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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Akira Otani (AO)

April 20, 1993

Kewalo Basin, O'ahu

BY: Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mr. Akira Otani at his office in Kewalo Basin in Honolulu, O'ahu on April 20, 1993. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

Okay. You know as I was saying earlier, today we're going to pick up where we left off. We were talking about leaving the Triple V and going into the 442[nd Regimental Combat team]. But before we go into that we're going to backtrack a little bit further and talk about some things that you remembered about your old neighborhood. You were talking about the blacksmith and the *senbei-ya* that lived in your part of town when you were a boy.

AO: Yes, in recalling some of the things that we had earlier discussed, I remembered that close to or next to the *papa-san*, *mama-san* store about a block from where we lived there was also a blacksmith shop. I cannot exactly recall what he actually did. But it seems to me that perhaps he must have worked on fishermen's gear or maybe even with horseshoes. Also there was, what we would call, a *senbei-ya*, which is a Japanese cookie-making shop. It was more or less two doors away from where we lived. I thought it was a little interesting that operations such as these were going on in our immediate neighborhood.

MK: Would you remember the names of the people who ran those two businesses?

AO: I think as far as the blacksmith's shop was concerned, it was more or less in the neighborhood of the Yanagihara family or clan and therefore, I'm pretty sure the name of the blacksmith must have been A. Yanagihara. As far as the *senbei-ya* or Japanese cookie maker is concerned, offhand, I do not remember his name (Fujiwara).

MK: We're gonna leave that part of your life, then, and we're gonna bring you up to World War II. You've left the VVV and you're gonna go into the 442, now tell me how did you join the 442?

AO: Well, (chuckles) the sequence of events was such that when the story of the army saying that they would be organizing an all-nisei unit here in Hawai'i [broke], when that story broke, it more or less became the beginning of the end for the Triple V. And it's because of the 442 being organized that I believe the Triple V was dissolved in order to enable those boys who wanted to volunteer for the 442 to do so. As far as I can remember I think most of the boys who were in the Triple V signed up as volunteers right there at Schofield Barracks where we

were situated. We signed and volunteered for the 442 while still in the Triple V.

MK: You know when you first heard that nisei was being organized into an all-nisei unit, what did you think?

AO: Well, it's pretty hard to think back to identify or pinpoint exactly what I might have thought then. But I think the general feeling was that for most of the boys who were in the Triple V, they had already served once as volunteers in the Hawai'i Territorial Guard and had been kicked out, because of which they had then volunteered as common laborers to serve in the Triple V. So when this opportunity came about to finally serve our country bearing arms, I think most of us felt pretty elated. We felt that we finally were gonna get the chance to do something to show the people that this was what we were. We were true Americans and this is what we want to do. Like I say, it's pretty hard to pinpoint exactly what I thought. But I think that was the general feeling that this was our chance, we'll do it.

MK: And then prior to you actually joining up, did you discuss what you were gonna do with your family or close friends?

AO: No. I did not discuss it with my family. Once again as I did in the case of volunteering for the Hawai'i Territorial Guard and also in volunteering for the Triple V, I felt this was something that I must do and I felt that I should. Because of this I know I did not go back home to discuss it with my mother or my brothers or sisters, I just signed up.

MK: And then once you signed up for the 442, what happened to you?

AO: Well, I don't know exactly what the sequence was, but we were dissolved. We were let go from our duties at Schofield Barracks. We did go home, but exactly how long we or I stayed at home until called for duty for the 442, I don't remember.

MK: And then once you got into the 442, called to duty, what happened?

AO: It's not clear in my mind as to exactly where we were called to assemble. The thing I can remember is that we were told to report to certain places to get our physical exam, sign in, and the next thing we knew, we were on trucks headed toward Schofield Barracks and got situated in tents.

MK: And then at Schofield, what were you doing?

AO: I don't know. My memory is hazy. I don't exactly remember how long we stayed at Schofield. I do remember it must have been five or six or eight boys to a tent. It wasn't long before we were called to leave the islands. We did go to assemble at the ['Iolani] Palace grounds, the old palace grounds, and were greeted or sent off by the governor or whoever was in charge, went back to Schofield, and the first thing we knew we were back on the train coming to town. Walked from the old railway station on Iwilei and King Street. From there we walked to Pier 11 and caught the *Lurline* and we were on our way to the Mainland.

MK: And then when you got to the Mainland, whereabouts were you assigned to?

AO: Well, not exactly assigned, but the boat landed in Oakland and there we got on—I don't know

how many trains, but we all got on trains. But at that time we were unaware of what our destination was. Eventually we ended up at Camp Shelby in Mississippi.

MK: And at Camp Shelby, what kind of training did you folks get?

AO: Oh, we were in the infantry and I was assigned to an infantry platoon. I was in the First Battalion, Baker Company, Third Platoon, and I was a rifleman. We were trained as infantrymen.

