

Ralph Yempuku #72  
April 16, 1985

Q: Ralph, were you a University student in 1941?

A: No, I was not student. I was working there already.

Q: Uh huh.

A: I was a... I had graduated in about 1936 or '37. I say '36 or '37 because they wouldn't give me a diploma in '36 and I had to wait till '37 to get my certificate. But from then on, up until the War started in '41, I was an assistant instructor in physical education at the University. So I was working there.

Q: Were you connected in any way with the ROTC program there?

A: Yes, I had finished four years, two years of Basic and two years of Advanced at the University when I graduated. But you see, uh, I had not been able to complete my ROTC requirement and this is the reason why they wouldn't give me my certificate of graduation, see. And the reason that I couldn't fulfill my requirement was because I had a bad knee and couldn't go to one of the summer camps, you know. And those things were required to complete your ROTC course, and I just had to delay it one year.

Q: So when the Japanese attack on Oahu came on in December 7, 1941, what were you doing that day?

A: Well, as part of my work, I was involved with the Department of Athletics there, and at that time we had a team in from San Jose' I think; San Jose' football team and possibly we had two teams. We had another College of Pacific football team. It was just in December, and during that month we... the University of Hawaii football team played a Shrine benefit game and another game, and brought in teams from the Mainland. You know, of course they came by boat and they stayed at the Moana Hotel. Of course, during that period, at that time there were only two hotels on the beach there, the Moana and The Royal Hawaiian. And it's not like today.

And on that morning we had scheduled a bus around the Island tour for these teams. I think one of the teams had played the night before, or the Friday night, uh... you know, the 5th or the 6th of December, and so I went down to the Hotel, Moana Hotel, to make arrangements for these ball players, to take them around the Island on these buses, you know. And that's when the thing started.

Q: So were you down there at the Moana Hotel then?

A: Oh yes. I was at the Moana Hotel, and we uh... well we were going to leave at about 8:30, or thereabouts, and I normally get down there a little early (one hour early) to see that everything goes along alright, you know? And when the Japanese started bombing Pearl Harbor, of course we could see the smoke and hear

the bombing, and everything, and like everybody else, we thought it was just another rehearsal until we found out over the radio that it was the real thing.

So I immediately got a hold of the bus company and cancelled the buses and re-cancelled the tour. And an interesting part of the whole thing was uh... I'm there at the Moana Hotel steps and uh... oh, must have been about 8:00 or thereabouts, and then these four Navy aviators, they were sleeping at the Hotel, come rushing down the steps. You know, they had a big night, Saturday night, you know, and they wanted to get to Pearl Harbor, you know. And there was no way for them to get there; no Taxis or anything was going out there. So I said, "Well, I'll take you folks down."

So I put them in my car and you know, we're going down the road, and one of them said, "Look, you gotta stop at a drugstore. I gotta get a Bromo Seltzer. I gotta big head." you know.

Q: (laughter)

A: So (laughter) I rolled up into the drugstore someplace and get him a Bromo Seltzer, so that he could, you know... he was still... he had a terrific hangover! The four of them had a terrible hangover in fact, and I think you know, this shows what was happening on the morning of the 7th. You know, all of our people that were uh, you know... should have been alerted, weren't, for one reason or another, see. And so I took them down to Hickam.

Q: What was that drive like?

A: Eh?

Q: What was that drive like?

A: Ride? Oh, geez... it scared the hell out of me because I started going down there and then I see these trucks coming back by the old airport; right around there going down to the Pearl Harbor Gate. I see these trucks coming back with bodies loaded on the trucks you know; people that were killed, or half dead, or whatever, in the attack. And you know, just like carcasses, or... on an open truck. So when I saw that and I saw all the smoke coming up, I couldn't get them unloaded and get out of there fast enough. So I unloaded them at the gate and came back.

And then I think it was the following day, I think, or that night, I don't know when it was, that I went down and... you know, because I heard that they were looking for uh...you see, National Guard was not here at that time, so they wanted a Territorial Guard. And this is when I went down and I volunteered, because I had my ROTC commission and uh... We got this thing going, but the interesting part was that so many then didn't know what a gun was all about, you know?

Q: Uh huh. What did you do? What was your job in the Territorial Guard?

A: Well, I had a platoon, you know, uh... about 30 or 40 men under me, and we started to guard all the public utilities, like telephone companies, water tank, and things of that nature. But

there were so many rumors flying around that the Japanese had landed, had put down parachuters and up Kaimuki, up Maunalani Heights, you know. They said they were all over the place. And today we know that they had not landed, or they had not put I any troops. But all I know is that fortunately, the Japanese made the biggest mistake in the whole War, in this respect, that if they had brought in the troop transports and had brought in 5,000 soldiers, they would have taken this place lock, stock, and barrel, you know.

