

#191 ROBERT KINZLER: SCHOFIELD BARRACKS, 27TH INFANTRY REGIMENT

John Martini (JM): It's December 3, 1991. My name is Ranger John Martini from the National Park Service. We're doing [an] oral history interview videotape with Mr. Robert Kinzler. Mr. Kinzler was a soldier stationed at Schofield Barracks, 27th Infantry Regiment on December 7, 1941. At that time, he was a Private Third Class radio operator. He was then nineteen years of age. This oral history videotape is being produced in conjunction with the National Park Service, USS ARIZONA Memorial and KHET-TV.

So, thanks for coming to speak with us. And the first question I always ask is when did you enlist and where did you enlist?

Robert Kinzler (RK): I enlisted on the 24th of June, 1940 at Newark, New Jersey, and requested service in Hawaii. My purpose in doing that was to try to win an appointment to West Point by attending the West Point prep school which was being conducted here, or at the Schofield Barracks at the time. They had another one at Fort Dix, New Jersey, but that was only a few miles from my home, so I opted for Hawaii. And it took three months to get here. I didn't arrive here until early September, 1940 on the USAT *REPUBLIC*, a transport, which brought me from the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Brooklyn Army base to Panama, to San Francisco, to Hawaii.

I got here and they off loaded us from the ship, put us on trucks, drove us a few blocks to the Iwilei Railroad Station. They then put us on a very small railroad car. To me it was small -- I was used to the regular size, but this was more like a small gage railroad. And they took us by rail to Schofield Barracks.

When we were off loaded there, today it's an area just in front of the present Post Theater. There was a Post Theater then also.

JM: It actually ran through the base?

RK: Mm-hm, right into the base. They then assigned me to H Company of the 27th. I had no basic training up until that point, so they began to give us our basic training. During the period of basic training, which lasted for six to eight weeks, they had an officer, Captain John H. Bentley, Jr. -- who was the communications officer for the regiment -- come out and try to get some volunteers, you might say, to transfer from whatever company we were in, to Headquarters Company. And I had a year of college before I joined up and I thought that would be a better opportunity to be in Headquarters Company than in H Company, which was a heavy weapons company. So I transferred and that's when I began to learn the Morse code.

We developed to the point where we could take twenty words a minute, which would break down to twenty-five letter code groups in a minute and take it from there. But I was still a private, but I began to go up the scale. A success, you might say, pay-wise, by going from sixth to fourth, to final Third Class Specialist.

JM: What did you make when you first entered?

RK: When I first entered, it was twenty-one dollars a month. Now, every payday, they would line you up alphabetically according to rank, so I was somewhere in the middle of the line. But they would immediately take off twenty-five cents, that was for the old soldiers' home. That was a compulsory

deduction. Then you began to -- they paid you in cash -- you then paid for the credit extended to you for movie tickets, for the PX, quartermaster laundry. Then if you had any money left, the fellow who loaned you five for seven would come around, and that was forty percent interest. Usually lasted about a week. And then you were broke.

They had no facilities or no enlisted men's club. They had NCO clubs. So you had to make your own entertainment, so to speak. If you had any money, you could hop into a bus. They called it a bus, it was just a dilapidated taxi. It would take you to Honolulu for a quarter. They would take you as far as the Army-Navy YMCA, on the corner of Hotel Street and Richards Street. From there, I guess they walked to Waikiki about three miles. And we would never ever be allowed in Royal Hawaiian Hotel or Moana Hotel, especially if you had a uniform on. They would come up and ask you if you were a registered guests there. If not, they would sort of push towards the door.

JM: Did they do that to officers?

RK: I was not an officer.

JM: I know.

RK: Officers, yes, perhaps they would see the insignia and they would be, you know, treated slightly different. But the general opinion of the citizens, the people living here, was that anyone in the military was nothing but a bum who couldn't get a job on the outside. I resented that somewhat because I did have a year of college, engineering college. But we did have men in the unit who were there by virtue of the judge giving a choice. Either go to jail and have a prison record or you join the military and have a service record. Most of them opted for the service record.

JM: Who were --- the other guys that were in your outfit, especially the company H when you first got there, with a year of college, did you find yourself more educated than most of the other guys?

