

#232 ROBERT MCKENNEY: SIGNAL CORPS, U.S. ARMY

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller. I'm here with Harry Butowski at the Waikiki Park Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. It's December 8, 1991 at 10:15 p.m. And we have the pleasure to be talking with Mr. Robert McKenney, who was assigned, who was a Private assigned to Signal Company, Aircraft Warning Service Hawaii. He worked at the Opana station on the fateful December day of December 7, 1941, at which point Mr. McKenney was twenty years old. We're doing this oral history tape as a part of the oral history program for the USS ARIZONA Memorial and the National Park Service, in cooperation with KHET-TV in Honolulu. So thanks for coming.

Robert McKenney (RM): Yes, I understand. It's good to be here.

SH: Right. Mr. McKenney, how did you join the Army? How did you particularly get into signal corps work?

RM: Well, it was communications and electronics was a hobby of mine. As a matter of fact, I, I, before I joined the Army, I took a correspondence course in electronics, radio repair, to be more specific. And I was interested in that, I was interested in ham work, ham communication work. And I, I joined the Army just to, just to, for adventure, really. Prior to that, I was a, in the merchant marines for a few months, and then the war came along and I had to get out of that because they wouldn't let me sail in bad water. Then I was in the Civilian Conversation Corps, so the Army was, you know, it was a thing to do for me, and I did. Of course, I got into the Signal Corps. They seemed to want people with a little bit of background in electronics. So I found myself, and I enlisted for Hawaii, figuring, well, there's a war in Europe and I'm going the other way. So that's the way I went.

And I arrived in, in Honolulu in 1940. I think it was November of '40. And they were just, they had just formed this Signal Company Aircraft Warning, at that time, up at Schofield Barracks.

SH: So what kind of duty did you do then?

RM: Well, primarily, we were in a training and a recruiting mode those days. You didn't get your recruit training, or boot training, however you want to say, at one particular camp, like they do nowadays. It was up, it was the responsibility of the local commander, of that unit, to provide you with that training, and that's what we did. And we had about six or, about eight weeks of that. It was, it was pretty tough. But it was with our unit, and most of the, most of the guys were pretty green, a lot of young men and everybody, you know, it was a real green outfit.

And then we proceeded into more communications training. We learned the CW, you know, the Morse code. And we learned the basic radio theory, which I was fairly familiar with anyhow. And from there, we just, just, we fooled around with radio communications. We didn't -- the radar equipment hadn't arrived yet, so that . . .

SH: When did it arrive and how much further training did you get on it before you . . .

RM: We, we, well, we had, I would say we only had maybe four, maybe four months of hands-on training. Not even that. It was, it was because we, we were kind of kept in the dark. Nobody, nobody really made the point of giving us the

big picture, you know, what, what this equipment is for, and we had all kind of wild ideas on, on what the equipment is for, but . . .

Harry Butowski (HB): What did you think this equipment was for?

RM: To, to spot aircraft or just something that shouldn't, shouldn't be where you spot it. We didn't know the range of it. We didn't know the -- we got an idea of the procedure. WE knew that this thing had developed in England and we knew that the RAF were using these devices in their night flights and things. That much we knew, so we had an inkling. But nobody, nobody gave us the idea of this unit will operate with the range of a hundred and thirty or a hundred and fifty, under ideal conditions. And that was, it was the way it was those days. You know, you were enlisted to perform a certain job and that was it.

HB: Did you train on all phases of the radar equipment, operating the scope and doing the plotting, and to operate the tracking equipment?

RM: I, I think we, no, I think early on we, we learned how to set the equipment up and how to get it, get it going and then the allied jobs of plotting and things like that came along. The plotting didn't seem to be any particular thing to learn, I mean, it's very simple. You know, you just put an X on it, a piece of overlay paper, under the direction of the guy at the oscilloscope, except he'll pick out, the plotter will pick the azimuth by looking out the window and seeing where the thing came in.