Q: So, from your experience, you'd say that the Island was pretty thinly defended, then huh?

A: Not thinly, I don't think it was defended at all. Because after, you know they were firing these anti(c)aircraft guns up from someplace you know, out maybe from Hickam or places like that, and all I know is that many of those shells... you know they didn't know... you know those shells, you gotta fuse it, you know. You gotta... you gotta... if you fire it up in the air, if it doesn't hit anything, it's not going to go off unless you fuse it at 5,000 or 10,000 feet or whatever. Then it's going to drop to the ground and burst when it hits the ground. And I think that a couple of guys got killed, and many uh... there was quite a few damages because the shells went up and came down because they failed to fuse it, you know?

Q: Uh huh.

A: And uh... they were really inexperienced and they didn't know what it was all about. So that's why I say that it was very, very fortunate for us that the Japanese had not foreseen that we were so... no defense at all, and they had failed to take advantage of that and bring in... just a hand full of troops could have taken this place.

What can we do, you know, like the guys that I had in my platoon, they didn't know how to load the gun, let alone shoot it, you know? But they went out and guarded the installations. And I remember it was right on December the 7th they had a "black out", you know, you couldn't light... a "black out". So, we would go out to inspect, to see that the troops weren't sleeping, or weren't goofing off. My God, it was so scary, you know because if you... they going to shoot you! (laughter)

Q: Yeah, probably everybody must have been pretty tense.

A: Yeah!

Q: Do you recall, I guess a month or two after the attack, when the AGA members of the Hawaii Territorial Guard were demobilized?

A: Yeah... yeah. Well, I think, you know, looking back at that time, I was bitter and I said, "Geez..." because what they did was to get rid of us, you know, because we were Japanese.

Q: Uh huh.

A: And uh, here we had gone out and volunteered and gone through all that harrowing experience of you know, we could do right after the bombing, and then to be you know, kicked out because you're not loyal enough or we can't trust you, you know? But anyway, when I look back at it, you know, you feel that...telling stories about these... about a month or so after the bombing they started moving troops into Hawaii from the Mainland. And the troops would come down to the waterfront and everything, and there would be us, guarding the water front. And they'd say, "Oh my God, we're late. We're too late." So, they've taken over the place, see. So, when those things starts happening, you know, you kind of figure...

Q: Excuse me for laughing... I just....

A: No, no. That's quite alright.

Q: It's just the way you said it struck me.

A: Yeah. They... well, we look like them see. So what they.... they had a big, big problem, they had to get rid of us. But they couldn't very well say, "You get out and you stay." So what they did was demobilize the Territorial Guard one day and the same afternoon and then the same afternoon they mobilized it again. And when they mobilized it, they got rid of us.

Q: Well, and it was... you know, after that a lot of you folks were pretty depressed and...

A: Yeah. We were very... I for one was very depressed and I says, "Jesus" you know "what are we going to do now?" So I went back to the University where I had physical education this and that.... teaching. And I think all of the... most of the Territorial Guard people, many of them were University students and they went back to school, see.

Q: Well, how did the Varsity Victory Volunteers come to be formed?

A: Yeah, well, now I come to that. That was a concept, if I recollect correctly, a concept that was put together by people in the community. See, because of this tremendous... at that time, tremendous number of Japanese people here, I think it was around 35 or 40% at that time, now it's much, much less, proportionately, but during that period the proportion was much, much larger than now, and I suppose the Commanding General, or you had military law here, and they were worried what... you know, how to cope with this big group of Japanese.

So they formed an Emergency Service... and Emergency Morale Committee, they call it, and they had leading citizens of the City in this Committee. And the Committee, one of the members was Hung Wai Ching, Shigeo Yoshida, Mitsho(?) Kido, and Dr. Murai, and uh... Masaji Marumoto, Charlie Loomis, Mr. Herman Wai was a member also. But anyway, you know, there were some Nisei's and some other nationalities in this Committee, and when they kicked us out of the HTG, the

Territorial Guard, and we went... I went back to school to teach or work there, and many of the members went back to school for an education. The Emergency Morale Committee must have figured hey uh, you know, we gotta do something to sort of alleviate the bad situation, the feelings that was prevalent at that in this community anyway. They were afraid of the Japanese!

