

Interview with Mack Collings

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Program

March 28, 2012, Hesperia, California

Interviewed by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service
Transcribed by Professional Transcripts

This interview is part of the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Project. The interview with Mack Collings was recorded with his permission on a digital recorder. Copies of the audio file are preserved in mp3, wav and wma formats and are on file at the offices of the National Park Service in Anchorage, Alaska. All photos courtesy of Mack Collings.

The transcript has been lightly edited.

0:00:00.1 Greetings and requesting permission to tape interview

Mack Collings: Morning.

Janis Kozlowski: Good morning. Is this Mr. Charles "Mack" Collings?

Mack Collings: This is him.

Janis Kozlowski: This is Janis Kozlowski in Anchorage, Alaska. Is this going to be a good time to talk?

Mack Collings: I'm ready to go. I've been waiting and waiting for your call.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, and is it okay if I tape our conversation today?

Mack Collings: Absolutely. It's something I would like to do, yes. Please do.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Okay great. Well, I've got the taper recorder on then, right now.

Mack Collings: Okay. Well, the main thing is, is what would you like to know, Janis, about my experience with the Battle of Attu or the Aleutian Islands?

0:00:38.9 Mr. Collings describes how he wanted to enlist in the service and go to the Philippines

Janis Kozlowski: Well, can we -- can we kind of start and get a little bit of your background about how you ended up in -- in the service and all that?

Mack Collings: Yes, okay.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: Well, I graduated from high school in Spanish Fork, Utah, 1939, and after I was graduated from high school my sister, brother-in-law and all of us, we drove down to California on a vacation and on the way back the World War was starting in Europe. So, I was at that good age of joining the Army, so me and a buddy in 1930 -- no, it was in 1940, June, we wanted to join and go to the Philippines. Well, we took the application papers to my mother and she says, no, my son is not going to war. Well, anyway, after two or three weeks we decided to go back and re-enlist because my mother said, well, okay, and that was in 1940. So we went back, but the enlistment into the Philippines was filled up by five of my high school buddies that decided to go and join the Army too. Well, those five, they went to the Philippines and to make it short from that aspect, they were in the Battle of the Philippines and the bloody March of the Philippines and we lost all five of them.

0:02:19.0 Joining the military and training at Fort George Wright in Spokane, Washington

Mack Collings: So anyway, we joined Alaska. We didn't want to stay in the States. And in that aspect, we went to Anchorage -- to Seattle, Washington..... No, Tacoma. No, I'm sorry. I'm 91 and I'm trying to get everything straightened..... To Spokane, Fort George Wright training. Well, we went in there and we were going to Alaska, so I had my little single-shot -- single-shot shotgun on my baggage on a wood -- paper bag, and went in there with my friend and we joined, and making a long story short, we spent three months at that Fort George Wright, Washington. Then, December the 26th, I think it was, we went to Seattle and we got on a ship that took us to Seward, Alaska, and I'm not -- it was in December and I just can't get over when they took us from Seward up into Anchorage, the trucks that they took us in on the front of the grilles -- they were all the hard grilles that had three inches of snow frost on all the trucks.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.) What month?

0:03:40.6 Arriving at Fort Richardson in Alaska

Mack Collings: It was. It was really something. So anyway, we arrived at Fort George Wright -- Anchorage. Goodness gracious. What was the Army base there?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, Fort Richardson.

Mack Collings: Richardson.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Mack Collings: Fort Richardson, then Elmendorf Field. I think that was the Air Corps.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: They were together. Well, anyway, over that period of time we had some barracks built and some not built, and we happened to be lucky to run into a couple of guys that were there as civilians to build these barracks and that for the Army and the Air Corps and they were from Utah. So, we had good friends from there.

0:04:27.2 Playing a trumpet with the 4th Infantry Band

Mack Collings: Now, while I was in Fort Richardson I don't know why I did, but it was bad for me, and I did it, but then again it was good I did it. It was good, bad, or different..... I'm a trumpet player and I was -- been playing a trumpet since 19 -- oh, geez, 1935 or something, maybe earlier. But anyway, I heard there was an opening with the band and man I went and I applied and the bandleader accepted me into the 4th Infantry Band. Well, in that, we spent years -- two years in Anchorage, and it was wonderful. There is no other country in this world more beautiful than Anchorage and Fairbanks and Nome, and I've been to all of them because in that being the band we had to entertain everybody in Alaska. We would get in an airplane from the Air Corps and we'd fly to Fairbanks because they only had the train going up there and it took two days to get from Anchorage to Fairbanks on the train. We stayed at -- a couple of times at McKinley Field I think it is, or mountain.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, at Denali? Mount McKinley, uh-huh.

Mack Collings: Yeah, we would stay there overnight because the train never went through from Anchorage to Fairbanks in one day.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

0:05:54.0 The band introduced Bob Hope and his group in Anchorage

Mack Collings: So anyway, we traveled all over Alaska and we always played for everybody. You know, we spent two years of it. We played in Anchorage and we played dances and over a period of two years we developed, developed, developed and got better and better and I remember one time Bob Hope and Frances Langford and another character, a good comedian, visited the services in Anchorage, Alaska, and we, as a band, introduced members of his group in this large auditorium that we had to entertain the soldiers. Well, we played, and then they introduced Bob Hope and his group and then naturally I went and sat in the front row with the rest of my band members, but there were a couple of empty seats and this Frances Langford came in and sat down next to me.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh my gosh!

