

Fort Hunt Oral History
George Washington Memorial Parkway, Headquarters
Interview with Oliver Aymar
by Brandon Bies, Matthew Virta and Vincent Santucci
January 3, 2008

BRANDON BIES: Today is Thursday, January 3, 2008. This is an interview as part of the Fort Hunt [00:09] Oral History Project. We are here interviewing Mr. Oliver Aymar. We're actually here at park headquarters, George Washington Memorial Parkway. Again, this is Mr. Oliver Aymar from Reno, Nevada. He's also here with his son Ed. This is National Park Service Historian Brandon Bies, as well as Cultural Resource Manager Matthew Virta, and on the phone joining us we have Chief Ranger Vincent Santucci. So with that, Mr. Aymar, as I said a moment ago, and if you wouldn't just mind telling us, if you wouldn't mind, when and where you were born, and just a little bit about growing up and your family growing up.

OLIVER AYMAR: I was born in Auburn, California, and [01:00] we moved to Reno in five years, in 1920, and that's been my home ever since.

BB: And when were you born?

OA: Oh, April 15, 1915.

BB: And did you have any siblings? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

OA: One brother.

BB: Got you. And so your family moved to Reno in --

OA: Well, my grandparents came out to Carson City, which is only 30 miles from Reno, and they settled there in 1862. So we've got a long heritage with Nevada.

BB: Fantastic [02:00]. Could you tell us a little bit about growing up and your schooling? Did you -- I assume you went to and graduated from high school in the Reno area. Sure, no, go right ahead.

OA: Yes. All the schools are gone now. [laughs] But I went to the Orvis Ring School, and then North Side Junior High School, and then Reno High School, and then the University of Nevada.

BB: Okay. You can't do that.

OA: Don't do that.

BB: [inaudible] If you -- if you can't avoid it, it's okay.

OA: Oh, okay.

BB: But yeah, but the microphone won't pick it up. Do you -- what year did you graduate from high school?

OA: From high school, 1933. From the university, 1937.

BB: What did you study at the university [03:00]?

OA: Economics.

BB: Okay.

OA: That was the middle of the Depression [03:06] and nobody was interested in economics. [laughs] So I went back and took some accounting lessons.

BB: Had you studied any foreign languages or anything like that?

OA: Just the usual. I studied French, but the usual scholarly stuff. It wasn't -- I couldn't really speak French.

BB: So you were really only proficient in English? You weren't proficient in any other languages or anything?

OA: No, no.

BB: Okay. So you graduated in 1937 with a bachelor's in economics, and what did you do with that? Did you get a job with it? Were you able to find a job at that point?

OA: Oh, yes [04:00]. Well, I was rather fortunate. My father was on the railroad. He was a -- what would you --

ED AYMAR: A telegrapher.

OA: Well, he was a -- he was the agent there in Reno, and he put me to work pretty early. As I went along, I was building up hours, and so whenever I wanted a job, I could bump somebody below me, take it on. But after university, I had a job with the state -- well, it didn't last too long, six months or so, something like that. So I'd go back and forth between the railroad and other [05:00] jobs. The way I got mixed up with the State Department, I was in a town called Winnemucca in Nevada. It's right -- pretty much in the middle of Nevada, and I was working for the railroad then. I saw this little article in a magazine, something about the State Department wants recruits and this sort of thing, so, well, give it a shot. So I sent in the little coupon, and, oh, three or four months later, one of my friends in Reno said, "What's going on here? The FBI was here asking [06:00] questions about you. What the heck have you done now?" And it wasn't long after that I got a letter, said "Report to Washington, D.C." So I came out, and there were two others, that we went through the State Department thing. It was kind of scholarly, learning all about the State Department, which took about two months, something like that.

BB: What year was this?

OA: This was 1940.

BB: Okay. So you came to Washington then, and so you were in Washington for a few months for training?

OA: A couple of months at the State Department, and then overseas [07:00]. We had to go by boat. There weren't any airlines running into China at that time, and it took around a

week to Hawaii, two weeks to Japan, another week to Shanghai, another week to Hong Kong, and then waiting in Hong Kong for an airplane. They were pretty scarce. So then on to Chungking [07:37].

BB: Real quick, if you don't mind me stopping you there, when you came to Washington for this job with the State Department, were you -- did you request a particular position or were you just assigned?

OA: No, I just saw -- the coupon just said "State Department," so I just sent that in, and they were the ones that [08:00] got me into the code stuff.

BB: And that was -- and the code training, that was by the State Department.

OA: Yes, we had to take the code thing and learn how they did it and the various ones, the most popular, not popular, but the most important secret, down to just ordinary stuff.

BB: Were these codes to be sent over a radio transmission or something, or were these written codes for letters?

OA: No, this was -- they were sent out by, I guess, telegraphy in those days, or just hit the telegraph thing.

BB: So when you got to Washington to first start working with the State Department, did you find out right away that you would be going to Asia?

OA: No, no. They kept that [09:00] as a surprise for us. [laughs] We didn't know where we were going to go.

BB: Really? You were just being trained in codes and other --

OA: Yes, it took two months, something like that, and then they got us together, and they said two of us were going to go to Chungking [09:19], which was not the best assignment in the world. People, you know, they thought, God, Chungking [09:27], that's awful. And

the one guy, he was from Texas, drove us crazy with singing “The Eyes of Texas are Upon You.” Anyway, he got Japan. So we all, “Boy, he’s doing good.” But then we went on, and then we finally arrived in Chungking [10:00], which was one of the most ungodly-looking towns in the world by that time.

BB: And for those of us who are a little bit geographically inept, could you explain where in relation to China -- where Chungking [10:17] is?

OA: Chungking is west, almost to the border. If you climb a high hill, you can see the Tibetan mountains.

BB: Oh, really? Fantastic. Okay, got you. So this is really pretty much in the center of China, though? Pretty much. I mean --

OA: Well, yes. That’s where Chiang Kai-shek [10:49] had moved the government at that time to get away from the Japanese, but it didn’t work because the Japanese -- we called it the [11:00] bombing season. From May to September, they would drop bombs on the city for -- almost every day.

BB: In Chungking [11:12]?

OA: Yes. We lived across the Yangtze River [11:17]. It was about an hour, almost half a mile wide there at that place, and we lived on the side that was supposed to be for the other diplomats. All the countries had their embassies there. The Japanese weren’t supposed to bomb them, but every once in a while, they’d make a mistake. [laughs] So we had to dodge a few bombs.

BB: Did you have any apprehensions going [12:00] into this? Did you realize you were essentially going into what was already a war zone?

OA: They told us that, “You’re going to a war zone. If you want to quit now, you can quit

now,” and all that sort of thing, but we never really knew how serious it was. I mean, God, one of those pictures there shows Chungking [12:29] getting bombed, and I was standing there on the porch of this house that we were going to rent, and “Oh, my God, what have I got into?”

[laughter]

Because this bombing thing was no joke.