So they originated this idea of a group of workers, a labor battalion, for the military. And uh... the YMCA got involved because Hung Wai Ching was a director of the... he handled the (name?) House, which was the University YMCA there (University Ave.) and he was Executive Secretary there I think. So he was one the Emergency Morale Committee and they put this thing together, and they talked to quite a few of the Nisei students that were there, and they agreed to the plan. And this is when we're going to have this group and we will go to the Commanding General that we want to serve as a Labor Battalion. You won't let us serve our country with guns so we'll do labor. And so they got this group together.

Now, I was older than most of them because I had graduated in '36, '37 and they were still freshmen and sophomore in '41. So I was 8, 10 years older than them, and they figured they needed somebody older than them, you know, because they had about 125, 150 people, to be their supervisor. So they approached me and I says, "Alright." you know "I'll go." So this is how I got involved with it and we got together and went to Schofield Barracks. At that time, you know,, we had now idea what we were going to do. Then, but, I think it was more of a project to convince the local population and also the military that we were, you know, we like to do something.

Q: What were living conditions like up at Schofield?

A: Oh, it wasn't....you know.... they had these barracks there and they opened up the barracks for us, and there was about 150 of us stayed in the barracks and there was one, two, three barracks. And uh, maybe uh...30, 30 people in one floor. It wasn't bad. It was the same living conditions as the soldiers had, you know. So, of course, but you know, our kids weren't experienced as far as the conditions were because they lived at home and all of a sudden they get thrown into this barracks situation.

Q: They had some adjustment problems?

A: What was that?

Q: Did they have any adjustment problems?

A: You mean problems adjusting?

Q: Yeah, to the...

A: Yeah. All of them did, you know. But I think, because most of them, I'd say 90% to 95% of them were University students. And that doesn't make them any better than the others, but mentally and intellectually, they could cope. Because I think they all knew that this isn't what they're going to do all the rest of their life. This was an interim thing and we were out there to show the General that we could be just as loyal as anybody else, see? And uh, as it turned out, we became like a show piece for the Emergency Morale Committee and Hung Wai Ching and others they go to the General and say look at that. We had

all Colonels, Generals, and everything, they come and look at us you know?

Q: Anybody from Washington ever come out?

A: Yeah, yeah... McLoy(?) the Sec. of the Army, or whatever, you know? They came out. I think they... by about then they figured Jesus maybe they... uh, they pulled the bone away as far as the West Coast Japanese are concerned, and so they came down and they saw what we were doing, and I think that was one of the main reasons why they were willing.... because at that time the 100th Infantry, they were federalized, but they were on the mainland training, but they weren't given guns. They were used as labor battalions or whatever see. And I think the basic thing is that it was a matter of trust, whether they could trust these Japanese to fight. So after they say what the EMC was doing, I think it convinced whoever made the decision that, you know, that maybe they can be trusted. So they were given guns and then they started to form the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and that's when we disbanded, because everybody wanted to join the 442.

Q: What kind of work... what kind of projects did you guys work on? Do you recall any of them specifically?

A: Well, there was uh... yeah, we had the whole 140 or 50 people divided into different work gangs. And we had a quarry gang, a gang that went up, you know, the Kolekole Pass. They got up at the top there, they got this quarry; they have a big quarry there. There were not enough workers, so we had about a dozen or 15 of our boys in one quarry gang and they went and reported every day, every morning, 5:00 or whatever it was, to work at the quarry. And we had uh.... gangs working in the building doing carpentry work, building pre-fab, not homes, but barracks you know, because they started to bring in troops from the mainland and there was no place to keep them. And you know how the military is always that way. They .... So the logistic problem was terrific, so they had to have these things to put them up in Kahuku, out in the field someplace. They gotta build latrines you know, uh, regular portable latrines. Then we had a couple of crews that went out to fix roads for military roads, you know. Not asphalt roads, but make it passable for tanks and trucks and whatever, for their training purposes. So we had all kinds of work gangs, you know.

Q: When the call came out for the 442nd, did you go in there too?

A: Well uh... yes, I tried to get in there. We disbanded. But you know, the same reason that kept me from getting my diploma or my certificate in 1936 now kept me out of... although I got my certificate uh, as an officer, commissioned, but right after... You see, right after that the draft started, you know, the military draft, and because of my knee, I was put in 4F see, and now when I wanted to volunteer for the 442, they said, "No you're 4F. You can't go." So here again, Hung Wai [*Ching*] and Emergency Morale Committee says, "Hey Ralph, you gotta go. I mean the boys all going and I'm sure you want to go, and they're depending on you to go." So I says, "Yeah, I want to go but the military won't

take me." So they say, "Alright." So they went to see the General and uh...

