

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Telephone Interview with

Mr. Merle Volding

Date of Interview: February 22, 2013

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Telephone Interview in progress.

Larry Rabalais: This is Larry Rabalais and today is February the 22, 2013. I'm interviewing Mr. Merle Volding. The interview is taking place here in Fredericksburg, however, by telephone, and he is located in Westminster, Colorado. This interview is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. And with that mouthful, Merle, I'll let you go ahead and ... and start, okay? When were you born and so forth?

Mr. Volding: Okay, I was in ... on December 19, 1923 on a farm near ... Crystal Lake, Iowa. And I ... graduated from high school there (throat clearing) in ... May of 1941.

Larry Rabalais: Did you have brothers and sisters there?

Mr. Volding: Uh, yes, I ... had five brothers and sisters; three brothers and two sisters.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh, one older than me and ... the rest younger, and ...

Larry Rabalais: Did they go into the service also? Just out of curiosity.

Mr. Volding: What?

Larry Rabalais: Did the brothers go into the service also?

Mr. Volding: Uh, all ... all four of us were in service, yeah.

Larry Rabalais: Oh, they did?! Uh huh.

Mr. Volding: Yes, uh huh.

Larry Rabalais: What branch was it ... were they in ... just out of curiosity.

Mr. Volding: My older brother who graduated in '39, he joined the Navy when he got out of high school.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And my two younger brothers were both in the ... uh, in the Army. One of them in ... Construction Corps ... some kind, and the other one ... was ... uh, in ... Infantry Company.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum. Okay, and you ... uh, okay when ... you had graduated in '41 you say?

Mr. Volding: '40 ... 1941, yes.

Larry Rabalais: '41, okay. So, were you getting ready to start school again when Pearl Harbor occurred or ... uh, were you still ... uh, you were still in school?

Mr. Volding: No, I ... uhm, very, very few, almost none of the ... uh, young people that grew up in the farming area where I did ... went to college. A lot of them didn't even graduate from high school in those days.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uhm, but ... I left ... the farm when I graduated and came to Denver, Colorado for my first trip to a big city to try to find a job.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Not knowing the unemployment rate was so high and I wasn't yet eighteen, but I finally found a job as a shipping clerk. And then, of course, on ... December 7th, that year, 1941, was Pearl Harbor ...

Larry Rabalais: So, you were working at that time? Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh, yeah, and twelve days later on the 19th of December, I turned eighteen and became eligible for the draft.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: (Throat clearing), and I ...

Larry Rabalais: Now when you ... when you heard of Pearl Harbor, did you have any awareness of where it was at or any feeling about war coming on or ... or you weren't too cognizant of that maybe?

Mr. Volding: Well, not ... well, I was very aware of Pearl Harbor because my brother, older brother, was already in the Navy and had been stationed there.

Larry Rabalais: Oh, he was?! Okay.

Mr. Volding: Yes, uh huh. Uh, of course, I was, you know, a little bit aware of things, but ... didn't expect anything like that to happen certainly.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: But I ... I decided I did not want to wait to be ... drafted ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... in the Infantry or something and so I ... accidentally discovered on a ... one of my two daily trips to the post office as a shipping clerk, I saw a ... notice, uh, by the ... Civil Service Commission in the Army Signal Corps together announcing some schools they were going to conduct together ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... to train radar technician ... radio and radar technicians. I ... took note of that and was telling my boss about it, and he ... suggested that I pursue that, so I did, and ...

Larry Rabalais: Now that was the Army, right?

Mr. Volding: Uh, the Army, yes, the Army Signal Corps.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And ... so, I enlisted in the Signal Corps, and they ... of course, the war had just started and they didn't have ... many facilities for all these people being drafted and so on, so they set up a school in Des Moines ... one ... well, there were several. One in Des Moines to train these people. And so, I enlisted in the Signal Corps and ... and (throat clearing) was ... in Des Moines going to school.

Larry Rabalais: Well, they didn't send you to basic first?

Mr. Volding: Well, they didn't have any room for us to give us basic first.

Larry Rabalais: Oh, they didn't have room for you to go to basic, okay.

Mr. Volding: You know, there was an extreme shortage of ... of training facilities.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum, yeah, they were (unintelligible).

Mr. Volding: And ...

Larry Rabalais: They were building these little wooden camps everywhere.