SH: Did you ever -- excuse me, Harry -- did you ever visit the information center at Fort Shafter?

RM: Yes. What I mean by visiting, I went by the room and got a look into the room as, as we were doing some chores down at Fort Shafter.

SH: But never . . .

RM: I've never . . .

SH: . . . shown around and explained . . .

RM: No, never, never, no. There was no, no briefing or anything like that done, at our level. And the only reason why I was down at Fort Shafter, and most of us were in those days, was the equipment came in at Fort Shafter. We unloaded it and put it on the trucks and carted around. Even at that point, we didn't know what we were, what was in these big giant boxes. And we disassembled, take the, we took the antennas and the arrays out of their casings, and of course we knew then what they were, but we had no idea what, what the technical end of it was.

HB: How many men would normally be assigned to a unit when you're operating?

RM: What is normal? I ended up in the Pacific, and I guess a crew would be there. I was a radar chief -- that is an enlisted person that was in charge of the entire station. And on one crew, I would think about four to six people. And of course, if you ran three crews, four shifts, three or four shifts, you would have to have that many more people.

HB: What would a normal shift be at Opana, the period from November, you know, Thanksgiving Day . . .

RM: That would just, just, just, just, just be a couple hours. I would say just a few hours.

HB: But how many people would be working on it at one time?

RM: I would say two.

HB: Two.

RM: And, but both of us would start the generator, get things going, wind the thing up and check the instruments, and away you go.

HB: Did you at that time, in late November or early December, perceive that there was any real threat to the Hawaiian Islands, that you were under imminent threat of . . .

RM: Yeah, I, there was that feeling, but it was, it was, we picked it up mostly from the newspapers, what was going on. We, there was no briefings from our chain of command as to any imminent danger that I know of.

HB: Colonel Tetley told me that he heard there was a betting pool among the enlisted men as to when the Japanese were going to attack. Did you have any knowledge of that?

RM: No, no. It doesn't surprise me, though. I mean, you know, something like that could have happened. But I, I, I knew of none.

HB: You had no personal knowledge.

RM: No.

HB: And were you on duty December 6, the day before the attack?

RM: I think I was. But then, what, what happened that night, or earlier that Saturday, there was this call to perform from the evening of, for the morning of December the seventh. And Joe Lockard and I were the only two experienced, so called crew chiefs there. And the one, the unit down at the base was also required to be on that night, and there was three of us, three of us together that tossed a coin to see who would, who would draw that duty, that had to be there to operate from four to seven, four a.m. and seven. And they would have to go up earlier to be there, and I remember tossing with a fellow by the name of James Winterbottom, and he won the toss him and I lost, so I tossed with Lockard, and Lockard lost, so he got the, he got the job.

HB: Who were, what were the names of the people assigned to Opana at that time?

RM: You know, I really couldn't -- I know, the only ones I know are Lockard and Elliott, and a Lieutenant Upson?

HB: Upson.

RM: Upson, and he was, you know, I wasn't, I couldn't even tell you what he looked like. He was very new.

SH: Were you -- let me clarify -- were you on duty at Opana the more, four to seven a.m. shift . . .

RM: No.

SH: . . . the sixth?

RM: No.

SH: No, okay.

HB: Do you know who was on duty on that shift?

RM: I don't even know if there was a shift.

HB: Okay.

RM: I really couldn't, I really couldn't.

HB: Okay. So, so you were not, you were not up there at the time . . .

RM: No.

HB: . . . say, Joe Lockard and George Elliott . . .

RM: No.

HB: . . . were . . .

RM: Just, just those two were up there, to my knowledge.

HB: When did you learn of the attack on Pearl Harbor?

