Higgs, Walter M. Interview pt 2 10-4-85

[Speaker 2]
Any kind of a guess as to how many were in that first camp of yours when you got there, in the thousands?

[Speaker 1]
In the thousands, but I wouldn't have it a guess. When we were in this camp, you have to remember there were Filipinos, Filipino scouts, Filipino Army, and Americans. And there were thousands in there.

I wouldn't have it a guess. But the Filipinos, of course there were more of them, naturally, but they were dying, I believe, at a greater rate than the Americans were.

[Speaker 2]
Any idea how come that the Filipinos would not last as long as Americans?

[Speaker 1]
I really don't know. I never could understand that. I've always been amazed that they wouldn't.

I mean, it being their own environment and so on, but it... Now, I could be wrong in my view of it. Like I say, there was more of them, and the percentage may have been less.

But just observing, I thought it was a great number of Filipinos. Of course, there was a great number of Americans. They would put ten in a grave.

If, say, it turned out there was five for a grave, you needed five more. You'd go back in 15 minutes and get five more. That's the way it was.

So you imagine why anybody wouldn't get out of a place like that. Indeed. Even if you did get unlucky, you'd go back to the camp.

[Speaker 2]
In the camp, did you organize yourselves into not just Filipinos and Americans, but into any kind of units, or was it just sort of a big group of people? Were the officers in one place and the personnel somewhere else?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, there was separation, and I guess the nearest organization came was by the hut you went. Forty or fifty people, I don't recall the numbers. Seventy-five maybe.

I guess that's the nearest organization.

[Speaker 2]
And would the senior NCO in a hut be in command? I'm just wondering if the military command structure continued.

[Speaker 1]
It collapsed. It collapsed. The Japanese were totally in charge.

Except for some things I know of them tried to, and you had to try to maintain a little discipline beyond what they were doing, but they weren't totally in control. But there was some, you know, maybe just an understanding between ranks and so on. They still recognized that a sergeant or a captain or something said something.

It had some authority to it.

[Speaker 2]
How long did you stay in this first camp that you were in? For quite a number of months, or was it a fairly short time in transit?

[Speaker 1]
Oh, let's see, in April I was going in there, and I believe about two or three months, and I went back to the town I worked at, and came back about the end of September, and then went to Japan in October.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, fairly quickly then. Before the end of 1942 you were in Japan. You must have been some of the first people taken out of the Philippines back to the homeland.

[Speaker 1]
I think so, maybe the first back. I'm not sure, but so many of them got sunk later on. Some of them more than one time.

But when we left there, which was again I believe on October 8th, October 8th, something always happens to me. Next week coming up. That's right.

But I believe it was October 8th we left there, and we went out of Manila Bay there, and just as we left Manila Bay, we had a torpedo fight at us, and went back into Manila Harbor there, and stayed, I don't recall, two or three days and nights in the hold of a ship in the tropics.

[Speaker 2]
Not a good place to be. Everything I've heard about that is, people convince me that that was maybe the worst part of the whole time, the time in some hold of some ship.

[Speaker 1]
I have friends of mine that, particularly some of those that got sunk, and maybe more than one time, they told me that they had been locked in those holds, and some of them had tried to drink the other's blood, tried to cut his wrists and all that stuff. I didn't observe any of that, but they said one of them.

[Speaker 2]
Gets awful desperate. That's right. How did they pick you, or did they just sort of arbitrarily say, we want X hundreds of people to go to the Japanese home islands, and you're the ones?

[Speaker 1]
They picked it. What method they used, I don't know. They picked the ones to go.

And after we left Manila, it took us 36 days to get to Yokohama.

[Speaker 2]
It was a slow boat.

[Speaker 1]
Well, they was hugging the China coast, in typhoons, trying times, and locked in that hold. And I got so sick in a typhoon, and of course there was a guard standing right at the hatch there. I got so sick I didn't, I thought I was going to die anyway, this, that, and the other.

And I came up, and of course he shot at that, you know, and pointed a bayonet, and I didn't pay no mind. I didn't care. I fell overboard.

I was so sick. But I went and stood on the railroad and hung on to it, and just watched back. Felt like I was going to faint in a minute.

But he let me stand there, and I got feeling better, and went on back down. It's a wonder I got away with it.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah. Now, when you got to the home islands, where were you in Japan?

[Speaker 1]
I was between Tokyo and Yokohama, in a camp called Kawasaki No. 3. Kawasaki.

That's a name that you still see. Yeah, right. Another strange thing happened.

I was off this ship, off this shipment from the Premier War camp in the Philippines. I was the only American that went in this camp.

[Speaker 4]
Hmm.

[Speaker 1]
Who else was in there? Australians, Dutch, English, Javanese, and later, later, two Americans from Sitka were captured. One Japanese attacked Alaska.