Q: Was that General Emmons or....

A: Yeah, General Emmons here. And somewhere orders came down the line to the Colonel, and they called me and they said, "O.K., we'll take you on the condition that you can go through the Ranger Course." They had a Ranger Course in Schofield where they had trained these Rangers for combat. They said, "You go there for a month and you pass that course, and then come back and we'll take a look at you."

So I went there and I was the only civilian that ever entered that Ranger Course. Every morning I'd go out in my car and go to the running, and jumping, and rope climbing, and everything. So after a month of that, I went back... I think at that time, Kam [Kahehameha] School, or one of the schools there was a big hospital, and I went there and saw the Colonel. So he tells me, "O.K., get up on the table here... on the desk." So I get up on the desk. He said, "Now jump to the floor." Of course, what the hell, it's only three feet, so I jump on the floor. He says, "O.K., you in." (laughter)

Q: (laughter)

A: So here again, you know... (laughter) .... military.

Q: That's probably one of the most unusual Army physicals I've heard of. (laughter)

A: Yeah, one month I'm building myself up physically and he puts me on the desk and says, "Jump." (laughter)... and that's it! So anyway I passed the test.

Q: Uh huh.

A: So I.... then they gave me my commission back, or restored my commission and I went to Camp Shelby... I mean, yeah, and trained with the 442 there.

Q: Did you go through all... all through the African...

A: No, see, this is uh... apart from the VVV [Varsity Victory Volunteers] picture I stayed with the 442 for Basic Infantry Training. Then they sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia, at Atlanta or Fort Benning, and for Officers Training Course, you know? The military game you know? They put it before and afterwards see. So I go to Officers Training School. Then while I was there the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA they wanted Nisei's(?) to volunteer for OSS while we were at War with Japan. So I could speak a little Japanese, so I volunteered. So there's about maybe, oh.... 15 of us that volunteered for officers and a dozen enlisted men. And I served uh... went to Japanese language school, then went to jungle training and everything, and finally I found myself... I wound up in Burma, fighting the Japanese in Burma. (laughter)

Q: Oh yeah?

A: Yeah.

Q: What kind of duties did you have over there?

A: Well, I was with Detachment 101 which is a OSS outfit, and we uh... most of our... all of our activities there... first we were an Intelligence outfit. We were way behind the Japanese lines. We didn't have any lines; Burma is all jungle.

Q: How did you infiltrate in...

A: Well, I got behind the line, the first one, with a small plane, you know? And then we got back there and we organized Katcheen(?) Guerrilla troops and we had about one, two battalions. I think three battalions of Katcheen(?) guerrillas. We armed them and we ambushed the Japanese in groves and trucks, and this and that. So at first it was the Intelligence gathering team, but you know, as we went along, we had all these Katcheens back in our battalion. We might have had 2 or 3 hundred of them. So I stayed out there six months... about six months, out in the jungles, you know, and with these guys, and fought the Japanese.

Q: That's really an unusual story because of course the 442 is... has lots been written about that...

A: Yeah.

Q: ... but not much about you folks who uh...

A: Yeah, well, the OSS had phenomenal success in Europe during the War. You know, they had people in Germany, people in France, and Italy, and all the places, long before the Americans or the Allied Forces came in. They were handling mostly Intelligence duties.

But back in Burma and that part of the world, they ... the U.S.... at that time U.S. military forbade the Nisei's, like you know, interpreters, to go in front of so many uh... like battalion headquarters, or regimental headquarters. They wouldn't let them go ahead of them, because they were afraid that the Japanese would capture them and torture them. And this is how the OSS got in.

Now, as far as we were concerned, OSS was a real bastard outfit. It wasn't a... it wasn't under the military; it was under the President. So they could do anything they wanted, you know? I had people in my... with me, that were doctors, who were very intelligent people, majors, you know, and no military training at all! Draftable OSS because they had certain capabilities that uh... military officers didn't.

So, with us, they shifted us, you know like I was behind enemy line for six months see? They, you know... and there was no objection by anybody you know? They were OSS... OSS.

So I stayed there until then after we cleaned the Japanese out of Burma. They asked... I went up to China and stayed in China, and reasonably when I went to, when I was in the Mainland, after I was recruited and going to all these OSS schools, original plan was to drop us in Japan, see? And the same way that they had Yugoslavians, Americans drop into Yugoslavia, French... Americans drop into France. They think they can do the same thing in Japan, you know? That I could drop into Japan...