BB: Those photographs, you can tell.

MATTHEW VIRTÀ: Very dramatic, yes.

BB: Those are pretty intense. Did you have any real sense then -- at this point, this was still 1940 [13:00]?

OA: Yes, oh, yes.

BB: Did you have any real sense that America was ultimately going to be involved in this war?

OA: No, no. America was not even close at that time. Well, we had a lot of conversation, but nothing really serious about America getting into it.

BB: And so what were your duties besides dodging the occasional Japanese bomb? What were your duties when you arrived to Chungking [13:39]?

OA: Mainly the codes. That was my job.

BB: And so who was coming up -- what sorts of messages were you sending?

OA: We'd tell them that Chungking [13:55] was bombed the night before, and [14:00] certain people had arrived at the embassy. There was a lot of these well-known reporters of that age. A lot of them would come to Chungking [14:15] to see what was going on and everything.

EA: One of those pictures actually is very similar to a picture that I think was the front page of

Life magazine, with the bombing in Chungking [14:27]?

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

EA: Your mother used to have a copy of that.

OA: Yes, a big copy.

BB: So you were essentially sending these coded messages, and they ultimately were making it back to the State Department in Washington?

OA: Oh, yes, they'd go right to the State Department.

BB: Got you, got you. Were you responsible for encrypting the messages? For example, would somebody hand you --

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: So someone would hand you a message, and you would have to encode it [15:00]?

OA: Yes, work it out and take it to the ambassador and say, "You got some mail."

BB: And so likewise, so were you both sending and receiving messages?

OA: Yes, yes.

BB: That's really fantastic.

OA: All the flunkies could, more or less, do the code stuff, but I was the one that did most of it.

BB: Okay. So that was your primary responsibility, was working with the telegraph and sending coded messages and encrypt or deciphering messages?

OA: Yes.

BB: Okay, and so how long did this -- well, actually, let me back up. A few more quick questions about Chungking [15:42]. About how people -- how many other Americans, I should say, worked with you there in Chungking [15:49]?

OA: Well, in the embassy, there were about five [16:00] -- what am I going to say about -- that

were really State Department people, I mean that had passed the examinations to become ambassadors and so forth. There were about five of them, and that was about it as far as the people from the United States. We had some local Chinese worked.

BB: So most of your work was in the actual embassy itself?

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: Did you -- were you housed in the embassy?

OA: No, no, it was up to us to, more or less, find our own housing. It was kind of a joke, because there was no housing. But anyway, there was a missionary lady there, and she owned five houses [17:00]. The Germans had one of them, and they were getting kicked out. So we were right there on the door, knocking on the door; "Can we rent your house?" And it was a nice house. So the two of us rented the house and lived there all the time we were in China.

BB: Got you. So how long did this go on for? Was this your routine the entire time you were in China?

OA: Yes, more or less, and it was, oh, terribly hot, humid. It was the only embassy in the whole world where you could wear shorts, it was so hot. And no air conditioning, nothing like that.

BB: Sure. Did you -- I guess at this point you picked up a little bit of Chinese [18:00], then?

OA: Oh, yes, yes. We had servants practically running out our ears, and you'd get so you order them in Chinese and that sort of thing. But to really learn the language, we never sat down and did that. We just picked it up as we went along. We tried to learn it. I had a little teacher that tried to teach me, and two or three times I'd get a teacher, but it didn't really work great.

BB: And so, what happened? Obviously, you left China at some point. How did that -- was that a result -- what happened there?

OA: That was after Pearl Harbor [18:56].

BB: So you were in China up until Pearl Harbor [18:58] was attacked [19:00]?

OA: Well, after Pearl Harbor [19:02] went to -- we were all still doing our work and everything. So I got -- what would you call it -- brave or something. I don't know, but then I wrote a letter of resignation to the ambassador. He called me in, and he said, "You don't have to do this. You can stay right here." I said, "Well, I don't want to go through the war and have my grandkids say I was pushing a pencil while other guys were out." So he kind of laughed and said, "Okay." So I left.

BB: So they maintained that embassy, though?

OA: Oh, yes.

BB: Do you know, was that embassy maintained throughout the entire war?

OA: Oh, yes [20:00], yes, yes, until quite a while after the war.

EA: Tell them about your golf clubs.

OA: Well, I took a set of golf clubs when I went, and everybody was saying, "What are you doing with those golf clubs? You're going to Chungking [20:26]. There's nothing there." And I said, "Well, maybe I can think something up." But I finally yielded, and I left the golf clubs with the -- not the embassy. What the word they call it? The little -- the office under the embassy.

BB: Like a consulate or something?

OA: Consulate. That's it. That's it, yes. So I left the golf clubs there [21:00], put my name on it and everything. When I went back to China, after the war, we went to Indochina, a

little group of us, and I bummed a ride up to Hong Kong [21:21] and walked -- this is five years later -- walked in and said, "You got an extra golf club here?" And he said, "Sure. Right there." And here were the golf clubs.

[laughter]

But somebody had used it because the shoes were gone.

BB: So did you take them back at that point?

OA: Oh, you bet. I was in Indochina at that time, and we -- a bunch of us fixed up a little golf course. We had quite a good game.

BB: So do you still have the golf clubs?

OA: No, I gave them to the guys there when I [22:00] left.

VINCENT SANTUCCI: That's a great story.

BB: So you found out that Pearl Harbor [22:07] had been bombed.

OA: Oh, yes.

BB: Did you immediately resign or a few months later?

OA: No, no. Pearl Harbor [22:16], that was -- in China we're an hour -- a day ahead, and we started getting these messages, and it said "Pearl Harbor [22:32] has been bombed." And we said, "My God, what are they talking about?" And it went on days; these messages kept coming in about this ship was shot; this ship was down, and all this sort of thing, and we didn't know what was going on. And then finally we got the message that Pearl Harbor [22:55] had been attacked, so many ships were [23:00] -- and do what you have to do.

BB: Did that change your operations at all? After all, you were already being bombed by the Japanese.

OA: No, it didn't change much, no. It maybe made things a little more secret and that sort of thing.

BB: I guess at that point maybe the Japanese didn't mind bombing on your side of the river as well.

OA: Well, no, no, they never did.

BB: They still didn't?

OA: No, no. Oh, I didn't tell you. When the Flying Tigers [23:37] -- you know all about them.

BB: Absolutely. The P-40s.

OA: When they came, they were stationed at Kunming [23:48], which is maybe 200 or 300 miles below Chungking [23:54], and we got to know quite a few of them [24:00]. We said, "You want some R&R, come to Chungking [24:03]." So they'd come up, and we'd have a party for them and everything. Where were we?

BB: That's not when you met [Claire] Chennault [24:21], is it?

OA: No. Well, yes, I guess it was. Yes, yes. He came up, but I just met him in the embassy. We didn't have a party for him, but the other guys, we'd have a party for them and everything.

BB: Did they ever fly over or anything?

