

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT J. SENNA

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Albert J. Senna on October 17, 2005, in Somerset, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and ...

James Herrera: ... James Herrera ...

SI: Mr. Senna, thank you very much for having us here today.

JH: Mr. Senna, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your father's background.

Albert Senna: My father's background? My father was a candy maker in New York, used to work for Huyler's and he moved to Plainfield. He went into business, and then, from there, he sold the business, went into Bound Brook. ...

SI: What kind of candy did he make?

AS: Oh, like, chocolate candy, coconut candy, stuff like that.

JH: What was your mother's background?

AS: My mother's background, I don't know too much about. All I know is, she was married and had ten children. [laughter]

JH: Do you know how your parents met?

AS: They met in New York. Why? I don't know, because I have a lot of relatives in New York. They would know more about it. ... Last year, I had a party out here and it was the 105th anniversary of my parents' marriage, yes. I had all my nephews and nieces over, but they had ten children. I'm the last of the ten [still living].

SI: What was the age range between the ten children? How much older was your oldest sibling?

AS: Well, let's see, my oldest one was Joe. He got killed by a railroad [train]. He worked for the railroad. At that time, I was only about sixteen. I'm about third from the last of the ten. It's seven boys and three sisters.

SI: Were your parents born in this country or did they immigrate to the United States?

AS: My mother was born in this country. I don't know, my father could have been born in Italy, but he never talked Italian. He always talked English. ...

SI: Your father was an Italian-American.

AS: Yes, yes.

SI: Was your mother also?

AS: ... She was Irish. My mother was Irish. My father was Italian.

JH: Why did your family settle in Bound Brook?

AS: ... Well, they sold the business in Plainfield and they moved to Bound Brook and they worked for two people who were in the stores, you know, candy stores. My father worked for two people in Bound Brook, one, Fred Thompson, another, Bob (Chewzeski?). He died, must have been about in his eighties, maybe eighty-six. My mother died [when] she was about seventy-eight.

SI: Did your father make candy in a candy shop or did he make candy to sell to candy shops?

AS: Well, in New York, he worked for Huyler's, who was, you know, a big candy man, candy store, at that time. In Plainfield, he sold the candy, ice cream, stuff like that; in Bound Brook, the same way. He just waited on people, which [was] convenient for me, because I went to St. Joseph's School and I would just walk down the street, get all the ice cream and candy I wanted. [laughter]

JH: Were your parents ever involved in any clubs or organizations?

AS: Well, my mother belonged to the Rosary Society. She was a Catholic. My father didn't. I, at one time, belonged to the Sons of Italy in Bound Brook and, of course, I belong to about six veteran's organizations. I was national commander of the fellows on Bataan and Corregidor [American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor], during the Truman Administration. So, that's why I got most of the letters from President Truman. I was over his house, outside, but he was sick at the time. So, I told the guard, "Don't bother mentioning my name, because he'd probably invite me in," because I had letters from him since '48, when I ran the first convention in Atlantic City. ...

SI: Was that his home in Missouri or Washington, DC?

AS: In Missouri, his home in Missouri. ... At that time, you know, they didn't give any pensions to Presidents. His house could [have] used a painting; the fence could, too. ... He [only] had one guard, across the street. He'd come over and I told him who I was, but I said, "Don't bother the President, because he'll probably want to invite me in." He was sick. The following year, he died and we happened to have a convention ... out in Kansas City, so, we went to ... visit the grave and put a wreath on it. ... He was one of the few Presidents you could get an answer off of. [laughter] The only other one was ... Nixon, because him and I were over in the Philippines for the twenty-fifth anniversary. So, we're good friends, but the rest of them, I couldn't get any letters from. ...

SI: What was Bound Brook like when you were a child? What was your neighborhood like?

AS: Oh, very good. It was during the Depression. I lived on a dead-end street. We knew everybody and we had a field down there. We could go swimming, go ice-skating. We built a ball field and one of the families gave us a place to stay in the evening, so, we built a clubhouse.

So, I had a very good time. At that time, we'd go ice-skating, sleigh riding, you know. It was very good, a very happy group there. We had a lot of children, [played] leapfrog, you know, shoot marbles. They don't do any of that today, [laughter] but it was very happy. I had a very good life. Bound Brook was a very good place to be during the Depression, because you could walk all over. My mother was Irish and she did the cooking. If I wanted an Italian meal, [I would] go up to (West End?). They would make their own spaghetti and stuff. Another place, ... we had a Polish section there, you [could] get your stuffed cabbage, you know, and you knew everybody in town. ... Bound Brook is altogether different now. It's a rough town. If I walked around today, I'd probably get mugged. [laughter]

SI: Were your friends a mixture of Italian, Polish and Irish kids?

AS: Yes, they had everything there, you know, yes, and the children were safe. They used to walk to the Polish school, which was close to a mile, you know, kids, six, seven years old. They wouldn't be able to do that today. Christ, they'd get picked up.

JH: Were there any African-Americans?

AS: There was only one, behind us, by the name of (Shipley?), a very good family. That was the only black person in Bound Brook at that time. Most of them were in South Bound Brook. They were very friendly. ...

SI: You mentioned that you went to St. Joseph's. Was that a high school?

AS: No, that was a grammar school and I went to Bound Brook High. I was the first in the family to go to high school. The only reason I went was because it was during the Depression and the only job around was making jigsaw puzzles, ten cents an hour, fifty hours a week. My mother said, "You're going to high school." ... Of the ten, there was only three, the last three of us, my younger brother, my other sister, [who] went to high school. All the rest of them either went to grammar school, or even dropped out [of there], and worked, at that time, but that's the only reason I went to high school, is [that] there were no jobs around. So, my mother said, "You're going to high school." ...

SI: Did all ten children live in the household that you grew up in?

AS: Yes, all of them were there. It was a real family and we had a big, big kitchen and my father used to make candy [at] home there and I'd take it in. [When] I was at [Fort] Belvoir, Virginia, I used to make a lot of it, take it over to Belvoir, Virginia, throw it on the bed. Everybody'd scramble for it. [laughter] See, I used to go home every weekend while I was at Belvoir, because I [had] worked for Union Carbide and I had enough money to go home. So, when I was assigned guard duty, I'd pay a guy fifty cents an hour. [laughter] For four hours, that's two dollars, [it] was a lot of money for him; four-eighty-five from Washington, DC, to New Brunswick, because I had the girlfriend, Helen, who later became my wife for fifty-five years. ... I used to stop in New Brunswick and stop over here, and then, I'd go into Bound Brook. At that time, they had busses running.

JH: You said that your other siblings worked during the Depression.

AS: Yes, they all worked.

JH: Where did they work?

AS: Well, [the] one that was killed, my oldest brother, he worked for the railroad. He got killed in 1927 and the other was a mechanic and my sisters worked in (Cause-As?), in Middlesex. It was a candy place. I think they paid, like, twenty-five cents an hour. So, they all went out and got to work. The other brother worked in Rubber Rool, which I don't know if they're still in business. They were in South Bound Brook. ... I went to high school, and then, I took a surveying and mapping course and that's what I was in the service, a surveyor. There was three of us from New Jersey. We got appointed on the boat going over to the Philippines. One was Mike Bachowsky, from Parlin, and the other [one] was up [from] around Bernardsville, [Private Walter M. Thompson]. One got executed, Mike Bachowsky, and the other one died in prison camp, [Thompson]. [PFC Michael P. Bachowsky was executed by the Japanese at Tumauni, Isabela, in the Philippines on September 26, 1942.] I was the only one that came back alive. ...

SI: How did you get involved with surveying?

AS: Involved with the surveying? I worked for a surveyor when I got out of high school. I was working for Douglas Henderson in Bound Brook and they were surveying the whole township. ... One of the surveyors there hired me. So, that's how I got interested in surveying. So, then, I decided to take an ICS [International Correspondence School] course and I was figuring on finishing it when I come back [from the service], but I lost my eyesight. I went into New York. I couldn't see, so, I decided I'd better give it up, but they knew, when I went in the service, you know, that I had been a surveyor. ... On the boat, the three of us, they appointed [us as surveyors]. We built one airfield. About Thanksgiving, the 34th Pursuit [Squadron] came in. First week in December, then, the Japanese flattened them out. MacArthur made the mistake of leaving all the planes on the ground. [laughter] A guy says he was in warning [radar, early warning systems], he was on duty at that time and he said, "MacArthur said, 'Leave all the planes on [the ground],' because ... [Franklin Roosevelt] hadn't declared war on the Japanese," you know. It was stupid, because they didn't declare war on us when they [bombed] Pearl Harbor. They didn't mention it. They just went in and bombed them. So, in fact, they had some B-17s coming in from Hawaii. They were going to bomb Formosa. It was ideal. The Japanese expected it, "Leave all the planes on [the ground]." I was on the 34th Pursuit, [which had] just come in about a week [before]. They [the Japanese] flattened them all out. We shot down one plane. ... One plane was shot down. Me and another fellow ran [over] and, when I saw the guy was dead, I didn't bother, but the [other] fellow went in and he took a German *Luger* from the Japanese, a fellow by the name of Lee, but I think he had to discard it when the surrender came.

SI: When did you graduate from high school?

AS: 1936.

SI: Did you work for the city as a surveyor until you went in the military?

AS: Yes, yes. No, I had been working for Union Carbide, because they paid more. So, the surveying job was mostly a part-time job, during the summer and spring. ... [In] 1939, I went to work at Union Carbide.

SI: What did you do at Union Carbide?