RK: Most cases. We did have several high school graduates, but they were far and few between. Although you could pick them out because they seemed to stand out a little differently from the others. I would say that I did, but in my looking at other men in the company, I could figure out those who had a little more education than normal soldiers.

JM: You mentioned the local populous didn't think you were anything if you were wearing a uniform. At that time, the fleet was here, and the Army was being built up. How were relations between the enlisted levels, like the Army and the Navy, the Marines? Did you guys have certain areas you went to? Did you ever . . .

RK: No they . . .

JM: . . . spend time together?

RK: They had an area of Honolulu, known as lower Hotel Street. You may have heard of that. That's where they congregated, if they had the money. They came to the point where a two dollar bill was known as sailor money, and that was the going rate.

JM: At the houses?

RK: At the houses. On payday, along River Street, from Hotel Street to King Street, along River Street, there was one organization, you might call it, called the Cottages, Cottage Rooms, that's up on the second floor. You'd always see a line coming down the steps onto the street and on there, you just had to stand in line, take their turn. Payday. (Laughs)

Prior to payday, we were given a lecture by a doctor, chaplain, and a company commander on the evils of visiting the red light. But they said if they did go to the red light, make sure you visit the green light afterward. That was the prophylactic station.

(Laughter)

RK: But as I say, today an enlisted man has enlisted men's clubs. They have a lot of areas of entertainment, so to speak, that they can partake of, whereas we didn't have it.

JM: If you were restricted up to the base up there, but, you were off duty, what, what did you do, to kill time?

RK: Each regiment had a little so-called restaurant in the sallyport [*of their barracks quadrangle at Schofield Barracks*]. It was run by a Chinese family, usually. And beer was ten cents. And they called it a restaurant, but it was usually a beer hall. You'd hang out there.

On Sundays, we used to hike up into the Waianae mountains, long. We'd go up the Kolekole Pass and then we would go from Kolekole toward Ewa, along the summit, overlooking Lualualei.

But I did take the physical exam for West Point, three days of it, and I flunked because of my eyesight. So on December 7, 1941, school ended abruptly anyway, so I didn't lose out.

JM: Can we talk for a sec[ond] about the West Point Prep School? How did that work, because there were a couple of them, I know.

RK: The West Point Prep School was a school that was run by the Army to allow servicemen the opportunity to win an appointment to West Point. Now, at that time, I think the student body was something like 2,000. The president had so many appointments he could make. Each Congressmen and each Senator could make some, but they, in some cases, had to skip a year, and that was my problem. My --- they didn't have it for that year, and I guess I was somewhat in a hurry. So they suggested West Point Prep School. Now that --- you could tell those soldiers, they had formfitting uniforms that were taken in by the laundress. And they also had a yellow band around the hat. It was a campaign hat, a hat similar to what the drill instructors today wear. Might be something like what a park ranger might wear, except they had instead of that leather band, they'd have a yellow one. That differentiated a West Point prep soldier from a regular run of the mill.

JM: Anyone that's talking about Schofield Barracks is going to talk about "From Here to Eternity," and James Joyce. You know what, . . .

RK: James Joyce . . .

JM: I'm sorry.

RK: James Jones. Anyway, he was in F Company, 27th Infantry [Regiment] at the same time that I was in Headquarters Company, but I didn't know him. Apparently he didn't know me, because I can't pick myself out in any of his characters.

JM: How do you feel about his depiction of the Army at that time?

RK: Each company has teams. I was on the regimental track team. I was also on the company track team. But they didn't go, in my way of thinking, they didn't go into it as deeply as the picture depicted.

(Taping stops, then resume.)

RK: . . . view. You were doing what you wanted to do. They weren't forcing you to partake in any of these. Except on one Thanksgiving, I think the first year I was here. They didn't have enough men to represent the company on a cross-country three-mile run. So Sergeant Dougherty said to the next man walking past, he ordered him to do it, and that was me. So out of forty-five finishers, I was forty-fourth, so I didn't take last place. But I couldn't walk for the next two weeks either. I had no opportunity to train for this.

JM: Yeah.

RK: So I --- stand up, they gave me a shove and I could start walking, but it was really tight in the muscles.

JM: As we, as everything got tighter and the build up happened here at Pearl, and on the whole island, what was the role of the guys up there at Schofield?