MK: And what were you feelings being trained as an infantryman?

AO: I don't know what you mean.

MK: Well, you're gonna be in infantry, you're really gonna be fighting. What did you think about being in that type of position?

AO: Well, the infantryman, in my opinion, to be in the infantry was not a good position to be in. Because the infantrymen did all the very difficult job of fighting with his hands, his rifle, and many times in man-to-man combat. Where the boys in the artillery more or less stayed behind the line or the cannon company. Or in the case of people who were in tanks, they were more or less protected in some form or another. But the infantryman, he fought with his hands and his rifles and I think he had the toughest job as far as fighting a war is concerned. It was not a good position to be in as far as fighting (was concerned).

MK: So, did you have any choice?

AO: No. None of us had any choice. We were assigned to different companies, platoons, squads, and we all did what we were told to do.

MK: About how long did you folks stay at Camp Shelby for training?

AO: I don't remember. I cannot recall exactly how many months we stayed there. It must have been several months, certainly five or six months. But I don't know for sure.

MK: And then when you look back on those months of training, were they okay, rigorous, or easy? What do you think they were?

AO: (Chuckles) It was not easy. It was rigorous, it was tough. Especially in view of the fact that most of the niseis or Japanese boys were very small in size and stature. And still at the same time being called on to do work more or less assigned to bigger people. It was not easy, it was tough. But I think, invariably, all of the boys in the 442 worked very hard because they had a mission to accomplish and I think we did it.

MK: And you know, while you folks were in training, who were your immediate superiors?

AO: Oh, as far as immediate superiors were concerned, we in the infantry, our company commander was a Mainland Caucasian most of the time. In some cases they did have some local nisei officers who had more or less been in the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] locally. But in most cases our company commanders were Caucasian and in many

instances were from the Mainland. Then we had platoon leaders. Platoon leaders were sometimes local Japanese boys. But there again, in most of the cases, I think they were Caucasian officers. Then below the platoon leaders we did have, what is called, platoon sergeants. The platoon sergeants, in our company as well as in our platoons, and in fact this held true for the whole 442 combat team, the platoon sergeants were in most cases Mainland Japanese boys who had been in the army and had already been serving in the service at the time our organization reached Shelby.

MK: You know for a local boy like yourself, Japanese from Hawai'i, how was it having a Mainland Japanese as a platoon sergeant?

AO: Well, actually it had been said and much had been written about the animosity that existed between the Mainland Japanese boys who were, in most cases our platoon sergeants, between such Mainland boys and ourselves who were from Hawai'i. But I don't think it was that prevalent, as far as the so-called bad feelings that existed between such Mainland nisei boys and local Hawai'i nisei boys. There were some instances, yes, but I think that was only because, or primarily because of the spoken language. They could speak better than we could. They spoke better English than most of us from Hawai'i could. And that made for some bad feelings. But I think (generally speaking,) we got along pretty good.

MK: How about you and your platoon leader and you company commander? You're being supervised by Mainland, White men. Now, what was your reaction to that?

AO: Well, I don't think anything out of the ordinary. We were primarily soldiers. We took orders and we tried to do what we were told to do because we were there for a purpose. We were there to learn to become good soldiers and they were supposed to be the experts and we were supposed to be the learners. So I don't think there was any problems along that line.

MK: And, you know, since the 442 was a Japanese unit stationed out in the South, what was it like when you folks went off the base?

AO: Well, there, there were problems. Being in the South, discrimination was a key word. Wherever we went the Blacks were segregated from the Whites. The toilets and restrooms at the bus stations, railroad stations were all separated. There were toilets for the Blacks, there were toilets for the Whites. And even in riding buses, in each bus there was a Black section or the rear section was more or less set aside for the Blacks. We were, the Japanese boys or the boys from the 442 were classified as Whites. And as such we were not permitted to classify ourselves as Blacks or go into the so-called utilized Black toilets, Black sections in the buses or trains and that caused a lot of misunderstanding and uneasiness on the part of the local boys.

MK: How about yourself personally, how did you deal with the situation?

AO: Well, we were told that it was very important for us, the members of the 442 to do as we were told. And we were told to use all facilities that were reserved for the Whites. And for my part, I just went along. We had to, we were forced to do that. Now, there were quite a few Japanese boys who more or less could not accept this and I personally experienced one incident where we were on a bus and going along traveling within the base. There was a Black soldier in uniform standing at the bus stop waiting for the bus to come and pick him

up. The bus driver who was a White passed him by without stopping even though there were many, many seats open in the bus. Well, when that happened some of the boys told the bus driver to go back and pick up the Black soldier. This guy, the driver didn't want to. Well, the first thing you know we had trouble. The boys were very unhappy, told the bus driver to stop, he didn't stop and they ended up in the scuffle because the boys could not accept this type of treatment to a fellow human being.

MK: So after the scuffle was the Black soldier accommodated?