RM: Well, I was, I was down below at the base. And it was, I wanted to, it was a Sunday coming up and I hadn't been to church. I just got a tough letter from home, so I figured I better go. And I decided to go and a couple of other guys were going to go with me. So we got in our Class A's you know, our cottons. And we were, we decided to wait for the bus. There's a bus that made a -- you know, the same bus is still there, I guess. Or maybe it was a GI truck, I don't know. But arrangements were made that we would picked up and go in to Pearl City or someplace for Mass, early Mass. And while we were waiting for this, the, you know, we all heard all this so you could, I guess, you saw this stuff, you know, way off and we, somebody remarked to our officer, he was there, that this is a great, this is a real, some formation, isn't it?

And of course, the thing broke down and things started to happen. And so we got into our, our vehicle and just, and went up to where Lockard was.

HB: What do you mean, things broke down?

RM: Well, just, just hell broke loose. You know, nobody -- we, we didn't have any ammunition and all we had was a few pistols, forty-fives and nobody had any ammunition. Nobody really knew what to do. And was just, just chaos.

HB: But did somebody come up and tell you that Pearl Harbor was under attack?

RM: We got, we got the word somehow and also we saw some of the, what was going on, and, and then there was the cars started to come out of Pearl City,

you know, because civilians. So we got, you know, we threw a lot of stuff on the truck and got up to where Lockard was.

HB: So you, you went back and then you actually passed them on the road?

RM: Well, that's, that's, that's what I'm told, but that's my, my impression was that, that we got up there and Lockard was, was sitting on the, on the board, for, for one of the vans, you know. It comes down and you sit there and my impression was that he was there and we told him what was going on, and he got pretty p.o.'ed about it. But in talking to, over, over the years, I've never asked Joe or anybody else what happened to him. I just had my own impressions. And it wasn't until just recently that Joe says that, it wasn't, he passed us. And that could well be.

HB: So you, what you're saying is that you returned to Opana and Joe Lockard . . .

RM: Yeah.

HB: . . . was still there.

RM: Right, yeah.

HB: Was George Elliott still there?

RM: Yeah.

HB: Was anyone else up there?

RM: No, nobody.

HB: Did they, did they leave at that point, or did they stay?

RM: I think they stayed but I'm not sure. I know we got, we got busy doing fortifications and doing things, because from there on out, there was, we got all kind of rumors were going on about the possible landings and possible -- there were some aircraft hit and the guys bailed out, and we heard, based on that, why, there's going to be some hostile ground action, so we were busy with fortifications. And, and manning the radar. It went on continuously from there on out.

SH: Did you take over the radar set? Do you recall when you personally took over the radar set?

RM: No, I don't. The shifts were whacked up and I don't know if I went on right away. I think I went on later on that night, during the night, yeah.

HB: Did, when did Lockard tell you, or when did you find out they had actually tracked the incoming planes?

RM: Oh, we knew that right away. I don't know how we knew it, but I remember looking at the overlay.

HB: So, you, you actually . . .

RM: Yeah.

HB: . . . saw the overlay, rather than . . .

RM: Right.

HB: . . . Lockard telling you?

RM: Yeah.

HB: How did you assess that information?

RM: Well, I thought, boy, this is something! You know, it, it just, you know, I thought, wow, you know, just a, just a feeling of, of this where we're going to get out of this, this dead thing we're in. We're going to be really doing something. And figuring all the hardships and all the, all the things that happened to the, you know, the guys in the field, why, it was . . .

HB: Did you have any sense that you were sitting on some very important information?

RM: Oh yeah, sure.

HB: In the sense that, you know, you knew where the planes came from, so you could . . .

RM: Right, yeah.

HB: . . . right where the carriers were. Did anybody make any attempt to communicate this to the Navy or to the higher parties?

RM: I would, I would have no knowledge of that time.

HB: Who would, who would have been in charge of the Opana unit at that time? I mean, you're up there with Lockard and Elliott. Was Sergeant Murphy up there at that time?

RM: No, it was, Sergeant Hilton was the NCO in charge, but he wasn't there.

HB: When did he arrive?

RM: I really couldn't see. I know he did, he did arrive, but I really couldn't say. And the officer, he was, he was around, but I just don't remember him being any, any particular force in my life.

SH: Was anybody giving orders at that time? Do you recall?

