

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With

Richard M. Abe

Alameda, California

November 22, 2019

On Oahu 12/7/41

Seven Years Old (12/7/41)

U.S. Army 1956-1958

Mr. Misenhimer:

My name is Richard Misenhimer, today is November 22, 2019. I am interviewing Mr. Richard Abe by telephone. His phone number is 510-263-8641. His address is 123 Anderson Road, Alameda, California, 94502. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

His wife Yukiko is helping with this interview.

Richard, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today to share your experiences on December 7, '41. Now the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is okay with you.

Mr. Abe:

Yeah, that's no problem at all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well, let me read it to you.

"Agreement Read."

Is that okay with you?

Mr. Abe:

Yes, it's no problem.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I need to get is an alternative contact. We find out that sometimes several years down the road try to get back in contact with a person, he's moved or something. So do you have a son or daughter or someone we could contact if we needed to to find you?

Mr. Abe:

This is my son.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And his name?

Mr. Abe:

Keith. Yes, K-e-i-t-h Abe.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And his phone number?

Mr. Abe:

510-327-0210.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Let me read that back, 510-327-0210.

Mr. Abe:

1-0.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you have an address for him?

Mr. Abe:

57 Staple Point, S-t-a-p-l-e Point, in Alameda.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And the zip code?

Mr. Abe:

94502.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Same as yours. Okay, hopefully we'll never need that, but you never know. Okay, now first off what is your birthdate?

Mr. Abe:

5/29/34.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where were you born?

Mr. Abe:

In Ewa, Hawaii.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Abe:

Yes, I have four brothers.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Older or younger than you?

Mr. Abe:

Three older and one younger.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Are any of the older brothers actually involved in World War II?

Mr. Abe:

They were too young, but they all served in the military.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But later on, not in World War II?

Mr. Abe:

Right, after the war, yeah. Between the Vietnam and Korean War.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were you say?

Mr. Abe:

I was in the military between '56 and '59.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What branch were you in?

Mr. Abe:

Oh, the U.S. Army. U.S. Army, the 4th Division.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now where did you say you were born?

Mr. Abe:

In Ewa, Hawaii, E-w-a. It's the name of the town.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was your father's occupation there?

Mr. Abe:

My dad was the supervisor of the Ewa Sugar Plantation. It was a sugar company that he worked for.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what was his first name?

Mr. Abe:

Yeikichi, Y-e-i-k-i-c-h-i. That was my dad's first name.

Mr. Misenhimer:

First name, Yeikichi okay. And what was your mother's first name?

Mr. Abe:

Kimiyo, K-i-m-i-y-o.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you grew up during the depression, how did the depression affect you in your life?

Mr. Abe:

Well, basically I was too young to notice this, but my dad worked for the sugar company so that's the community I grew up in. It's a small sugar company, about fifteen hundred in

population at that time. There were a lot of immigrants, my dad is an immigrant worker from Japan. And eventually, after the war became a U.S. Citizen.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now tell me about your experiences on December 7th, '41 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Abe:

Well, let me relate to you this much. In the morning of December 7th I was out, I'd say between 7:30, 7:45, because we normally go to Sunday School. And I was waiting for my neighbor between the two houses. And you know during the time we were kids, I was seven years old at the time, there were a lot of military, the Marine fighter base was situated three miles from us. And planes normally fly over our rooftops depending on the wind condition. So airplanes flying wasn't strange to me at all. However that morning when I was awaiting for my neighbor the plane was unusually low. And it somehow it just, and in between two houses, my house and my neighbor's house, there's an open gap. And the plane was making a left turn at the time, very, very low. So I could visually see the pilot. And of course I just had my hand and waved at the pilot. And so the pilot sort of, I thought at that time he acknowledged my waving at him. In retrospect, after I found out from my mom, who called me about a couple of minutes later to come back home, you know she said, "Come back home, come back home!" And I was astonished in one respect, because why would my mom deter me from going to Sunday School and say, "Come home immediately." Apparently my parents were listening to the Japanese newscast and said there was some kind of emergency. And so upon getting to my house, one thing I noticed immediately was that my parents immediately told me something is happening, there is an alert. And one thing they were doing was filling bottles of water, containers of water. And I guess the news said to, you know collect as much water as you can. And my impression at that time was possibly, you know poisoning the water so they were doing all those things. And in retrospect, after I found out, I noticed the one thing, the plane color. After, I said, "Hey it's