AO: I don't remember. But apparently that must have not have been the only incident because scuffles or fights were happening here and there in many places. And I do recall that the colonel or commander of the 442 called for an assembly of the whole combat team and read us the articles of war. Especially pointing (to) that section on "mutiny." And he emphasized that we are in the South and there were certain rules that we had to abide by and we cannot change the custom of a whole area within the United States. That we had better let things alone. And if we don't, then something will happen to our own organization. I think that more or less woke some of the boys up and although there continued to be some scuffles, I think the number of fights and misunderstandings decreased substantially.

MK: Now how about relations between the 442 boys and the White community?

AO: Oh, I think we were accepted very well, primarily because there was a man who was very, very friendly to the nisei boys. I'm trying to recall his name. I think it is Earl Finch. And he, having been from that part of the country, made it a point to alert people as to our position as to what kind of people we were and everything else. So on the whole [in] the White community there at Hattiesburg which is the closest town to Shelby, we were accepted very well and I don't think there was too much trouble there.

MK: And how did you feel personally being on the Mainland in the South at that time?

AO: Oh, I don't think I had any special feelings. Again, we come back to the purpose for which we were there. And I think whether it was, whether we had been placed at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, or had we been placed some place else in Oregon or what have you, I think it would have been the same. We were there for a purpose, we were there to train for a mission and I think we all worked very hard at trying to be good soldiers. So I don't think that mattered very much.

MK: And so after your stay at Shelby, what happened to you?

AO: Well, when it came time for the combat team to go overseas, and I think I should say that by that time, the 100th had already been sent overseas. They were setting tremendous records, being accepted very well. And therefore, the big boys felt the 442 was also ready to join the 100th. The 100th having been a battalion, and the 442 having been a regimental combat team which consisted of first, second, and third battalions, as well as cannon company, antitank company, artillery, engineers and so forth, the regimental combat team left when it went overseas, left the cadre or noncommission officers from the First Battalion back at Shelby so that these so-called noncomms could train incoming draftees or incoming nisei boys which could eventually be trained and be sent over as replacements to the combat team overseas. And I was one of those that had been left back with Baker Company at Shelby as a cadre. So

I did not go overseas with the organization.

MK: And then when you were left back, was that when you entered officer candidate school?

AO: Well, we stayed back. When I say we, several of us from our company. In a battalion there were four companies: Able Company, Baker Company, Charlie Company, Dog Company. And all the non-comm from these companies were left back to train the recruits. Now I was in Baker Company so there must have been, oh, I don't know, twelve to fifteen non-comms from our company that remained back and, I don't know, we must have stayed back, two, three months training incoming nisei boys, a lot of (them) from the Mainland. But during that period of training these incoming recruits, a few of us were picked to go to officer (candidate) school at Fort Benning, Georgia. I was one of those picked and ordered to go to Fort Benning, Georgia to try to become an officer there.

MK: Tell me how difficult it was in those days for someone to successfully complete OCS [officers candidate school]?

AO: Well, I think in our case I think we were very fortunate in that we (already) were infantrymen. We started out as buck privates in the infantry and became corporals, sergeants, staff sergeants and so forth. All the work we had done and had been doing was as an infantry soldier. Therefore when we were sent to Fort Benning to the [officers candidate] school, it was more or less a repeat of what we had gone through in basic training. So for most of us and I say others who had gone together with myself to Benning, although we had been put in different classes, it was as if we were going through basic training. Therefore the training itself was not very hard. Especially considering the fact that others in our company at Benning were boys from the artillery, from headquarters, from the signal corps and such groups that were not related to the infantry. For boys that had come from outfits such as signal corps, headquarters, or artillery, the infantry was an entirely different thing. Therefore it was not very easy for them and yet for us it was, I wouldn't say exactly easy, but it was not especially difficult. So I think most of us got through without too much trouble.

MK: I think you quoted some number of how many candidates there were and how many actually made it through in the end?

AO: Well, I think in the company that I was assigned to I think we must have had about 290 some-odd boys that started out in this particular company and I think by the time we graduated I think we graduated about ninety some-odd second lieutenants in the infantry.

MK: That's a high attrition rate. (chuckles)

AO: Well, I don't know. After all, we were supposed to be trained to lead other men and therefore, I guess the powers that be felt that this thing could not be taken too lightly. The fact remains that we started out with anywhere from 300 candidates and ended up with between 90 to 100 second lieutenants.

MK: How did the local boys fare as a whole in OCS?

AO: I think the local boys did very, very well. I knew of many that were assigned to go to OCS and I don't know of a single one that failed.

MK: You know nowadays, people hear about the [Bruce] Yamashita [discrimination] case and his experiences at officer candidate school. At your time, during World War II, did you experience anything like what Yamashita has experienced?

