

#196 WILLIAM JOHNSON: SCHOFIELD BARRACKS

John Martini (JM): Okay, today is December 4, 1991. This is an oral history interview tape with Mr. William Johnson. Mr. Johnson was with the Headquarters Company, 14th Infantry [*Regiment*] at Schofield Barracks, on December 7, 1941. He is today seventy-two years of age. This is tape number eighteen. My name is John Martini, a park ranger. This tape is being produced in conjunction with the USS ARIZONA Memorial, National Park Service, and KHET Television in Honolulu.

And thanks for coming, Mr. Johnson. And, first question I'd like to ask is how did you get into the Army and when?

William Johnson (WJ): I volunteered for the Army instead of waiting to be drafted in March 1941.

JM: Did you know that you were going to be drafted, inducted?

WJ: Yes, my draft number was coming up pretty soon, so I volunteered and asked for Hawaii.

JM: So you asked for this duty?

WJ: I asked for the Hawaii, just to come to Hawaii.

JM: So, what kind of an image did you have of Hawaii that made you ask to serve out here?

WJ: Just an island image, I suppose. I never gave that too much thought. I just wanted to get into the regular Army and go to Hawaii.

JM: When you enlisted, did you take basic training on the mainland, or did they ship you right to Schofield?

WJ: No, no basic training on the mainland at all. I got all my basic training at Schofield Barracks.

JM: Tell me about coming to Hawaii and arriving on the island. You, obviously, you came by ship. How long . . .

WJ: Oh yes, I was inducted in Roanoke, Virginia, sent to Fort Slocum, New York, in kind of a holding pattern, and they finally got enough to send by ship. And they sent us down the East Coast, through the Panama Canal, up San Francisco and gave us a day's pass in San Francisco. And then, on down to Hawaii. And in arriving at Hawaii, it was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. But I really patted my own back for selecting Hawaii. It was so nice.

JM: And when you got up to Schofield, well, let's go back. As you were being sent over, did you know that you were going to be going into the particular, into specifically the 19th Infantry [*Regiment*]?

WJ: No.

JM: You just showed up and they said . . .

WJ: We weren't assigned anything, just to get on that ship and go to Hawaii.

JM: And you actually arrived here when?

WJ: I believe it was the thirteenth day of March, 1941.

JM: How did you like soldiering in Hawaii before the war?

WJ: How did I, what?

JM: How did you like duty here at Schofield Barracks?

WJ: Oh, I liked it all right. I kind of had a head start on the army. I spent a couple of years in the national guard at home. However, I was out of the national guard. I asked to get out and they let me out because I was too far out of town, working on the farm. So I asked to get out of the national guard, released from the national guard. And then I kept thinking about my draft coming up, so I wanted to beat the draft and get into the regular army.

JM: At that time, could you basically say, "I want to be stationed here," and they'd give you the option.

WJ: Yes, you could.

JM: Up there at Schofield, there are the four, they call the quads.

WJ: Yes.

JM: Each one is for a regiment. And I know the one that was next to you, they called themselves the Wolfhounds. Did you guys have a nickname for your . . .

WJ: Yeah, we were Rock-a-chick-a-mogwa.

JM: Rock-a-chick-a-mogwa?

WJ: Yeah.

JM: Was it made up of a lot of southern boys?

WJ: No, no, it wasn't. It was more Pennsylvania.

JM: Why did they pick that name, that designation?

WJ: You mean the Rock-a-chick-a-mogwa?

JM: Yeah.

WJ: It has a little history in the annual that I showed you of how it got named the Rock-a-chick-a-mogwa.

JM: Go back to the civil war?

WJ: Yes it does.

JM: Just in the weeks before the attack took place, you know, in the last days of peace, what were your duties? What were you trained to do? Because alerts were happening, what was the basic duty of your unit?

WJ: We, in my particular section, which was the radio section, we weren't trained to do anything in that line at all. We were just trained in radio work. We had field trips and we went on maneuvers. We were --- the particular --- voice was excused from all the duties on the whole, such as KP and police work, you know, the clean up. We were excused because we practiced every day in radio work, international Morse code and voice radio.