0:06:54.8 Sitting next to Frances Langford and playing at dances

Mack Collings: Now, can you imagine this; a 19-year-old kid that hadn't been near a girl for six months or a year and she comes and sits by me with that beautiful perfume.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: That was absolutely beautiful. So anyway, we played there and we met Bob Hope. We played with him and, oh, it was great. We did that all that time in those two years, and we used to go down to Anchorage and play parades and stuff like that, so naturally we were the only musicians in the area, and so even the prostitutes invited us -- I mean, they put on a show for the soldiers that had been visiting them and we had a big dance and they invited us and paid us to come and play for this dance for all these soldiers and the prostitutes. Believe that, kiddo!

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: So anyway, we did that and they would come up and say, oh, will you play this and this and that and this, and I said, oh, fine. So we played it and they would give us a 20-dollar bill each.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow, that's a lot of money!

Mack Collings: Yeah, at that time, do you realize that was? So anyway, we spent many good beautiful years in Anchorage. We had a couple of our members build a home outside of the Elmendorf -- I should say the services place, and invited their wives to come up and stay with them, and they did. So we built these homes for these other members of our band and it was great.

0.08:40.0 Awakening to the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor

Mack Collings: So, getting on to other things, we went on and then we had -- was in December, we played an officer's dance on a Saturday night. Well, we get to sleep in -- I mean our 12-piece band members would get to sleep in on Sunday morning because we worked after playing the dance and around 6 o'clock in the morning everybody came in hollering and whooping and yelling, we've been bombed, we've been bombed! We threw shoes, clothes, every item -- shut up, we're supposed to sleep. That was the morning of December 7th of Pearl Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: Whoa!

0:09:27.3 Digging foxholes after the bombing of Pearl Harbor

Mack Collings: The first thing they did, they took us out of the barracks and took us out in the backyard and dug holes for us to sit in. Can you believe that?

Janis Kozlowski: Were you frightened?

Mack Collings: No. No. We'd just been bombed and -- the United States had just been bombed at Pearl Harbor and so the Japs were going to come and bomb us in Anchorage, so we went out and dug foxholes to get into to be safe (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I was.....

Mack Collings: Every morning after that we had to go out and jump in our foxholes to protect ourselves.

Janis Kozlowski: But were you afraid? Did you really worry that -- that that was going to happen?

Mack Collings: We weren't afraid. We just laughed at it because they -- that's what General Buckner wanted. We had to go out every morning (laughter). I don't know what they'd want us to do if it was at night. Now this was in December when it's dark 24 hours.

Janis Kozlowski: And cold.

Mack Collings: And cold. So anyway, we did that until that time and then -- well, I guess it was December 8th, 1942. Now, we were just soldiers. We didn't know who -- what's going on with the big Generals and all that stuff. Now have you heard of the 7th Infantry and how they got into the Battle of Attu?

Janis Kozlowski: I know a little bit about it.

0:10:55.0 How the 7th Infantry and 4th Infantry got into the Battle of Attu

Mack Collings: Well, anyway, this 7th Infantry, I think they were on about seven ships, boats, or whatever you want to call them. They were heading for the Philippines into the hot country and on the way there, they were told that we had enemy on American soil, and this is the one thing that I completely -- and I honestly go -- wherever I go, I ask about -- anybody know about the Aleutian Islands? Anybody know about Alaska? Anybody know about the Battle of Attu, and nobody knows anything. Anyway, we -- these 7th Infantry were trained at George -- Fort George here in California. Now they only had shoes. They didn't have boots. They didn't have clothing for anything below 60 degrees. Well, these Generals, they said, well we can kick these Japs off of the island of Attu in a matter of four or five days. Well, they sent three ships up to Attu. They landed, they went on the island there, and for five days they put more back on the ships with frozen bodies and feet and that they lost with being shot by the Japanese. This really upset everybody, so we were on Adak now, because we arrived there December 2nd I think it was, 1942, so we were there until May. Well, they took the 4th Infantry Regiment..... Now this is another thing that upsets me, is the fact that no information of the Battle of Attu was the 4th Infantry Regiment mentioned in any of the Battle of Attu or Kiska or anything like that, and we were the ones that went in..... Because we'd been in

Alaska. We knew what cold was. When we landed on Adak in December, we were put out in snow to take a night nap and we woke up in the morning in water.



Adak, Aleutian Islands, Alaska. Photo courtesy of Mack Collings.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

0:13:18.6 Assignment to the Signal Corps on Adak

Mack Collings: On Adak. Now that was in '42, but anyway, they took this 4th Infantry Regiment and there was A, B, C, D, E service companies, the band, and all the other parts of the 4th Infantry Regiment and we went in and we helped the 7th take care of the Japanese, and us being in the band we weren't authorized to go into direct combat, but we were assigned to the Signal Corps and emergency -- emergency division. So we took care of the soldiers that were hit and then we carried messages. You know, they didn't have communication now -- then, like they have now. We had to take a message from one company to another company by a note from this captain to that captain, etc., etc. That was during the battle.

Janis Kozlowski: So you were on the ground during the battle and you were kind of running back and forth conveying messages from one company to another?

