don't know if you'd be

interested in my Army advancement or not.

Alexander: Absolutely!

Elfering: I advanced from private in 1940 to corporal to sergeant to staff sergeant. I was promoted to staff sergeant on the Fiji Islands. Then I was selected to go to Officer Candidate School. The infantry needed additional officers, so they conducted two ninety-day sessions of training.

Alexander: Was this out in the Pacific?

Elfering: It was on the Fiji Islands. I went to Officer Candidate School--I was the only one selected from my outfit--in October, 1943. In January, 1944, I became a second lieutenant. Then I went back to my same artillery unit. The fellows who got their lieutenantcies or commissions in the infantry went back to their same divisions, but in different companies.

Alexander: That was in 1943, you said, when you became a lieutenant?

Elfering: It was in January, 1944.

Alexander: What were your duties?

Elfering: I pretty much stayed in radar. I was

supervising the radar units for directing searchlights. I was also the transportation officer. I advanced from second lieutenant to captain when I was separated.

Alexander: You did not stay in the service after the war, then?

Elfering: No.

Alexander: Where did you go?

Elfering: I went to the University of Michigan [in Ann Arbor]. I started there in January, 1946. I could have started a semester earlier, but I guess I just figured I wanted some time off (chuckle). So, I stayed in South Dakota with my sister and brother-in-law for a while. I hunted pheasants. Then I went to Montana and just kind of reminisced again.

Alexander: What kind of business or work were you doing after you got out of school? What was your career?

Elfering: After college I became an electrical engineer. I was hired by the Consumers Power Company in Michigan. I stayed there for thirty-five years and retired in 1985.

In the process, I got married on June 18,



1948. Through the years, my wife and I had five children. They're all self-supporting.

Alexander: You probably have some grandchildren, I would imagine.

Elfering: I have six grandchildren.

Alexander: It's a pretty good life, isn't it?

Elfering: It turned out quite well, yes, after all. I'm just happy to be here to tell you about it, I guess.

Alexander: Well, on behalf of the University of North Texas and the Nimitz Museum, we really appreciate your taking this time to give us this oral history.

Elfering: You're welcome. I'm very happy to do it.