JM: My understanding is that the defense of the island itself was broken up into the north shore, south shore.

WJ: It was. It was. Now, I know what was going on at the time. We had night patrols on half-ton trucks, fifty caliber machine guns with live ammunition, every night, for several months before the attack.

JM: Do you remember what part of the island they were patrolling?

WJ: Pupukea Heights. And North Shore.

JM: North Shore?

WJ: Uh-huh.

JM: Mm-hm. What were they telling 'em to watch out for?

WJ: Well, there was lights, flashing lights in the hills and flashing lights in the ocean, out in the ocean, seeming to send signals back and forth to each other, and we, our patrols were supposed to find out about those and break 'em up or capture whoever was doing it.

JM: Did you ever get anybody?

WJ: Well, I --- that's what I don't know because I never went with those patrols.

JM: Did --- when they were out . . .

WJ: I would see 'em when they left and I would see 'em when they come back. And the morning of the attack, that, the night patrols were just beginning to come in to the quadrangle, with live ammunition. They did do some shooting at those planes. They actually shot -- well, machine guns now, fifty caliber.

JM: Let's go to that morning. Can you remember the night before, what you were doing the night before, or and the day before the attack?

WJ: No, just the usual around the barracks, because we didn't have too much duty on Saturday, not a regular weekly duty on Saturday. And most times, we slept late on Sunday. However, I was up that morning.

JM: You were up that morning?

WJ: I was up. I was up and dressed.

JM: What were you going to be doing that day?

WJ: I don't know right in particular what I was going to do.

JM: You weren't in the bed still, you were up, ready to go.

WJ: Oh yeah. Mm-hm.

JM: When did you first notice something was going on?

WJ: When I heard all the noise, all the bombing noise down at Wheeler Field. And then the planes flying over the barracks, machine gunning the barracks.

JM: Did you see the planes going over?

WJ: I actually saw 'em. I could see the pilot in there. He was so close.

JM: When you saw . . .

WJ: Dive down, dive down and, and strafed the barracks. Turned the plane sideways when he left, and you could see the pilot in there.

JM: Can you remember what the plane looked like? Did it have landing gear up or down? Couple of guys in the plane, single guy?

WJ: No, this was, the one that I saw, had one man in it, one pilot, and the wheels were up. The landing gear was up.

JM: That would have been a Zero then.

WJ: Oh yeah. There was this big red dot under the wings and on the sides.

JM: Did you . . .

WJ: Big red dot.

JM: Did you know that they were Japanese?

WJ: We couldn't figure it out for a while. Some of them guessed it was Japanese planes, and some of 'em said they were just strange planes. They didn't know where they come from. Then we finally decided that they were Japanese planes and somehow or another we got word that Pearl Harbor was being bombed the same time Wheeler Field was, and they were all over, everywhere. They sky was literally filled with them.

JM: When you were, when you first heard that, the noise, discover that it's the bombing of Wheeler, did you know right away that it was bombing, or did you maybe credit the noise to something else going on Sunday morning?

WJ: Yeah. We didn't really know. But it wasn't long after, or just a few minutes afterwards that it first started, that they started to bring in truckloads of wounded soldiers from Wheeler Field to the hospital. And the ones that they thought --- I walked up the line there, along the front of the hospital, where they, where it was unloading those wounded soldiers, and the ones that were already dead, they laid them on the front of the hospital, in lines. And the ones that were still living, they carry 'em in and see if they can, what they can do for 'em. And I saw all of that. I couldn't tell you how many, but it was at least fifty, sixty or more.

JM: And they were from Wheeler?

WJ: Yeah, from Wheeler.

JM: Well, what was going through your mind, just about that point? Sky is full of planes.

WJ: I don't know. I really just don't have words for it. It's just the most horrible thing you ever seen. Even women from the officers' quarters were coming out of the officers' quarters and come up to the barracks to find out what was going on, the officers' wives.

JM: Did they sound general quarters and have everybody report to posts at a certain time?