Mack Collings: That is correct. Those are -- I was working as a Signal Corps.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, so you were in -- in harm's way. You weren't, you know, far away from the action then.

Mack Collings: No, we were right in it. I was -- I was in the part of that, and we would deliver this..... We were concerned and it was cold. It was cold. We had so many members coming off the cotton-picking ground into the boat and it was terrible.

Janis Kozlowski: So, was the 4th.....

0:14:58.3 The battle in Massacre Valley

Mack Collings: So then after three, four, or five days, we started progressing on them and we started getting -- now, we were in Massacre Valley.....

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings:and going up towards the mountains and the snow was deep and we're trying to -- our fellow soldiers were trying to pull these big cannons up the damn mountains to get to these Japs because they were embedded in the mountains because they had dug caverns into those mountains over the period of months. Making one little thing short here, after things were settled, we -- me and my other buddies would travel all over the area there looking for things and we found more dead Japs up in the mountains, and we went into these ravines in the mountains that the Japanese had dug into the mountains, and it was the smelliest, dirtiest, rottenest stuff I've ever smelled, and they lived in that, these Japanese soldiers.

Janis Kozlowski: Hmm.

0:16:01.9 Japanese invading their camp and killing people as they slept

Mack Collings: So anyway, we went in there and we were running around, me and my fellow bandsmen and the Signal Corps, and emergency rooms, and we were helping them, and then this battle was going on, boom, boom, boom and all this stuff was something else. So we sat there and worked there and took care of our buddies and then all of a sudden this -- we knew what was going on, but we didn't know the full everything about how it was progressing or anything like that. So we sat and did our duty, did our job and we were taking care of things and then at midnight one night we heard boom, boom, bang, bang. The Japs had come in and they were killing us in our tents and we were almost shooting one another because we had these Japs all over these damn tents and we were right in that! And we would just -- sometimes we would be shot by our fellow buddy, because they didn't know whether I was a Jap or an American. They just shot. It was somebody that was going to kill them. This was in our tents in our sleeping bags.....

Janis Kozlowski: Hmm.

Mack Collings:at 12 or 1 o'clock in the morning.

Janis Kozlowski: So were you actually there in the tents when this was happening?

0:17:26.6 Both sides lost many men

Mack Collings: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. I was in that area and we were doing that, and we would go in and have to take -- anyway, in that aspect we finally got rid of them. It -- we lost, oh, I don't know how many, but they lost many and they -- they quit. That was the end of it. I think there was 500 of them that came in to the Massacre Valley, went into these tents, into our hospitals, into our emergency camps. There were no buildings; it was just tents.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: And we were taking care of everybody and trying to get everybody on the boats to get them home and these Japs came in at night and they started killing us in our sleep, and that's when we finally got rid of them.

Janis Kozlowski: How did you escape from being harmed?

Mack Collings: I don't know. I haven't any idea. All I know is, I did.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, lucky!

Mack Collings: Yeah, that's right. I don't -- I don't understand it, but I -- I made it. Me and many others, but I did lose a lot of friends that I knew and we played with.



Attu, Aleutian Islands, Alaska. Photo courtesy of Mack Collings.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: So anyway, that was the battle and that -- within that era that ended the Battle of Attu.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

0:18:43.5 Mr. Collings discusses being upset that the Aleutians were not publicized as part of the war

Mack Collings: And the thing that bothers me is that all the big battles of World War II were publicized; pictures of it, comments of it, big people of it, but nobody knew that we had an enemy on American soil since 1812. It was the first time.

Janis Kozlowski: Yep.

Mack Collings: And in that aspect, it has been bugging me like you wouldn't believe. To think that they didn't show the bloody Battle of Attu. Now, Dateline and History did make a couple of CDs on it, and I have them, and I've used them. In fact, I have given two of them to my friends -- a dentist down here because I went to get my dentures fixed the other day and the young lady there wanted to know what I did in my life because I'm 91. So I told her, and she says, oh, I'd like to see that, so I took her these Battle of Attu CDs to her, but that's getting a little up to date now.

0:20:00.5 Living conditions on Attu

Mack Collings: And anyway, in this aspect of finally settling the Battle of Attu, we got our instruments back in a few months and they were starting to build the air -- airport runways. The Navy came in, the Corps of Engineers, and they were going over this whole cotton-picking island and doing things. Well, here we are entertaining everybody, so I would go -- now this was when we were in tents and I have pictures of all these, and we would dig down 4 feet or so into the soil of the island and put our tents up, but still the winds at night would pick that tent up no matter what we did. We spiked it down, put heavy rocks on it. We did everything and we'd always lose our tents. Well, the wind would come along and pick them out of the cotton-picking 4-foot deep holes and take them off of us and then we would be sitting there freezing in our sleeping bags. That was after the tent left us.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: So, we'd have to start all over again and replace the tents.

Janis Kozlowski: Do you -- do you remember -- which islands were you on where you were living in those tents?

Mack Collings: In Attu.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, on Attu that was.



Pyramidal tent on Attu dug into the ground. Photo courtesy of Mack Collings.



Tent camp on Attu. Photo courtesy of Mack Collings.

0:21:22.7 Mr. Collings discusses the photos that he has on his webpage

Mack Collings: Yeah, well we also lived in tents in Adak and then Shemya after -- after the battle -- no, before the battle, from December we were on Adak and then we stayed there a while and then -- then we went to Shemya. Now did you see -- you say you saw my webpage from George Smith.