AO: No, I think that was very unlucky for Yamashita. Because in our case almost every one of us. . . . I don't---well, I cannot speak for the others, but from what I've heard, the others say, I think their cases were similar to mine in that I was the only nisei in my company of candidates. I was the only nisei. There was one Black, there was one Puerto Rican, and the others were all White, Caucasians. I can't recall any incident where I felt I was discriminated against either by the officers in charge or by any of my fellow candidates. I thought we were very fortunate in that sense.

MK: So you were, more or less, all kind of treated the same.

AO: The same. I think we had to let our work speak for ourselves rather than our ethnicity, whether we were Japanese, whatever it was, you know. Our race.

MK: And then, so, after you completed officer candidate school, what happened to you?

AO: Well, I was assigned together with some of my fellow, by then, officers from Hawai'i, we were assigned to go to Fort McClellan in Alabama. There we were assigned to a certain unit in which we ended up training recruits. But strange, (as) it was, not niseis from Hawai'i or the Mainland, it was White, Caucasian boys primarily from the South. It was hard to understand, but nevertheless, that's the army. We went where we were told to go and we did what we were supposed to do.

MK: And how did these *Haole* recruits react to these training officers who were Japanese?

AO: Well, again, I don't think they looked down on us or certainly they must have thought we were different. We were---for one thing we were small in stature and we looked different and everything else, but nevertheless, inasmuch as most of the training was field work which means a lot of marching, a lot of physical activity, a lot of shooting of rifles and so forth, a lot of night work, the fact that we looked different and were much smaller, I don't think it had much to do with their attitude toward us. In fact, one of the reasons was, I think, is that a lot of these trainees, so-called, were very poorly educated people. And for the first time I realized that. I came across people that were so poorly educated to a point where a lot of them had received letters from home they could not read. They asked for their letters to be read, they asked us if we could help them write replies to these letters that were written to them. It was, well, to me it was a great shock to find people like that still around. But there they were.

MK: It was a real different experience. So you spent time training these new recruits, then what happened?

AO: And, well, I don't know how long. Again I cannot recall whether it was three months or four months, but it wasn't very long that we did this type of work until somehow some people realized that I, and some of my friends that came from Hawai'i could speak and understand the Japanese language. And it wasn't long before we were on our way to Fort Snelling in Minnesota to go to the military language school. And I think there were three of us that were

very close. The three of us had been very close ever since the Shelby days. We were in the same company, we went to OCS together, although we weren't in the same company, but we graduated, more or less, about the same time. We went to Alabama to train White, Caucasian recruits about the same time, and we were assigned to Snelling in Minnesota about the same time. So there we were, together, at Fort Snelling, going to the military language school.

MK: You know, I'm wondering how did they find out that you knew Japanese?

AO: Well, actually, the military had their own records. They---in fact, it's amazing it took them so long to discover, (chuckles) you know, that we had background in the Japanese language. Because many of our friends had been grabbed from the military, from Schofield right after getting into the 442. Others had been grabbed right at Shelby even before they started basic training. So actually, it took a long time. They were very tardy in grabbing ahold of us, 'cause the records all spoke for themselves that we did have some background in the Japanese language.

MK: So did the army just kind of do a background check and realize that you had Japanese language training, or did they test you before sending you to MIS [military intelligence service] school or how was that?

AO: No, in my case they didn't test me. They just grabbed me and ordered me to go to Fort Snelling. I think in the very early days, either at Schofield Barracks or at Shelby, I think there were people that did come to interview some of the boys. I don't know if they gave tests to these boys, but I know that a lot of my friends were interviewed and were whisked away to military language school. But in my case I was not interviewed, I was not tested, I was just ordered to go and there we were at Snelling.

MK: Yeah, that was sort of a departure, right, that you ended up going to military language school. What did you feel about being put there instead of being sent to Europe?

AO: Well, yes, that's a good question because it ended up that all the training that they had given us at OCS to become a good infantryman was now, more or less, wasted. If they had wanted to use us as language soldiers, they could have done so before having sent us to OCS. But I guess that's the army's way of doing things. Again, it's not what we thought that counted in the army. We just did what we were told, because what you think doesn't mean very much.

MK: So, you know, the army sends you to Snelling up in Minnesota, right?

AO: Right.

MK: There's a lot of us that don't know much about MIS [military intelligence service] and military language school. Now, what was Fort Snelling for?

AO: Well, actually it was (a special) school run by the military to train. . . . And I don't know if they have a section training soldiers in other languages. But I know it was primarily to train the boys to read, speak, understand, interpret, translate the Japanese language.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: You were just telling me about Fort Snelling.

AO: Yeah. I mean again, after all, I myself was an individual. Or even myself and my friends, we were just a tiny cog in the whole overall picture. But apparently already the big boys knew that the war between Japan was getting heated up and they were expecting a lot of action between the Japanese and the Americans. Of course, we all had heard some of the news in which a lot of our boys had gotten involved and were being utilized as interpreters, translators and so forth. So, we were being trained to accompany American troops at the time the American soldiers got into action against the Japanese at whatever area involved. Therefore, the type of training we were getting was primarily to be able to read the Japanese military messages, speaking military type of Japanese as against the ordinary type of Japanese spoken language.