not the normal type of plane color they normally fly over our house.” Normally the Marine color was more like a gray blue color. And the plane that flew over our rooftop that morning was a little, I’d say brownish, dark brown, or something to the fact. And after noticing what my mom said to me, I said, “The pilot did acknowledge my wave.” And from what I can gather I think he was trying to tell me to get off the street, instead of acknowledging my wave. And that’s my vivid memory of that, and as I said in some ways I feel kind of embarrassed I’m waving at our enemy attacking us. And so, you know in some respect I’ll always remember the fact that one, a plane was a different color, and secondly, I said he was not acknowledging my wave at all. During our time it wasn’t jets, so the planes were flying rapidly, as fast as they could. So I got a chance to observe the pilot and just sort of wave at him. And from his reaction I knew it was, you know I could wave him back but it appears now like he say, “Hey, scoot, get off the street,” or whatever. And that’s the vivid memory I have of Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor is only six, seven miles, west of where we were. We were really close to West Loch which is the west end of the Pearl Harbor and where they have all the oil supplies and I’m quite sure the war time supplies, too. And Lua Lua Lei is a communication center which is about eight, ten miles from us. Where they had a lot of tunnels, where they, I’m quite certain that they had all the ammo, ammunition stored in all the tunnels there. And that’s vividly what I remembered on December 7th. Of course some of the things I’m saying is in retrospect of the recollection of what I remembered on that. Then it was startling thing to me to say, “Hey, I was really waving at enemy attacking us.” And of course at that time, you know I didn’t realize it until later.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Could you see any of the damage going on, bombs going off and that sort of thing?

Mr. Abe:

No. You know my observation was that only the military installations were bombed or attacked. And right adjacent to the Marine airbase is Barbers Point, which is a Naval air transport. And of

course at that time, you know the Air Force was not a different branch of the service at that time. So it was a Marine Air Force, Army Air Force. And also later on in the afternoon, we could observe a lot of the, you know oil burning from the Pearl Harbor, which is quite a distance away from us.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About how far were you from Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Abe:

I was eight miles west of Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Could you see the smoke or anything from that?

Mr. Abe:

Uh, yes very faintly because of all the trees and whatnot, but you could smell the burning of the oil.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Abe:

On that day that's all I can recall. My mom, my parents confined us to the house so we weren't able to go anyplace at all. I guess there must have been some kind of alert.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What happened the next several days?

Mr. Abe:

Well, we had gone to blackout all of a sudden, they told us to blackout. One thing that is vividly in my mind too is that, I guess my parents were told that they had to confiscate anything that had anything written in Japanese. So I'm quite certain that we lost a lot of the, some Japanese documents or whatever they had, because we had to burn it out in the fireplace in the backyard.

Burn all the literatures, or magazines, or letters, or whatever that was written in Japanese.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now your parents were Japanese, is that correct?

Mr. Abe:

Ah yes, they're first generation from Japan, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About when did they come to the States, do you know?

Mr. Abe:

I believe my dad came in about 1922, I believe, and my mom about four or five days later.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did you ever get a chance to see any of the damage, the ships and stuff down there?

Mr. Abe:

I've gone to see the, you know the restoration of all the exhibits that they had in Pearl Harbor, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened after that?

Mr. Abe:

Well I just grew up in the islands and I guess we were sort of confined in a lot of respect because of the, you know at night it was total blackout. And if I can remember correctly we did have a bomb shelter built, we were told that we had to build a bomb shelter. So you know every family basically had a bomb shelter in case of disaster.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did your parents have any trouble being the fact that they were Japanese?

Mr. Abe:

I can't recall that much, but I'm quite sure they'd gone through a lot hardship during that time.

But we were in a small community where virtually, I'd say more than half were Japanese, half Filipinos. It was a mixture of races in our community so you know, but we had no problem as far as that's concerned, I guess I was too young. Financially I'm not too sure whether they had some problems at all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So on December 7th the only you saw was that one airplane, is that correct?

Mr. Abe:

There was a few, but what I think was happening was, like I mentioned we were only about three miles from the airport, and they probably attacked the airport and came over our rooftop. And I'm quite sure, you know there were more planes because there was a lot of noise going on. And you know, no sooner when the first plane I saw, my mom a couple of minutes later, since I was waiting for my neighbor to get ready to go to Sunday School, came running out and told me.