AS: ... I was a lab technician and, when I came back, I was applying [for different jobs]. I couldn't see too good and, of course, it was a shift job. At that time, you're only guaranteed the same job back and I went back to [Union Carbide], but, then, there was an opening on days to train people. So, they were hiring a lot of new people. So, they gave me the job of training them, including fellows in college. They used to hire a lot of guys from college, during the summer. So, that's where I finished. I put in about thirty-five years and I retired [in] 1975, which was a good year to retire, because my wife wound up with cancer in '76. So, I was able to take care of her until she died, but I had a good life. I couldn't really complain. Of course, I was, [for] three-and-a-half years, a POW. You know, it was kind of rough. [After] the fall of Bataan [and the] Death March, I was so weak, ... I walked ten feet, I'd keep falling down, [then, walk] another ten feet. In fact, I never even slept in the barracks. It's a good thing I didn't, because, I found out later, they were burying them alive. It was the Japanese; they had so many of them dying, a hundred a day, Americans, and Filipinos [were dying at] about somewhere [between] three or four hundred [a day]. So, I slept outside all the time, until, one day, they said, "Well, we're going to open up a new place there, Cabanatuan. You want to go? Walk to the car." I got to the car. They threw me in. The next thing [you know], I wound up in Cabanatuan. I just happened to be in the Zero Ward there. That was the worst ward there was and Dr. [Samuel M.] Bloom, from New York, came over to see me. He says, "Could you walk over to my part?" I said, "Sure." This was right next to the morgue, you know. So, next thing you know, he says, "You've got diphtheria." [laughter] So, I had to go in the diphtheria ward and the diphtheria ward was real bad. I mean, there was no medicine, everybody choking to death. [We] had one guy ... [who] went out of his mind. He used to go in (magnets, you know, with his mess kit?), drink the water. One day, he escaped and, at that time, they had you in groups of tens. If one escaped, they shoot the other nine. So, I would have been shot. The only thing [was], he didn't get out of the main gate. He just got out of [where] we were quarantined, [which] had a fence around us. If he [had] gotten out of the main gate, why, then, they would have shot us. So, finally, I got out of there, wound up in the blind ward. After I got out of the blind ward, I wound up in the barracks, where a guy did escape, and I had just come into the barracks. I thought, "Uh-oh, they're going to pick me," but, evidently, they had already picked the other nine. So, they took them out and made them dig their own graves and wanted everybody to watch them, but I wouldn't watch them. I walked away from it. So, I was pretty lucky all the way.

SI: Before you entered the service, did you know anything about what was happening in Europe or Asia? Did you follow the news?

AS: Well, my mother was [following the news], you know. Of course, Roosevelt said, "No draftees will be sent overseas." She says, "Don't believe him." [laughter] Actually, ... I volunteered for a fellow in Bound Brook whose mother was ill. ... They called me up in Union Carbide and I knew the fellow, so, I said, "Well, I was going in anyway, I'll go in a little early,"

[laughter] but they wanted me to go in before Memorial Day. I says, "I have two tickets and a girlfriend I'm going to take to see *Arsenic and Old Lace*," original [run, starring] Boris Karloff. So, I went in June the 4th. So, I went in [for] training at [Fort] Dix and, from there, I went over to Belvoir, Virginia, training. ... They gave us winter clothes, sent us out to California. The next thing we know, we're on a boat to the Philippines. [laughter] So, I got there in October and the job was nice, I mean, the surveyor [duty]. It was hot weather. You only worked a half a day, but, six weeks later, the war broke out and we're busy all the time. [Under the] Japanese, I worked on the airfield. We were working twelve hours a day there, seven days a week. That was a rough job.

JH: You enlisted because of a friend of yours.

AS: What's that?

JH: Why did you enlist?

AS: Why did I enlist early? Well, they asked me and I knew the fellow, so, I figured, "Well, maybe," this was in June, "I'll probably, maybe, get drafted in July." So, I figured, "Go in and get my year in." See, most of us figured on being in one year and get out, so, the sooner you get in, [the better]. I love the shore. I wanted to go into the Signal Corps. The Signal Corps was located in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. I love the shore. I liked to swim a lot, but the clerk in Bound Brook, E. Bella, he said, "Well, you're a surveyor. Why don't you get in the Engineers?" [laughter] So, that's why I wind up in the Engineers [and went to Fort Belvoir].

SI: How well did you adapt from civilian life to military life?

AS: I didn't care for the military myself. I mean, see, ideally, you're going to be drafted anyway, so, I figured, "Well, I'll get in [now]." So, I didn't care for the military. That's why I got out in a hurry. Other people stayed in, but not me; I was glad to get out. [laughter] I didn't get out until '46, because, when I came back, I was still blind, and I was up in Valley Forge, in the blind ward. I was among people that [had] lost legs and eyes. Christ, I was even with a fellow from Plainfield; he lost both eyes and both legs. When my mother came up to see me, and my girlfriend, I was in one piece. Internally, I wasn't too good, but ... at least they saw me in one piece, when I introduced them to the fellow from Plainfield. His wife was only about twenty-two years old. She used to come over, pick us up [on the] weekend and we'd go home on the weekend, and then, she'd pick me up in Bound Brook. ... It was terrible to see all those people with arms and legs missing. I spent about fourteen months over there, and then, I finally got discharged from Fort Dix, in 1946, but I've been pretty lucky, you know. I've been in fairly good health all my life. My wife was sicker than me. I mean, I was eighty-nine just the other day. ... The reason I have her, [my aide, is, I was] in the hospital, St. Peter's, had an infection, gall bladder. They said, "You've got to go in assisted living or you've got to have somebody staying with you all the time." Well, I've got a nice home here, I've got a nice yard and everything's convenient, got a drugstore, the bank, two eating places. So, her sister applied for the job from Poland, Theresa. In other words, I had to have somebody with me all the time. So, [I was] lucky to get her sister, because of her. Her sister felt bad. She was weeping, [did not want to] leave me alone and she asked her sister [to take over]. Her sister said [that] she'll take

care of me until she comes back. So, it makes it convenient. I keep busy. I belong to the Walking Club for the township; every Thursday, [I] go walking, and, Friday, I go shopping with them. ...

SI: How long have you lived in this house?

AS: Sixty years, yes. That's why I don't like to leave it, [laughter] a lot of happy memories here, and I've got a nice yard, nice backyard there. Summertime, I could sit out there in the hottest weather. ... Going into assisted living would be entirely different and I've got a good [aide]. She takes good care of me. See, I have to go walking every day. So, even though I'm blind, I'm able to walk.

SI: You look like you are in good shape.

AS: Oh, yes, fairly good shape, oh, yes, yes. When I'm a hundred, I'm going to see if I could go in the marathon in New York. [laughter] I'd be in better shape than when I started on the Bataan Death March, because I was on the frontline all the while, in [the] advanced guard, and I walked all day and all night. I was so weak coming back. I had a machine gun in one hand, a Springfield rifle [in the other]; I threw the machine gun away. When I got in the camp, somebody stole my bed. I fell asleep. The next thing [I know], the commanding officer pokes me, "General King [Major General Edward P. King, Jr.] surrendered Bataan." So, the next day, I get out on the line there. I was so weak. All I had was a mess kit and a canteen and I look across from me and there's a Filipino, no legs, on crutches. I said, "Boy, I'm in good shape, compared to that guy," but he didn't get too far, because he fell down. A truck ran over him. ... They [the Japanese] had bayonets. If you got close to them, they'd hit you with the bayonet. There was a lot of killing on the Death March, because it lasted about eight or nine days. It was sixty-five miles, no food or water. Some of the Filipinos wanted to feed you; why, the Japanese shot them. A lot of them would hold up two fingers; they'd cut their fingers right off. So, they were really rough.

SI: Why were they holding up two fingers?

AS: Victory, victory fingers, you put two fingers in for victory. So, the Japanese would just cut off the two fingers. Anybody wanted to give [us] food, they'd shoot them.

SI: In training, were you trained for combat situations or was it all engineering training?

AS: No. Well, mostly, we'd done walking a lot, but not too much of what was going to happen in the wartime. Today, I guess they do, but, you know, a lot of fellows there, we didn't know how we should act when we were POWs. We didn't have, really, any traitors. There was only about, maybe, two or three that were turned in as traitors. One of them was in charge of the boat of us going over to the Philippines, and one of the fellows was passing down some fish to me and the other fellows and he [the traitor] turned him in and he [the POW passing the fish] got beat up. The guy comes down in [the hold] and he says, "I'll kill him [the traitor] when I get out in California." [laughter] So, when I was commander [of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor], he wrote to me and wanted to know where he was and I didn't know, but I had a

convention down in ... San Antonio and the guy [a convention attendee] says, "You want to know where Major (Ferris?) is?" He says, "I saw him in a bar. He got broken down to a buck sergeant," but this guy was out to kill him as soon as he got to California. [laughter] There was one Japanese that [had] come over [to the United States] and the guy spotted him. He was one of the guards and he [the former POW] had his hands around his throat, ready to kill him. His wife hollered, and then, they got help, but he didn't wind up killing him. ... A lot of the Japanese were over [here]. They spoke pretty good English. They were educated over in California, some of them.

JH: How did your family feel about you enlisting?

AS: My mother was really sore. She didn't want me to enlist, you know. She was really disturbed about it. [She] said, "Wait until you're drafted," but I knew the fellow and his mother was in the hospital at the time. You know, I figured, "Go in and get it over with." Most of us figured [that], you know, a lot of us. You go in there and [you] said, "We're going to get out in a year," and the guy [an officer] said, "A year? You're kidding," you know. He wanted to make you a buck sergeant or something, to train people. "I'm not interested." [laughter] Over in the Philippines, they made a lot of the enlisted men officers. After the war, ... over in Corregidor, you'll find out [that] ... all the officers were in Corregidor, Malinta Tunnel, with all the food, you know. A lot of them were West Point graduates, even. Guys were wondering, "Why did they make all these guys [officers]?" and that's what they were doing. It was a real bad set-up all around. I had a West Point graduate [over me]. I was glad to get rid of him, nice guy, was scared of his shadow, and they wanted to advance me a grade. I said, "What am I supposed to do?" "Guard the commanding officer." I said, "Forget about it. He's supposed to guard me. [laughter] I'm not going over to take that kind of job, forget about it." ... It's a bad set-up all around.

SI: That was when you were in the Philippines.

AS: Yes, when I was in the Philippines, yes.

SI: Was that before or after the war started?

AS: No, this was during the war, during the war, yes. They made assignments. We were wondering why they were asking enlisted men to become officers.

SI: When you first joined the military, did you have a sense that they were not prepared for war?

AS: Well, they told us, ... "Oh, don't worry about the Japanese. We'll rub them out in a few days, no problem." [laughter] They [the American soldiers] got over there to find out we didn't have anything over there. They [the Japanese] rubbed us out [in a] short space of time. You know, it was terrible, and then, they [the Americans] were sending everything over to Europe. We had no medicine over there or anything, no food. It's a bad set-up all around.

SI: The supplies and arms were inadequate.