Two native people came in there. But I was the only American wound up in this camp.

[Speaker 2]
How odd.

[Speaker 1]
I don't know how that ever happened.

[Speaker 2]
Kind of United Nations camp, and you were the only American representative. That's right. What did you think of the other people in the camp?

[Speaker 1]
Well, I had a great deal of admiration for the British and a little less for the Australians, but almost as much for the Australians as the British. But I had a great deal of admiration for the

British. The Japanese always told us that if Americans ever bombed Japan, they would immediately execute us.

We did get bombed, and it so happened we got hit right on top of our camp.

[Speaker 2]
Casualties from the bombing?

[Speaker 1]
At this time, I think there's two or three Americans beside myself and 22 British. About 50 or 60 Australians. The rest of them, three or four or five hundred, were made up of Dutch and Javanese.

Well, this bomb fell between the Australians and the Javanese, and it so happened it fell on a huge reservoir, and the whole thing went down in there. And, of course, the Japanese ran and tested it. It didn't come back to the next day.

We had a doctor, nothing but coffee knives and no medicine, but the doctor. And we started pulling over people. It killed some Australians, it killed some Dutch, it killed some Javanese, no British or Americans.

And, of course, there were people down there, pinned under timbers and arms missing and eyes missing and all that stuff and screaming. I had been stealing a little whale oil from the place of work and put it on rice and so on, you know. So we improvised a light, I poured this oil in a tin pan and lighted it until it was dark, because it wasn't good, which wasn't very much.

And the Japanese came back the next day and told us that they had warned us that what would happen if we, if Americans had a bomb, and lined us up, presumably to shoot us, and every British in the camp fell ambush. They said, if you shoot them, you shoot us. And they tried their best to separate us.

I assumed they were going to shoot us, I don't know whether they would have or not, but they tried to get the British out by kicking, knocking, beating, but they wouldn't do it. And so the Japanese backed down.

[Speaker 2]
That's the kind of thing that stays in your mind.

[Speaker 1]
That's right.

[Speaker 2]
Given your experiences, would you have been surprised, for example, if the Japanese had shot prisoners right out of hand?

[Speaker 1]
No, I saw them do it. No problem with that. They didn't have to get permission from their CO.

No, sir. It would have been no surprise for them. And, like I say, sometimes I think a private in the Japanese Army has more authority than a general in the American Army.

[Speaker 2]
Looks like it.

[Speaker 1]
Sure does. You know what we'd have to go through if you wanted to shoot somebody. We'd have to go away as prisoners.

But not in the Japanese Army. Not at that time. Now, it may have changed.

[Speaker 2]
I don't know, but at that time, but a guard at a prison camp had a pretty free hand. And, unfortunately, used it fairly frequently. Absolutely.

You said you were working outside the camp. What were you doing?

[Speaker 1]
Well, we worked at a plant that was formerly, they tell me, owned by General Electric. It was Tokyo Shibara Electric. And what they did, among other things, was make transformers.

A lot of metalworking, of course. And that's what we did. Some of them, some people who were overqualified, were machinists and all those kinds of things.

Worked machine shops and metal shops and welding.

[Speaker 2]
Did you get any kind of extra food or any payment for what you were doing? Or was it just work you were assigned to do?

[Speaker 1]
Unless you could do a little bartering or something.

[Speaker 2]
There was a certain amount of black market, even in Japan. Oh, yes. How did that work?

[Speaker 1]
Well, I don't know. This old man, old Japanese, he was very good to me. Treated me very well.

And he used to let me have food and so on.

[Speaker 2]
Just with civilians?

[Speaker 1]
Civilians. Of course. You've got coal.

You've got sharks. But he used to let me have food. And he was the foreman of this metal cleaning shop where he used to ash himself here and cost his clothes and all that stuff.

So I could go to the prison or war to the other parts of the plant without them suspecting me. Because the Japanese way of thinking was if that prison or war goes over there, somebody told him to do it and he's got a right to do it. And they wouldn't question him.

So I'd go over there. Fuel oils and so on. And oil and fuel were a precious commodity to the Japanese.

I'd go and find me a five-gallon drum of oil and come back. And many Japanese would make soap. And he'd take it out and sell it.

Of course, they probably didn't have any. You couldn't get it. He'd sell it and he'd bring me cigarettes and extra rice and all those little tidbits.

[Speaker 2]
So you were not living at least as badly as you had in the other camps. No, no.

[Speaker 1]
Well, the truth of the matter is the Japanese were talking too. They really were.

[Speaker 2]
Now some of the stuff in the scrapbook includes messages that you apparently broadcast over Radio Tokyo that were picked up by ham operators on the West Coast and then forwarded across the country. One time. One time.