And I'm quite sure there must have been planes attacking the Marine airbase.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did you see other planes besides that one?

Mr. Abe:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

There's just the one.

Mr. Abe:

That was very unusually low, that's the reason why I kind of looked up all of sudden, because it was lower than normal, I'd say.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever get down to Pearl Harbor to see the wreckage and all down there?

Mr. Abe:

Well, later on yes, many, many years later.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How much later?

Mr. Abe:

I'd say when I was possibly in high school. Yeah, so it'd be about what

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you didn't get down to that area before that?

Mr. Abe:

Yeah. Most of the time it was restricted going in there anyway, so there's no way you could have gone there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I understand they were pretty tough on the Japanese people in Hawaii, is that correct?

Mr. Abe:

I was too young, well we were kind of restricted, but I don't think that it was as restricted as my wife's situation where she was in an internment camp versus us in Hawaii. I believe one of the reasons for it was at that point in time, I believe about thirty to thirty-five percent of the population in Hawaii was Asian. So I think it was impossible to intern us. My minister, a Christian Minister, was interned, my Japanese school principal was interned. And I believe all the community leaders in our community were probably interned to the mainland at that time, Stateside.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you were going to school there, is that correct?

Mr. Abe:

I went all the way to the University of Hawaii. And later on I did some graduate work at U.C. Berkeley, that caused me to stay in the mainland instead of going back home.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But I'm talking about just after December 7th, you were in grammar school were you?

Mr. Abe:

Yes I was in, I'd say what, second, third grade.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And you continued in school after the attack?

Mr. Abe:

Yes, uh-huh.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any problems, anybody tough on you or anything?

Mr. Abe:

No, not at all. I guess we were too young, but you know they were basically, all of us shared the same problem that we had, the hardship that you go through, I mean in time of war.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was your school mostly Japanese children or not?

Mr. Abe:

Well, I'd say half and half Filipino. There was a lot of Portuguese, Chinese and it was a multi-cultural school that I went to, but majority of people were Japanese, yes. There were immigrant families, you know kids from immigrant families, yeah. Born in Hawaii, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now after the attack did your dad have many problems at all?

Mr. Abe:

From my perspective I had no problem at all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How about your dad?

Mr. Abe:

Well I'd say, I'm quite sure they must have had some problem but they never discussed this with us at all, we were too young. I'm certain dad, they'd gone through some hardship but they never related any of those kind of information to us at all. In my case I was too young to, you know observe anything of that nature.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you're oldest brother, how much older was he than you?

Mr. Abe:

He was about twelve years older than I.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So he'd have been something like nineteen when it was attacked.

Mr. Abe:

Right, he was in high school.

Mr. Misenhimer:

He was in high school?

Mr. Abe:

Um-hum.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then did he go into the service or anything, what did he do?

Mr. Abe:

Yes, he went into the service I believe in the mid 1947, right after the war.

Mr. Misenhimer:

He didn't go in during World War II?

Mr. Abe:

No, not at all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

None of your brothers were in World War II?

Mr. Abe:

No, they were all post World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And you were in the service from what, '50?

Mr. Abe:

'56 to '58.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what branch were you in?

Mr. Abe:

U.S. Army.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I mean were you in the artillery or infantry?

Mr. Abe:

Yeah, 4th Division Infantry.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where did you take your training at?

Mr. Abe:

Schofield Barracks in Hawaii.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And how was that training?

Mr. Abe:

Oh about twenty-six weeks of solid basic training, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And then what happened?

Mr. Abe:

My unit was shipped, the training cycle was shipped to Fort Lewis, Washington. And I spent two years in Fort Lewis.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then you were discharged?

Mr. Abe:

Right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you go back to Hawaii?

Mr. Abe:

Uh yes, I returned to Hawaii and probably worked for about a year then went back to graduate school at U.C. Berkeley.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And when did you graduate there?

Mr. Abe:

In '56.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what did you do?

Mr. Abe:

I spent about a year in graduate school and I was not happy, I had intended to go into social work and I wasn't happy at all. So I worked for United Airlines for the duration of my years of life (*laughs*), dedicated my whole life to United Airlines.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About how many years with United Airlines?

Mr. Abe:

Forty-one years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what was your job with them?

Mr. Abe:

My department handled all the training for all the new hires, and reservationist, our sales clerks they went through the, you know process of making reservations for the airlines.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall about World War II?