AS: Well, the supplies were nowhere near adequate. Well, [for] one thing, once we lost all the planes, that was a rough time and the Japanese could do anything they want, you know. They're able to land on the airfields, take over everything, you know. I mean, MacArthur really goofed. He got a Congressional Medal of Honor for that. A lot of times, a lot of the reporters wonder how he got the Congressional Medal of Honor. ... A lot of these guys that were in the Air Force, they had political connections, I guess, because quite a few of them got the Medal of Honor and things they shouldn't deserve.

SI: How did you view MacArthur before the fall of Bataan?

AS: I didn't know too much about him, because ... I've never actually seen him, even. I mean, he rode by in a truck, but I didn't get a good look at him. So, I didn't know much about MacArthur; it was only when the fellow told me he was on duty that night and he [MacArthur] ordered all the planes to stay [grounded]. So, then, after the surrender, when I came back, I found [out] more about it, because all the guys were teed off, because they knew what happened. ... They were in the Air Force and they blame MacArthur for a lot of their problems, "We could have held ... out for maybe a year or so, instead of five months. It would have been a lot easier for us." Of course, we had a good air force over there and the ones that came in from Hawaii, you know, were flying in, but, as soon as they got on the ground, [MacArthur ordered], "Stay there." So, it was a real bad mess.

JH: Do you remember where you were on December 7, 1941?

AS: When the Pearl Harbor [attack] was? Over there, it was December the 8th and I was a Catholic. We were ready to go to church and they told us that they bombed Pearl Harbor. So, they cancelled the church services. So, from then on, we were on the go until we wind up in Bataan, keep [getting] forced back all the time.

SI: Around that time, were you expecting some sort of a move or attack by the Japanese?

AS: ... Well, actually, we had a feeling ... something was wrong when we got on the boat, because they wouldn't let us off in Pearl Harbor, see. We figured, "[We will] at least get off in Pearl Harbor for a visit," but it was all on the quiet side, you know. So, they sent us right ... into the Philippines. Nobody was allowed off. Some of the guys knew. ... Out in California, they went AWOL, but they picked them up and shipped them out later. I remember, one guy from my outfit, he put it on the board, you know, his mother sent him a piece, "No draftees will be sent overseas." [laughter] He puts it on the board. He got a written reprimand on it. [laughter] ...

SI: Which engineering battalion did you serve with?

AS: Oh, 803rd Engineers, ... Aviation Engineers. It was called the ... Air Corps then, and then, they changed it to the Air Force. So, I actually retired from the Air Force. I didn't even have a chance, you know; I was only there six weeks, just finished basic training. So, here you go, three-and-a-half years, you couldn't even increase in grade once you were captured. It wasn't

until after you got back that you increased in grade, but I didn't want to stay in the service any longer. Once I got out of the hospital, got discharged, that was enough for me. [laughter]

JH: Do you remember any propaganda during your training pertaining to how they portrayed the Japanese and Germans?

AS: You mean after the war?

JH: No, before.

AS: Oh, before. Well, I didn't know much about either one. I knew there was a war over in Europe, see, but the Japanese, I didn't know anything about [them], until Pearl Harbor, when they bombed Pearl Harbor. ... That's when a lot of people volunteered to go in the service.

SI: You mentioned that, in the six weeks before the war started, you worked half-days.

AS: Oh, yes, because it was very hot over there, so, you worked until about noontime. So, it was nice.

SI: What did you do on an average day?

AS: Well, I was a surveyor, so, we were laying out an airfield. So, we'd have to cut all the brush down and stuff like that. ... It was quite a job there, but there were three of us from Jersey. It was a good job, surveying.

SI: Did the three of you work together or individually?

AS: No, we had to work together, plus, we had an instrument. One guy had an instrument, two guys on the rods, you know.

SI: Were the men who cleared and leveled the field American soldiers or Filipino civilians?

AS: The ones that helped us? That was all 803rd Engineers. It was a special outfit for construction only. They had carpenters, heavy-duty men. ... Probably, a lot of them were people [who had] worked on the farms, you know, that they got [to work] with the ground and all, engineers, electricians. It was one of the more specialized outfits. We were all specialists.

SI: Had they all worked in the trades before the war?

AS: Yes, they all worked in the special trades, like, carpenters were carpenters, electricians were electricians and the heavy-duty men, they worked on farms ... with that heavy equipment we had over there. Yes, we had a good outfit. ... See, I was in the B Company and ... my group was the one that worked on the airfield and we were supposed to be sent over to Corregidor, but what happened there [was], ... the A Company, in combat, they lost about a third of their people, either killed or injured. So, Corregidor was a safer place for them. So, they sent them over to Corregidor and I wind up staying on Bataan.

SI: Was the airfield that you were building on Bataan?

AS: Yes, I was on Bataan when the surrender came, yes.

SI: How soon after December 8th were you actually attacked?

AS: Well, let's see, ... we were attacked December the 8th. We were attacked. That's the reason why we couldn't even go to church. See, we heard about Pearl Harbor and, over there, of course, it was December the 8th, instead of the 7th.

SI: Was there an attack in your area?

AS: Oh, yes, they attacked our camp. In other words, they attacked all the airfields and all the planes were left on the ground.

SI: How did you react to the first attack, the first time you were under fire? How did you feel?

AS: Well, I felt very bad, you know, ... you know what I mean? Of course, I always thought I'd get back. I figured God would answer my mother's prayers, so [that] I would get back, but, you know, none of us wanted to surrender. In fact, ... if we had been told in advance, we wouldn't have surrendered. A lot of us would try to join the guerillas, and a lot of them did, but, you know, I'd just come in, [was] lying down, the next thing [you know], he pokes you, he says, "You've got to surrender everything." All I had was a Springfield rifle. He says, "Well, I'll put in a statement and charge it against you." [laughter] I said, "It's ridiculous," you know, getting rid of one [rifle] that the Japanese wouldn't get, but he never got back anyway. ... Most of my officers, I don't think, [survived]. There's only one, ... I think, that made it back. The rest of them got sunk, because [the American] forces come through and bombed, sunk all the ships. MacArthur knew about it, but he says, "Bomb them anyway." So, in '44, I was on the last ship that made it through. I got into Formosa. I got bombed out of Formosa and wound up in Japan.

SI: Do you remember the name of the ship?

AS: Yes, it's in that book there, if you look in the book there, on October 4th. ...

SI: Do you remember the first time that you were actually on-the-line and firing? How was your deployment as fighting units arranged?

AS: Well, see, normally, we were supposed to be engineers, but, actually, we were in combat, but we didn't get combat pay for it, see. In other words, everybody was in combat, actually, when the war broke out, because the Japanese were attacking everybody. Yes, there's [the] one; maybe in the index you'll see [the] hell ships.

SI: I am looking at the section on the hell ships.

AS: Yes, that page there, there's one in October, the *Maru*, I forget which one. A lot of the guys remember everything. [laughter] After the war, I don't want to remember all that stuff. You see the list of hell ships?

SI: Yes.

AS: [The] Smothers Brothers' [father] was on one of those, following me, that got sunk twice. He was on a rough ship. They were cutting each other up and sucking the blood out of their body, because there was no water. Everybody hollering for, "Water, water, water;" see the list of them, the one on October 4th or so, the one that went to Formosa.

SI: The *Haro Maru*?

AS: Yes, yes, all the others got sunk.

SI: It arrived on October 25, 1944.

AS: Yes, yes. ...

JH: What was your attitude towards your officers during combat?

AS: About officers? Some of them weren't too bright. [laughter] What happened in Company A, from our Engineers, the officer decided to charge the Japanese and they were all camouflaged up in trees and they saw they were all trapped and that's how they got injured and killed. ... Some of them didn't have too much experience in combat and they got trapped. Of course, these Japanese, if you spot them, you were able to kill them, but, I mean, they were camouflaged so well that ... one-third of them were injured.

JH: While you were in combat, what was your attitude towards the home front?

AS: ... Well, you know, they were always saying, "We're going to get help," but we never got help, you know. We figured they were sending everything over to Europe, including the medicine and all that stuff that we could have used, food, although, over in Corregidor, they had a lot of food, but the officers were eating it all, in Malinta Tunnel. They could have shipped some over to us. We were on half-rations, even under the Americans. The last good food I ate was when I left the States. [laughter] No, we were in bad shape to start off with. That's why we lost so many on the March. When we got to the first camp there, Americans were dying [at about] a hundred a day and Filipinos, like, three to five-hundred a day, because they were much weaker than us; like, me, I was still in good shape. I had six weeks [in] before the war and I used to do a lot of walking.

SI: Did you have much contact with the Filipino forces or the locals?

AS: When I first got over there, I did, but, after that, I didn't. They kept the Filipinos in a separate group. We had Australians, you know, and stuff like that. They were pretty good, but the hell ships were really terrible. Everybody hollering for, "Water, water, water."

SI: By that time, you had been a prisoner for about two years.

AS: Three-and-a-half years, all together.

SI: However, it was two years before you went on the hell ship.

AS: Yes, yes. I was on the hell ship, two hell ships, one from [the] Philippines to Formosa [and one from] Formosa to Japan. ... See, in the Philippines, they bombed all the ones after me. They bombed us. That's where I lost ... my hearing in the left [ear]. ... It was so loud that I have no hearing in my right ear whatsoever. It's dead. ... When I got over to Formosa, you get on the ship there, there was a Red Cross [ship] right next to us. ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

AS: ... I think it was like February the 12th or so, and it was cold. I used to go swimming for mussels. Boy, they would take half of them. I'd put a sack around my neck, go underwater, dig them up and the Japanese would come over and take half of them and the other ones were cooked up for the rest of the fellows, who would sun-dry them. ... The last day, I got beat up pretty bad. That's the one that was in *The Home News*. I was out planting the rice. Well, I never bothered to plant it. I buried the rice. I buried the seeds and, on the way back, I fell down, held up the detail. So, I get in, they call me up, the next thing [I know], I get beaten up in the face. I didn't even bother to eat, I was so weak. The next day, I wake up, ... I didn't have to be called out. See, it was the 15th [of August]. The war was over. So, then, a couple of days later, two officers come in and one of them was in charge of me as an engineer, a fellow by the name of Thomas, [from] Selma, Alabama. He come in, says, "You want to work for me?" [laughter] I said, "I'll be glad to." So, I worked for them until I got shipped back over to the Philippines. From the Philippines, I went out to California, in the hospital [ship], and, from there, I was [on] a hospital plane, took me ... to Valley Forge.