But they fail to realize that uh... at that time, and even afterwards, that in Japan it is an entirely different thing. Then France; in France uh... or Italy, or Yugoslavia, they were parties in troops that were allied, you know. They were for the allies...anti-German. But in Japan, they was no anti-Japanese! (laughter)

Q: Nobody to hook up with once you got there huh? (laughter)

A: You get there and you're on your own (laughter)... because I never heard of any Japanese that were against the military. So fortunately that never took place and you know, I uh... I stayed in China for a while and the War ended.

Q: What were you doing in China?

A: Same thing.

Q: Same thing?

A: ... the OSS, and we were getting ready for the you know, big thing, and OSS had cleaned up in Burma, so we went into China. And then when the War ended, I uh... was put on a "mercy mission". There was about 3 or 4 "mercy missions" and we jumped into different prisoner of war camps; one up in Peking, one in Shanghai, and I went down to Hainan Island and it's a big, big island, then we thought there were American, regular American Intelligence, a lot of American prisoners of war in this big prisoner of war compound in Hainan. And they were afraid that the Japanese would murder them. So as soon as the War ended, the following day, we were down there and I was .... there was six of us. I was the only Japanese speaking guy in the six, and we jumped into the prisoner of war compound to tell the Japanese that the War had ended. But fortunately they had heard already and they didn't harm us. So we took over and there were no American prisoners of war. They were all Dutch and Australians, yup. And so we got them out.

And then I went to Hong Kong on the way back you know. You gotta get to Hong Kong, and the British weren't too happy to see us around, you know. But we stayed there and then, this is the strangest story that ever happened to anybody.

So I'm there in Hong Kong. See, I have four brothers, and before the War, my father, back in 1932 went back to Japan. And he told me, O.K. you can come back with us to Japan or you can stay in Hawaii and finish your education. So I said I was going to stay here. So the other four kids he took back to Japan.

So when the War started, I had no communication with the family at all. We just had it before the War started and so forth; half a dozen years. I don't know what they're doing. They don't know what I'm doing.

So I get into Hong Kong and I'm on my way back to Kunming the Chinese headquarters. And I'm up in the Peninsula Hotel, up in the second floor, you know out on the lanai there, watching this surrender ceremony. And Japanese, of this was about 3 or 4 weeks after they surrendered.

But then the ceremony was going to take place and I'm watching them. And unbeknownst to me, my brother was interpreter for the Japanese General who was giving the sword to the British General see? And he sees me up there in an American uniform. Of course he doesn't say anything and I don't know anything about it, until I get to Kunming in my tent there.

At that time I was a Capt. I'm in the tent and then a friend of mine

comes knocking you know. Says, "Hey, you gotta brother?" I says, "Yeah, I have four brothers." You know I had four brothers. He said, "Where are they?" I said, "Oh, they must be in Japan." He said, "You know, I gotta tell you a story. The strangest thing happened to me." He says, "I was in the British, you know? I was American but was assigned to the British because they didn't have any deputies." So he was with the British and he was in Hong Kong, interrogating the Japanese prisoners of war. He says he sees a guy exactly like me, you know? He knew me here see; he and I. Exactly like me but it's a Jessuz, I better not say anything because he knew that I was in OSS and we do all kind of strange things. And one of the things, we masquerading as Japanese prisoners of war, and trying to find our some War criminals, or whatever, you know? So I didn't want to say nothing, you know? I figured it was you. But I say you know, after a while, the wheels started... I couldn't stand it any longer. So I called him to me, and he says, "What is your name?" He says, "Yoboku." you know? He says, "You have a brother?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "You know your brother is alive?" I says, "Yeah, I saw him the other day." (laughter) He says, "What do you mean? When did you see him?" And then the story came up on the show and I saw him up there. And...

Q: Did you recognize him when you were looking down?

A: No! No I didn't. I couldn't, you know, see very well for one thing, and I would never think that you know.... (laughter)

Q: That's an amazing story!

A: The way the story is, it doesn't' sound true but that's how it happened. Yeah... yeah.

Q: Well, it sounds like you had a really interesting career.

A: Yeah, so then I... after the War I went to Japan because my brothers and family lived in Hiroshima, to find them, you know... to see what happened to them. And fortunately they were all alive and were healthy, so I stayed in Japan with the CIC for about a year, and then came back.

Q: Well!

A: O.K.? (laughter)

Q: Thanks!