Janis Kozlowski: I did, yeah, mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: Did you see the pictures of us digging those holes and all that stuff?

Janis Kozlowski: I -- I see pictures of the tents and the peop -- and some guys standing next to them and how they're dug in.....

Mack Collings: Yeah, well, in that tent area there were some of them around Shemya, some of them around Attu, of my webpage.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

0:22:07.3 Entertaining the Navy troops and eating "good" food

Mack Collings: And that tells my story. In that I'm just telling you that I just said the main story of my life going from high school into the Army and then coming home. So anyway, after everything was settled -- that was in May, so June, July and August and that, we entertained everybody. I mean, we -- when everybody was working their butts off trying to get the island straightened out, we would go and entertain them. Now, the Navy was building and they were all well fed and we were in tents living on mess kits. We'd got get our food in our mess kits and go back to the tent and eat it.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: So, on Monday -- or on Wednesdays and Fridays, the Navy would always have chicken and steak and all we had was canned Spam.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: Really! So every Wednesday and Friday I would go down and pick up a Jeep and then about four of us take our instruments and we'd go down and entertain the Navy in their nice barracks and buildings and we'd play for them and then they'd feed us. Oh man, what a deal!

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.) So at least.....

0:23:32.6 Entertaining the civilian engineers

Mack Collings: So, then -- it was so much fun. Then we would go around and we would play for the civilian engineers in their tents at night when they were gambling.

We'd go around playing for them. Hell, we had our hats out and they'd put more money in it than you could understand.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.) You.....

Mack Collings: Because they were getting paid thousands. They're engineers and they're building runways and all that.

0:24:01.6 The weather in the Aleutians

Mack Collings: Now just don't forget, while we were there the weather was pathetic. It was always bad, and it was something else. I've got pictures of the tents, oh what, 40 feet away from one another. The wind was blowing the smoke out of one tent to the east and on the other one, it was blowing to the west.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: Yeah, it -- it was something. I've got all those pictures. I mean, it was really something else. I'm telling you, I don't recall now how I did it but I got them, and I'm a photographer turkey.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

0:24:40.4 Japanese bombers continued to fly over the Aleutians

Mack Collings: But I always had them and I still have some of them, and anyway, we were on this island of Attu and we entertained everybody and we were doing this. Now another thing that really happened was, I guess let's see from May, June, July, August, September, or October somewhere in there, maybe July, we were entertaining the troops. We were in a tent. They'd take two tents and put them together and make it 40 feet instead of 20 -- 40 instead of 20/20, and we were sitting there playing, entertaining these young soldiers and we were playing this lovely tune: "*I came here to talk to Joe.*" You don't remember that one!

Janis Kozlowski: Well, I have that song, so I do know it.

Mack Collings: Well, anyway, we were playing that and all of a sudden we heard a boom, boom, bang, bang, boom, boom, boom, brrrrrrrrr (rapid gunfire sound), boom, bang, and do you know what was happening? A squadron of Japanese bombers were flying over our -- Attu, and they were trying to shoot these bombers that were flying at 30,000 feet with 50-caliber guns.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: You could see the -- you could see the tracer bullets go up and then come right back down (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Well, was this.....

Mack Collings: And boy did they catch heck at firing at those airplanes because they couldn't get them. They couldn't hit them!

Janis Kozlowski: Was this after the Battle of Attu?

Mack Collings: Oh, yeah, this was way in September while we were on Attu. We were still on Attu.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, but it was after the battle, right?

Mack Collings: Yes, it was in September.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: Somewhere in that area.

Janis Kozlowski: So the Japanese continued to try and harass you guys.

Mack Collings: That's right. That was way after the Dutch Harbor bombing.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: So, anyway, we just..... (background beeping noise) What was that?

Janis Kozlowski: I don't know.

0:26:52.6 The History Channel's piece on the Battle of Attu

Mack Collings: Well, anyway, don't worry about it. Anyway, one thing I did say that has always got me and I'm completely after..... Oh, incidentally, years later here with my present wife here in Hesperia, California, the History Channel, they were calling me and..... (background beeping noise) I just -- I don't know. Don't pay attention to it. So, anyway, they got in contact with me and I almost was invited to go to the Aleutian Island of Attu and then -- and put the story on their aspect of the Battle of Attu. (Background beeping noise) Whoever it is, forget them. Anyway, the thing was, that there was another gentleman who was in the battle. I mean, he was on the front line fire. They took him instead of me because I only had a story. I didn't have a story of being shot or hurt or firing at in battle at the Japanese.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Mack Collings: I was just there.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Mack Collings: But I almost made it (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

0:28:06.2 Entertaining during pilot awards ceremonies

Mack Collings: So, anyway, in that basis -- and then I've always wanted to be a pilot. Oh, incidentally, in that..... (background beeping noise)in that aspect we would go down and enter -- they would give awards to pilots at the field there and we would always be invited to go play when they would give awards, so we were all -- we were with everybody. We were here and there, me and the band members.

Janis Kozlowski: You mean the Air Corps and the Navy pilots?