RK: We had gone on several alerts. The role of the men at Schofield, there were two divisions there, the 24th and the 25th. In the case of an invasion or any such thing as that, the 25th division, I believe, was to try to secure the lower, or the southern half of the island, the 24th, the northern half by defending the beaches that might possibly allow a landing, you know. Spread the concertina type barbed wire, and things of that sort.

But being in Headquarters Company, we did not normally go out on these field trips or field problems. We went on our own problems where we were to set up communications, and had some practice that way. I cannot recall ever going out with the entire regiment on a maneuver. No, I'll take that back. In May of 1941, we did have an island-wide maneuver. Our position was down here at Fort DeRussy. We set up a radio net there and that was it.

JM: You know, when they kept having those alerts and in November . . .

RK: November 27, 1941, they had an anti-sabotage alert called a real low class alert for it was one that did not have any activity. It was done to protect our planes primarily by taking them from their protective revetments and then lining them up, wing tip to wing tip, tail to nose and nose to tail, both at Wheeler and at Hickam. We also had a small base over at Bellows Field. There were some planes there. Now, the planes were in that condition, on the seventh of December.

JM: Just before, well, kind of to set the scene, December 7 itself, what were you assigned to that day?

RK: Okay. Well, let's lead up to it.

JM: Yeah.

RK: The week before, starting December 1, we had dry run rifle practice. Just sighting imaginary targets, squeezing the trigger, getting the position, prone position and then kneeling position and things like that. And then on December 6, the company had a cook out for some of the people. I not only was the radio operator, but I did drive a half-ton pickup truck for the radio section. But once we got to where we were going, I was then a radio operator. So I was invited to this party, which was primarily truck drivers. And that was at Kailua Beach the night before, December 6. They had the usual beer and soft drinks and hot dogs, and things of that sort, a little cook out. And we didn't get back to Schofield until roughly two o'clock that morning.

JM: So you . . .

RK: So if you were not assigned to, say, KP or something like that, you were sleeping in. We actually had off from noon Saturday until roughly Sunday, each week. And from noon Wednesday until roughly Thursday morning.

So I was intending to go into Waikiki. I had fifty cents so I get in -- not Waikiki, but Honolulu. I had fifty cents that I had at my disposal, so it was pretty close to the beginning of the month.

JM: Burning a hole in your pocket.

RK: Right, and I had to get rid of it. But not in the manner that I finally ended up in going to Honolulu. But at 7:55, there was a terrific explosion. Now that, loud enough to wake everybody up regardless of how much that person might have had to drink the night before.

JM: You were in the sack still?

RK: Yeah. I could sleep good at that time. But we got dressed immediately. Went out onto the lanai to see what might have caused that explosion. For you see, at that time, each regiment consisted of three battalions, four companies each. Each company had their own mess hall. And then we had one, two mess halls in headquarters building. Those ranges or stoves in the mess hall were oil fire.

We thought perhaps an explosion had occurred in one of them, so we expected to see a little excitement around one of the mess halls, but there was none. But at the same time, and I was on the second story of a three-story building. Flying from our right, or left rather -- which would be from the direction of Wheeler Field, away from it, left to right -- was a very strange looking plane. The building was three stories and this was just barely missing the roof of the building, the Second Battalion, First Battalion barracks. And I'd say it was no more than fifty yards from it, but I didn't recognize it as a plane, other than it was an American. It wasn't an Army plane.

JM: Mm-hm.

RK: It had fixed landing gear, two men in the cockpit, the canopy was back, close enough to see the pilot clearly -- that a man, not whether he was Chinese, Japanese, whatever. But he did have a brown helmet with fringe. But also this huge red circle painted on the fuselage, just behind the rear man. Could have been a Navy plane, could have been a Marine plane. Didn't mean a thing to us.

We had no aircraft identification instructions in our particular company. There was no war talk. Maybe amongst the higher echelon of officers, but not in our area.

So not recognizing it as anything, we went down to breakfast. We were dressed, breakfast was being served so we went down to our mess hall to get something to eat. Well, I never did get to eat that day. That's when they laid the alert call. Everything was done by bugle, not the tape or anything. A bugler went up to a seven-foot megaphone, blew his call maybe three times in three different directions. But an alert call is noise. Nothing familiar about it at all. You know something is up when you hear a call like that, especially in the dead of night. But this was eight o'clock, maybe, by that time.