OA: And when the Flying Tigers [24:49] arrived, there was never another bomb.

BB: Oh, really?

OA: It stopped right there. It was amazing. We never could figure out why [25:00], but that's the way it was. They just stopped bombing.

BB: It must have been pretty effective, then.

OA: There was never a date -- nobody ever set a date and said that the Flying Tigers [25:17] are coming on this date, but the word got out, and we were on one side of the river, and the town was the other side, and it looked like there were a million people there. They were all there, "Hey!" screaming and yelling and shouting, and oh, my God. I said, "God, those are our guys. They're our guys." It was really touching.

BB: Yeah. I'm sure it [26:00] must have felt good. It felt like you probably weren't alone after all. Well, you were -- so it sounds like you were in Chungking [26:11] at the embassy for what, about a year and a half or so?

OA: Two and a half.

BB: Two and a half years?

OA: Two and a half years, yes.

BB: Wow. So when exactly did you finally leave the embassy?

OA: In the spring of -- that would be --

BB: Of '42?

OA: Forty-three.

BB: Oh, '43.

OA: Yeah. Two and a half years, yes.

BB: So you were at the embassy still for at least the first year or so of the war?

OA: No, for about four months, four or five months.

BB: Okay.

OA: Yeah. And then I had to -- well, I took my time getting home.

BB: So how did that work? How did you manage -- you said a little bit about -- I imagine your trip getting home must have been even more difficult than your trip going [27:00].

OA: Well, they were flying over the hump at that time, and so I flew out of there and went to Calcutta, where I had some friends, stayed there a couple of weeks, then went to the Taj Mahal and saw the -- saw that. Then we went to -- went down to -- what was that city in the south of -- where everybody -- where the airplanes took off?

EA: In India?

OA: In India, yes.

BB: New Delhi?

OA: No, I don't think so. But anyway, there was this city where they landed the planes. Planes were running at that time, but you had to bum a ride on one of the planes. So I [28:00] finally got a plane and went across -- well, finally wound up going across Africa and landing there and staying another week, and crossing into South America and staying another week. It took quite a while to get home.

BB: And all this time, you were not yet in the U.S. military? You were still --

OA: No, no, no. Well, I was very naïve about it. I had left the States before the draft or anything, so I didn't even have a draft card or anything. And so I went down to the recruiting office, told my story, and the guy said, "Oh, don't worry. We'll take care of you." [laughs]

BB: You made it [29:00] -- you made it then. Did you end up going back to Reno?

OA: Yes, right -- yeah.

BB: So this whole trip must have taken, what, three, four months?

OA: No, about two months.

MV: So essentially you were just a civilian? Because you said you had resigned from the State Department. So you were on your own, just traveling as a civilian?

OA: Yes, I had to bum a ride on the planes and everything. I was -- as I say, I didn't have a number or anything like that, and this guy said, "Oh, we'll take care of you." Now, there was nobody in Reno. All the guys had left; they'd joined the Army, and away they'd gone, and a lot of them took ROTC. They were [30:00] officers and up, and I had taken ROTC in high school, two years. And if I knew what I was doing, I would have gone to the -- whoever would take you in and get a commission. But I didn't know anything about all that, and I just sat there. I was having a great time. All the guys were gone. [laughs] So I started as a buck private.

BB: Really?

OA: Yeah, worked my way up and finally got to Officer Candidate School [30:57] and got a commission, but I could have had [31:00] it when I first started. But it wasn't all that bad.

BB: So can you tell us just a little bit then about -- you said you enlisted as a private. Did you immediately go to boot camp somewhere then?

OA: Oh, yes.

BB: And where was your boot camp?

OA: Guess where? Iceland [31:21].

BB: You're kidding.

[laughter]

Really?

EA: That wouldn't have been your boot camp. That would have been your first assignment.

Where did you go for training?

BB: For basic training.

OA: Oh, I went to Fresno [31:31], and then -- oh, and they had a code school.

BB: In Fresno [31:44]?

OA: No, this was up in New York. So they sent me up there. I'd told them I could code, and pretty soon I was helping teach. [laughs] Then [32:00] when they sent me out there, I wound up in Iceland [32:05].

BB: Okay, let me interrupt one moment. We're getting right near the end of this first tape, so I'm going to flip it over, and we can pick up again.

(End of Tape 1A)

(Beginning of Tape 1B)

BB: Fantastic. Again, just to cover in a little bit more detail, you went to your basic training in Fresno [00:11]. This was infantry training?

OA: No, it was Air Force [00:16].

BB: Oh, so you were Army Air Corps [00:19]?

OA: It was the Air Corps [00:20] in those days.

BB: So you actually joined the Army Air Corps [00:25] then?

OA: Yes.

BB: Did you have any aspirations of becoming a pilot at some point?

OA: No, I was too old [laughs].

BB: I guess that's right. I guess at this point, you would have been, what, about 28 years old or so, 27, 28. So you went into the Air Corps [00:47], and then did you go straight from Fresno [00:49] to New York, where this code school was?

OA: Yes. We went to the code school and then they sent [01:00] -- then went to Atlantic City. Okay. That was a jumping-off place.

BB: Okay. Now, the code school, do you remember if it had a specific name?

OA: No, I don't.

BB: Do you remember where in New York it was?

OA: It was up -- well, up toward the Canadian border. It was north of New York City, but we could get to New York City without -- we'd take the train and get there in two or three hours and spend a weekend there and that sort of thing.

BB: About how long were you at this code school in New York?

OA: About a month.

BB: Okay. And you said after a short while you were better versed than the instructors?

OA: Well, not better, but I offered to -- there were quite a few [02:00] of these guys all learning this code stuff, and so I told the teacher, I said, "I've had a lot of this stuff, if you need some help." He said, "Sure, I need some help."

MV: Your vast experience paid off. You were able to take over.

OA: So I was just helping out, but I had to move when they said, "Go."

BB: Sure. Was this the same code system you were using at the embassy?

OA: More or less. More or less. It was the same type. Not the same letters and stuff, but same type of stuff.

BB: Sure. So then you went to Atlantic City, you said, just a short little time there.

OA: Yes.

BB: And where did you go from Atlantic City?

OA: Iceland [02:50] [laughs].

BB: Were you still an enlisted man at this point?

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: You hadn't gone to OCS [02:57] yet?

OA: I got one stripe [03:00]. What do they call that?

BB: PFC?

OA: Yes, private, what?

MV: There's a private, and then --

BB: Once you've been in the military for six months and have had no infractions, you automatically became a PFC. So you might have been a PFC at that point.

OA: I guess that was it.

BB: So what was your assignment exactly in Iceland [03:29], of all places, which must have been quite a different experience from --

OA: It was not code work [laughs], but I did get a job in the office, just as kind of a secretary to one of the officers there. And it was great in the summer. We played baseball at midnight, and all that sort of thing, but then September came, and then [04:00] October came, and then the snow came, and the ice came, and the cold weather came, and I thought, "Oh, no. I got to get out of here." So then I put in for Officer Candidate School [04:16].