Mack Collings: Yeah, right! See all of those pilots were given awards. They would -- they would fly in from the United States and fly around the battle trying to get at the Japanese, trying to find their boats, and all this time that they were there, so we would entertain them for these big awards and we were right in the middle of all of it. I was, with my band members.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

0:29:07.1 Applying to be a pilot, passing the exam, but not getting called for training

Mack Collings: So, in that aspect, these young officers or pilots were flying P-40s, P-39, P-38, and all those big aircrafts, B-26s..... (background beeping noise)and so in October I applied -- no, in Anchorage I applied to go be a pilot and my papers finally got me in around September of '43. I went to Dutch Harbor to take my exam with 150 other members and out of 150 only 50 passed, and I was one of them, and after all the exams and all the questions and all the physicals and all this jazz, they only sent three members back for training.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh!

Mack Collings: And five or six of them already had their private pilot license, but none of them were called to go back.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow!

Mack Collings: It was only the three that hit 170 or 180 on their intelligence test.

Janis Kozlowski: Hmm.

Mack Collings: (Laughter.) I only hit 146.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, you almost made it.

0:30:21.1 Restating his disbelief that no one knows about the Aleutians and the Battle of Attu

Mack Collings: Yeah, so anyway, my basic concept of all of this is that I love Alaska and I can't get over what the battle was -- the bloody Battle of Attu and nobody knows of it, and nobody has heard of it, and it..... In fact, just the other day -- now this is 70 years after the battle, my wife and I went on a senior's bus and went to a gambling casino in Nevada. Of course me, I'm the entertainer, I had to entertain everybody (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

0:30:57.9 Mr. Collings' song about Attu

Mack Collings: And so I asked them. I said, has anybody ever heard of the Aleutian Islands? Yeah, two hands went up. I said, has anybody heard of the Battle of Attu? Not a hand went up. So anyway, I said, I was there and I wrote a song in entertaining the people on the Aleutian Islands in 1942 and -- or 1943. So I wrote a song that I always sang and my fellow members played. Do you want to hear it?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes!

Mack Collings: It's hard for me to do, but I do it. (Singing voice) *"I want to go home. I want to go home. The bullets they whistle like cannons; they roar. I don't want to stay here on Attu no more. Take me over the sea, where the enemy can't get at me. Oh, my, I'm too young to die. I want to go home."*

Janis Kozlowski: That's great!

Mack Collings: You'll have to excuse me on that. I cry every time I sing it.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, it just brings back lots of memories right?

Mack Collings: Oh, golly, yes! Memories like memories you wouldn't believe.

Janis Kozlowski: That's a good song.

Mack Collings: Well, anyway, I used to sing that to all the guys and all the service personnel on the Aleutian Islands, and that was something that I really loved and enjoyed, and so I'm still doing it today.

0:32:28.2 Mr. Collings still plays his trumpet and loves to play Taps

Janis Kozlowski: That's great. Do you still play your trombone?

Mack Collings: Trumpet.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, trumpet.

Mack Collings: Yes, I still play it, and there's nothing more that I like to do than play Taps.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah, that's beau -- yeah.

Mack Collings: How many, many, many, many have I played Taps for, even today.

Janis Kozlowski: What's your guess?

Mack Collings: Pardon me?

Janis Kozlowski: What's your guess? How many do you think you've played for?

Mack Collings: Oh golly, I could never guess, never.

Janis Kozlowski: Hmm.

0:32:55.0 Becoming a pilot when he came home in 1946 or 1947

Mack Collings: I've played that for so many. I've got -- I'll send you a picture of me doing it. Today -- oh, incidentally, I didn't pass my -- I didn't get sent for training so when I came home in 1946 and 1947, my brother and I became pilots and I am a Civil Air Patrol pilot now.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, that's great!

Mack Collings: And I've been flying since 1947 in the Civil Air Patrol looking for lost airplanes and that, because that's what the Air Force -- it pays our gas to go look for a problem. They don't want to send a big plane out from the Air Corps or Air Force.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

0:33:40.3 Mr. Collings describes his married life and living in California

Mack Collings: So anyway, my dear, I am over home here in California. I have had extremely wonderful years and I -- my first wife divorced me. My second wife, we were together -- we were married for 38 -- 39 years, and she passed away in '94, and my present wife, I knew her and her husband in 19 -- well, through '85 until '93 and she lost her husband in '93. I lost my wife in '94. We were married at 75.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow (laughter).

Mack Collings: Everybody just can't get over it. We had our 90th birthday party in February last year and we had 100 people at our country golf club restaurant dinner party and all -- I'll send you some pictures of that. You'll never believe what fun we had.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow, that's -- that's a great story.

0:34:45.5 Mr. Collings restates frustrations with the Battle of Attu and 4th Infantry not being recognized

Mack Collings: And in that same aspect I got other things. So anyway, I hope I've told you a little story about me and the Battle of Attu and the one thing that bugs me, no information to the citizens of the United States and no information of the Battle of Attu for the 4th Infantry Regiment, which is a decorated 100-year organization, if you believe that.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, we'll try and educate some people and let them know about -- about the 4th Infantry.

Mack Collings: I -- I do that every time I can possibly do it. I just can't get over it because the 4th Infantry was it, okay?

Janis Kozlowski: Why do you think they're overlooked and the 7th gets all the credit?

Mack Collings: I cannot figure it! I cannot figure it! Well, General Buckner, which I knew like I know you right now, I'm talking to you. I used to talk to him at dances, after dances and that, because we entertained them and..... I just can't figure out where these -- these jerks figured number one that they could kick them off of Attu when they had 30 below zero weather with people with street shoes on. It's impossible!