And then when we ran out of the mess hall, no officers were around. Dougherty, our first sergeant told me to get a certain portion of my anatomy out to the pool to help disperse the trucks. That motor pool was a good ten-minute run away. I ran out only to find the trucks had been dispersed, so I had to run back, not upright, sort of leaning. But I cannot recall whether I could hear continuing bomb explosions from Wheeler. And out of 353 planes in the sky that morning, I only recall seeing the first one. I didn't bother to look up. But while I had run out to the mess, motor pool area, and then run back, the rest of the company had rolled their full fuel packs, which consisted of half a tent, you know, toilet articles, everything you would need to go out into the field.

So I was alone in the barracks, and I was rolling my own full field pack when all of a sudden, the loudest noise, even louder than the one that woke us up, took place. What I imagine was the fact that every gun in the area, which had been mounted on the roofs of the buildings, was firing at a plane flying over. And maybe the plane was strafing, I don't know. But at the same time, a lieutenant colonel came into the squad room, looking for some other officer, and he came over to me, and I was as flat on the floor as I could get and he joined me. And then he left. But I just finished and I went down. Then they issued me a forty-five caliber automatic pistol.

Well, maybe three months later we found out that it didn't work, so, well, as far as I know. The ordnance came, put a shell in the chamber, pulled the trigger, nothing happened. So we ejected that one, put another shell in the chamber, nothing happened. Then they found out that the firing pin had either broken or was just filed down. It was a little too short. They then gave me a rifle, an 0-3, the old Springfield.

JM: Can I interject for a second? At this point, there was an alert on, your turrets are firing, do you know that it wasn't a drill? Do you know it was the real thing? And do you know who was coming at you?

RK: We figured from the noise it was the real thing, but who. I didn't know for maybe ten, fifteen minutes after I had gotten back from the motor pool area that it was Japanese.

JM: Up until that moment when you did find out, what had your opinion been of the Japanese as a possible enemy?

RK: Never even thought about it. I was reading news articles of the war in Europe. I was thinking more of that, not out here. Maybe I'm the only one that never thought about it, but I also find that after fifty years, practically everyone else other than myself was either strafed or bombed.

(JM chuckles)

RK: I was neither. And I went from Schofield with a hundred and fifty others --that's how many were in the company -- all the way down to Roosevelt High School, which is at the base of Punchbowl. We, that was, the football stadium was our regimental headquarters, and that's where we set up our radio net. So by, say, between 9:30, perhaps, and quarter to ten, when the attack was easing off -- 'cause it ended around ten -- we came down from Kipapa Gulch area, down the old Kam[ehameha] Highway. We could see all of southern -- well, we could see all of Pearl Harbor from there. And that was our first clue, you might say. Even going past Wheeler Field, none of us --- I can't remember seeing any of the smoke or the planes that were burning there. And we went right past it. We had to, that's the only way we could get from Schofield down to Hickam.

So I think our thoughts were more on what was happening right there, rather than what's going on over here and being curious in watching that. But once we saw that dense black smoke coming from the ships that had been burning, the oil burning, and then seeing in that black smoke, occasionally a very deep orange colored flame shooting, probably from an explosion, internal explosion or something. We weren't really scared of anything, but from that point on, I think everyone in that truck that I was in, a big two and a half ton truck, might have had a laundry problem and so forth. We were scared.

The thoughts that I can recall being talked about between us was first of all, I remember somebody asking what caliber -- we knew by that time it was Japanese -- but what caliber shell, rifle bullet, did they use. Somebody said twenty-five, so we wondered, would that hurt as much as a thirty caliber, which we had. Are they going to invade? Is there going to be follow up? Is the worst yet to come, or has the worst been taken place already. And then we got it down around East Loch, going past there, up toward the present -- today they're empty -- but at that time, the tank farm that borders Pearl Harbor.

There was a Marine standing there and every time we had gone down that way, whether in a taxi or a bus, or in a convoy, there was always a Marine guarding that. I think he was probably more scared than we were, being there, having a more or less bird's eye view of what was happening, and being surrounded by Navy F-14s tanks of a million gallons of fuel oil or so.

JM: Mm-hm.