Mr. Volding: With the huge need and all these people being drafted, there was a shortage of facilities, so ... uh, I was ... in the Signal Corps but I went to school six days a week, eight hours a day in Des Moines ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... for six months on very intense technical training.

Larry Rabalais: Was that an ... uh, and electronically ... electronically oriented type training or ... uh, radio ... (unintelligible).

Mr. Volding: Combination of ...

Larry Rabalais: Combination.

Mr. Volding: ... mechanical and electronics.

Larry Rabalais: Okay, alright.

Mr. Volding: Then I ... I did well grade wise in that school, and was picked as one of ... a few that were sent on to the University of Iowa where there was a program ... sponsored by the ... Army headquarters.

Larry Rabalais: Wasn't a V-12 program or something like that or ...

Mr. Volding: Uh, I've got the document which I could send.

Larry Rabalais: No, that's okay.

Mr. Volding: I've got that on the computer, too.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And I was there for three months in the School of Engineering at the University of Iowa.

Larry Rabalais: Wow.

Mr. Volding: And then, by then they had a camp ready for us in California, Camp Kohler, K-o-h-l-e-r, and they ... uh, it was originally used to gather up the Japanese civilians ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... on the west coast.

Larry Rabalais: That they were going to intern.

Mr. Volding: Yes, uh huh. And then they ... moved them inland.

Larry Rabalais: Right.

Mr. Volding: To places like Utah and ...

Larry Rabalais: And Idaho and places like that.

Mr. Volding: ... mid ... all over.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And that became ... Camp ... uh, our camp, Camp Kohler.

Larry Rabalais: Now, did you do any basic training *ever*?

Mr. Volding: Oh yes. They ... then we went to basic training with ... uh, you know, the ... the whole bit.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And ... then ... we went back ... uh, into some more technical training. They gave us ... some tests ... and I ... I guess I must have passed it. We (throat clearing) they sent ... some of us ... to ... a ... uh, a small college in northern California for another thirty days of testing. And then this was the Army's Specialized Training Program, ASTP.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And my buddy, Bob Hines (sp?) from Kansas City and I were both there, and then he got sent to ... uh, the University of Utah, and I got sent to the University of San Francisco.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Which, you know, is very, very small in those days.

Larry Rabalais: For ... for ...

Mr. Volding: A (unintelligible).

Larry Rabalais: ... for further training?

Mr. Volding: Uh yes ...

Larry Rabalais: For specialized ...

Mr. Volding: ... we were ...

Larry Rabalais: ... specialized training.

Mr. Volding: We were in ... uh, well, we ... in that program, you majored in either foreign languages or engineering.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And I was in ... engineering. And then six months later, some thing went kind of bad in the war, the Battle of the Bulge, and so on, and ... and they suddenly closed it down. And ... I ended up going back to Camp Kohler and joined, as did my friend, Robert ... Bob Hines from ... uh, University of Utah. We both ended up in that and another buddy of mine from Texas, Al Kirk (sp?). But ... uh, the quickly ... uh, put together a ... a Signal Company and ... then we went from Camp Kohler back down ... to the port of embarkation by Oakland, and uh,

got on a troop ship, and we headed for the Pacific not knowing where we were going.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And we thought, after we got of the harbor at San Francisco, we'd be part of a convoy, but we, for some reason, we weren't and we ... we were unescorted. The whole way we zigzagged for twenty-six days.

Larry Rabalais: Was that a troop ship or a ... a liberty ship ... or ...

Mr. Volding: Oh, just a ... a little ... one of these ... they called them Kaiser's caskets ...

Larry Rabalais: Yes, uh huh, yeah.

Mr. Volding: ... built by Kaiser Shipbuilding Company.

Larry Rabalais: It was ... put together ...

Mr. Volding: They built them by the thousands.

Larry Rabalais: ... put together in pieces.

Mr. Volding: A lot of them were sunk.

Larry Rabalais: Right uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And we ... were told ... about twelve hundred of us on that thing.

Larry Rabalais: Well, did y'all go directly to what island?

Mr. Volding: Well, we ... we went all the way ... over six thousand miles, not counting the zigzagging ...

Larry Rabalais: So, you didn't stop in Hawaii or anything ...

Mr. Volding: ... and to the island of New Caledonia.

Larry Rabalais: New Cal ... directly to New Caledonia, okay.