One message. Tell me a little about how that happened. Where were we?

[Speaker 1]
About the message. Well, as I recall, they decided that it would be good to make a sort of handwriting on the wall or whatever that was going to send a message on. Of course, they brought out the recording equipment and had it all under control.

But it certainly wasn't a live message.

[Speaker 2]
So it was a recorded message that was made in the camp.

[Speaker 1]
Right. I see. Then they carried it back to Radio Tokyo.

As I recall, I said something in my message about telling it to somebody that was in the Marines. You know, maybe I said, I'm doing fine. You know, they were talking about telling it to the Marines.

[Speaker 2]
Tell it to the Marines. I imagine, though, it was a reassuring message when it got to your people at home.

[Speaker 1]
Oh, I'm sure it was. We never knew whether it did or not. But I'm sure it was.

[Speaker 2]
You do have some... It looks like you were allowed to write a very small number of letters through the Japanese prisoner of war people and then the Red Cross or somebody. I'm not sure how it was done.

[Speaker 1]
I've forgotten the frequency of it. It was infrequent, as I recall, and limited to 30 words or something like that. Very limited.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, it looks like maybe three a year or something like that. Very limited, yeah. Once every three or four months.

Did you get a feeling when you were in Japan, could you sort of tell how the war was going by how the bombing went or how more difficult the Japanese lives were? Did you have any sense of how long you were going to be there and how the war was going?

[Speaker 1]
Oh, in the... Well, not in the very beginning, of course. Because, like we agreed, things weren't going too well.

But on my birthday, I guess it was, in 1944, was the first... Of course, I'd heard the Japanese talk they feared the B-29, and they admired but also feared MacArthur. But they really didn't fear the B-29.

And like I said on my birthday, I guess it was in 1944, the first B-29 I'd ever seen.

[Speaker 2]
Your birthday is...

[Speaker 1]
November 1st. November 44th. I believe that's correct.

But the first B-29 I'd ever seen.

[Speaker 2]
You could tell it was something different.

[Speaker 1]
Oh, yes. Of course, I was working in this place and I heard this airplane and I knew it wasn't Japanese because he was way up there. This Japanese that worked was named Sudo-san.

Well, Mr. Sudo. I called him up and I said, Sudo-san. And we looked and said, nothing in contrary to that B-29.

Long B-29. So what he was doing was observation. He was photographing.

And then from that time on, the bombings got more frequent and more destructive.

[Speaker 2]

There had been earlier bombing raids or not?

[Speaker 1]
Well, do little. And, of course, there had been some others that were never publicized and that we didn't know about. There had been some minor bombings.

Hit and run. No big damages.

[Speaker 2]
The last year or so, did your living conditions get harder as the Japanese got pressed harder and harder in terms of food and fuel and stuff? Or did things stay pretty much the same?

[Speaker 1]
Pretty much the same, except it wasn't any rice. You were eating barley and corn. And they were too.

About the same. Maybe a little less quantity. And certainly not the same quality, but if you like rice, it's not good.

The poor got smaller and the quality poor.

[Speaker 2]
And the intensity of the bombing raids increased as 1945 went on. Oh, yeah. And you could see that the level of attack was going to be over.

I imagine there were rumors about a variety of things, about how the war was going.

[Speaker 1]
Well, it was visible. They were firebombing areas for miles and miles. There wasn't a house left standing.

They bombed us one night in another camp, after we'd been moved. This was the first time we were bombed. They moved us to another camp and there was firebombing, and the camp we were in was involved in it.

And they were using phosphorus, and I know a little good friend of mine lost his arm, burned his arm off. It was white phosphorus. They rounded us up to try to get us out of the firestorm, and it was a firestorm.

It killed thousands of Japanese. It was almost on the level with Dresden when they firebombed it. And they tried to get us away from it, and the camp commander was a Japanese sergeant named Eno.

And he was trying to get us out of it, and the Japanese were trying to get to us. You can understand why. They were being killed and burned, and the family was, but they were trying to get to us.

He wasn't hesitating to money, and did. On the morning of Caden, he'd ram up a sword through a Japanese. Ran back into a prisoner of war named Kramer from Idaho, who cooked for this camp commander.

He had him paying white blood off of him. And if it was necessary again, he did.

[Speaker 2]
So he had his orders, too, that you were to be protective. That's right. And you can understand the Japanese civilians.

I certainly can. That's right. Yeah, I heard stories from people who were shot down in Europe.

Over Germany. They said that once they got into the hands of the military, they felt safer by quite a bit, or the local police officials. But one fellow said he knew a friend of his who came down in the field and got pitchforked by a farmer.

He was the one who didn't make it. He was killed by the local civilians before they got into the hands of...