RK: Well, again, no plane strafed us, we weren't bombed. So I feel let out, according to some of the stories that are being told about, "I went across that field and here comes a Jap plane strafing me, alone."

I don't think they wasted bullets on one person. So I feel as though maybe I missed something on December 7.

(JM chuckles)

RK: Anyway, we finally got to our so-called battle station and set up a radio and telegraph nets for the outlying battalions. Then I was immediately put on duty. I was a pretty good operator by that time. And we did get reports. Some of these rumors that you hear, "Invasion fleet being sighted off of Waianae coast." Somebody saw some puffy clouds and they became paratroopers.

All of that came into the headquarters, was given to the regimental commander, who in turn had to determine what battalion would have to investigate

that particular rumor. And that's what they were, primarily rumors. Then around four o'clock that afternoon, I think we learned that military law had been established.

The --- I don't know, the most uncomfortable feeling that night was laying on a cold floor under that football stadium, totally blacked out, no lights at all. And then have somebody come and stumble over somebody. And then you hear a shot ring out. But fortunately, those shots all went up. Because I think it was so dark you couldn't tell whether you were horizontal or vertical.

JM: What's your strongest memory of that day and immediately ensuing? After fifty years, what sticks out most?

RK: Seeing the plane, and then seeing the ships burning, as we came down from Kipapa Gulch. You know, we come up Kipapa Gulch, and then you have the whole of Pearl Harbor, all three lochs you can see. And then see those tremendous fires, very dense black smoke.

JM: With all those alerts and rumors that were going on, did you still have a laundry problem, or did you kind of settle down?

RK: Oh, my problem was not so much laundry. I was just scared, but not -- I don't like to use certain words -- but I wasn't scared something.

JM: It's okay. (Chuckles) Go ahead.

RK: Shitless, that's the word.

JM: Yeah.

RK: Sorry about that. That doesn't go out over the air.

JM: We'll blip it.

RK: Blip it, beep beep.

JM: Yeah. In fifty years, a lot of changes since then. How did you feel that evening, though, about the Japanese? You hadn't thought about 'em before . . .

RK: I really didn't think about 'em as an enemy or anything. I was just concerned and worried about my own safe being. And then, as time went on, there was no return, especially that day. You begin to relax just a little. And then, our company commander, I think his name was Captain Fred L. Walker, Jr. Things got to be rather boring, the same thing every day. So he had a motto, keep them busy, take their mind off of desertion. So you've heard the proverbial, "Digging a hole and then filling it in." Well, we would dig the hole one day and then next day, we filled it in. All in the vicinity of Roosevelt High School. It was, I believe there's a stream that ran down along. There's the football field and on the other side, toward whatever road it is, there was a stream. That's where we did our digging, in that stream.

But we stood guard duty. In fact, I had taken some pictures. I had bought a camera in the old, the Waikiki Pharmacy, which is next to the theater. And I took -- they were slides, and I didn't get 'em for about three years. They, well, they were us standing against a brick wall -- not a brick wall, but a stone wall. And they kept them because they said that there might be some

military significance to it. But they finally gave it to me. I still have some of 'em.

JM: We've only got about a minute left. Anything that you'd like to add or say specially. And think someone maybe is going to look at this at the seventy-fifth reunion, or the hundredth anniversary.

RK: Well, I hope to be here for that one. I liked Hawaii. I liked the life, the climate and the type of living that the civilians were. Oh incidentally, those civilians that, around October in 1940, they began to draft their own sons in, so their attitude toward the military sort of changed a little. And on December 7, we were at Roosevelt High School. A lot of Japanese families lived in the area. They couldn't do enough for us. We had cookies, we had cake, we had soda, everything brought to us. Things changed.

JM: Things change.

RK: But I liked Hawaii so well that I returned for good in 1954.

JM: And you're making your home here now.

RK: I had no job. I had a wife who was seven months pregnant and I had 1,500 dollars. It took me a week -- not a week, but a month to find a job. That job lasted thirty years, so I'm, I'm pushing forty years in the island now. That job was with -- can we use names of companies?

JM: Sure.

RK: It was, I got a job with the C & H sugar refinery at Aiea.

JM: And we've got to wrap it up right now. Thanks for coming, thanks for talking.

RK: It was good.

JM: Thank you.

RK: You know, life -- not everybody was . . .

END OF INTERVIEW