Mr. Volding: And the only three things we saw in the twenty-six days ... one day was a rock sticking up out of the ocean, one day ... uh, alarm went off and there was a bomber going overhead, but it was a ... a U.S. bomber, and the only other ... thing we saw one time was a ship on the horizon. That was a (unintelligible).

Larry Rabalais: Was there a lot of guys onboard or just a ... a small number of y'all?

Mr. Volding: Well, there were a total of twelve hundred, and these ships were operated by the Merchant Marine, not the Navy.

Larry Rabalais: Uh huh. Did they have a Navy armed guard onboard, you know, manning the cannons or whatever?

Mr. Volding: No!

Larry Rabalais: Or ...

Mr. Volding: We (chuckles) ...

Larry Rabalais: ... had ...

Mr. Volding: ... uh, these Merchant Marines, in those days, they were very casual and informal. They ... wore anything. And a few of them were trained to ... we only had a ... a couple of guns on the deck, and every once in a while, they'd have a training exercise and fire them.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: They'd send up a target and then fire at it.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh, but no, that's the only protection ... we had. And ... uh, so we were on there twenty-six days and finally ...

Larry Rabalais: Did you get sea sick? That's a long time to be at sea.

Mr. Volding: Well, that's ... that is (chuckles), no stops.

Larry Rabalais: No stops.

Mr. Volding: In fact, they ... they ran low on food and we lived off of apples and things the last few days.

Larry Rabalais: Was the weather reasonably good to where it was not stormy, to where you would ... would get sea sick?

Mr. Volding: Not ... well, when we first left, I think everybody onboard but me got sea sick. I don't get sea sick.

Larry Rabalais: Oh, you don't?! Well, good for you.

Mr. Volding: Uh, now, yeah there was a lot of sea sickness.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: But ... when we got to New Caledonia, uh, everybody unloaded except our ... our company, Signal Company. And they told us that we were ... going on to Guadalcanal.

Larry Rabalais: Uh oh!

Mr. Volding: Now ... now, the fighting was over with ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... by then at Guadalcanal.

Larry Rabalais: But it's a nasty place!

Mr. Volding: Oh, terrible place! But, a couple of days later all of a sudden, they told us we were getting off, and what happened was ... uh, there was already a Signal Company ... in our battalion, the 319th Signal Service Battalion, ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... already ... one of the companies on that island, and so they decided instead to have us replace them on New Caledonia and send them to Guadalcanal.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Which was a lucky break.

Larry Rabalais: Right.

Mr. Volding: And ... uh, so ... then ... uh, I ... I forgot to mention in my advanced training back at Camp Kohler, they gave us some tests and I ... was sent to ... Cryptography School to become a ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... a cryptographer, and in the process of getting a top secret clearance ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... an FBI agent showed up at ... the homes of several farmers that ... near where I was born.

Larry Rabalais: Checking on you (chuckles)?

Mr. Volding: Yeah, and I got a couple of letters from farm women wondering if I was in trouble.

Larry Rabalais: (Laughter).

Mr. Volding: And ... anyway, we got to New Caledonia and ... uh, I actually ended up in working ... almost the entire time in cryptography ... it's a little (unintelligible) everything. And then eventually, I ended up a Sergeant in charge of one of the ships ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... in the ...

Larry Rabalais: So, y'all ... were y'all sending encoded messages among other things or ... uh ...

Mr. Volding: Oh yes, that was mainly what we did and ... and see, ...

Larry Rabalais: ... (unintelligible), what's a typical (unintelligible)?

Mr. Volding: ... uh, New Caledonia became ... the SOPAC headquarters, the headquarters of the South Pacific.

Larry Rabalais: Yes. Yes, I'm ... uh huh.

Mr. Volding: And that's why ... Nimitz ... uh, was there just a few times.

Larry Rabalais: Did you actually get to see him or he just ...

Mr. Volding: I never did ... yes, uh huh.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh, MacArthur, he was there ... a few times, I think, but I never had occasion to meet him.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: But our ... see MacArthur was in Australia.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And so ... many, many, many messages, top secret messages, uh, would come out to us from MacArthur's headquarters in Australia, and then we would distribute them to islands all over.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And ... we did a lot of paraphrasing ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... to avoid sending the same ... uh ... (unintelligible).