SI: Did you suspect that the war was drawing to a close? Did you have any inkling?

AS: ... When they dropped the second bomb, that's when they could tell. Japanese were figuring, if they [the Allies] invaded Tokyo, they were going to put us in the front lines, all the Americans, so [that] we'd get killed first, but that second one is the one that they decided to surrender [after], but, every day, we were bombed. We'd go out to work, the next thing [you know], we'd be bombed and the Japanese would hit these shelters. They'd get buried alive. They forced us back into the camps. Yes, some of them were so young. I remember one detail I was on, working on the airfield, and these kids come in, Christ, they were about ten or twelve years old and, on my birthday, ... our forces bombed the airfield I was on and these kids were crying, you know. I said, "Just lay down. You'll be all right," young kids, twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. They used everybody.

JH: You mentioned the atomic bomb. Were you aware of the dropping of the bombs?

AS: We heard about the first one and, [for] the second one, I was in Kobe at the time. The [Allied] commander, when he came in to take over the camp, he told us, "Don't leave, because some places aren't safe to go." Some of them wanted to take off right away. So, they kept dropping ... fifty-five-gallon drums of food. One of them hit the barracks and killed quite a few fellows and some fellows died from overeating, because it was, like, Spam and stuff like that. They ate too much at one time. They died, because we weren't used to eating that much food. So, then, I got into Letterman [General Hospital] in California. I liked to ice-skate, so, I went ice-skating [laughter] and, from there, I went to Valley Forge.

SI: You mentioned that you believed that you would make it home, that God would answer your mother's prayers.

AS: Yes, yes.

SI: Did you always feel that way?

AS: Yes, that's right, I always felt that, yes, always felt that.

SI: Did you see men around you suffering from despair?

AS: Well, a lot of them gave up on the trip [back home], because they said we wouldn't be welcomed home, which we weren't. You know, they covered everything up. I mean, they never did come out with the truth, all the tortures and heads cutting off and all that stuff, same way with the nurses. That's the reason they all [were discharged]. They discharged them right away, ninety-nine of them. They all made it back. Then, you had these fellows committing suicide. A wife told me that her husband just drove the car up on the railroad [tracks] and shut off the keys [engine]. ... The train come up and smashed him all to pieces and the death rate was, like, twenty percent when we first come back and that's the reason. ... They said, "[There is] nothing wrong with you." So, I gave up the VA [Veterans Administration]. I went to a doctor in Plainfield. [laughter] Even now, I don't bother [with the VA]. Well, I worked up in Lyons [the Lyons VA Hospital] for about fifteen years, because they had called me up. They had a POW committee there. So, they knew I was commander, so, I said okay. So, I worked up there, helping them up there with the claims for the veterans, for about fifteen years, but ... I knew all the doctors, so, I was treated pretty good. So, I didn't have any problem there. I had a good time up there.

SI: Was it a matter of the VA not recognizing post-traumatic stress disorder as a legitimate health problem?

AS: Yes, well, most of us that were under there had post-traumatic stress, but a lot of us had beriberi. We had swelling in the feet. In other words, you could put a thumb down [on] your feet there and you could put a basketball there, or a baseball there, and [it would] stay there. It was a lack of Vitamin A, thiamine, Vitamin B-1. I passed out on our fortieth anniversary. My wife thought I [had] died. It was up on Bataan Day, [which] they had over at Lyons every year, and I was up at the head table. All of a sudden, I got through the speech, I sit down, start sweating, took off my tie and all and passed out, [laughter] and that's what they found out. It

was beriberi heart disease, lack of B-1, thiamine, and [I was] just lucky, of course. I got good help, because the medical doctor who was in charge of the VA in Washington, he was the principal speaker. So, I had a lot of help. I was in the hospital [for] a couple of weeks, and then, I got released. Since then, I've been in pretty good shape. Every once in a while, it comes back on me and I never know when. That's why I wound up in the hospital. I fell down. I was walking one day and, all of a sudden, I passed out and they said it was a gall bladder infection. Now, I've got to keep out of the hospital, too expensive, [laughter] sent me a bill for about one hundred-and-twenty thousand and the operation is ninety-five thousand. I said, "Christ, what kind of an operation is that, for ninety-five thousand dollars? For crying out loud, that's a lot of money, Jesus," but, today, I'm back to normal. I have a good helper there. She does the cooking and cleaning the house, washing the clothes and all that stuff. Her sister was very good, too. She wept. She didn't want to leave me alone, ... but her mother got ill. I said, "You'd better go back. Mother's first." So, her mother's doing pretty good now. So, she may come back. She was worried, who's going to take her place? Then, she volunteered to call her sister. So, that made it easy. So, she goes with me, walking. The township [senior group], we go walking on Thursdays, she's with me, go shopping on Friday and we went shopping over in Princeton Shopping Center, last Saturday. She went with me. So, it's good.

SI: Can we go back and talk a little bit about the surrender, when you were first captured?

AS: Yes. ...

SI: Where were you held before the March?

AS: Right in the camp.

SI: In the same camp that had been your camp.

AS: Yes, right, my camp, and we got outside the camp to go on the Death March, ... about sixty-two-and-a-half miles. A lot of them say sixty-five, but, actually, I think it's like 105 kilometers, about sixty-two-and-a-half miles, but no food. It was hot. We were used to being under the shade all the time, under cover. It was over a hundred and that's why a lot of them died. The fellow next to me there, he was [walking] for about two days, and then, he dropped. "Carry on, men," the truck ran over him, but a lot of them were bayoneted, a lot of them [were] shot. I had two fellows from my outfit, I think they cut off their heads. One ... belonged to ... John Kennedy's [district] when he was a Congressman. So, the mother wrote to me and all I could find out [was] that his head was cut off, but I'm not going to [tell her that]. I was supposed to see John Kennedy, you know, but I'm not going to tell him. I mean, that's up to the government to decide, be better just to keep it quiet, because they paid us; like, I appeared before a Congressional committee, during the Truman Administration, on inhumane and forced labor. They were paying a dollar-and-a-half a day for every day you were a POW. So, this mother wanted to find out when he died, but that's the only information I could find. ... The other one was up in Pittsburgh, from my outfit. He was a hot-headed German, [laughter] strong as a bull, used to pick up a Connemara pony, lift him right off the ground, but he was hot-headed. [laughter] He cursed Roosevelt up and down. Well, if the Japanese gave him any trouble, he would probably go to kill them, but they killed him in the meantime, because, otherwise, he

would have made it, because he was very strong, but a lot of fellows gave up on the March and they even tried to talk me [into it] and said, "You wouldn't be welcome when you got home." I said, "I know my family would be welcome [make me welcome], my girlfriend would." So, that's all I was interested in, you know, but he was right, you know. We got back, they covered everything up. They saw a lot of money in Japan. So, it wasn't until ... about thirty years later, when they signed the POW Bill, that we ... got any help off the government. By that time, quite a few of them were already dead. 1975, they passed the POW Bill.

JH: Was rank adhered to among the prisoners in the camps?

AS: Well, the rank, ... I was only a private see, so, I got paid, like, five cents a day for working, [laughter] where an officer might have been getting a dollar a day. They respected the doctors. Doctors, they took care of, and nurses. They must have taken care of them pretty good. [For] the rest of them, it was altogether different. All the doctors made it back, chaplains, most of them made it back, except the ones who went down on the boats. That's where the Smothers Brothers lost their father, on that boat. He got on two ships. He died in Korea, in April 1945. They got thrown off the air, you know. They criticized the Vietnam War, during the Nixon Administration, but they sued. ... They won the case.

SI: Had you seen any of the Japanese brutality before the March, in your camp, perhaps?

AS: ... No, we didn't. Well, even General King didn't expect it that bad. See, when he surrendered, he says, "We'll be treated [well]?" They agreed, "Yes, yes," but he didn't expect that. Otherwise, he probably would have never surrendered. ... General King was a very good general. I knew him good, because he was the commander two years before me. I knew him very good. I didn't know [General Jonathan] Wainwright. In fact, the Channel 4 that ran a documentary ... on Bataan, they called us in, they wanted to know about General Wainwright, and the other fellow with me was on Corregidor. He didn't know much about him and I didn't [either]. So, then, after I gave her my story, they decided to run the story. So, they had a documentary for one hour, on a Sunday night, and we held a meeting down in Colonial Virginia. We had an executive board meeting and they gave them their story, ... and then, they went over to the Philippines and took some pictures, because we had just come back to the Philippines, [in] '67. Then, after everything was all ready, it was, like you, [they] wanted proof. I had to go into New York and they gave me a preview of it all and I had to sign that everything they said was true. See, that's the way it is today, I guess, on all those [shows], *60 Minutes*, the same way.

SI: How long was the March, in terms of days?

AS: The March was supposed to have been 105 kilometers, about sixty-two-and-a-half miles, some people say sixty-five, and it took, maybe, eight or ten days or so, depending on ... what shape you were in. I was lucky. I was ready to fall down and die, because ... I was tired to start off with, you know. Then, all of a sudden, I got weak and I fell down. I said, "God, I can't go any further," and I didn't have to. [laughter] It was dark and they didn't want us to go in the dark and I picked up enough strength [from] resting. Then, when I got in the camp, of course, I wind up on one detail and this Mike Bachowsky says, "You'd better go over for medication." I

go over there and pass out. [That is] how I wind up in the Zero Ward. They called it St. Peter's Ward. Maybe one out of a hundred got out of there alive. That was terrible.

SI: That was Camp O'Donnell.

AS: Camp O'Donnell, yes. The first fellow I seen was a fellow from Asbury Park. He used to play football in college, but he was underneath the barracks, he was so bad. He was one of the first ones I'd seen die, but, then, there were several others that died while I was in the hospital there.

SI: Were you given any food at all on the March?

AS: No food at all, no, no water, either. Some people would take sewer water. So, they'd wind up with dysentery. Yes, I lost about fifty pounds at least. Al Vicarow, he must have lost a hundred pounds. He weighed over two hundred pounds. When I saw him, he looked like he was just skin and bones, but he was like a chaplain to us. ... So, he might have been very depressed that he surrendered, but quite a few of them there gave up. They didn't figure it was worthwhile.