RM: Well, yeah, well, the orders, you know, would be to, to man the, the scope continuously and then we had to set up our own perimeter defense. And there was a lot of things going on that had nothing to do with our radar operation.

SH: Who was giving the orders?

HB: And who was in charge?

RM: I really couldn't say, because we were, I would, I would say it was, it was probably Hilton, but I couldn't, couldn't put my, really say.

HB: Hilton was the sergeant?

RM: Yeah. And I know he, I know he was there later on, but just when he came back, I don't know

HB: Did, did you track the planes, or did, to your knowledge, did the Opana unit track the planes back to the carrier?

RM: I don't believe so, and that's just hearsay. Because the unit was closed down.

SH: What, what . . .

HB: Go ahead.

SH: Okay. What personally, then, what would personally were you doing at this time? You get up there, as you said, you started to dig trenches. Could you just describe what, you know, went on and what you personally had to do, and what you saw?

RM: Well, the, personally, well, we had to move the, the, our base camp up to where we were, so we, we could be there and we wouldn't have to be going back and forth. Then I understand one of the line companies, regiments, or battalions, whatever, had, had set up a perimeter defense down along the beach and then there were, there were all, there units, it seemed to me, all over the place, and it was a real threat to try to go from point A to point -- down, like go down to the road, especially in the hours of darkness. It was real bad because you, I remember going for something, in a vehicle, and you had to go real slow and you had to listen for somebody hollering, "Halt," because if you didn't halt, if you didn't hear them hollering halt, when you kept going, when your life was in jeopardy, because they would, they would shoot you.

SH: Did you get out of the vehicle then? That, that night? Talk about that night . . .

RM: No, that night, I think we just, we operated and did some fortifications, and then slept. Because there wasn't, initially, I don't think there was that many men. We were working pretty long hours. Just, just how long, I don't remember, but you know, we were getting fatigued. Plus all the excitement.

SH: Yeah, how were you -- could you describe your feelings at that time?

RM: Well, I wasn't, I wouldn't say I was fearful, it was just that, boy, this is, you know, with Japan right, where they are, and we knew what was going on in Japan and the way in China, and all these., these countries they had been invaded. It was, it was scary at the point where we were expecting a landing. And had they, we felt that had they landed, if they did land, why, it would be pretty tough because we weren't in a state of readiness, by any means.

SH: Excuse me. You just, one point further, I'd like to know . . .

RM: Sure.

SH: . . . since you're, you had a little bit of a story that you shared with us, that you told us . . .

RM: Well, there were, there were some new people over and younger than me, that's certainly not, not experienced in the Army. And I remember I would get

off the, off duty at night, and I'd go to my tent and this was one fellow would holler, "Who's there," or, "Halt," or he'd say, "Who's that?"

And I would say, "It's me."

And I hear this, this, this rattle and about the second or third time this happened, I became curious, so I, I did light up -- which you, you know, you shouldn't. Here, this guy's got a forty-five aimed at me. You know, he was, he was frightened. Well, after seeing that, I was frightened.

HB: With good reason.

RM: Yeah.

HB: (Inaudible) it's now fifty years after the event and we're having this -- and everybody is trying to understand Pearl Harbor, put it in perspective and try to figure out what it all means. In terms of the use of radar and at Pearl Harbor, what happened especially what happened at Opana and the people you know, how do you see it today? What, what are the lessons that we need to learn from this story, and this incident?

RM: Well, what are the lessons? I feel that there, there should have been serious attention from a level higher than ours, into what our purpose would be there and what the purpose of the equipment was. Everything, the equipment was in place, and the essentials were there -- the plotting, with the Fort Shafter information center was there and the thing is, it could have been functioning, but there just wasn't enough, enough something top side, from, you know, from the high, from the high command.

HB: And I don't, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but are you saying the technology was good, but perhaps the organization . . .

RM: That's right.

HB: . . . was lacking?

RM: There was no commitment, really, no. It was just, you know, haphazard.