Larry Rabalais: Right, you were explaining that to me yesterday how you don't want to ... uh, do the same message on a different code the next day and so forth, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Yep! Same ... exact same message in two different codes ... makes it easier to ...

Larry Rabalais: Is a no-no (chuckles); it's a no no.

Mr. Volding: So, uh, did that ... I was there for ... going on two years, not quite two years. And ... uh, we ... we were encouraged to spend ... time ... time off over at ... a big hospital there where they'd bring wounded from the islands ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh huh.

Mr. Volding: ... where the fighting was going on ... which we did a lot of. And it was kind of interesting; we heard many, many stories ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... from these wounded ... Marines and soldiers and ...

Larry Rabalais: A lot of guys from Peleliu and places like that.

Mr. Volding: Oh, yeah, many islands, uh huh.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And then ...

Larry Rabalais: Did you have ...

Mr. Volding: ... the one thing ...

Larry Rabalais: ... did you interface any with the natives that ... were they evident around there?
Were they used by the Army for different things that you were aware of?

Mr. Volding: Well, see, true natives of the island ... they were called Kanakese.

Larry Rabalais: Kanakese, uh huh.

Mr. Volding: And they were ... a dark, husky people.

Larry Rabalais: Uh huh, did they have the frizzy hair or ...

Mr. Volding: Well, one strange thing about them ... when our ship, troop ship, pulled in to
New Caledonia, here were all these ... people standing there, and their hair ...
uh, grew straight up, and ... uh, and it was dyed a deep red ...

Larry Rabalais: Oh really?!

Mr. Volding: ... looking color and if they hadn't dyed it for a while, the lower part would be
... black as (unintelligible)!

Larry Rabalais: Oh, is that right?

Mr. Volding: (Chuckles), reddish ... and it turns out the natives there would ... take some kind
of seeds and squeeze the juice out of them and use it as a dye.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And it was a common thing to dye their hair, but in general, there were some
natives lived ... uh, down ... in the Noumea area where all of the ... almost all of
the military were on the ... on the far south end of the island.

Larry Rabalais: So, you were at a particular town ... what was the name of the community where
you were at?

Mr. Volding: Well, if there was ... there wasn't much on New Caledonia in those days.
Almost everything was Noumea.

Larry Rabalais: Okay.

Mr. Volding: N-o-u-m-e-a.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: That was where the ... headquarters of the South Pacific was and ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... and ... and there were ... Army and Navy and Marines coming and going. It was common for ... for divisions who'd been in combat ... to ... come to New Caledonia and ... use the beaches ...

Larry Rabalais: Yeah.

Mr. Volding: ... way up north of where we were.

Larry Rabalais: Past the ... as an R&R kind of place.

Mr. Volding: Well, no, to practice for the next invasions.

Larry Rabalais: Oh, the practice, oh okay.

Mr. Volding: Yeah (laughter), yeah. Uh, but ...

Larry Rabalais: Now you described the terrain for me yesterday a little bit that it has mountains and jungle and it can be pretty warm and humid there, too, is that correct?

Mr. Volding: Oh, yes, yes, and in fact, we ... one time ... uh, after I'd been there quite a long time, uh, four of us, three of my friends and I ... we took several days off and we took a weapons' carrier ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... and decided ... start up a road which turns into a trail and a path and see how far we could go up into the mountains. And, of course, you get so far and then you just, you ... you know, you just can't go any further in it. But it did get up to where ... we were ... uh, reasonably close to a tribe. We didn't know it, but there was a native ... there where we stopped, and it turned out he had left his tribe and he became a trader.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And what he would do is ... uh, he would take stuff from one tribe and sell it to another tribe and vice versa.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And he told us ... let's see, one of my buddies had learned to speak their language, Kanaki (sp?) language.

Larry Rabalais: Boy, that's ... that's a tricky one, I bet!

Mr. Volding: Yeah, he ... he was good at that, but he conversed with him and ... and it turned out (chuckles) that night ... uh, the tribe that he had belonged to, the chief had a daughter and a son both of whom were going ... were getting married that day, and they were going to be celebrating that night, and he was going out to it. And you could drive part of the way and so he talked us into ... going with him, and, uh, we ... we came to a ... a river and ... he said we needed ... as far as we could drive, we needed to ... wade across the river. Well, we didn't want to wade across the river; we didn't know how deep it was or anything. And so, he ... he offered ... take each of us on his shoulders ... just ... and anyway, (chuckles) he got us across the river and we ... walked up to this ... camp of huts where they were celebrating this wedding. And ... the ... he took us in the chief's hut, and the chief ... uh, offered us some kind of a drink and we were told, "Absolutely don't eat or drink their food."