0:36:11.9 The 4th Infantry was prepared for the Alaskan weather but the 7th was not

Janis Kozlowski: Was the 4th Infantry outfitted better than the 7th?

Mack Collings: Oh absolutely! We'd been in Alaska for two years. We had mukluks. We had proper clothing. We could put our clothes on and all that stuck out was our nose. No, we had equipment. We could take 60 below zero.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Mack Collings: We -- we had the equipment to do that. Can you believe that?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I think you're right. It's just that they thought it was going to be over so quick they didn't have to.....

Mack Collings: That's right. That's right.

Janis Kozlowski: Yep.

Mack Collings: So anyway, it was -- it was upsetting to me. I -- of course I was just a little Corporal. I couldn't go any higher because the 28 members in the band, nobody ever left after five years in the band (laughter). Can you believe that one?

Janis Kozlowski: That was a pretty good job.

Mack Collings: Yeah, so anyway, if there's anything else you want to know I would be happy to do anything. I've got your email. I'm going to send you some pictures of recently and of the olden days and stuff like that.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I'd love to see the pictures.

Mack Collings: I will be doing that to you and you don't know how happy and pleasurable it is for me to talk to you.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I sure appreciate it too. Now, do you have a few more minutes? Can I ask you some questions?

Mack Collings: Oh absolutely! I have all day, my dear, you can just go ahead. (Background beeping noise) I can't get over somebody..... I don't know how it's coming over the phone because nobody's using our phone. It's coming somewhere, but anyway, go ahead and ask me questions.

0:37:54.9 Discussing General Buckner and how well liked he was

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Let's see -- so you said you -- you knew Buckner fairly well. What kind of a guy was he and how well was he liked? Do you know?

Mack Collings: Oh, he was loved! Yeah, we -- everybody liked him up in Anchorage. Yeah, we -- you know, we'd have parades and, you know, they'd have a group of soldiers come in, the band would go out and play for it, and he was well respected, and everybody saluted (background beeping noise)at the officer's dances (background beeping noise)when he would come around to our barracks and that in later years, you know, around -- he was always loved. Yeah, I liked him. Every..... (background beeping noise)But when he would come around..... Oh, I'm sorry about this problem. I don't know what it could be.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. So, he was a very respected leader. (Pause) Are you still there?

End of first tape at 0:39:08.7

(Conversation begins after reconnecting via phone.)

0:00:01.9 Reconnecting and continuing the conversation

Janis Kozlowski: Hello, is this Mr.....

Mack Collings: Hi Janis, this is me again.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I just tried to call you back. I don't know what happened. It just went dead.

Mack Collings: Yeah, I know it. That's what just happened, but anyway we're back together. Maybe it won't come on anymore; I don't know.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Well, can I ask you.....

Mack Collings: Okay, now finish -- start your questions.

0:00:18.8 Playing with the USO and many big stars while in the service

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Let's see, so you mentioned that you saw Bob Hope and some other famous people when you were playing.....

Mack Collings: Absolutely! We -- there's many times. Even when we came back to the States, we arrived here from '43. We were here from '44 into June of '45 and we entertained people with the big stars. What did they call it? The USO?

Janis Kozlowski: Uh-huh.

Mack Collings: Because we -- we -- that was our job.

Janis Kozlowski: Uh-huh. Yep, that was your..... So, what.....

Mack Collings: Yeah, so we met all these people. We were the first ones to introduce them.

0:00:57.2 The band changed from the 4th Infantry to the 214th Ground Forces

Janis Kozlowski: Where were you in '44 and '45? Did you go back to Tacoma?

Mack Collings: We went -- we came in..... We were at Fort Lewis from December 2nd or so and then we went to Camp Hood, Texas.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: We went to Camp Hood, Texas, and the band was now called the 214th Ground Forces -- 214th Ground Forces.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: That's what we went from, the 4th Infantry to the 214th Ground Forces.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: I don't know what happened to the 4th Infantry.

0:01:39.4 Memories of playing at a Texas college game

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. So what were the most interesting audiences or places that you played?

Mack Collings: Oh! One was good. We went to -- we were asked to come and parade and play for a big game of Tex -- two Texas colleges. Texas State and Texas something whatever. Now, the stadium was full. Now, this was in '44, yeah, in that area, and the stadium was full and we paraded down in the parade, then we went up and sat with the audience. They had special seats for us. We would sit with all these Texans. Well then, they would have the college bands get out also and they would start playing their Texas anthem -- National Anthem. Well, our band members, well we didn't know what the hell Texas was. We didn't stand up, but everybody else did. We almost got thrown out of the cotton-pickin' stadium!

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: So this is what we would do. We'd go to these big events and we would play. We would parade and all that kind of stuff.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did they -- you traveled around like that until the end of the war?

Mack Collings: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was it.

Janis Kozlowski: And then.....

0:03:05.2 Playing for the soldiers that came to Camp Hood to train

Mack Collings: Not only would we -- they'd fly us there most of the time. They would -- because there weren't very many bands in the services at that time, and they would fly us to other fields and we would get out and play and the big deal was that we would play for an hour while all the soldiers that were coming in to Camp Hood to learn how to fight -- we would -- you know there would be 4 or 500 soldiers coming in to Camp Hood to train and we would parade them in. We would go down and pick them up at the train, take them in to Camp Hood, then the next day we would play a parade for them while they were introduced to the General.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow, that's quite a welcome!