HB: I imagine after the events of December 7, then there was a change of feeling . . .

RM: Oh yes, yeah.

HB: . . . that this radar would . . .

RM: Just like I was saying.

HB: . . . take a much more serious view.

RM: Yeah. No doubt about that.

SH: In the couple of minutes we have remaining, it would be interesting to follow up then that line reasoning and just, just discuss for us very briefly how you went on to apply radar that you, how you used radar in your subsequent war service and assumedly it got better.

RM: Oh yeah, it got better.

SH: Where did you go with it?

RM: Well, I went to, I went to the island of Kauai, and there we, for the first, it was the first permanent radar, this [SCR-]271[-B]. And that was, that was a little scary because there was just [2nd] Lieutenant Caceres was, was the, our officer then, and he selected me over some non-coms [(noncommissioned officers)] to, for this job, which I was eternally grateful, because it was a real break. So it was just me and a murder sergeant, and him. We went to Kauai to put this, get this radar going. Well, the unit was, was the Corps of Engineers that arranged to have all the, the building was up and the antenna structure was up. And it was just, the only thing I had to do was, you know, get the equipment connected and tune it and get it going, which I did. And matter of fact, it was done in time for the Midway, Battle of Midway, because the, the Navy came up and used it to guide aircraft and, and things back that couldn't make it. It was used very successfully in that point.

And after I, after we got the thing operating, in operation, I sent crews over and that worked out pretty good. And from there, I went -- by that time, I was a master sergeant. And I went down to the South Pacific, to a place called Canton, Canton. And there, they had, they, the radar was already set up. It's just a question of relieving somebody else that was in charge of it.

And then I, I applied for -- it was, it was actually, it was pretty boring there. We were not that far from Japanese garrisons, but there wasn't much activity, except in the air. That is aircraft would go out and get beat up and come back. But there's no hostile ground action or things like that. So I put in for OCS, I put in for the academy, and I put in for a warrant. And whatever came in first, it was OCS [(Officer Candidate School)], and I went back to the States and, and got commissioned.

And from there, they, they used me to go around and sell war bonds at, at factories, you know, that was a pretty good job.

HB: Good job.

RM: And then I got a real, real nice job. I went to, I was in the Signal Corps, inspection agency. And that, that was a, we would, where they made radars, where they made equipment, why, I would, I would be like the officer in charge of a certain area that did this. And that was really, really a civilian job. That was, I really lucked it out. You know, I did that for the remainder of the war.

HB: I just have one last question.

RM: Sure.

HB: You know, check for the flip of a coin, you would have been sitting up there that morning . . .

RM: Yeah.

HB: . . . instead of Joe Lockard.

RM: Yeah.

HB: You have any thoughts on that?

RM: Initially, yeah, I thought, gee, you know. And then, I thought, well, you know, I, I could have, I could have perhaps done nothing. And then, then how do you like that? Then I also realized that over the years, you know, I think it's more difficult to take, to take notoriety than it is just being mediocre. You know. And I, I'm still holding onto that theory. I don't think Joe has enjoyed the position he's in, because you're, you're a target, you know, and all kind of things happen. So I never, I never, you know, regretted it or, you know, thought too much about it since.

HB: You don't, you don't, you don't envy Joe for his fame.

RM: No, I don't. Positively not. 'Cause I know that he, he thought of making the military his career and so many things happened, and not in his favor, that it discouraged him. He got out. Whereas myself, I, you know, I maintained a, I got in the reserves and the guard and I retired as a Colonel, National Guard, which was okay.

SH: Well.

HB: Well, I think that's about it, unless you have any other questions.

SH: I don't think so, but I'd like to thank you very much . . .

RM: You're welcome.

SH: . . . for sharing a pretty important thing in your life with us.

RM: Oh good. I hope it was all right.

HB: (Inaudible) and we appreciate your coming.

RM: Oh, thank you.

SH: Thanks so much.

HB: All right?

END OF INTERVIEW