Larry Rabalais: Okay.

Mr. Volding: And ... so, we ... we refused to do so, and ... and which made the chief very angry. And ... but the ... the trader, native trader, had ... taken us up there; he was drinking like crazy and ... and ... the young ...

Larry Rabalais: So, kind of ... con ... concoction that they made up you mean?

Mr. Volding: Oh, oh, stuff they made, oh yeah, yeah.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, stuff they made.

Mr. Volding: Uh, the youngest in our group was a ... from Oklahoma, and ... he was so ... he became so scared that he became rather ill, and so ... uh, our buddy that ... spoke their language explained to the guy that we were with, the trader, that ... we were going to have to leave and ... and he thought it was because we were not having any fun.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And so, there ... outside there were two rows of ... of girls ... chanting very musically, very good, and he ... he thought we weren't ... weren't having any fun, so he started walking down between them to see if he could fix us up with some girls.

Larry Rabalais: (Laughter)

Mr. Volding: Well, that ... that didn't last; some native grabbed him and knocked him down, and with that ... the four of us took off and ran back down and across the river (laughter) to get out of there.

Larry Rabalais: It was getting a little rough, huh?

Mr. Volding: Well, the natives are very peaceful, but that was just ... strange event; I won't say any more time on that.

Larry Rabalais: Not your ordinary wedding reception.

Mr. Volding: Huh?

Larry Rabalais: Not your ordinary wedding reception.

Mr. Volding: (Laughter), no. Uhm, but ...

Larry Rabalais: Were they dressed pretty much in regular clothes like you guys wear or were they ...

Mr. Volding: No, no, no. No, they wore ... uh, you know, they'd get cloth and make ...

Larry Rabalais: The loin cloth, yeah.

Mr. Volding: ... and some of them were very ragged looking.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: I've got a few pictures you'll see of the kids and ... and ad ... and adults, natives.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: No, no, they lived in tribes up in the mountains; there were a lot of tribes in the mountains.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh ...

Larry Rabalais: Were the highlands, the mountains, somewhat cooler, of course, get away from the coast ... maybe it wasn't ...

Mr. Volding: Well, a little big, but they weren't ... they weren't ... uh, as high as mountains like the Rockies ...

Larry Rabalais: Yes.

Mr. Volding: ... (unintelligible).

Larry Rabalais: So, did it rain quite a bit, too, I gather?

Mr. Volding: Uh, during the monsoon season, we got a lot of rain.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah.

Mr. Volding: Lots!

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: The ... I guess the main things I remember ... uh, is when ... uh, when they dropped the first atomic bomb.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: I was on duty at the time in the message center, and ... when we got ... when we got the message they had dropped it, uh, there was so much excitement because ... until they dropped that bomb, we'd just assumed we'd be there for ... maybe a couple of more years, you know?

Larry Rabalais: Were you pretty much getting enough of it? In other words, you had ... you had enough, you were ready to get out of there?

Mr. Volding: Well, you know, it's ... uh, you're always happy to come home, but on the other hand ... you know we had become such a very ... tight ... tight-knit ... tight-knit little group.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh, that ... you know, you just felt like you were a part of something very important.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum. Well, did the message about the bomb being dropped come through you guys to be ... you know, encrypted or ... how ... how did y'all find out?

Mr. Volding: No, that ... that was so top ... it was top, top secret.

Larry Rabalais: Top, top secret.

Mr. Volding: They didn't ... they didn't even send any messages.

Larry Rabalais: About it, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Nope, it was done ... it was done in person.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And ... so we ... so we didn't know about it.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: But when we heard about it, we thought, "Oh boy, maybe this is the end!"

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum. And it had ... really was ...

Mr. Volding: Because of it being ... had been ...

Larry Rabalais: ... pretty, pretty soon after that.

Mr. Volding: Well, if they had to invade Japan, it's going to on, you know ...

Larry Rabalais: It was going to be bloody.

Mr. Volding: ... yep, it could have gone on for quite a long time. Anyway, uh, then ... the ... the war ended and ... several months later most of our guys got to go back home.