Mack Collings: Oh, yeah, it was great! We would really play for them and that..... Oh Jiminy, I had more fun in all my life, then you wonder how I can still play a trumpet.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.) I bet -- I bet the guys loved that, didn't they?

Mack Collings: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, they loved it. They strutted like you didn't believe it. And then -- and then this one time instead of just playing the march, our band leader got up, which is Warrant Officer Ernest B. Gentile. He would get up and we would jazz it. "*Da da, da dat dat, do do doot doo, da dat doot doo*" instead of the regular march tune (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: He ju -- so he made it more fun and lively.

Mack Collings: Right! Right! It really just made him really proud and he'd swing his shoulders, much like a soldier.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. So.....

Mack Collings: Yeah. That was what we did. We did that for a few years.

0:04:56.5 The daily routine of the band members

Janis Kozlowski: So you didn't -- you didn't play every day though, so what did you do when you weren't playing?

Mack Collings: My dear girl, we'd get up in the morning. We would get dressed, we'd go have breakfast, and we'd come back to our barracks and we would have an hour of practice. Then we'd have two hours of rehearsal, then we would go have lunch, then we would come back. The dance band would rehearse and the guys would individually rehearse, then the whole band would rehearse again, and then we'd go out and play Reveille -- not Reveille, but Retire the Flag. We did that every day!

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, so you did have daily chores that kept you pretty busy.

Mack Collings: Oh, yeah, absolutely!

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. So -- so they didn't train band members to be like gunners or.....

Mack Collings: Oh no, they didn't train us to be warriors, no.

Janis Kozlowski: No.

Mack Collings: They trained us to entertain the warriors.

0:05:57.3 Working in the Signal Corps

Janis Kozlowski: But, wasn't it a little unfair then for them to put you in the Signal Corps where you were kind of in the line of fire, but you weren't really trained to defend yourself?

Mack Collings: Oh, we were able -- we -- no matter where you were on that island, you were in danger, but they needed some -- they didn't want the firing soldier, the front line soldier, to be that duty that he didn't have to do. They needed him on the front line, so they put us in his place and sent him on the front lines.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Mack Collings: So, that's -- that was our duty and we did it with all our hearts and soul.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, do you remember.....

Mack Collings: But we did carry a rifle and a pistol.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, you did, okay.

Mack Collings: Absolutely. Absolutely. We had those little '45s and those rifles almost all the time and we knew how to use them.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, so you weren't completely defenseless.

Mack Collings: Oh, no. No way.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: We were -- the only thing, we weren't sent to the front line.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Well, that seems fair.

Mack Collings: Yeah. Well, we were there to protect ourselves and that was it.

0:07:04.9 Delivering messages with the Signal Corps

Janis Kozlowski: Do you remember what kind of messages you conveyed between the different groups?

Mack Collings: No, because they were all sealed.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. So you just took an envelope or -- it wasn't a verbal thing or anything you really knew what was.....

Mack Collings: That is correct. We had no information. But they needed this information to get the Company A to Company G over to Company C or back over to whoever they needed to get it to.....

Janis Kozlowski: So did you have.....

Mack Collings:and we had to travel within all this range up Massacre Valley.

Janis Kozlowski: So there must've been pretty good communication for you to know where Company A or Company G were, right. You -- somebody.....

Mack Collings: Absolutely. We had to know where everything was.

Janis Kozlowski: Right. Right.

Mack Collings: Now that was before anything was settled. See, we were still there. There was nothing on the island but us soldiers.

Janis Kozlowski: Right. And did you know much about how the war was going or.....

Mack Collings: No.

Janis Kozlowski: No. You just did what you were told and didn't really know.

Mack Collings: That is exactly it. We did not have any specific information like as if Company A is over on Mountain Hoo Hoo and Company G, they just ran into 50 soldiers. No, we didn't know anything like that.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Mack Collings: They just said, deliver this to Company A. We took it. Company A said, okay take this over to C-D Company. So we just did that in that aspect, but then we did take care of the soldiers also when they came back wounded.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, so, if you -- if there was somebody wounded or passed away then you littered -- littered them out?

Mack Collings: Yes. Yes. We put them on the ships. In fact, when we put them back there some of the older soldiers would bring souvenirs they'd want to sell to the Navy personnel so -- you know, like sabers or a helmet or anything Japanese so they could remember the war.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay.

0:08:59.0 Japanese helmet he brought home and used as an ashtray

Mack Collings: I brought a Japanese helmet home and I used it as a ashtray in my backyard and my late wife, she said, honey, you'd better get rid of that because we had a Japanese banker move next door to us that came in to be a banker. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: I said, he doesn't even know what a Japanese helmet looks like.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Mack Collings: Another question, my dear.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. So, what kind of -- what do you remember about the Aleutians? What kind -- what were your impressions when you got there?

0:09:39.5 First impressions of the Aleutians

Mack Collings: When we got there I said, oh, oh, oh. All we could see was snow, you know, on the rocks, on the island. And then, but -- now you should see on that webpage of mine the big 4-foot hole we dug to put a tent in, one of them, and it was in the summer and that's the way it was. So, yeah, that's all we did.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did you have -- did you have days off when you were in the Aleutians, and if you did, what did you do?