WJ: Oh yeah, yeah, they tried to assemble us after a while. I remember one thing standard in my mind. One of the fellows got a running automatic that's supposed to be fired from a tripod. He got right much ammunition and fired from shoulders at those planes. And that was something unusual to see and for any of us to do. I don't say that he hit the plane, but the plane that he was firing at was hit. It caught on fire and it flew in the direction of Kolekole Pass and hit the mountain side over there and exploded. I saw that. And another one come across the barracks, practically the same way, it caught on fire from somebody's rifle fire from the ground. It caught on fire, circled back, and fell in Wahiawa -- not too far from the reservoir, along the edge of Wahiawa. But it didn't fall in the reservoir. And the Jap got out alive and was caught.

JM: Do you know, the pilot got out?

WJ: Yeah.

JM: Do you know what happened to him?

WJ: No, not really because he was a prisoner. He was taken out somewhere. We captured him.

JM: When you said you saw the sky was full of these planes, did there seem to be any logic or pattern the way they were flying? Did they come from a certain direction?

WJ: Yeah. They had a pattern. Their pattern was to bomb Wheeler Field and strafe the barracks at Schofield. And they made circle after circle doing that, just continuous. Bomb Wheeler Field, strafe the barracks, go round and round.

JM: And when they were shooting up the barracks, were they going for buildings, were they going for people, were they going for trucks?

WJ: They were going for the buildings and they would fire in the windows. And bullets popping in the floor in front of us and we would back up against the -- there were all the partition walls in the barracks are concrete. So we backed up against the concrete partition walls and just stood flat against the wall. And the bullets were breaking window and popping the floor. I carried one for a long time. That is, it exploded into a kind of a star shaped metal, you know, real jagged.

JM: Where did it hit you?

WJ: It hit in the floor. It didn't hit me.

JM: Oh. When you said you carried it, I thought it was . . .

WJ: No. I carried it in my pocket, in my belongings.

JM: In all the previous build-up and the months before, had they ever trained you what to do if an air raid happened?

WJ: No. No, not that I can think of.

JM: When they finally got, started to get everybody together, what did they assign your unit to do? Where'd you go?

WJ: To just get all your gear together and leave the barracks. We left the barracks by truck and went to the hills. I think you call it north of Wahiawa, Pupukea Heights.

JM: Pupukea Heights?

WJ: Mm-hm. And then we lived in pup tents dug back into the mountain. We dug holes back into the mountains and covered the front end of 'em with our pup tents, and slept on the ground for months. And then finally they began to move portable shacks into the pre, pre-built sections. Move 'em in, in sections and we set 'em up, nail 'em together and made eight-man shacks.

JM: So you were setting up the headquarters and the communications all up there?

WJ: Yeah, we had headquarters there and communications back to our barracks, which was in communication with Pearl Harbor and headquarters down at Hickam Field. And we could, the radio station pulled duty on the . . . well, you call it telegraph, I guess, 'cause we didn't use international Morse code. That's why all our measures is back and forth, and we was, we had received messages from the Navy saying, tell us about all the naval activities in and around the islands.

JM: That night, when you were digging up around Pupukea Heights, were there other units that you were coordinating with that you were down on the beaches, setting up beach defense?

WJ: No. No, not that first night. We got it set up in just a few days.

JM: There --- I've read a lot about there were rumors that invasions were taking place and paratroopers landing. Did you get wind of any of that?

WJ: Oh yes, yes. We got --- we would receive messages about code system that there was a small vessel out in the ocean, flashing lights and this, all kind. We got messages from all directions. You know, unknown things happening.

JM: What was the general feeling among everybody in the unit right then?

WJ: We were pretty well shook up and, but didn't anybody seem particularly scared. They were just doing their work and making the best of it, I guess.

JM: What's your most vivid memory of the day? What sticks with you the most?

WJ: Wondering about what my people were thinking back home when they heard about it. That bothered me a lot and my people back home didn't know whether I was living or dead for, until, I'd say, in January. I mean, all through

December, they didn't hear from me. I wrote and the letters didn't go through some way. But then my mother looked in this book and found a lieutenant's name that was in the 19th Infantry [*Regiment*], and she wrote to him, and he brought her letter to me and said, "Your mother wants you to write to her. I want you to write to her and bring the letter to me and I will see that it's mailed to her."