Larry Rabalais: But you didn't?

Mr. Volding: A few of us ... uh, had to stay longer because of our top secret clearance; there were very, very few of us that had that.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And so, a few of us had to stay until the following February of '46 ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... including our First Sergeant, and who I worked directly for, and ... and who was a fantastic guy. And ... then we all came back. But fortunately we came back on a really nice Navy transport.

Larry Rabalais: Oh you did, yeah? Well, listen ...

Mr. Volding: And there weren't a lot of us on there, and I, in fact, one of the pictures I have ... is a picture of those of us ... from the Army who were on there.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Going back on this ... uh, Navy transport.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum. How was the food and accommodations on New Caledonia for you guys? Was it pretty decent?

Mr. Volding: Most of time it was, you know, wasn't gourmet, but ...

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... our cooks did a ... a good job.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum, y'all ate in the Army mess or ... uh, was it regular buildings that y'all had or did y'all have ... sleep in tents? I wasn't sure what ... what (unintelligible).

Mr. Volding: Well, I'm ... yeah, I've got a picture ... a couple of pictures. I know there's one of them, see, because it was hilly around there, and we were on the waterfront, too, one of the pictures I noticed is ... taken from up on a hill, I guess, of ... of

our encampment which shows ... the message center building and some other buildings ... pre-fab kind of stuff ... down at the bottom. And then ... uh, our ... our tents, four-man tents, in roads going up the hill, and then there's a ...

Larry Rabalais: So, that's where ... that's where you slept primarily ... was in ...

Mr. Volding: Well, then ... and then there was one picture of my three tent mates and me out in front of our tent.

Larry Rabalais: Okay.

Mr. Volding: Now each tent was about ten feet square.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And ... uh, there was ... a ... a cot, an Army cot on each of the four walls, and that was it. There wasn't anything else in there.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: So, you didn't do anything but sleep in there.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah. Well ... so, on your way home, where did you end up ... in San Diego or ... where did y'all end up?

Mr. Volding: Yeah, we came back to San Francisco.

Larry Rabalais: San Francisco, okay.

Mr. Volding: Yep. It took us, I think it was sixteen days to come back.

Larry Rabalais: Straight back, yeah.

Mr. Volding: And ... on the way back, we did go through a typhoon. But on this Navy transport, it was, you know, much better. Came back to San Francisco, and ... then we ... they processed us there a little bit. And then ...

Larry Rabalais: Did you have enough points to get out? In other words, everybody was getting out then I guess? That was ...

Mr. Volding: Yeah, well we ... we went by troop train from ... uh, San Francisco to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... where we were discharged. But when we got to Fort Leavenworth, they got us ... they would take us individually and then give us a sails pitch on staying in.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Now, they were *really* after those of us who had a top-secret clearance.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Uh, because of the shortage of them.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: But ... I didn't ... I didn't want to do that, and so I went in and got discharged there at ... uh, at Fort Leavenworth.

Larry Rabalais: Were you ready to get out (chuckles).

Mr. Volding: Yeah, it'd been going on four years.

Larry Rabalais: You'd been gone a long time from home.

Mr. Volding: Oh yeah, I ... I really ... for all practical purposes, I really never lived back at home ... after I came out here to Denver in '41.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: So, I ... was gone ... (unintelligible) basically. I did go back home from Fort Leavenworth, and then I (throat clearing) went down to the University of Iowa ...

Larry Rabalais: So, you did go back to Iowa to go to school, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Yes, I went to the University of Iowa.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And majored in accounting. Now, the ... well, the second night ... I was home though from overseas, I ... uh, my brother that was in the Navy by ... I hadn't seen him for years because he was on a subchaser in the ... in the Atlantic, and he was in the invasion of North Africa and ...

Larry Rabalais: Oh my goodness!

Mr. Volding: ... Sicily and Italy and so on.

Larry Rabalais: Wow!

Mr. Volding: But by mere ... weird coincidence, he ended up arriving home the day before I did ... for discharge ... after discharge. And so, the ... the next night after we arrived home, he and went down to the famous Surf (sp?) in Clear Lake, Iowa where all the big bands played and everything ... small town, but a big, big ... ballroom, and that's when I met Marion (sp?), my wife.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And ... but I ... I'd been out on that island for so long that ... we met in ... I guess around the 1st of March and ... got engaged in April and married in August.