Mr. Abe:

All I can recall is that it was pretty tough during the time, because we had a lot of drills. I can remember, you know wearing gas masks, training, and all, you know having, I guess it's called air raid, siren system and whatnot. And we had to go walk through the trenches in the, especially when in school where you had to walk through the trenches, you know to be safe and sound I guess, to practice drill.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What is your middle initial?

Mr. Abe:

M as in Michael. My Japanese name is Masamichi.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And how do you spell that?

Mr. Abe:

M-a-s-a-m-i-c-h-i. I thought you might be interested in the fact that my wife was about four years old and she was basically, I guess young enough to remember, but she was interned. She was in Seattle, Washington at that time. She was interned to Minidoka which is outside of Twin

Falls, Idaho. Do you want to talk to her?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, it'd be fine if I could talk to her, right.

Mr. Abe:

She's hard of hearing, but if you could talk louder to her she'd probably could hear what you're saying.

Mr. Misenhimer:

If she can't understand me you can tell her what I'm saying.

Mr. Abe:

Yeah, hold on.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Hi, how are you doing today? Can you hear me okay?

Mrs. Abe:

It's very faint, it's my hearing I'm sure, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What do you recall from World War II?

Mr. Abe:

What can you recall from your experience in World War II?

Mrs. Abe:

Well I was only about five years old then, so I have some recollection but they were more pleasurable probably than anything, you know that could explain other than to what I saw within the area that I was living.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where were you living?

Mrs. Abe:

Block two.

Mr. Abe:

This is in camp Minidoka. Are you referring to where she was living in Seattle?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well during the war, where was she living during the war?

Mr. Abe:

She was living in Seattle.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So she wasn't in Hawaii when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Mr. Abe:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Ma'am is there anything about World War II you remember you want to talk about?

Mrs. Abe:

Yeah I remember it. But I didn't know war, the explanation of war probably until I saw a movie, The Five Sullivan Brothers. You have an excerpt about that on your display in the museum and I took some pictures. I remember that movie.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right, right, I do too.

Mr. Abe:

He remembered that too.

Mrs. Abe:

I remember it, yes.

Mr. Abe:

He remembered that too, he saw that too.

Mrs. Abe:

Oh yes, uh-huh, and I saw the movie.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, it was interesting, right.

Mr. Abe:

Uh Richard, she's probably having a hard time hearing us. I thought you might be interested.

Do you have any questions that you want to ask her?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Not that I can think of, no. What else do you want to talk about?

Mr. Abe:

What I want to say is that, the reason why I thought you might be interested in having her involved in this is because, from my stand point, of course I'm talking in retrospect now, I think I had it easier than she did. Because, you know from Seattle they were interned to Minidoka, Idaho for about three, four years. Whereas, we were not, you know restricted to internment posts, some people refer it as concentration camp which is more severe than we were. We were not too restricted as compared to her and her family with her, you know in internment camp, where we were more at liberty to move about like any other citizen of the country. And I thought maybe, you know you would want to ask her some questions about that. Of course she was too young at the time also to remember too much. But she did spend about three, four years there. That's the reason why I did mention her in the conversation and she did mention some of the things that she really enjoyed the museum very much, so I thought maybe she might have something you might be interested in knowing.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did your parents get to be American citizens?

Mr. Abe:

Ah yes, all her parents eventually did become citizens, as well as my parents also as well. As a matter of fact, you know it was very strange that right after the war my dad calls us all in and says, "You are an American now. You can do a couple of things you don't want to do." Said, "You don't have to go to Japanese language schools," because us kids were all complaining about after going to the normal school, you have to go to Japanese language school. And the other things that, you don't have to use chopsticks (*laughing*), that was just, I thought was sort of hilarious. And the other thing I really regret very much is that I didn't keep up my dual language. In other words, speaking a little more fluent in Japanese than what I know now. So I found it, you know my parents really did want us to accommodate, because my dad after spending so many years in Hawaii, said that he was never going to move back to Japan. He said, "I like the lifestyle of the U.S.A." So that's why we remained in Hawaii all this time, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when your dad came to the United States, did he come with his family or how old was he or how did he get here?