0:10:16.3 Entertaining the troops to keep morale up

Mack Collings: We never had any days off. We just did our everyday duty, every day, every day, every day. Get up and -- when we weren't playing we would have duty to clean up our yard or just walk around the island and just things like that. When we weren't working on Shemya we were on the high end. In fact, one of those pictures you can see us digging our hole, but you look on the top part you can see a 50-caliber machine gun sitting there, but we would go entertain people and then we'd come back and be there. That's all. We'd just sit there.

Janis Kozlowski: So, they kept you pretty busy. You didn't have to worry too much about what to do.

Mack Collings: Oh, no. No. No way did we have that. We always had something to do.

Janis Kozlowski: So, were the guys pretty happy with their -- their band and situation and that kept their morale up, or did some of them really dislike where they were stationed?

Mack Collings: They were fabulous with us. They just -- oh my God, we were home. How beautiful, we'd play! We'd entertain then and, you know, when you get entertainment you enjoy things.

Janis Kozlowski: Right. Right.

Mack Collings: And of course we made it worthwhile for them. Really, we did. And they always supported us. When we went out and played for the civilian engineers, my God, they would put money in our pockets.....

Janis Kozlowski: That's great (laughter).

Mack Collings:and say thanks, you know.

Janis Kozlowski: Do these -- the guys in the band, you said they pretty much stayed in their positions. Did you keep in touch with those guys over the years?

0:11:59.8 Keeping in touch with band members

Mack Collings: Up until about five years after we left one another in June of '45. I kept track of them. There were about four of them here in California and one of them, Curtis Harrington, was a sax player. He was in San Bernardino and he worked for a mortician and he passed away, but they're all gone now, and _____, my fellow trumpet player, he -- I lost him, but everything has changed and they're all gone now, but me.

Janis Kozlowski: Hmm.

Mack Collings: I don't know why.

Janis Kozlowski: It seems like you're doing pretty good though.

Mack Collings: Oh, I'm having a hell of a good time.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter). That's great! See, that's what keeps you going, right?

Mack Collings: Oh, it does. Everybody is so happy with me and all that and my wife is just signaling to me now that we've got to -- at 11 o'clock we've got to go to our senior center over there and talk to a lady. I'm an electrical sign contractor and I'm going to help the senior center do something with the building, and she's a sewer. She used to be in charge of the Sew 'n Sew for 35 years. We're just active all along.

0:13:17.0 His wife's sewing hobby

Janis Kozlowski: That's great! What kind of stuff does your wife sew?

Mack Collings: She -- lap robes.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, nice!

Mack Collings: And now -- hey, I'll send you a picture of some of them. They're beautiful.

Janis Kozlowski: I'd love to see them. I'm a sew.....

Mack Collings: Absolutely beautiful. I'll send them.

Janis Kozlowski: I'm a sewer too.

Mack Collings: We'll be in touch with you.

0:13:35.3 Exchanging thanks and appreciation for the interview

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Hey, thank.....

Mack Collings: Do you have any more questions?

Janis Kozlowski: Well, you know, I've got hundreds of questions, but I think you did a good job in telling your story, so I appreciate you taking the time with me today.

Mack Collings: Oh, you don't know how much I appreciate you asking me.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, you know what I'm going to do next is I'm going to have this transcribed and I'll send you a copy of it and we can take a look at it and if there are any questions or clarifications is it okay if I give you a call back?

Mack Collings: Absolutely. You can call me any time and I'm here to do it because this is the one thing that is important in my life, is this part.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, well great. I appreciate your time today.

0:14:14.6 His sister married a man from Alaska and Mr. Collings visited Alaska in 1977

Mack Collings: Well, you just give -- oh, incidentally, as far as Alaska, I left there then, but my sister married a guy that came from Alaska down to California and they met and they got married and they went back up to Anchorage and they were there when they had the big earthquake.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh boy, we just celebrated an anniversary of that quake.

Mack Collings: I'll be damned. It was '66 wasn't it?

Janis Kozlowski: '64.

Mack Collings: '64. Well, anyway, in '75 or '77 our mother passed away so she came down -- they did, and so me and my wife went back to Anchorage and we went to Anchorage back there in '77 and I went and rented a plane with a pilot and went flying and we went fishing and he was doing it and he helped put up the oil line.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh my gosh!

Mack Collings: I got a lot of stories to tell you about that, and pictures (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, boy! Sounds.....

Mack Collings: I've got more stories about that one. He and his fishing.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I bet fishing was good back then.

Mack Collings: Yeah, well I got a cute story I want to tell you the next time you call about he and his fishing boat that ran out of diesel.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh boy! (Laughter).

Mack Collings: There is a story, it's real good.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

0:15:41.5 Exchanging good-byes and closing the interview

Mack Collings: Call me. I want to keep in touch with you and I'll call you.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, that sounds good. I would like to stay in touch.

Mack Collings: Absolutely. God bless!

Janis Kozlowski: All right. You have a good day today.

Mack Collings: I'm going to do it. You do the same, and I'm looking forward to more talking.

Janis Kozlowski: I will talk to you soon.

Mack Collings: God bless!

Janis Kozlowski: You too, bye-bye.

End of interview at 0:15:59.5