SI: About how many hours a day would you walk for on the March?

AS: Well, usually, [you] walked ... until it got dark. Once it got a little dark, they decided they didn't want to take a chance, because some of the guys were escaping any way [they could]. They'd jump over a bridge and stuff like that. So, they figured they'll wait until daytime and get us marching again, but that helped me, [laughter] because I was a goner.

SI: On the March, if one person escaped, were there reprisals against the men left behind, or was that only later?

AS: No, on the March, what happened [was], if you fell down, they'd just ... bayonet you or shoot you or run over [you] with a truck. Some of the fellows got weak at the beginning and, of course, they saw me with nothing [to] carry, so, they asked me [to carry things]. ... I mean, I knew them, I've got to take it, carry it, because a lot of them carried big sacks of everything, clothes and everything. All I had was my mess kit and a canteen and a pair of shorts, that's it, because I was too weak to start off with. You know, just coming off the frontline, I hadn't had any rest at all. So, I walked all day. Coming back, I was lucky. I got rid of my machine gun and I had a sergeant, ... he said, "Senna, tell them people, 'Move faster, move faster.'" It was a Philippine group, run by Americans, and the officer came over to me [and says], "Any more noise out of you, I'll blow your head off." [laughter] [I thought], "Boy, that guy's nasty," but I got in the truck. ... The guy really saved my life, because I probably would have been a lot weaker, ... coming all the way back, because it was a long trip. I think it was from Mount Samat back. Yes, soon as I get up there, he says, "Clean out the barracks." So, I go to the first barracks. I see a young girl nursing a newborn baby. I said, "Japanese are coming." Then, I got out and I heard a shot and I crawled back. Next thing you know, we didn't even have time to eat, we're heading back to camp. Then, we found out that General King surrendered Bataan. ... I had a lot of luck getting through. I used to walk off jobs a lot of the time.

SI: Walk off from the details that the Japanese would put you on?

AS: Once in a while, he caught me, that beady-eyed; yes, I had a fellow, (Connie Matsu?). I was a surveyor and I was working on ditches and I was slanting them down. He liked the work I'd do, but, every day, he was pushing me, "More, more." I said, "I'm going back on the trucks." So, on the trucks, I used to get on the first line and, somehow, I wound up in charge. So, none of them would move until I said, "Yes." So, they were glad. ... The group next to me might have fifteen loads going down and I wouldn't have even started yet. Connie Matsu knew I was the leader, so, he takes me off to work for him. So, I just walked off the job, went back on the truck. He'd come looking for me. I'd send a guy down. He didn't like the way he was doing it. Next day, he brings me an apple. Of course, we used to argue back and forth. You talk like a dog, you know; [I could] tell by the voice that the guy's angry. He knew I was angry. [laughter] The next time there, I'm on another job with him and he's lighting some dynamite. I couldn't see. The guy next to me says, "He's lighting some dynamite. Let's climb up a tree." We climb up a tree. He sees me up there. He picks up a stone, didn't hit me, but it hit the other guy in the forehead. There was one day there, it was so hot, I didn't even pull out a load and there's a big stoop who was in charge. Christ, if he hit me once, he would have killed me; [I was] lucky I got away with it. ...

SI: Where and when did the stories you have been telling us take place?

AS: ... When we were, like, working on an airfield.

SI: Was this before the war started?

AS: No, this was when we were POW, ... working on an airfield, and we used to have these small trucks you'd load and we'd load them up and run them down to fill it in and they had a lot of guys, like, from Mexico. They were pretty strong. They'd run out a lot of loads, you know. They'd say, "Well, [if you] get so many loads, you could go home." So, they might run fifteen loads, where I might have five loads. So, I'd have to wait until five-thirty or six-thirty before we could leave.

JH: Were you working on airfields for the entire time you were there?

AS: In the airfield, yes, all the time. I'd see a big hole and we'd work the red shell. I said, "We won't fill it up. We'll put some clay over top, a big piece," and these planes would come in and go into a dip, but they never caught me, never caught me. They'd go into a dip. [laughter] It's the same, Las Pinas Airfield, when I went back in '67. It was the same one. I said, "I hope they filled all those holes in," [laughter] but, now, they've got a new airfield over in the Philippines, but, in '67, they still had the same one I worked on. I had a good time in the Philippines. You know, Nixon was on the same floor. ... He was very friendly. A lot of people wanted to have a picture taken with him. He'd say, "Okay," and we had parties; we'd invite him to them. ... I was hotel chairman, so, I had good connections with the Ambassador. He'd come over every day and we'd go out. Over there, ... they don't have any jury, just the judge. You go to Mass one day there, on one Sunday, you hear shots. Some guy that was going to be accused of something, and I guess they didn't like him, they killed the judge, right in church, while he was

receiving Communion. You go visit some of the judges. They had a bar. They were all back in the back of the place. They had a bar and they offered you a drink. ... They went in for politics a lot. There was always shooting a lot. I met the mayor there and he was running for president against Marcos and, [based on] the fact that I met him, he's telling the press there that the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor are supporting him. So, the notice gets back to General Blumel. He was from Trenton. Him and I are good friends. So, he sent me the letter. So, I had to straighten that out, but [there were] a lot of killings [in the Philippines]. If you're a politician, you had it made, with Marcos, kickbacks. Every business over there had to kickback to him. He had a lot of money. His daughter went to Princeton. He had a home there. He had a place in Europe, down south, all kind of ships he had. They really ripped off the people. ...

SI: How often have you gone back to the Philippines?

AS: Just the twenty-fifth anniversary, we went back. Yes, Mrs. Marcos was a shoe collector, but I met with Marcos, with the Gold Star Mothers, the ones that lost sons that were there, but she never showed all the shoes she had. We thought maybe we'd get a souvenir. She used to go in the Waldorf Astoria and get a lot of shoes in New York. She had a real selection.

SI: How do you think the Filipino people viewed the American Defenders of Corregidor and Bataan?

AS: Oh, they treated us very good; oh, yes, very good. We had some good parties over there when we went back to Bataan. I was the only one able to visit the Vietnam vets, because I had a clearance. Senator [Clifford] Case got me a clearance from the State Department, because they had some virus. They wouldn't allow anybody [in], but I couldn't stay too long, because the bus, we were going over to eat, it was so hot, it wasn't air conditioned. So, I saw, maybe, about fifteen or twenty Vietnam veterans that were in bad shape. I'd [have] liked to stay there all day and visit them. So, I ... had this letter there, I showed it to the guy. So, when they stopped the bus, he called my name off, I was the only one to get off. I was able to get medicine for the sick people, because I had prescriptions from doctors, but I had a real good time there.

JH: I read in one of your previous interviews that President Truman appointed you as National Commander.

AS: Yes. Did you see the letters? I have letters here from Truman.

SI: We saw them.

JH: How did that happen?

AS: Well, see, ... I always invited him to the convention and, of course, that's how he come to answer my letters, since, well, '48. We had the convention in Atlantic City and I wrote to him then and in ... '49, '50, '51. Did you read any of the letters?

SI: We saw the letters from Bob Hope.

AS: Too bad I don't have my sight; I could pick it out right away. There's one, two pages, that he wrote that was printed in the *Newark Star-Ledger*, in fact. They mentioned it in one of my write-ups. Find the one on Truman? He had a couple of them. Is that the one with two pages?

SI: It looks like there might be a second page. It is from 1952.

AS: President Truman's two pages. It's tough to be blind. Is that the write-up?

SI: Yes.

AS: Yes, it's two pages, the one that Truman had, would be suitable for today's speeches, about preparation and all that.

SI: Here it is.

AS: You find it?

SI: Yes, May 1, 1952, two pages, Harry Truman.

AS: Yes, mentioned about preparation and all that stuff there. Yes, that's the one.

SI: Was there a particular reason why you were selected as the National Commander?

AS: Oh, they had the convention in Atlantic City, see, and I was convention chairman and they put my name up, but I turned it down, because the fellow by the name of James McEvoy, from Boston, he wanted to go on another year. So, I took the vice-president's job. So, then, up in Pittsburgh, I was elected Commander, and then, I was reelected down in Philadelphia. So, I served two terms. General King had been [National Commander in] 1950. I was [elected] in '52. ... He was very good. He was the only one that supported us. He appeared on the dollar-a-day ration [committee] before Congress and I appeared on the dollar-fifty-a-day [committee] before a Congressional committee under Truman and it was passed, but Truman, any time I wrote, he always answered me. Then, when we had a convention there, the fellow took us over to where he lived. ... The house was an old house, needed a painting, the fence needed painting and the guards came over and I told him who I was, but I said, "Don't bother telling him, because he's liable to invite me in," I mean, he probably would have, "because he was sick." ... The hotel where we had the convention, they were already meeting, once a month, there to prepare for his death.

JH: Do you still remain active in veterans' organizations?

AS: Yes. I ran, as National Chairman, ... about fifty conventions, until I lost my [sight], and I would still be going, but my wife died. ... So, when she passed away, I couldn't go to anymore, but we had the fiftieth one out in Frisco. That's where we left and I was chairman then. So, I met a lot of people. So, I had to arrange for the convention and I'd get the principal speaker. That's the reason I have [letters from] Bob Hope and all those guys, Ed Sullivan, trying to get help.

SI: How large is the organization?

AS: Well, we used to have about close to four thousand, but, now, it's down [to] about fifteen hundred. We had a convention out in [California]; the largest one we had was out in California, when we had the fiftieth. We had about twelve hundred attend it. ... Texas, we have a lot of members [there]; we used to have big ones down there. They gave me the red carpet treatment when I was down there. When they'd make arrangements, [they would make me] stay on the plane; they announce my name, and then, they pull out the red carpet. All the officials are there to greet me. Atlantic City, we had good conventions. That was before the casinos started. We had, I think, three conventions there. Philadelphia, we had quite a few. Yes, we were pretty close-knit. Executive board meeting, we'd meet out, sometimes, in California, San Diego, ... Minnesota, because the women ... would have to travel with the men, because most of the men weren't in too good of shape. So, they like the big shopping centers. San Antonio, we had a good, very good convention there. We were there during the fiesta, where they have all these horses, you know, parading around. ... They gave us specials seats, had buses for us to go anywhere you want. At that time, they had beer free, free beer, right in the town, but they cut it out, I understand, now, and they gave us a free meal.