Larry Rabalais: (Chuckles), you didn't fool around then!

Mr. Volding: And (chuckles), by then I was already going to the University of Iowa ...

Larry Rabalais: Yeah.

Mr. Volding: 'cause I started down there ... in ear ... in summer school ... in May, and ...

Larry Rabalais: Well that ... your contribution then is ... is from the point of being involved in the crypto ... cryptography area or message sending, very special messages, so you got to ... did you get to ... actually read the un ... unencrypted messages or ... or ...

Mr. Volding: Oh yes.

Larry Rabalais: Y'all did actually see the ... was there anything ... out of those messages that was ... really shocking or stunning or ... of particular interest of all the places (unintelligible)?

Mr. Volding: Oh, a lot of what we handled ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... were messages having to do with the planning for the next invasion.

Larry Rabalais: Oh really?! Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: Yep, uh hum.

Larry Rabalais: So, that was important information if the enemy could have gotten a hold of that (chuckles).

Mr. Volding: Yeah, and then you always had an oddball message once in a while. For example, uh, a ... a ... division of the military had gone up to one of the islands and ... and this ... uh, he was a ... a Colonel had been stationed for some time there in Australia and ... went up with them and ... uh, it turns out that he'd gotten a woman pregnant ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh oh!

Mr. Volding: ... in Australia.

Larry Rabalais: Uh oh!

Mr. Volding: And so, the message ... to tell him ... that his friend was pregnant was classified as top secret (chuckles).

Larry Rabalais: (Chuckles), okay, I can imagine that especially if there's a wife at home.

Mr. Volding: Right (laughter). But most ... and ... the message back from him denied it. But ... almost all of the messages were top secret. Now, keep in mind that ... uh, see, a lot of the messages came in to us ... uh, and they were encoded ... at high ... higher speed by the ... SIGABA that I mentioned to you the other day.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: The encoding machine that we operated.

Larry Rabalais: Right, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: But then a lot of the islands ... didn't have that, and so we had to then ... retransmit them encoded differently.

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: And one method was ... uh, you know, just a ... a simple little device, and it wasn't, you know, it wasn't as a SIGABA, but sometimes you had to do that because the person you were sending the message to didn't have a SIGABA.

Larry Rabalais: Right, I understand that, uh hum.

Mr. Volding: So, that was ... pretty much ...

Larry Rabalais: Uh hum.

Mr. Volding: ... what we ... uh, what we did.

Larry Rabalais: Well, I appreciate, you know, you're sharing all of these little details with us. The ... that's an area of the war that ... people are not ... terribly aware of. They ... they know of the battles and all, you know; watch the Pacific War mini-series and all that sort of thing, but there's a lot going on behind the lines that ... that are just as important in their own way. And that ... that ... your story is part of that; you're just part of that machinery. Well, again, on behalf of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Merle, I would like to thank you for that. You sound like you're in such good health. I mean, your voice is ... is sharp as a lot of younger guys that ... that I've interviewed, so ... I really appreciate you doing this disc for us. I will be sending you or Stephanie will be sending you a copy of the ... the interview, and you can, you know, use that to see if there's any additional information that you might want to share. So, with that ...

Mr. Volding: I ... yeah, I ... I'll just email you a few of these pictures.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah! That'd be good.

Mr. Volding: Explains ...

Larry Rabalais: We will include those in the file, and I think Reagan Grau is in charge of our ... our photograph area ... might appreciate those, so I'm going to forward those directly to him by ... by digital also. Well, you have a good day, and ... and pray for rain and snow! (laughter).

Mr. Volding: Yep, we can always use more!

Larry Rabalais: We need it here.

Mr. Volding: As I mentioned ... as I mentioned before, you ... get out this way some time, give us a holler and we'll get together.

Larry Rabalais: Will do that; thank you, Merle. As a matter of fact, we're going in June, so I might give you a call before I ... before I leave.

Mr. Volding: You do that!

Larry Rabalais: All righty.

Mr. Volding: Yeah, that'd be great!

Larry Rabalais: Thank you, Merle!

Mr. Volding: Thank you!

Larry Rabalais: Have a good day, bye bye.

Mr. Volding: Bye.

(end of interview)

FINAL copy

CD – #OH03880 – Mr. Merle Volding

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