MK: You know, since you're being trained in Japanese language, spoken and written probably to communicate with Japanese military personnel as the Americans went more into the Pacific and Asia, were you more fearful, less fearful for yourself because you're gonna be a Japanese fighting for the Americans in contact with Japanese rather than Europeans?

AO: I never thought about it. I never gave it a thought. When the time came I don't know how I might have felt, but as far as during those days at Snelling, I never gave it a second thought as to how I might feel when the time came.

MK: When you were at the school, how did you fare? I've heard stories about local men who hardly knew any Japanese and had a hard time at the school. And there were others who had an easy time. How about yourself?

AO: To be honest with you, I had a very easy time. I think apparently, or unknowingly I had good training at Kishida School [Kaka'ako-Alapai (Union) Japanese-language School] and Chūo Gakuin so that as far as the language was concerned I don't think I had any difficulty whatsoever. It's only getting to familiarize myself with military terminology more than anything else. But as far as the language is concerned, I was very fortunate that I had a good background, I had good training and there (was) no problem.

MK: I'm kind of curious about your classmates. What kind of people were at MIS school?

AO: What do you mean my classmates?

MK: Were they mostly from the islands, from the Mainland? Were they mostly Japanese, *Haole*? What kinds of men were there at military language school?

AO: Well, I think there was almost all Japanese. Almost all Japanese. I think in a way it was fortunate because they did have some of the boys who had been in the CBI theater, China, Burma, India theater, who had already seen action and had come back for refresher courses. They in turn were doing some work in teaching the teachers as to what emphasis should be placed upon. But otherwise, there were almost all Japanese. I don't think I recall seeing any other nationality. We were put into classes based on knowledge of the Japanese language

rather than on rank. And therefore, even though we were second lieutenants at the time, we were placed with sergeants, buck privates or whatever depending on how much knowledge we all had. We were ranked according to our knowledge of the language. And there were grades, so to speak, to simplify I could say first grade, second grade, depending on where they classified you as far as the knowledge of the language is concerned. As you asked, you know, there were some who were not too familiar with the language and therefore did have some hard times trying to learn. But then there were others who were very good, very knowledgeable. They breezed through the classes, too, and the only question was learning the military terminology rather than the language itself.

MK: And who were the instructors over there?

AO: Well, they had a bunch of instructors, a lot of Mainland older niseis, as well as some older niseis from Hawai'i. For one I think there was Mark Murakami, I don't know whether you know him or not, but Mark Murakami for one. I think there were mostly Mainland Japanese who were a little older than we were. But I think they must have had some training in teaching the language from the. . . . Initially I think the language school must have been in Presidio in California, and then they had moved to Camp Savage in Minnesota and then gone to Snelling. So these were the so-called teachers that had been trained as teachers, rather than just being picked out of whatever they did in life and coming to school, you know. I thought they were pretty well trained as teachers, you know.

MK: And you know, before or right after you graduated from military language school, did you know what they wanted you to do? What they intended?

AO: Well, actually, we did not reach that stage. I think things were getting heated up, unknown to us, but all of a sudden they alerted us. Even before we had completed whatever training we were supposed to get, all of a sudden, like I say, we were alerted and were told to be prepared to leave. Then it wasn't I guess two or three days after that the atomic bomb was dropped [on August 6, 1945], Russia declared war [on Japan], came into the picture, the war was over [August 15, 1945] and we were in limbo. So actually, we had not completed our training. We had not been trained enough where we said we were ready to go. All these things happened, we were in limbo, and then I think we must have sat around for a week, ten days, thereabout, not knowing what was going to happen.

MK: And then after that period, what happened?

AO: Then after that period, I think, I'm not certain about this, but I think we were given the choice if we wanted to go overseas [to Japan] as part of the occupation force. [We were told] that they needed language people, that we could go simply because of the fact that by then we had had quite a number of time put into the army, you know. I don't know if we qualified to be released, but inasmuch as we were given this particular chance to go overseas, that we had had the training, again we said, yes, we'll go.

MK: So you were sent to Japan?

AO: So we were---yes, we were sent to Japan.

MK: What was your particular assignment in Japan?