BB: So you weren't using any of your code skills or anything?

OA: No.

BB: Did you get any rhyme or reason of why on earth the Army Air Corps [04:26], after having invested in coding -- obviously, you were a good code writer, since you were helping teach. Why did they send you to Iceland [04:36]?

OA: They just gave you a job. That was it.

BB: So you were essentially serving as a clerk, then, to an officer?

OA: Yes, just clerical work.

BB: And so then you applied to OCS [04:51]?

OA: Yes, and fortunately, the guy that I was working for, he had something -- he was on the board that picked [05:00] people and everything, and that was -- well, we went to Scotland. We got on a ship that went to Scotland, but we couldn't get off. So we sat out there for about a week, while they made a bunch of ships -- what --

BB: A convoy?

OA: A convoy, yes. They had to get that all ready. It was in the fall, and we said, "Well, we'll be home by Christmas." We'd go along and then the alarm bell would ring, and everybody would scatter all over the place, and then they'd have to gather them again. That took a day or so. They kept going and going and going [06:00], and Christmas came and went. We said, "Well, we'll be home by New Year." New Year's came. Finally, we got into New York. Oh, gosh. There were three of us, I think, assigned to the OCS [06:20], and that was in Florida.

VS: One extreme to the other.

OA: So we got on the train right away, and it was crowded, but we didn't care. We got down to Florida. The first thing we said, "Where is the YMCA?" And some guy said, "Over there." We went over there, and I think we soaked for about four hours [laughs].

BB: And so do you remember when -- would this have been 1944 [06:56]?

OA: Must have been, I think so. No [07:00], maybe not. Well, right in there, '43, '44.

BB: Okay. Do you remember the name of where OCS [07:11] was at? Was this at a university, or was this at an actual --

OA: It was right outside of -- what's the -- Miami. It was right outside of Miami, and there was a big park there, and that's where we'd march and everything.

BB: But was it at a school school, or was it at a military base?

OA: Well, they had taken over a hotel, and it was in the hotel, actually, where we stayed and would meet in the morning and all that sort of thing.

BB: So what sorts of things were you trained in at OCS [07:49]? Anything specific?

OA: Just general stuff.

BB: Just how to be an officer?

OA: Yes. Wasn't any particular skill or anything like that.

BB: Do you remember how long [08:00] was the OCS [08:02] course?

OA: It took four months. Originally, it was three months, and then they moved it up to four months because the war had been going quite a while by that time.

BB: Sure. So you then graduated from OCS [08:20].

OA: Yes.

BB: You hadn't received any further training in code work, right?

OA: No, no, nothing to do with code work, no.

BB: Any intelligence training at all at OCS?

OA: No, not at OCS. But for some reason -- and I never found out why it is -- the Intelligence School [08:42] was at Orlando, and that was my first assignment. I went to the Intelligence School [08:49].

BB: So you graduated as a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps [08:55], and then you immediately went to Orlando for Intelligence School [08:58].

OA: Yes, and that lasted two months, I think [09:00]. Then they -- well, they wanted to give us something to do, I guess, but four of us were sent around the United States to look at war rooms and give advice on how to fix a good war room. It was just a makeshift job. I

don't know. But anyway, we got a lot of traveling. We went everywhere around the United States.

BB: When you say war room, do you mean like a war planning room?

OA: Yes. Most of the air bases, they had a big room. And some -- and they all had -- they were different, and they'd put down -- they'd make copies of [10:00] airplanes going out and --

BB: To keep track of where all the planes were and whatnot?

OA: Yes. They kind of had a contest of who could make the best war room.

BB: To back up real briefly, do you remember specifically what you were trained in, in the Intelligence School [10:28] in Orlando?

OA: Again, that was code work.

BB: More code work?

OA: Yes.

BB: Okay. Anything about escape or evasion or anything, or was it just codes?

OA: No, it wasn't the escape and evasion stuff yet.

BB: Okay. So basically two months of additional code training.

OA: Yes.

BB: Again, some of the same codes you'd been using all along?

OA: Same system, yes.

BB: So you must have felt pretty proficient [11:00] in it.

OA: Yes, by that time.

MV: What time period again? Was this like late '43, '44 or something?

OA: Yes, somewhere in there, yes. Can't remember. I'd say yes, late '43 or early '44,

somewhere like that.

BB: So you then spent a few months traveling around the country with this make-work job.

OA: Yes. We saw every war room in the country.

BB: So you were literally just going from air base to air base around the country?

OA: Yes, we'd bum a ride with one of the pilots and go to the next air base.

BB: But you got to fly from base to base?

OA: Oh, yes. That was better than riding.

BB: Did you ever fly in any fun planes, or was it always transport planes?

OA: No, they were different kinds. [12:00] We even had a couple of women pilots, and they were good. There was one time -- oh, I don't know; we were in a rush or something, and some guy put a parachute on me, and it was dangling around my ankles. I stumbled over to the plane, got in, and we were going over the Southern Mesa desert, I think, and all of a sudden, the engine stopped, and the plane went down like that. He got it started, and up it went, and I was looking at my parachute, trying to figure out, "How the hell am I going to get this on?" And he did that about four times, and every time, he'd turn around and look at me. And I thought [13:00], "Jiminy Christmas, we're going to go down." [laughs] But he finally straightened out and got the engine going and everything, and oh, my god, boy, did I feel relief.

BB: Not so glad that you joined the Army Air Corps [13:20]. Probably wished you were in the Navy or something like that.

OA: That was a good scare, I'll tell you.

MV: I wonder how many people he did that to, if that was his usual routine.

[laughter]

Breaking in someone.

BB: So this went on for a number of months, then, a tour of these bases?

OA: Well, about four months, something like that, we were running around the country looking at war rooms. And then we got, more or less, permanent assignments, and I went to [14:00] -- well, it was right on the Gulf [14:05].

BB: On the Gulf Coast [14:06]?

OA: Yes.

BB: Was it in Mississippi?

OA: No.

BB: Because Keesler is in Mississippi, is an Air Force base.

OA: No, it wasn't that. Whatever it was.

BB: Pensacola was a naval air station.

OA: Maybe that was it. I don't know. But anyway, it was a training thing, and I had to pretend that -- that's where I started to get the pickup stuff, and that was what I did there [15:00]. The guys would go out, and I'd give them a briefing on what to do if the plane went down.

BB: Oh, okay, so this was more getting into this --

OA: Now we're getting into the --

BB: -- the escape and evasion [15:12]?

OA: -- escape and evasion [15:13], yes.

BB: So you were training pilots about escape and evasion [15:21]?

OA: Yes, every time they'd go up, I'd make a little speech, and tell them, "Don't take this road; take this road. Don't take this hill; take that hill," and all that sort of stuff.

BB: But this was all still training here in the United States?