SI: Can we ask you a few more questions about Camp O'Donnell?

AS: Yes.

SI: About how long were you in Zero Ward?

AS: I was in there, oh, maybe ... less than two weeks, I think, because, once they mentioned about this Cabanatuan opening up and they said, "Could you walk to the bus?" ... I crawled to there. I couldn't get on the bus. They picked me up and threw me in, because I knew [I had] no chance of living there. These guys, you know, one out of a hundred [survived]. I never slept inside the barracks. Maybe the first night I did, but I had dysentery so bad, I slept near the johns, [which] were outside, see. So, I slept right next to them. Then, I would get up in the morning, ... before the sun come up, and start trying to walk. I walked ten feet, fall down, another ten feet, but the one who saved me was Dr. Bloom, because I had the diphtheria, probably, in O'Donnell. I didn't know it until I got over to the new camp. He was an ears, nose and throat doctor and he walks over to [me], he says, "Could you walk over to us?" I said, "Sure." So, it was right next to the morgue. In case I died, they could just pick me up and put me in the morgue. I used to watch all these people that I knew, that died, coming into the morgue. Now, he says, "You've got diphtheria. You've got to go down [to] the diphtheria ward," no medicine. I was there about five or six, maybe seven days. The next thing you knew, ... the Filipino Red Cross threw over some stuff for diphtheria. ... He gave me a couple of shots there and I was okay, and then, they found out I was blind. So, they wanted me up in the blind ward, but O'Donnell was real rough. Americans were dying at a hundred a day, Filipinos, three to five hundred, ... one big grave to bury you in, terrible.

SI: Were most of the fatalities from disease?

AS: ... Yes, from the disease. They were too weak. There's no water. You line up in order, you know, there might be, Christ, three or four hundred people waiting for water, and then, all of a sudden, they decide to shut it off and only have it on for a certain time. Then, you'd have to come back the next day [for] water. ...

SI: You spent most of your time in captivity in the Philippines in Cabanatuan.

AS: In Cabanatuan, yes. I was in the hospital in Cabanatuan. I was in the hospital for a couple of years, and then, they sent me out on a detail to the airfield, Las Pinas. That was in about '43, I think. So, I worked there for quite a while, but it was a rough detail. A lot of [the] time [that] I didn't feel good, I would walk off the job and hide someplace.

SI: Did they put you on that detail because they knew about your background?

AS: They might have known. ... I don't know if he knew about the [surveying] background, because he picks me up, takes me out for that special job, you know. [Due to] the fact that I was a surveyor, you know, I was able to smooth everything down for him, but, then, every day, we'd argue and argue and I said, "Listen, I'm going back on [the truck]." He didn't like me on the car, anyway, because I was the leader, you know. We were always the last ones to pull out and he had a fellow there that talked pretty good Japanese and he says, "Connie Matsu doesn't like the idea [that] we're not turning out enough load." I said, "He hasn't said a word to me." ... The only ones I knew [were], "(Yasumay?)," or, "Banyo," was, "Take a break," or, "Go to the bathroom," was, "Banyo," or, "Yasumay," was, "Take a break." That's the only [Japanese I learned], but he would learn all the Japanese, and so, the guy, Connie Matsu, would always tell him, "[They are] not turning up enough." He was complaining. So, he figured he couldn't change me, so, he pulled me off the job to work for him.

SI: What rank was Connie Matsu?

AS: ... Connie Matsu? I don't know what kind of rank; I couldn't understand their rank. He was a supervisor. ...

SI: Was he an officer?

AS: Yes, supervisor. The other guy, (Watanabe?), he could speak very good English. There's quite a few like that.

SI: Were the conditions a little better when you were on the work detail?

AS: ... Well, the conditions were always bad. ... Yes, they were always bad, yes. Being a Catholic, we used to say the Rosary, a couple of guys, and we'd hide behind the barracks, you know. All of a sudden, they'd break it up [and we would] go somewhere else.

SI: They did not let you pray.

AS: ... No, they wouldn't let you. In the Philippines, we did. When I was in there, I used to go to church every morning. There were two priests that said Mass before we went out to work. ... Midnight Mass I had, the 1st of '44, but, otherwise, there was none in any of the camps.

SI: What else did the Japanese forbid you from doing?

AS: Well, that was the main thing there. They didn't want you to pray, and then, they didn't want you to congregate with a group. They broke them up all the time, because they figured you were up to something, but they were a rough bunch. They killed quite a few guys. They cut off their heads, especially on the March. Anybody give them a rough time, they'd take them out and cut their heads off, but the two guys from my outfit that I know, it was probably illness in camp. See, if a guy tried to escape, they caught him and they cut his head off, they killed the other nine. They'd make them dig their own graves and bring them back in and shoot them. One guy hollered, "God Bless America."

JH: When did your vision begin to suffer?

AS: ... I lost my vision five months after Bataan surrendered. I lost it.

JH: How did that occur?

AS: Yes, from malnutrition, from malnutrition, yes. There were quite a few guys that lost it, even worse than me. Some of them were completely blind, even when they come back, come up to Valley Forge. Some of the nurses married some of them, but they ... were blind. ... See, they wouldn't give me any glasses, because they said the malnutrition's from my eyes and glasses wouldn't do me any good. So, I says, "How am I going to go back to work?" So, after about a year, they finally gave it to me, and then, just lucky, I happened to go to a doctor who was a foreign doctor and he starts giving me all these vitamins. I didn't know anything about vitamins. I said, "Why are you giving me all these vitamins?" He said, "Well, you starved for three-and-a-half years. You've got to eat something to help you out." He says, "The vitamins will help you. You need something besides food." So, since then, I've been taking a lot of vitamins for the eyes. So, my eyes, now, are as good as they were when I was a Japanese prisoner. In fact, they're better, because, in prison camp, I couldn't see the flies and the insects and all these guys in the Philippines keep waving and saying, "Senna, can't [you see them]?" I couldn't see them. I ate them. When I come back, they ate my stomach out. I lost about fifty pounds up in Valley Forge. Just lucky, I was at Camp Kilmer; somebody said, "There's a doctor over there, a POW doctor." I go over there and he was my surgeon, in my outfit. So, he knew [what to do]. He gave me some paregoric and some other stuff and he called Valley Forge and told them what was wrong with me. So, they treated me, but I missed the free trip down to Florida. They were giving free trips down to Florida, Miami, for all the POWs. ... I was getting treated in Valley Forge. So, that's when I was figuring I'd get married, go down for our honeymoon, because a lot of them did. It was all free. It was ten days, I think it was.

SI: Can we ask you a few questions about the hell ships?

AS: Yes. Oh, the hell ships, it was terrible, very hot, humid and no water. They wouldn't give you any water. ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

AS: ... If you had to go, they'd pass a bucket around, you know, and then, the one guy would have to put it up front there. A lot of guys were drinking their urine, because they were so thirsty, and, [on the] ship that the Smothers Brothers' [father] was on, they were cutting each other up and sucking the blood out of their body, it was so bad. ... The guy next to me kept hollering, "Water, water, water." So, I said, "Hey, I'll give you a little of mine." He drank the whole canteen and he wound up dying anyway, because, when the [Allied] ships started bombing, it was so loud [that] he went out of his mind, but they were terrible, those ships, no water, no food, hardly. Salty food, they'd give you, so [that] it'd make it worse.

SI: Were you just standing, pressed together, in the hold?

AS: Oh, yes. We couldn't lay out flat. We had to [sit] back-to-back, knees, you know, crumpled up. It was really bad. Yes, quite a few guys died on the ship.

SI: About how many guys were in the hold?

AS: In the hold? I don't know how many they had in the hold. They had quite a few in the hold. Let's see, the one detail I was on, there must have been a couple hundred at a time. A lot of officers got lost on those ships. They were still in the Philippines, and then, they shipped them out at the last moment. It [that history book] mentions, I think, how many, if you look there. It tells you how many were on the ship, twelve hundred and something?

SI: Yes.

AS: Yes, yes. So, that's probably [right]. They loaded them on. You know, [when] you were cramped like that, you couldn't stretch out or anything. So, it was a real bad situation.

SI: Can you tell us about the process of going from Cabanatuan to the hell ship? What did they tell you was going to happen? Did they say anything?

AS: No, no. ... In other words, I was there [the Philippines] for the [Allied] bombing. They bombed the airfield on my birthday. Then, the next day, I was on the ship and there's one guy that was passing the sardines down. We figured we'd have something to eat, but he got turned in by the officer.

SI: At that time, you knew that the Americans were about to invade the Philippines.

AS: ... Yes, well, oh, yes, I knew. They were already bombing the Philippines quite heavily, but they bombed the camp I was in, working on the airfield, on my birthday. ... They already had been invading, so, we knew they were [coming]. See, a lot of them were left over there [in Cabanatuan]. In January, they liberated quite a few Americans that were still in camp. They

called us “Ghost Soldiers.” They have a book named *Ghost Soldiers* [by Hampton Sides]. They were the ones working on the airfields. So, in January, they liberated quite a few. ... A lot of civilians, Filipinos, and Americans that were married or whatever, doctor’s wives, they were in Las Pinas. The doctor would skin a cat, but their wives would never eat the cat. [laughter] We ate everything, dogs, cats. Dog’d go through the camp, ... hit him over the head, cook him up. Some guys even ate rats. I had a fellow, (Dobey Hall?); kill a rat, I’d give it to him. He’d cook it up and eat it, but it’s quite an experience.

SI: You have described a lot of brutality from the Japanese.

AS: Oh, yes, a lot of brutality, yes. They used to have beatings every day, especially on the airfield.

SI: Did you ever encounter any Japanese guards that you would say were fair or treated you okay, or were they all like that?

AS: Well, most of them were like that. Every once in a while, ... one wasn’t too bad, but they were taught [to hate us], you know. In fact, they had figured on killing all of us when the surrender came. They changed their mind, decided to march. Yes, when the Americans come in, ... people that were in hospitals, they killed them all, bayoneted them. They even ate Americans. I have a book there where it shows ... all the atrocities they committed. They would go into a hospital and kill all the people that were in bed. Some people, they ate. How would we know if they were feeding us ... people or not, because we just ate? We don’t know what it was.