- AO: My particular assignment in Japan was to—I don't know what you call the exact terminology (mail censorship)—was to oversee the domestic mail, to pinpoint public opinion or attitudes toward the Americans. So what happened was we actually utilized the local Japanese as mail inspectors. They would check all the mail coming through the central post office. I was in Osaka. And these Japanese men and women, in many cases I think we had more women than (men). They would be reading all these letters and they would find passages which would indicate what these people were maybe thinking about the American soldiers or the American occupation or what have you. They would make excerpts and pass it on to certain examiners who would in turn, with the translation, pass it on to us for our acceptance or inspection or whatever you want to call it. And that would be passed on to certain departments to be, you know, classified and to show an indication of how the Japanese were thinking. You know, whether they were anti-American or pro-American. They would try to more or less read what the Japanese were thinking. So I was in the department which inspected these so-called, well, trying to read the minds of the Japanese and pass it on to related people.
- MK: So, in essence, what you were doing was monitoring the Japanese sentiments toward the Americans as revealed through their mail.
- AO: Through their mail. And as seen by the Japanese because we couldn't inspect all the letters ourselves. So we utilized the local Japanese and they did a pretty good job.
- MK: So every piece of mail that came through that . . .
- AO: Well, I don't think they could go through every piece, but when you figure we had a room maybe ten times the size of this room full of about maybe, we must have had about thirty or forty girls or men going through all that mail. You know, they went through quite a bit of mail.
- MK: And so you got all this information, you've reviewed it and then you compile it. Then where does it go?
- AO: Well, then it went to headquarters and I guess they must have been doing this—we were in Osaka—they must have been doing this in Kyoto maybe, or also Nagoya, and Tokyo certainly and I guess they were all compiled and put into some kind of report for the big boys to, you know, to study and act upon.
- MK: And, you know, from your memory, were there any sentiments for or against Americans that stand out in your mind?
- AO: Well, I don't think they stand out, but I would say that large percentage were almost all pro. Very, very few incidents where they were anti-American. And then, also there was—you know Dick Kosaki [political scientist and college administrator], he was with us and he was in the—I forget what section (watch list section). But he was in our watch (list) section I think. So all the anti-American or subversive activity type, secret activity, that type all went to his department, you know. So we were together for all the times we were in Osaka. We stayed there seven months.
- MK: So was that tour of duty in occupied Japan seven months in Osaka, then?

AO: That is correct.

MK: And, you know, what were all your impressions of occupied Japan?

AO: In what sense?

MK: In terms of how good or how poor a job the Americans were doing in Japan at that time?

AO: Well, I think we or the Americans as a whole did a pretty good job because I don't think there was too much what you can consider trouble. We were respected by the Japanese although every now and then you might have heard of incidents where some oddball acted up and anti-American people did certain things. Well, I can't recall exactly, but they raised hell on the streets and so forth. Every now and then you found, what they call, the *Aka*, Communist people trying to raise some trouble. But the Japanese took care of these people themselves, you know. But on the whole, I would say the Americans were very well respected, they were liked and we had very little trouble. And to more or less confirm this I can tell how my own personal experiences were.

In this particular building that we used as a billet, where we lived was separate and apart from where we worked. And this particular building that we used as a billet was one of the few buildings in Osaka which stood complete and whole. I'll show you later the picture, but the entire neighborhood was more or less all smashed and demolished. But here we were in this building, we lived there, my good friend from Hawai'i was mostly in charge of the building, in looking after the property. At that time I did not think myself that the interior, as well as the exterior was exceptionally fancy or unusually good. We more or less lived there and we had, maybe I was in a room about half this size with about five other officers and we had our bunks, and got up, and went to shower at another place, and there was a dining room, there was a recreation room and everything else. But I guess I wasn't very observant (then) because I didn't think it was anything special until about two, three years ago, I went back to visit this building and explain[ed] why I wanted to see this building to the people that occupied it. It belonged to what they called the Cotton Club or Mengyo Kaikan. And the people were very nice because I had made a previous attempt to get to [there] before and didn't have too much luck, but this time I let 'em know ahead of time. They gave us a tour of this building and it was (a) most exquisite building. They had marbles, Italian marbles. The chandeliers were real nice. The dining room was real nice. But what I'm leading up to is the fact that the American soldiers occupied this building during the time of occupation and when the time came to finally turn this building back to the Japanese, according to what these Japanese owners said everything was in such perfect shape, they were so appreciative that the Americans took such good care of that building. In fact they were amazed that nothing had been stolen, you know. Generally, the housekeeping and everything was so well done.

This is why I say when my wife and I visited these people, this building two years ago we were treated like a king and a queen. I mean, as if I was responsible for having taken care of that building. You know, they invited us to lunch in a big board room and I never knew that this board of directors' room was there on the second floor. I guess the officers, the higher-up officers, were using this place. But there was a long table and the president of the association, the chairman of the association—this was an association—he invited us. They printed a separate menu for us, served all kinds of food, but of course it was lunch so we couldn't eat [it all]. But they went to that extent you know, as if I (had been) responsible for having saved

the building. But it wasn't so. It's just that the Americans were that type of people. They had the highest respect. I think the feeling was more or less general.