OA: Yes. But then I was not very happy just sitting there doing all this stuff, and the two attachés from the Chungking [16:00] embassy were then at the Pentagon [16:04], and so I wrote them a letter and said, "I'm sitting here doing nothing. Can't you get me over to China, for gosh sake? That's where I ought to be." And it happened that, while I was up giving them a talk one day, there was a little secretary in the main office, and he came over, and he said, "You got a letter from the Pentagon [16:36]!" So the orders to go to the Pentagon [16:43], and that was where I wound up here.

BB: Did you know you were going to end up at P.O. Box 1142 [16:53], or your orders were just to go to the Pentagon [16:55]?

OA: No, just go to the Pentagon [16:58]. I checked in, and they, [17:00] of course, sent me up here.

BB: So a car or something picked you up from the Pentagon [17:08]?

OA: Yes.

BB: So what sort of things do you remember about the post here in Virginia, P.O. Box 1142 [17:17]?

OA: Well, I remember the Iron Gate [17:22], and the guys with the guns and everything standing there.

BB: MPs?

OA: Yes. And I remember the general bawling me out.

BB: Since we've got the tapes going now, if you want to mention that. You said you remember there was a large field out in front of the headquarters there?

OA: Yes, there was kind of like a soccer field or something like that. There weren't stripes or

anything. It was all grass, but it was pretty large. And I was [18:00] hitting some golf balls. I wasn't digging up any grass; I was [unintelligible].

BB: You were replacing your divots?

OA: The general came out, said, "You're not supposed to be out here doing that," or something.

[laughter]

Said, "Okay." Then they started on the escape and evasion [18:27]. In my case, I guess there had to be somebody there that had been in China or something. They were telling -- they'd go into pretty good detail on how to get along with the natives and how to pick somebody who was going to be loyal and all that sort of stuff. And then toward the end [19:00], I guess maybe a month before the thing ended, we went out and around to air bases, and we'd make a speech and tell them about how this is the way you can probably -- if you're alive, you can get away easier if you know where you are and what you're doing and who was down there and all that sort of thing.

BB: So at P.O. Box 1142 [19:38], is that what you knew this post as, the one here in Virginia?

OA: No.

BB: You don't remember what you called it, or did you know it was called Fort Hunt [19:49]?

OA: I didn't know it was called anything.

BB: Did you get the sense that it was a secret intelligence camp?

OA: More or less, but it wasn't [20:00] floating around out there, thinking about it every minute at the time. When they were teaching, they'd say, "You don't want to tell everybody in the world about this," but they didn't make a big deal out of the fact that it was secret.

BB: We've got these couple of books that we've brought out, and they mention MIS-X [20:32]. Did you use that term during the war, M-I-S-X [20:37]?

OA: Not that I know of, no.

BB: That stands for Military Intelligence Service, MIS, and then the X Program is the program that was essentially the Escape and Evasion Program [20:51], and that had programs in Europe. Admittedly, the programs in Europe are much better known than the programs [21:00] in the Pacific theater. We know very little about the programs in the Pacific theater.

OA: Well, I think in the Pacific, there's quite a language difference. It's pretty hard to teach a guy the Chinese language in a few months or anything. Well, I don't know; maybe they thought that if you went down, you were down. I don't know.

BB: Of course, one fairly obvious thing, if you're shot down in Germany, you could still put civilian clothes on, and if nobody talked to you, you could pass as a German.

OA: Yes.

BB: If you were shot down over Japan or in China, there was -- you couldn't just put civilian clothing on. It would still be fairly obvious that you were an American.

OA: When we got out in the field, we had to pick out guys. There was a [22:00] Chinese general that we worked with. He liked Scotch, so I'd buy a bottle of Scotch for him all the time. [laughs] He would pick out people to train. The training wasn't much. All you could do was just tell them, "Get out and get this man out of there," without the Japanese catching up to them. But they'd get a rifle and they'd get grenades. They loved grenades. Scared me to death, the grenades. You'd have to show them how to use the grenades, and we'd pick out a stream or a river or something and throw it in there. I

always really ducked behind a rock when they started throwing [23:00].

[laughter]

BB: So to talk a little bit more in detail about your training here in Virginia, you were being trained, again, in escape and evasion [23:15]. You mentioned that there was somebody -- you figure there must have been somebody there who had previously been in China at some point. Do you remember anything at all, though, about the command structure or about your instructors and what sorts of people were doing the teaching?

OA: No, I don't. I can't -- no, I've forgotten all the names and everything else.

MV: So your knowledge of Fort Hunt [23:45], from what you were saying, it sounded like you just accepted the detail to some military base near the Pentagon [23:52] and D.C. area, and you were just being trained in classroom training.

OA: I don't have any knowledge of calling [24:00] it P.O. Box 1142 [24:07]. I never used that term, I don't think. If I wrote letters, I suppose I had to put it down in return mail or something.

BB: And the term "MIS-X" [24:19] doesn't mean anything to you either?

OA: Not really. Not really.

BB: In the Pacific theater, did you use the term "Air Ground Aid Service [24:31]?"

OA: Yes, AGAS.

BB: AGAS. So that's the program that you belonged to, was AGAS [24:38]?

OA: Yes.

BB: Do you recall at all here at P.O. Box 1142 [24:46] how many other Air Corpsmen were with you? I assume there were others with you being trained. It wasn't just you?

OA: There were [25:00] maybe three or four, something like that. It wasn't a big group at all.

They'd say -- I think they had a book, if I remember right, some kind of a book that we'd look up different pages and things, but I'm not even 100 percent sure of that.

BB: Do you remember specifically any of the information that you were trained in, just anything more specific than just escape and evasion [25:48]? Did you learn, for example, about certain parts of China, or did you already have that information because you'd already lived there?

OA: No, not that I can remember, but [26:00] there was no big deal made about going to China or anything like that.

BB: Did you know that you would be going to China?

OA: Yes, I knew that.

BB: And likewise, the other officers with you --

OA: I think that was on account of the guys from Chungking [26:24], the military attachés, they said, "You're going to China." So I said, "Okay. Let's go."

BB: Because we know -- we've actually interviewed another intelligence personnel, a veteran who went through a similar training to what you did, but he then went to the European theater, and all along, he figured he was going to Europe, just like all along you figured you were going to the Pacific theater.

OA: Well, when we went [27:00], there were two parachute jumpers, crazier than -- goofier than heck. Anyway, they were supposed to drop down by parachute if they had to go down. And then there was a captain. Well, I remember him because -- what?

BB: Oh no, I'm just checking the time on the phone to see. We've got about five more minutes left, and then we'll have to take a little break.

OA: Oh. Well, anyway, this guy, he was afraid of airplanes. The night that we were going to

leave, he came in, so [28:00] drunker than a skunk. [laughs] Oh, he was terrible. So I got him over to the plane, and I sat him down, and I said, "Now, don't move. Close your eyes. Pretend you're asleep or something." And then I had to go and get his bag and all that stuff and get him in there, but after he had his sleep, we got to Casablanca; that's where we stayed one night. By that time, he was sober. Oh, my God, I had a terrible time with him.