SI: Did you become desensitized to all of the people dying around you and all of the brutality?

AS: Yes.

SI: After seeing so many people get killed and die, did you not feel it after a while?

AS: ... Oh, yes, you begin to feel it, but I never had any hatred. They were surprised, when I came up to Valley Forge, [that] I didn’t show any hatred. I said, “That doesn’t solve the problem.” Even in the newspaper, I had put it, that I had no hatred. ... That’s what causes the wars, too much hate. *The Home News* had it, a couple of other papers. I had one guy call, “I hate the Japanese. I hate the Japs.” They wanted to set up for a television program. I says, “Forget about it.” It was on the fiftieth anniversary. I was on with Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt, on Channel 4. He lost his son in Vietnam. He was the one that introduced Agent Orange, you know, and his son died from it. [Editor’s Note: Admiral Zumwalt’s son, Elmo, Jr., passed away of Agent Orange-related cancer in 1988.] He was still fighting the VA, but I don’t know how he made out. ... His son died, but he said he didn’t hold it against him. His son didn’t; he says, “I don’t hold it against you.” ... This was during the Nixon Administration.

SI: The ship went to Formosa. You were on Formosa for a while.

AS: Yes, yes.

SI: How long were you on Formosa?

AS: Let's see, I think I was on [the ship to Formosa] about, maybe, seventeen days on that one, yes, and the one to Japan, I forget how many days. A book, one time, used to have the date. ...

SI: Were you there for a few months?

AS: Yes. ... I think it was in January [that] I left. I got there [to Japan] about February the 12th, cold, very cold, it was.

SI: Were you always in the camp outside of Kobe?

AS: ... Yes, yes. In other words, we had [been] working [as] stevedores, you know, loading boxcars [for] these people that were leaving to go out in the country somewhere, and their boxcars were so low that I wrecked most of the furniture. I'd get in, ... I used to have to get on my knees to get in to them. So, I used to get near the door and just flip it all in. [laughter] A lot of it was in bad shape.

SI: Did the camp there have a name?

AS: They had a name, but I couldn't keep track of any of that stuff. Some guys did, they copied everything [down], but I was in a daze most of the time.

SI: Was it a large camp? Were there hundreds or thousands of people there?

AS: No, there wasn't too many. It might have been, oh, maybe a hundred, that I was in. They didn't keep you in too large a group. Cabanatuan is different; they had, you know, quite a few. ... On the hell ships, they had quite a few in there.

JH: How long were you on the hell ships?

AS: How long? I was probably on, maybe, fifty days, altogether, between the two of them, yes.

SI: Were the conditions the same on both?

AS: Yes, both of them were real bad. The one from the Philippines was worse than the one ... [to] Japan, because, I think, maybe, the weather might have been a little bit cooler. The Philippines was hot, you know, when we left there.

SI: Did the Allies fire upon you on both ships?

AS: ... Just the Americans, I think, in the Philippines, I think, when MacArthur came back. He killed about twenty thousand Filipinos. The Filipinos didn't like MacArthur, killed a lot of children. Yes, I think it's about twenty thousand civilians he killed, and he knew we were POWs, because he could ... see us getting on the boat, you know; he had the planes overhead. He said, "Sink them." That's why a lot of the guys were teed off.

SI: In the camps or elsewhere, what would you talk about with the men around you?

AS: Well, we'd talk about what we were going to eat when we get back home, you know. ... Some of them were married, so, they were looking forward to seeing their wife, but a lot of us figured we'd never get back to collect Social Security, that's for sure. [laughter] I'd seen, when we get back, [that] we'd be in bad shape and, probably, fifty percent of them were right, because the death rate was real high.

SI: Did you all try to keep each other's spirits up?

AS: Oh, yes, yes. Sometimes, we had a little entertainment there [that] they'd give us, while we were in the Philippines.

SI: Like what?

AS: Well, some of the fellows had a little band, you know, that were musicians. They set up their own band, with a little music, and they had a couple of good singers. They had a guy from New Jersey who was a pretty good singer, but I don't think he ever made it back. Then, there were some comedians that were comedians professionally. In fact, they played in some of the nightclubs when they came back, but that was in the Philippines. Once you got out in the other places, there was nothing. Las Pinas had nothing, and some of the other camps. It was just in the main camp in the Philippines where they had services. They let the priest have Mass and the ministers. They were more humane, but, on details, they had some rough ones.

JH: While you were a POW, did your family know that you were alive?

AS: No, they didn't know [I was] alive until about '44. I had one card that I was able to send home and I just said, "I'm fine." I have the card somewhere around. ... It's one postcard, and then, when I got free, I wind up on a plane; Leon Gerofsky, from Somerville, I got on his [ship]. I got on and I said, "Anybody around from Bound Brook?" They said, "The commander's from Somerville." So, they said, "Leon Gerofsky." So, he came down to see me and he wired home that I was alive. They called home. Of course, at that time, my parents didn't have a telephone. They brought her down to the police station. So, he talked to her over in the police station and said I was alive, but I was only on one day. What happened [was], they had a lot of Javanese on there. Javanese, they stole all the silverware. They used to take sugar, pour it over the butter and eat it like that. The next day, I wind up on a different ship, but that was the only notice I got, until I got in the Philippines. My mother used to go down to the Red Cross every day, looking for information, no information, but it wasn't until '44 [that they found out].

SI: Were you ever able to get any information from the outside world?

AS: Some fellows were, some of them, but not in the camp I was. Some of them had some kind of connections, I don't know if they had a radio or something that was hidden, that were able to get in contact.

SI: On August 15, 1945, that is when you were ...

AS: Free, yes.

SI: However, Americans troops did not arrive until days, even a week, later.

AS: Yes, well, yes, it was about, maybe, five or six days later. They come in, I thought they were captured and they said, "No, the war is over." One of them was (Johnson?), Captain Johnson, and Captain Thomas. Thomas is the one I worked for as a surveyor, ... but I didn't tell him I was beat up, because I forgot about it. I mean, I could have picked the guy out and they would have held him for war crimes, because a lot of them were held for war crimes.

SI: In the interim between August 15th and when the Americans showed up, did the prisoners run the camp?

AS: Yes. ... Nobody bothered us. They were dropping food, fifty-five-gallon drums, you know, and it would go in the ground. We'd get it and open it up, with Spam and a lot of the other stuff, you know. In fact, I met one of the fellows, a couple of years ago, in Bound Brook, when they had the [John] Basilone Parade. He said he was in one of the ships that used to drop those food [drums].

SI: How long were you in Japan before you were sent to the Philippines?

AS: Oh, maybe fifteen or twenty days, maybe, at the most. ... I was put on this ship.

SI: Did the American medical forces recognize right away that they had to feed you slowly, that they could not just feed you anything? Did they know how to treat POWs, basically?

AS: ... No medical support whatsoever after we got free. Even when we got on the ship, they just put us on a ship and shipped us into the Philippines. Then, we got examined, over there, but, up until that time, they didn't have anybody on there. They might have, you know, if somebody got sick, real sick. I don't know. ... Leon Gerofsky was the guy that got the first [load of POWs], when I saw him. Then, when he came back, I invited him to the wedding. We were good friends after that. He used to be over here in New Brunswick, on assignments. He hated to retire. I think he had to retire, then, at sixty-five.

SI: Where were you taken in the Philippines?

AS: Into Manila, yes, one of the hospitals there, and then, from there, we went on a ship into California, Letterman Hospital there, and then, a train took us into Valley Forge. They used to feed us about six ... meals a day [laughter] at Valley Forge, in order to fatten us up, and the people there were pretty nice. We used to go out to parties. They used to come in, take us out to parties and this fellow from Plainfield was so light, I used to pick him up like a baby, carry him [up] two flights of stairs. Somebody'd take the wheelchair, but it was sad, you know, and then, his wife, twenty-two years old, first name was Joyce. He didn't live too long after he got out of

the hospital, but Valley Forge was a good place. Yes, we got treated good there. A lot of rich people around there used to come out, threw some real good parties.

SI: Did your vision improve much?

AS: ... At Valley Forge? not too much. It wasn't until after I got out, because they didn't give me anything for it, no vitamins, I mean, even though they had vitamins for eyes at that time. It wasn't until I got out. ... Since then, I've checked up on it. I have a lot of medical journals. That's why all those books in there are all medical journals and I'm always keeping up-to-date on everything, Health Science Institute, Johns Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic and all those. I keep up on the latest information on the eyes. So, I see. Well, you can notice there, I walk pretty good. You know, I have side vision, but it's the front [that is the problem]. See, your face is cloudy. That's why I call all women beautiful. [laughter] When I first went blind there, when I come back, I used to go to the conventions and [I would said], "Boy, you look better than you did last year." Then, my wife told them, "Well, he's blind now." This was seventeen years ago. ... See, it came back pretty good, to where I could ... see pretty good, but, then, it hit me, back in '88, I think, or so. It came back to where it was cloudy, but all these women, you know, I'd see them, I could see their lines on their faces and their gray hair, you know, and, the following year, I couldn't see it. I said, "Boy, you look [better], ... big improvement over last year," [laughter] and I'd tell my wife, but I had a lot of fun at conventions, went all over. I used to be chairman of most of them. I was out in Vegas; they'd give me a room for six hundred dollars a day. [laughter] I'd be in the room that Bob Hope was in, in Washington, DC. One of the best ones was the one that Truman had up in Pittsburgh. It was a long, long hallway and it had about four bedrooms and down at the end, where he was, he had a mirror, [so] that he could see who was coming in the door, [laughter] and, if he didn't like him, he'd wave to the guy, "Not available." ...

JH: When you got back, did you ever use the GI Bill?