But another thing, too, that impressed me was when I went to Japan, we flew from Hawai'i to Johnston to the Philippines. We stayed in the Philippines while awaiting transportation to go to Japan. So we stayed in the Philippines for about one week while awaiting planes. Everything was real—it was sad. The Filipinos they were down and out, they come to beg for food after we get through with our mess and everything. I didn't realize it then, but they were just going around as if they were lost. The moment we landed in Japan, the difference was there like that. The Japanese, you know, it's only a matter of a few hours, but you know the Japanese were going to the American camps, they were getting all these wooden boxes, they were taking that wood apart, and with that wood they were building homes, you know sheds and all. But they were doing things, cleaning up their places. I didn't realize it, like I said, when I was in the Philippines in Manila, but the moment we landed in Japan, the difference was that the Japanese were cleaning up, cleaning up, doing things.

MK: The Japanese were rebuilding, yeah?

AO: Yeah, already.

MK: You know during the years that you occupied Japan, did you renew family ties or ties that you had through your dad's business?

AO: Yes I did. I sure did. Before being assigned to Osaka, we waited for assignments in Tokyo. And while in Tokyo---my dad had had dealings with Taiyo Kōgyō or Taiyo Fisheries, which was considered one of the biggest fishing companies in the world. So I had gotten the names of two persons that my dad had told me to please look up. So I went to this company's offices and inquired and said I want to see Mr. Onishi. Of course, they were not quite organized very well at that time, but finally got to a point where they said, "Oh, he's *yukue-fumei*." He went as a soldier to Manchuria and they don't know where he is. So, then I pulled the other name, Mr. Saito, and they says, "Oh, he's at the cold storage office."

So I said, "Well, how do I get there?"

Eventually I ended up over there. So I meet this man and he was very happy that I called on him, but he says, "Chee, I can't offer you anything. I can offer you only some tea and some frozen mandarin oranges."

I said, "Well, I didn't---I just wanted to see how you were. My dad told me to look you up. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

So, that's one incident. Eventually this thing led to all kinds of relationships up to this present time, you know. But the other incident was after going to Osaka I visited my aunty in Yamaguchi-ken, Ōshima-gun. In order to get there I think what happened was she did come out once from the country to visit me at the office, and [from] there we went back together. She took me back. But [due to] the fact that I was an American soldier, and the fact that I was an officer, the Americans [who] controlled transportation, they gave me one whole car. And the Japanese were clamoring. They wanted to travel and they couldn't get transportation. They were on the [car's] rooftop, they hit the windows and everything. They couldn't get in.

I felt so sorry for them so I told the MP [military police], "Let these people into our car." Only my aunty and I were in the car. I almost got shoved out, you know, like a mad bunch of people just swarmed. But that's how bad it was. They couldn't get transportation and the Americans controlled the buses, the railroads and everything. For just one man they assign one car, which wasn't very smart, but nevertheless that's the way it was I guess.

MK: What an experience.

AO: Yeah.

MK: So, you know, how long were you in Japan?

AO: Seven months.

MK: Seven months. And when did you get out of service?

AO: Well, I got out when word came down that we had enough time in service and therefore could go home. We accepted the so-called invitation to go home. Because you know, from '41 to '46, that's pretty long and I thought it's about time we went home. So I opted to go home.

MK: So that was in 1946?

AO: I think '46, yeah.

MK: And all that time that you were away from home, '41. I know your father had been interned, right?

AO: Well, he had been---up through sometime in '45 when I brought him home, you know, from the Mainland---well, I didn't take him home, but I took him out of the relocation camp, took him over to Seattle and left him in Seattle. Then I went down to Presidio to my port of embarkation. When I flew to Japan and stopped by in Hawai'i on the way, in the meantime he had come by boat to come home. So that was in late '45.

MK: So, while you were in the service, your dad had been interned and also sent to the relocation camp on the Mainland, right?

AO: Right.

MK: I know that he was at Lordsburg, Santa Fe, Amache, (Colorado) and you visited him at two places, Santa Fe and Amache?

AO: Yeah, I don't know if it was Lordsburg, Santa Fe, and then Amache, yeah. Once in a concentration camp, I think it must have been Lordsburg, I think, I'm not sure. I thought it was Lordsburg, New Mexico. And then in Amache, Colorado, relocation camp.

MK: When you visited your dad there, what did you see? What was it like?

AO: Where is this now?

MK: The first one, I guess . . .

AO: Oh, yeah, in the concentration camp. Well, it was pretty miserable [like] what you read in a paper nowadays about how the Mainland people suffered in the so-called relocation camps. In the case of my dad and others, it was a concentration camp such as you see in the movies [with] barbed wire and armed guards and so forth. You finally get to see 'em. And during the visit, although I was in an American soldier's uniform sitting across from each other on the table there was an armed guard standing in between. This despite the fact that I was also an American soldier in an American soldier's uniform. So it didn't make for good feelings, but nevertheless, again, I guess we must have felt or I felt that it can't be helped. At least I was happy to see my dad looking well and I guess that more than anything else made up for the trip.