And I told him that I had been writing all the time, and I couldn't understand why she hadn't been getting 'em. But then, that's when she started hearing. What happened to those letters, I don't know.

JM: The whole time they didn't know if you were alive?

WJ: No, they didn't.

JM: When you talk about Schofield Barracks and Pearl Harbor, everyone's always, what comes to mind is the book, "*FROM HERE TO ETERNITY*", and the movie.

WJ: Uh-huh.

JM: You have any opinions about that movie and what they showed about both life and the attack?

WJ: No, not too much. I think it's pretty well in line of what did happen.

JM: Mm-hm.

WJ: Yes.

JM: You didn't know James Jones, did you?

WJ: No.

JM: Yeah. Next barracks over. How did you feel about the Japanese in particular that day?

WJ: I really don't know. I had mixed feelings about it. I wondered what was, how anybody could do such a thing. And have such a bunch of men together and the -- we were not nobody. I just couldn't figure that out.

JM: Had there been any talk or warnings, or training about the Japanese as a possible enemy? Did you think . . .

WJ: No. No.

JM: Did you have any impression of the Japanese as -- the military capabilities or anything -- before the attack?

WJ: No.

JM: Kind of came out of the blue?

WJ: That's right, it did. And the main word that was going around and the next few days afterwards, is that if they had only had an army to back up what the navy done and the air force done, then they would have owned the island before night.

JM: Would you have given them a fight?

WJ: Oh yeah. We would have. We would have, as soon as we could get to our ammunition and all. We were pretty well equipped with ammunition. And fire power, but we didn't have any place. I mean, the two of 'em, the rifles and ammunition, were separated.

JM: Yeah? Yeah, you could go into that. That, like in the movie, I've heard from other places that a lot of guys had a hard time getting at ammunition.

WJ: That's right. They did. But this one boy I was telling you about, with the BAR, he just went right on by that place, supply sergeant, and got what he wanted and pushed him aside and got what he wanted, and went on out and start some firing at those planes.

JM: Okay. You also mention that the night patrol was coming in with their fifty caliber's that were armed, and they were able to . . .

WJ: Yeah, they even carried one of those fifty caliber's up to the barracks and through the manhole to the roof, and set it up on the roof. And I've always thought that that was a machine gun that got those two planes. And it wasn't any confirmation on it, but I always thought they did because they had the best shot at it.

JM: When you were going out for your station that night to set up the headquarters, did you go by Wheeler or see any of the other battle stations?

WJ: No, no, we didn't go in that direction. Like I said, we went Wahiawa direction.

JM: Wahiawa direction, okay. If research . . .

WJ: We worked all night that night. We, after we got to our destination out at Pupukea, we worked all night and getting our equipment straight and . . . just . . .

JM: Someone is going to maybe [be] looking at this tape, you know, couple of months from now, or maybe on the seventy-fifth or hundredth anniversary of the attack. What do you think may be the most important thing to remember about what happened, or the most important thing that you'd like them to remember, from a human point of view, not military tactics, but from a human point of view? Like what researchers to know about you and what you went through?

WJ: I really can't answer that. I always --- it's --- just tears you up and you just -- I don't know. It gives you a sad feeling. It gives you a mad feeling. Has you all mixed, you know, all mixed with your thoughts about such a thing.

JM: Have you been back to Hawaii often since then?

WJ: One time. Come back in 1985. Then I was really surprised at the growth of the, you know, the islands. Development of all the roads and streets and buildings, and all that. Back then, the Aloha Tower downtown was the tallest building on the island.

JM: Also remembering now, in 1991, the media is talking a lot about relations between the United States and Japan. Japan even today is talking about should

they vote a formal apology for the attack on Pearl Harbor. What are your feelings about the Japanese today?

WJ: That's goes kind of like political talk. I'm not a politician, so I wouldn't know how to answer it, but I don't think we owe 'em anything. It's --- we don't owe nothing.

JM: I want to thank you very much for coming and sharing with us, and at this point, thank you.

WJ: Well, I hope what I said is, will help you. Like I said, I'm not much of a speaker, but that's my memories of it.

JM: That's great.

END OF INTERVIEW