BB: So at P.O. Box 1142 [28:50], here in Virginia, you were trained in escape and evasion [28:55]. Did you learn more to do with codes here in Virginia?

OA: No [29:00].

BB: So it was just the information you already had dealing with codes?

OA: Yes.

BB: So you didn't receive any training, specifically any new codes? Do you remember if there was any code work going on at Fort Hunt [29:15]?

OA: If it was, they probably gave us a book and said -- I guess most of us knew all about it anyway, so we could look at the book and work with that, but I don't remember any specific work with codes.

BB: Did you know that, at the fort at this time, there was a secret code writing system that was going on, sending coded messages through letters to American POWs [29:58] who had been shot down over Germany [30:00]?

OA: No, I didn't know that.

BB: In the guise of normal letters, they were sending coded messages and, likewise, an American prisoner would write a letter back to the United States in code, and it would be picked up at this post, and they would send secret messages and try to arrange escapes.

OA: No, I didn't know that.

BB: Do you know of anything like what I just described ever took place for the Pacific theater, writing coded messages to American prisoners?

OA: No. Actually, the code work was in the background after we got the escape and evasion [30:46]. That was mainly what we were working for: to find people that would help get the pilots out, and well, [31:00] we'd have to rely on the head man of a village or something to give us the right guy. The ones we got, as I say, they loved grenades, and they'd put the thing over their head and walk around. Oh, God, it was great.

MV: Why don't we go ahead and pause here. We're about out of tape.

BB: Yeah, we'll go ahead and take a little break right now.

OA: Oh, okay.

(End of Tape 1B)

(Beginning of Tape 2A)

BB: Okay. All right. We're going to go ahead and get started again. Again, today is January 3, 2008. This is an interview for the Fort Hunt [00:16] Oral History Project with Mr. Oliver Aymar of Reno, Nevada. He's here in the D.C. area visiting. We're actually recording this interview here at the George Washington Memorial Parkway headquarters. Mr. Aymar is joined by his son Ed Aymar. This is Brandon Bies, historian with National Park Service, as well as Parkway Cultural Resource Manager Matthew Virta, and Parkway Chief Ranger Vincent Santucci is joining us over speakerphone. This is the second in a series of recorded interviews. With that, Mr. Aymar, we'll go [01:00] ahead and just pick right back up where we were, try to just pick your memory a little bit more about information about P.O. Box 1142 [01:11]. You had mentioned a story when we

first met earlier this afternoon about working with some of the prisoners who were there at 1142. You remembered that there were German prisoners there?

OA: Oh, yes. Well, yes. They would let us -- as I remember, we could talk to the Germans, just, "How are you doing?" and all that sort of thing. It was no big deal [02:00]. Well, I have to admit I was surprised when I found out they were Germans.

BB: Did you know that there were any prisoners there? Could you see prisoner compounds and things, or was this all hidden?

OA: Oh, as far as I know, it was hidden. It seems to me they had a building, and they had cells in it with iron gates and all that. We could -- I think the Germans knew that we were listening to them, but we could sit in another room and hear what he was saying.

BB: So you knew about the listening devices that were hidden in the rooms?

OA: Oh, yes, yes. We [03:00] actually listened, as I remember.

BB: Really?

VS: So the folks who were manning those listening stations allowed you to come in and sit in?

OA: Yes.

BB: We have some pictures. We actually would have sent you in that packet a yellow booklet. It was a historic resource study of Fort Hunt [03:28]. There's a number of photographs in there, and some of them are of these room monitoring posts with the soldiers listening in on the prisoners and whatnot. In fact, we can give you, Ed, if you'd like, we've got some extra copies here, if you'd like to take a copy for yourself. But those have some of the photographs of what you're describing. But you obviously couldn't understand. This was all in German, though, correct? Okay, and you said -- I'm sorry. Go ahead [04:00].

OA: Oh, yes. It seems to me there was one cell where they could lower the temperature.

BB: Really?

OA: Maybe I'm imagining it, but it seems to me there was something that they could make it hotter, make it colder, that sort of thing.

BB: To make it a little bit more unpleasant?

OA: Yes.

BB: Got you.

MV: So was your participation as part of your training, or was this something that was --

OA: I think, yes, it was part of the training.

VS: Like a field trip out of the classroom into the --

OA: The teachers [05:00], or whatever they were, they would come with us, you know. We weren't allowed to wonder around in there or anything like that.

BB: Were your instructors -- do you remember if they were also Army Air Corps [05:16], or could they have just been U.S. Army?

OA: I would guess U.S. Army, but I'm not 100 percent certain on that.

BB: Okay. Did you get the sense that your instructors were -- that this was their regular duty station, and they were there -- and they had trained other Air Corps officers before you?

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: So this was their assignment, was just as an instructor?

OA: Oh, yes. We knew we were in a school.

BB: Okay. When you say "we," you mentioned earlier you were in a group. Did you say you think [06:00] it was about four or five?

OA: Well, when I say "we," I mean people that I met here. They didn't come with me.

BB: So you didn't come to P.O. Box 1142 [06:12] with anyone else. You arrived by yourself,

and you became part of this class?

OA: Well, there was one fellow that -- we were good friends, and we went to town together, but I can't remember if he was here or came at the same time I did, but anyway, we got to know each other pretty good.

BB: Do you remember his name?

OA: No, I don't. Names have long since gone.

MV: So essentially from your intelligence training at Orlando at the school you were at before, you went [07:00] through reassignment at the Pentagon [07:03], you were the only one from that school who came out and then went down to Fort Hunt [07:07]? You met your other compadres at Fort Hunt then?

OA: Yes.

BB: Does the name -- and I hope you don't mind, but we have a copy of the roster, and that's where we found your name. So, for example, on the roster, there is Aymar, Oliver C., rank of second lieutenant, arriving on February 2, 1945, and departing on April 26, 1945.

OA: Yes.

BB: There is another gentleman who departed on the exact same day, a First Lieutenant Daniel B. Phelan [07:55].

OA: That name sounds familiar.

BB: P-H-E-L-A-N [08:00], Phelan or Phelan. I'm just trying to think if any of these folks -- there's another name, Lieutenant Leonard H. Woods [08:11].

OA: Well, that name kind of rings a bell, too, but --

BB: Because the three of you were listed as all leaving the post on the same day. You arrived within a few weeks of each other, but you all left on the exact same day, which has me

thinking maybe that's when you were assigned to your next assignment.

OA: Could have been.

VS: Graduating class or something like that.

BB: But obviously, that's just kind of an educated guess at this point. So you met other Air Corps [08:59] officers here --

OA: Oh, yes.

BB: -- [09:00] who were going through the same training as you were?

OA: Yes, and we'd catch a bus and go into town and stuff like that.