MK: How was your dad faring?

AO: Well, he had a weak heart practically all his life because he had worked so hard. But fortunately at the concentration camp where he was there were some good doctor friends. And they kind of, more or less [took care of him]—he had good doctor friends. I think there was a Dr. Iga Mori, there was a Dr. Yukihide Kohatsu, who was really an eye, ear and nose man. But he had known my dad from before and he had taken such good care of him. There was also a good friend who was a newspaperman, Mr. [Soichi] Obata. And Mr. Obata was the one that helped my dad write the book [*Waga Hito to Nari Ashiato—Hachijyunen no Kaiko (Recollection: Story of my Life of Eighty Years)*]. So he was there at the same camp.

MK: And that was at which camp?

AO: At Lordsburg in New Mexico.

MK: And you know, when you saw your dad there, physically he was faring okay?

AO: Yeah, physically he was okay. He looked weak, but he was well. He used to come out to the visitation room and we were able to see each other. So he was well, yeah, so that made me happy.

MK: And how was he otherwise? You know, being in a camp, did he express his feelings or talk about how his life was like in there?

AO: No. I think he indicated that everything was okay with him. I think he must have been like many of the others. They're resigned to the fact that they would be in that type of position so long as the war went on. And although my father's friends, Judge [William] Heen, tried very hard to get him out, I guess he was treated like everybody else and couldn't be taken out. I guess in a way, the fact that there was no stress in having been outside with the fear that he might have been taken in, the fact that he was already in, they could more or less. . . . And so long as he could accept it and he did accept it, I think that was less stressful for him. And the fact that he had some good friends that were doctors that kind of looked after him, I think he did okay.

MK: How about as he went to the different camps? You know, he went from that camp to Santa Fe, Amache? Did he fare as well?

AO: Oh, yeah, well, I don't know too much about Santa Fe, but when he went to the relocation camp, Amache in Colorado, again he was befriended by a family, the Akao family, they were originally California people who were very, very nice to him. They looked after him as if he were one of the family, you know. They took real good care of him. So although he was weak, nevertheless, he did not suffer too much, But we were very fortunate. The [Akao] family took very good care of him. As far as relationships with the family is concerned, I think the mister is still alive, although the missus died some time ago. Their son and daughter are still someplace in California. In fact the daughter, has struck up a good friendship with my niece, Nancy's daughter who's in California now. They get to see each other every weekend. So the relationship is still there. But the family, the Akao family, was very, very good to my dad. That was in Amache, Colorado.

MK: You know, did you know why your dad was taken away? Interned and sent to the concentration camps, relocation camps?

AO: Well, actually they say that because he was a prominent businessman like other so-called prominent businessmen and like some schoolteachers, and ministers, these were people, I think, that the military considered could be influential in well, influencing the local Japanese in the event the Japanese invaded Hawai'i. So I think he was one of those that were considered to be possibly influential and hence they were grabbed.

MK: Well, because he was in the fishing industry, and in trade with Japan . . .

AO: Yeah, in trade I think primarily.

MK: Did he have contacts with Japanese government people a lot prior to the war?

AO: No, as far as I knew, no contact with government people. Certainly with business contacts, certainly with relatives, but not government people as far as I know.

MK: How about with relatives who happened to be in the Imperial Japanese Navy or was that a factor?

AO: As far as I know we didn't have any relatives in the navy, the Japanese navy, the Japanese army or anything like that. Because we were---my folks came from poor, very small fishing town there in Yamaguchi-ken. So I don't think for the most part that any relatives had too much education, any type of education.

MK: You know you mentioned that Judge Heen had tried to get your father released. What steps did Judge Heen take to kind of get him out?

AO: Well, I think inasmuch as he was in the local legislature, and having been in politics, I think he wrote to certain of his friends in Washington. And I cannot tell you, I cannot give you any names, but I think he must have written to some of his friends and made reference to my dad and see if he couldn't be taken out. I think on one occasion he even went to Washington maybe for some other business, and at that time he also attempted or did see certain people and tried to talk to 'em. But of course, at that time, nothing could help.

MK: And, you know, as for your mother, your mother had no husband at home, she still has

young children, the ones that are younger than you at home. How did she take all of this?

AO: I think she took it pretty well. But I can't give you any kind of first-hand reply because I was [not] at home myself.

MK: How about in letters to you?

AO: Nothing very much out of the ordinary.

MK: And then for the business, who took over the business during those years?

AO: Well, I had an older brother and he handled the business. He was assisted by the same Judge Heen. In fact my brother had already been in the business and these were years or time of many shortages and anything they could get ahold of during [these] months and—I couldn't say years, it wasn't very difficult to sell, you know, so they did, I think they did okay.

MK: I'm gonna end the interview for today right here. And what I plan to do is we'll cover the business end. We'll kind of go way back and bring you all the way up again, okay? I'm gonna end right here.

END OF INTERVIEW