Mr. Abe:

He came as an immigrant worker, you know during this time they were looking for some migrant workers in Hawaii. So he came, like I'd say in the '20s. And after spending so much time in Hawaii, he got to like the climate there, and he decided at one point and time that he thought he wasn't going to go back to Japan to live there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did he learn English?

Mr. Abe:

Very vaguely, he did speak understandable English, but you know in Hawaii because of all the different nationalities he spoke more what was referred to as a "pigeon English," which is a combination of Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Filipino, and whatever language (*laughs*). So it

was a conglomerate way, it was understandable, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you want to talk about your experiences growing up?

Mr. Abe:

Well, all I can say is that it was just tough for my parents I guess. But in the long run I think they were pleased with the decision they made and like I say, I didn't have it as hard as my wife did growing up. In Hawaii we were very fortunate because we had so many multi-cultural people living in, we got along very well, and you know since we were at school all day. So for me it was a very pleasant living at this point as a kid. So there was no problem for me, but I'm quite certain my parents went through some hardship as well. But like I mentioned, I think you know in comparison what I had to go through and experience it, I went through in World War II, I think my wife had it harder than we did in Hawaii.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well Richard that's all the questions I have unless you have thought of something else.

Mr. Abe:

No, but all I want to say is that I'm glad my son did take me to your museum, because I was very, very pleased and very historically, very well done. And the two things I want to mention to you is that, we live in California but the freeway that we have close, adjacent to where we are is named after Chester Nimitz, Nimitz Freeway, Highway which is the one referred to as 880 here. And the other thing is that we had the *Hornet*, the aircraft carrier *Hornet* as a museum here in Alameda.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well where I am in Corpus Christi, which is 40 miles east of me, they have the *Lexington* aircraft carrier there for a museum.

Mr. Abe:

Oh is that right?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right. So you and I have both the experience along that line.

Mr. Abe:

You have a wonderful staff there and we really enjoyed talking to your staff. And they're very informative and very helpful.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now where I am, I'm about two-hundred miles south of the museum, so I don't get there too often. And you're number 1,071 of these interviews I've done.

Mr. Abe:

Oh my goodness (*laughing*). I guess I was just very young, so you know I can't recall what transpired. But that was one of the vivid memories that is framed in. I can only recall a couple of planes, but the one that flew over our rooftop is the one I had to look up because, you know it was so low and I could see the pilot so vividly that I just automatically waved my hands. And later on discovered that, "Hey, that wasn't one of our aircraft that I normally see flying around." And of course when my mom yelled at me again to come back in the house, I thought it was something very different than what I experienced that morning. Then when I started thinking about it, I said, "Gee, that was not the same aircraft that we normally see and I don't believe the pilot was waving back at me."

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you saw that plane, did it have the round red rising sun on it?

Mr. Abe:

Well, at the time I'm quite certain there was a red dot, or whatever you want to call it, a circle. But it never occurred to me that it was a different type of aircraft. Until I said, "Wait a minute," you know the normal type of aircraft I see is not the same as what I saw that morning.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Again Richard I want to thank you for your time today, and now your recollections and your story is very interesting.

Mr. Abe:

Yeah and like I say again, you do have a great museum there. And like I say, I didn't realize that Chester Nimitz was from Fredericksburg myself, so I'm glad my son did take me to the place to see it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you been back to Hawaii very much?

Mr. Abe:

Ah no, I do go occasionally, but I haven't gone back as much because all my family, all my brothers went to the schools in east coast and west. None of them decided to go back to Hawaii too, because the business opportunities are so limited in Hawaii that they wanted to stay back in the Stateside, on the mainland. And eventually my parents did have to depart Hawaii also, because you know they were getting too old to be living by themselves there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About when did they come to the States?

Mr. Abe:

Yeah, eventually, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I say, about what year, do you remember?

Mr. Abe:

Oh I can't recall, but it must have been in the 1980's I believe.

Mr. Misenhimer:

80's, along in there?

Mr. Abe:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well Richard that's all I have.

Mr. Abe:

Okay, it was great talking to you, I hope my recollection might help a little bit also.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Thanks again for your time today and we'll be keeping contact.

Mr. Abe:

Yeah, okay, it was nice talking to you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Bye now.

(End of interview.)

Transcribed by:

Gayle Misenhimer

Harlingen, Texas

January 28, 2020

Oral History by:

Richard Misenhimer

P.O. Box 3453

Alice, Texas 78333

Home: (361) 664-4071

Cell: (361) 701-5848