MV: Did you bunk together as a group?

OA: Well, it seemed to me there were other bunks in there in the room where I slept, anyway.

BB: You did stay on post? You were on post housing?

OA: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes.

VS: And it wasn't just your class, your individual class who was in the barracks with you? There were other folks from Fort Hunt [09:38]?

OA: I don't remember a class like that, no.

BB: Do you remember if it was even a barracks, or since you were an officer, do you know if it was more of a house-type building?

OA: Well, I'd say more a house type, but there were, you know, iron bunks. They weren't [10:00] fancy beds or anything like that. [laughs]

BB: One of the other programs -- right before we took a break, I was mentioning about the code writing, where they were sending coded messages to American prisoners. Part of that program, they were devising escape devices, and these would have been hidden escape devices that would have been inserted into a care package, and then snuck through

past the German censors, and then the American prisoners would open up, and there might be a pair of shoes, and in the heel of the shoe, they'd break it off, and there'd be a radio transmitter. Or maybe a cribbage board, and as you moved the pieces on the cribbage board, it changed the stations on the radio. Even a deck of playing cards, that if you steamed the cards apart [11:00], inside would be an escape map, a silk escape map. The book in front of you, the one with the black and the orange writing, that's called "The Escape Factory," and that's the only book to have ever been written on P.O. Box 1142 [11:20]. It focuses on this escape program which was focused on the European theater. All of these escape devices, hundreds and hundreds of escape devices, were being smuggled into prisoner camps in Europe. Did you -- does any of that ring any bell to you whatsoever? Did you know any of that was going on?

OA: I might have known it was going on, but I had nothing to do with it. It was just something that the other guys were doing.

BB: Did you do anything at all [12:00] like that relating to AGAS [12:04], hidden devices and things?

OA: Well, as far as the devices go, it was mainly the guns and the grenades and so forth that we would give whoever we'd chosen to help the guys get out of a bad situation, but that's about it, and we didn't really pick them. As I say, this general, he did the picking, and we just kind of reviewed it and everything.

BB: Of who would go on these rescue missions?

OA: Yes.

BB: Okay. You have to forgive us for keep asking lots of nit-picky questions, but we're [13:00] trying to get at this from every little angle.

OA: No, that's fine.

BB: When you were here at Virginia at P.O. Box 1142 [13:08], do you remember, some of the buildings used by these programs had code names, and one of the biggest, most important building, in fact, I believe it was the building where all of the code writing took place, it was called the Creamery [13:25].

OA: Well, barely. I can't say yes or no, but kind of rings a bell, sort of.

BB: That's where all of these coded messages were being sent back and forth, and so I was just wondering if maybe -- if you received any additional coded training there. But it sounds like you don't remember receiving any code writing training.

OA: No, I didn't receive any more coding.

BB: Which is just kind of interesting [14:00] because that was one of the -- code writing was one of the specialties of P.O. Box 1142 [14:07]. They had a number of crypto-analysts that were sending messages, so it seems interesting that you didn't learn anything. You already knew it all quite well, it sounds like.

OA: I don't remember any of the code stuff. If they did, it went over my head somewhere. I don't know.

MV: Perhaps they had different emphasis for different groups. Your group was strictly the escape and evasion [14:35] type of thing.

OA: Yes, it was mostly escape and evasion [14:40] for us. As I say -- or did I say? -- that the last month or so, they sent us out to talk to these pilots that were going overseas and everything, tell them that this method [15:00] was there, that if they went down, there might be somebody there that would get them out and all that sort of thing. We had a little speech that we'd give them.

BB: Were these pilots that were going to the Pacific theater?

OA: I can't tell you that. I don't know.

BB: Just pilots going overseas somewhere.

OA: They were pilots, yeah. They didn't tell us where they were going or anything else.

BB: Could you explain in a little bit more detail -- you mentioned you told them that there'd be somebody there to tell them which way to go. Could you go into a little bit more detail about that?

OA: Well, again, we had to work through this Chinese general, talk to the guy. We didn't know what he was talking about half the time anyway, but we would try to, [16:00] well, insist that certain things be done, that they weren't supposed to be running around wearing their -- all this equipment and showing off. You were supposed to keep it hidden until necessary. But whether or not they did, we don't really know.

BB: Were you trained -- that advice, that they weren't supposed to wear flashy equipment, were you taught that at P.O. Box 1142 [16:41]?

OA: No, I don't think so. That was all results of Chinese stuff.

BB: Got you. Kind of learning from experience once you were in the field?

OA: Yes.

BB: Okay. So do you remember what you were taught about escaping [17:00] and evading here in Virginia?

OA: No, I can't really say definitely we learned this; we were taught this or that.

BB: Sure. Why I'm asking all this, I'm just trying to figure out exactly what it was that you were trained in here at P.O. Box 1142 [17:40], what the major themes were since you already knew code writing quite well. You didn't learn about these escape devices or

anything. You did learn about the way we interrogated prisoners. Did you learn anything [18:00] about what the pilot should do if they were captured by the Japanese?

OA: No.

BB: How to resist interrogation or anything?

OA: No. We didn't. I guess mainly because we thought that they'd never get a chance to use it, that the Japanese weren't about to let them go or use all this stuff or not.

BB: Anything else that you remember about P.O. Box 1142 [18:42]? You mentioned a couple of humorous stories about the golf clubs and whatnot. Do you remember -- we mentioned the interrogators. Did it strike you that many of them were German Americans, that they spoke fluent German and could understand the language [19:00]?

OA: No.

BB: Okay.

VS: What was your typical day like, if you can remember, at Fort Hunt [19:10]? I mean, you'd be in your barracks or your residence building. Would you wake up in the morning and then report to your classroom?

OA: Well, they had a pretty good breakfast, too. [laughs]

EA: We've heard a lot about some of the food down there. Usually the joke is bad Army food, but apparently this place had a great cook.

OA: No, it wasn't too bad.

MV: Well, walk us through a day, if you will, from the time you got up -- I mean, did you have to report?

OA: Well, we'd head for this room where we had a seat. I think the seats were assigned; we went to the same one. Then we had a book, seems to me. Yes, we had a book, and then

the guy would get up [20:00] and lecture and talk about what you might find and what you were supposed to do and that sort of thing. It seems to me they even gave an examination. I don't know. I can't remember for sure. We did some kind of writing, I guess. But it was mainly that they would talk. We wouldn't be talking. We'd be listening to all that they had to say, and that was about it.

VS: Were the lectures specific to the Pacific theater? Were they specific to China?

OA: No, not that I know. I can't remember.

VS: It was just general --

OA: They were not -- I'm sure they weren't [21:00] specific for China. No, I can't say that they were.

BB: Do you recall, of the men you were going -- the men in your class, per se, the other group of Air Corps [21:29] officers, do you know if they all also went to the Pacific theater?

OA: I don't think they did. I think there was only me and the captain, the drunk captain [laughs].