[Speaker 1]
Well, military, in the case of prisoner of war, you better call in the hands of the military when you want to debate. Because we had civilian guards, too, at times, in Japan. Instead of military.

And they were 5,000 times more ruthless than the military. They really were.

[Speaker 2]
Simply unwilling to... In what ways were they worse in terms of military?

[Speaker 1]
Well, beatings and all those kinds of things. We had one, I forgot what they nicknamed him. I don't know who the man was.

Just a British friend of mine nicknamed him. But if he ever had the slightest reason to hit you or get to disliking anything, he wouldn't let go until he was killed. That's a fact.

I recall I got some underwear and some socks from home. Small quantity. I don't remember how many pairs of each.

But I got these clothes. Because you had to boil the lice and all that stuff. And no facility in the camp where I worked had plenty of hot water and so on.

And I took these. I would take my clothes down there, you know, kill the lice in that hot water and so on, and try to keep clean and keep the lice off me. I took these clothes and washed them, boiled them, and put them out on the line right outside of where we were working.

It wasn't five feet away, except it was through a glass. And in five minutes, somebody stole them. So Eno and I were talking about it.

Not Eno, but the fellow I worked for. We were talking about it. He said, well, don't say anything about it.

And I'll try to get you some more. It won't be the quality, but I'll try to get you some more to replace them. And while we were talking about it, I looked around and there stood that damn civilian guy.

And he, of course, he would, they had the authority to jump on a Japanese civilian the same as they did us, I guess, because they'd do it. But he carried a big wooden stick. And he started hitting me, and I said, I said, no, hell no.

You don't do that, because I was like, I tell you, if he ever touched you, he'd kill you. May not that day, but he really would. So I said, no.

And so I said, we'll go back to the camp, and we'll talk to your boss, Sergeant Eno, who was in the military. And he said, all right. So we went.

And I told told Sergeant Eno what score was, and that my concerns were this guard. And you won't, you won't believe this, you never seen anybody beat until a Japanese beat you. And he liked to beat that civilian guard to death.

And he never bothered me again, and never bothered another person. Put the fear of God in him. He sure did.

[Speaker 3]
He wouldn't have got you on the way in.

[Speaker 1]
No. No, he wouldn't have got him, but he was a guard, so he didn't mean the fellow I worked for. We were talking about it.

We didn't know he was anywhere in around. But he was listening. And of course, he wanted to get his nose in it.

Anyhow, see.

[Speaker 2]
Had you learned enough Japanese by that time to carry on a fair conversation, or?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, pretty well. I never did have that much interest in it, but as part of self-preservation, I had to learn a certain amount of it. I was called on to do the interpreting and this, that, and the other.

Like I said, I wasn't ever that good at it, but I knew enough to do it. To get by.

[Speaker 2]
Just at the very end of the war, I've heard stories about some Japanese guards who sort of bailed out and left the camps.

[Speaker 1]
They did. Military.

[Speaker 2]
And that's what happened right at the very end of the war to you?

[Speaker 1]
Well, we went to we went to work this morning, of course. So, I don't know, nine or ten o'clock or something, the siren rang. They put us in this shelter, underground shelter.

And so this strange... We could hear the loudspeakers. They got loudspeakers in the factories in Japan, I guess in other parts of the world, too, you know, where you continue to hear all this propaganda and they can interrupt your life any moment they want.

But this strange voice came over there and I told this Englishman next to me, I said, well, it's over, that's the Emperor. Ah, ah, ah, hell it is. But, you could tell it wasn't typical Japanese speaking.

And it turned out to be them. And that's when the war ended. they lined us up and carried us back to camp, which is about three miles away.

And again, the civilians tried to get us.

[Speaker 2]
Hmm, last chance, huh?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, last chance. But they put us, we got back in camp and like I said, the civilians disappeared and the military came in and set up their machine guns and so on around the camp to protect us. And, a couple of days later here comes the Hellcat knocking down houses like it was dog houses, all them crates of shoes and food and all this stuff and we wrote a message on the top of the building and said, enough.

Well, it was falling out, we had a small compound, it was falling outside the compound, finally. Well, then we wrote the message and said enough and here comes one over there and drops this little tube in the can and says, we got it and you're gonna get it. But it was all falling outside the camp.

[Speaker 2]
So the civilians were getting it.

[Speaker 1]
The civilians were getting it, so Sergeant Eno, by the way, who had been camp commander, he's still there and he was at the gate and we wanted to bring Joe Taylor who was the rank in non-commissioned officer in the British. Joe and I went up there and I told Eno we wanted to go outside and he said, no. The Japanese had killed him.

So we told him the war was over anyway and he had his sword on and I told him to give me his sword before the war was over.