AS: No, I didn't use the GI Bill, no. No, I couldn't. I went into New York. I wanted to continue with the engineering course, see, but, when it comes to close work, I couldn't see. A couple of times, I fell asleep on the bus ride, my eyes were so tired, or on the train. I'd wind up in Trenton somewhere. So, then, I had to give it up. Even when I got over in Union Carbide, I was looking for a day job, because I had to go back on shifts, and shift work, ... I was out working on analytical balances and all that stuff, it was close work, but, then, the job opened up on days. I wasn't supposed to get the job. Somebody else was supposed to get it. They had seniority on me, but the guy I worked for, the fellow in charge, graduated [from] MIT and he wanted me, he didn't want the other fellow. So, he won out. Later on, they changed it in the contract. If you lost money, why, you didn't have to take the job, because the day job didn't pay as much and, my wife, I was figuring on raising a family. Then, she ... thought she was pregnant, ... [but she] had a tumor. So, she had to get it operated [on], couldn't have any children. So, we put in for adoption. In the meantime, a woman down in South Bound Brook, that I worked with her husband, she thought she was going to die. She had three children. She wanted somebody to take care of them. So, we signed a contract with the lawyer; in case she died, we'd take care of the children, because they were young, but she lived and had another one. Then, my wife's sister had twins, out in California, living in Los Angeles. She was choking to

death, thought she had cancer of the throat. She brings them over here for two more. Then, my wife had a cousin up in Tuckahoe, New York. She died at, I think she was about forty years old, ... had a four-year-old baby. She was in the hospital, ... so that she wanted us to take care of that child. So, we took care of her until she graduated from college. ... We had the ceramic studio downstairs. If you want to see it, you could. ... Anything else you want to know? ...

SI: When did you get married?

AS: I got married in '46. Yes, I've been married for fifty-five years, had a nice marriage, a very good marriage.

SI: Sounds like it.

AS: Yes, my wife died [in] 2001, yes, fifty-five years. So, we've done a lot of traveling. I always wanted to marry a poor girl and she was poor. St. Peter's used to give her the dresses. I gave her a box of candy, boy. [laughter] I never figured; you know, she fell in love with me. ... I never bothered with women. All I know is baseball games, football games, always men. So, I was going in the service and I liked to go into New York. So, I used to go into New York to see shows, the Paramount, twenty-five cents, you see all these top entertainers, Frank Sinatra and all, you know. So, I used to take a woman in from Bound Brook, different ones. ... I was over in near New Brunswick, had a union meeting, and she looked through a peephole, ... her and another girl, and she points, "See that guy? That's my guy," [laughter] and she invites me up. I didn't know she was going to fall in love with me. She decided to fall in love with me. [laughter] So, that's when it happened. So, she waited for me. ... I told her to get married. When I come back, she was waiting for me. So, we got married and I had a very good life. So, I can't really kick [it].

JH: Did you ever talk about your experiences in the war with the kids you raised?

AS: Not too many, mostly, like, my wife, I never told her the real story, even when I had the Channel 4 [documentary]. I told them, "I don't want mine published, shown," because ... she would have been in tears if I had to tell her all the problems I had. So, I kept it [private], but I went down to Colonial Virginia and had an executive board meeting and told them, you know. They interviewed quite a few there, and then, went over to the Philippines. So, they had a good documentary.

JH: You mentioned that you had ten siblings. Did any of your siblings also go into the service?

AS: ... What's that?

SI: Your brothers and sisters.

AS: Oh, no, no. Well, ... there was four in the family, from my family, that went to the war, yes, but all of us made it back.

SI: Did you have any other problems readjusting to civilian life?

AS: No, not once I got back. Of course, I had a lot of friends in Bound Brook, you know. They had a five-mile parade for me, from Somerville all the way into Bound Brook. All the kids were allowed a day off from school to watch in the afternoon. I went up to the high school, made a speech. So, they always invite me, all the time, down there, ... when they have Memorial Day parades. ... Automatically, I'll be there. Basilone, I've been there for about four or five years now. They have the sign on both cars. ... When you go down in the cellar, you'll see the sign, "Survivor of Bataan Death March." They all ... have the name S-E-N-A on it, see, because the guy that made it out was Italian. He's only familiar with S-E-N-A, see, because most of them are Sena, S-E-N-A. I have a dentist in the township that called the other day. ... When I was on the phone, I'd tell him, "You want the rich Sena, spelled S-E-N-A, [laughter] ... on Easton Avenue," but, at the convention, we have a good group, always the same group, always. We get to know them all and, of course, my wife would ... [play] the penny ante they played, these women. I'd have to get a special room for her and all these women would be telling her the trouble they have with their husbands, you know, and they'd ask Helen, "How is Al?" Every time they asked her, she said, "He's okay, no problems," because she gets too upset, ... but, as a rule, I was always in pretty good shape. You know, I ran nearly fifty conventions, so, I used to do a lot of traveling.

SI: Why did you become so involved in and dedicated to the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor?

AS: ... Well, I enjoy meeting people, see, for one thing and I enjoy helping them and, in fact, I was on a national registry for ... helping veterans. So, that's why, I got joy [out of it], because most of them depended on me a lot. So, I used to file claims for them and all. I was national service officer, approved by the government. ... Well, see, what happened [was], they were ready to fold up. I didn't know about it. They didn't have any money. They called me up to take the convention to Atlantic City. So, when I get down there, it was on a strike. Walter Winchell was the guy who gave us a plug and a guy comes in and says he wants to buy a corsage for all the women and a drink for all the men. So, I said, "I didn't know him from Adam," but one of the chaplains knew him. He was from Pittsburgh, in the oil business. So, he said, "Okay, you attend." ... The following year, we had it up in Pittsburgh and they didn't have any money. ... I put up five hundred dollars. What happened [was], this guy, O.D. Robinson, he donates a thousand dollars, and then, General Blumel, he was in Trenton. He had a fellow there that was pretty rich, in real estate, and he donated another thousand, because we used to do all the traveling for nothing. We never charged the organization, [since they] didn't have any money. I never put in a cent. I traveled with them [for] fifty years. Now, we're in pretty good shape, financially. We were able to pay a guy for traveling, but, at that time, they would have folded up if I didn't take it to Atlantic City, because ... we were up in Boston, where they organized [the group], but they had some money. They spent too much. They spent it all and wasted it. So, they hired a girl for twenty dollars a week, had to lay her off, had an office up in Boston, had to close that up, on (Bolston?) Street. So, once I got elected commander, ... then, I used to have to arrange the conventions and get the principal speakers. That's where I got all those signatures from and it was a good bunch. My wife enjoyed it. We'd get an executive board meeting, ... [they would] decide to meet out in San Diego or San Antonio; they liked the big shopping center in Minnesota. So, we were very close-knit.

SI: There was a lot of outreach to veterans, helping people out.

AS: Oh, yes, yes, still pretty close to them. We have a newspaper, the *Quan*, they call it. I used to be publisher of it. When I was commander, I had to be publisher of the *Quan*, had to do everything, arrange for the next convention and all, but it's a different set-up now. They've got certain people working on a convention sites committee.

JH: In retrospect, what is your best memory of the war?

AS: ... Best memory was when the surrender came. [laughter] When I saw those two guys, I thought they were captured. They were coming into our camp. He says, "The war is over." I said, "Boy." [laughter] For me, it was the two Catholic holidays, holy days, I mean, because December the 8th [is the] Feast of the Immaculate Conception and August 15th [is the] the Feast of the Assumption. So, when they came in there, he says, "The Japanese surrendered." We didn't get any help from any officers, outside of General King, who appeared on the dollar-a-day [committee] and I appeared on the dollar-and-a-half-a-day. The rest of them, the doctors, you couldn't get any help [from them]. I mean, they knew that all the guys were in bad shape. They didn't bother to testify. I was only a private, you know. [laughter] I come back and General MacArthur got back [at] the same time and he got fired ... [by] Truman and I wrote to him and I told him, "We're going to appear before a Congressional committee. If you want to go, I'll buy out. I won't bother." I figured if he ever appeared, why, they would automatically [pass it]. They wouldn't have any trouble. No, we had to convince him, but he says, "No." So, I had to appear.

SI: Can you explain that a little further, the dollar-fifty-a-day ration?

AS: Right.

SI: What were you trying to do?

AS: Well, that was ... because they didn't feed us. So, they figured that we should have got a dollar-and-a-half a day, you know, like ...

SI: Like war reparations?

AS: Yes, for food, yes.

SI: You were trying to get Congress to demand, from the Japanese, a dollar-fifty-a-day per man.

AS: ... Right, right, Japanese and Germans, because it included [prisoners of the] Germans, also, yes.

SI: You mentioned earlier that the government covered things up, or at least did not want to bring up the treatment of POWs.

AS: Yes. In other words, the dollar-a-day was for rations and the other day [ration] was for working, a dollar-and-a-half a day. Inhumane and forced labor, they called it. Yes, [we] had a good Congressman there, Congressman [Lindley Garrison] Beckworth, [Sr.], from Texas, and, of course, there were a lot of Texans there, so that he had no problems okaying it. He came in handy. There was a schoolteacher that married one of our fellows and, shortly after, he died. They said it wasn't service-connected. So, I got a hold of Senator Beckworth, or Congressman, and the next thing you know, the woman, ... she's thanking me. I says, "He's the one. He probably was the one that used the influence, because he knew what happened." So, he gave them testimony of all what happened.

SI: Do you think that the government has gotten better at recognizing what you went through?

AS: No, they covered it up. They covered up all the atrocities, even today. Yes, took us thirty years to get something; by that time, you know, a lot of them were dead or they were in bad shape. There was a lot of money to be made in Japan, I guess, they figured. The Nixon Administration lived on Japanese money. That's where they got all their money from, the Japanese. That's what broke the Japanese. [laughter] They bought a lot of American stuff, ... a lot of hotels in Hawaii, went under. Christ, they bought one of the colleges, I think, out here in the United States, a lot of golf courses, that just sent them broke. They're still in bad shape.

SI: Have you ever been to Japan in your travels?

AS: Well, just on a stopover. On the way back from the Philippines, we landed in Japan.

SI: Have you ever had any contact with any Japanese veteran's organizations?

AS: No, I haven't run into any, no.

SI: Is there anything else that you would like to put on the record today?

AS: No. The thing I enjoy now is [to] be able to take a shower, wash your teeth, you know, stuff like that, you know, and just getting out, get some fresh air, where I'm free to do everything I want. Before, you know, I used to take a shower with a canteen of water. You had to drink with it and pour it over your head. That's the way you took a shower, unless it rained and you get out in the rain. ...

SI: If there is nothing else, we will end for today.

AS: I don't know if you want any of these write-ups or not.

SI: We will take a look at them after we turn the tape off.

AS: Okay, if you want to take them with you.

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Reviewed by James Herrera 11/25/05
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 12/29/05
Reviewed by Albert J. Senna 3/3/06