BB: So the drunk captain, he was at 1142 [21:47]?

OA: I don't -- he never said he was. Where he came from, I don't know. I met him and [22:00] we got to be pretty good friends. I don't know. I can't even tell you if he was here at any time. I don't know.

BB: Okay, do you remember if anybody -- once you got to China as part of AGAS [22:19], do you remember running into anyone else who had also been trained at P.O. Box 1142 [22:26]?

OA: I can't say that anybody said they were. They all seemed to be pretty well trained, but nobody ever said, "I went to this school," or that school or anything.

BB: We know that a number of them were. You're the first one we've been able to speak with, but from that chart that we pulled out at the very beginning, the large, white piece of paper, that has the names, kind of the organization, and a number of the [23:00] names on that chart show up on the roster of having been at P.O. Box 1142 [23:08]. Certainly not all of them, but it would appear that a number of people in AGAS [23:15] were also trained here at 1142 [23:18]. You're just the first one that we've ever spoken to. There's one other living veteran who we've identified. We're actually going to go and interview him sometime soon. He lives in Delaware. He was in AGAS [23:35]. His name is Edmund N. Carpenter [23:40]. He went by Ned, Ned Carpenter. His name is also on that white org chart, but I believe he was in a different section. He wasn't in your part of China, but he was stationed and trained at P.O. Box 1142 [23:58], and then went over [24:00] to China as part of AGAS [24:03]. So you might never have crossed paths with him because he might have been 500 miles away or something like that. We haven't spoken with him yet, though, so you're the first one. So that's why it might seem like we're asking lots of obvious or basic questions. We don't have a very good understanding of what exactly AGAS [24:24] did.

OA: Well, it was kind of hard to understand. [laughs] How do you tell a person, a Chinese guy, that someday you might find an American parachuting down, and you're supposed to hide him and get him away and everything like that? It's kind of a weird situation.

BB: One last question before we move on because I would like to talk [25:00] for a little while specifically about some of your stories and what you did while you were in China. But did you learn -- we covered this a little bit, but did you learn any additional languages at all? Were you ever trained -- you had picked up a little bit of Chinese when you were

at the embassy, but at P.O. Box 1142 [25:24], did you receive any language training at all?

OA: No, none.

BB: Okay, well --

MV: A couple of questions, again, kind of the daily activity while you were at Fort Hunt/P.O.

Box 1142 [25:41]. You mentioned you'd get up, and you'd go to classroom training.

Were there any other participation in anything else on the base that you were involved in?

I mean, did you see other people doing other tasks? I know you took -- you said the instructors took you to the interrogation sessions sometimes. Were you aware of any other activities going on [25:00], regular just military base activities?

OA: I can't think of one. I'm not sure.

MV: Okay. So you mainly -- your existence was --

OA: I was there and listened to the speeches, and then we went out and talked to the different air bases, and that was about it.

MV: So your involvement with any other activities on the base were minimal.

OA: Yes, yes.

MV: You'd basically just go to your classroom, get instruction.

OA: Yes. We weren't involved in any of the teaching or anything like that.

BB: Vince, I know you have it on mute, but before we move on, away from Fort Hunt and to China, do you have any specific Fort Hunt [26:59] questions that you'd [27:00] like to ask now?

VS: Yes, thanks. Mr. Aymar, were you familiar with the OSS [27:08] [Office of Strategic Services]?

OA: Oh, yes. [laughs] Ran into them everywhere.

VS: I think that would be worth talking about a little bit. First and foremost, any understanding of OSS [27:27] activities related to Fort Hunt?

OA: No, no, I didn't know that.

VS: Your involvement with OSS [27:35] came after 1142?

OA: Yes, I ran into them in China. We ran into each other quite often.

VS: Okay. So you had direct dealings with the OSS [27:51]?

OA: No, no. We'd kid each other a bit, and they'd go their way, and we'd go our way [28:00].

VS: And how did you know that they were OSS [28:03]? Did they keep that secretive, or did they expose that to you?

OA: No, no, no. They'd say they were.

VS: Okay. Something that we have learned recently is that in the European theater, the relationship between the Resistance fighters and the Allies was apparently coordinated through the British, and heard the comment that, for the Pacific theater, the relationship between the Allies and the Resistance fighters were through the Americans; the Americans coordinated that. I don't know if you [unintelligible] talked about that.

OA: I would say that's true, yes. I don't know of any other country that got involved.

BB: So you didn't have -- [29:00] did you ever run into the British when you were --

OA: Oh, yes, we knew them, and we knew Australians, but as far as them working on this sort of stuff, I don't know. I don't think they got into it really. They might have, but I don't know.

VS: We know a lot about how the French, largely, and a few other countries helped American and British prisoners of war once they escaped, helped them to evade recapture, and I imagine that same kind of scenario existed in the Pacific.

OA: It could have, could have, but --

EA: Isn't that what your Chinese general [30:00] was teaching people to do, to help the pilots?

OA: Yes.

VS: I was curious if you had a role in helping American prisoners of war in the Pacific try to escape and evade [30:21], not before capture, but actually after capture, and did you work [unintelligible] --

OA: No, I had no training in that at all.

VS: -- American or Allied prisoners of war [30:32] escape?

OA: What was that?

VS: Brandon, could you repeat that?

BB: I think he was wondering if you had any role in Americans who had been shot down in China, who were already taken -- had been taken prisoner by the Japanese. Were there any efforts to free them from the Japanese?

OA: No, not that I know of.

BB: So it [31:00] was strictly just trying to help them evade capture?

OA: Yes, it was mostly evasion, to get --

VS: So part of it was you were providing training to Air Corps [31:14] pilots before they were sent on their mission?

OA: Yes.

VS: So training was an important part of what you did?

OA: That there was a possibility that they might run into Chinese that would help them.

VS: And so you provided instructions on what they might do in the event that they got shot down and how they might communicate with individuals who could help them to evade

capture?

OA: Yes, it was mainly people, both white and Chinese, that would pick them up and take care of them [32:00].

BB: Vince, just one second. We're going to flip the cassette tape here.

(End of Tape 2A)

(Beginning of Tape 2B)

BB: We're back on again.

VS: Okay. Mr. Aymar, in addition to briefing pilots before their missions, did you have any dealings with known pilots who were shot down, in trying to locate them, to try to communicate with them?

OA: Oh, yes, yes, that was part of the instructions to the Chinese, the ones that were working for us.

VS: You then communicated directly with Chinese or through some means to communicate with the pilots who were in hiding?

OA: Yes, yes.

VS: That's interesting. Did the OSS [00:49] also serve a role in that kind of activity?

OA: I don't know.

VS: Okay. Brandon, that might be worth some additional questions regarding any firsthand experiences he has [01:00] regarding trying to communicate with pilots in hiding.

BB: Yes, no, absolutely. I wanted to mostly check and see if you had any questions specific to 1142 because, at this point, if you didn't, I was going to move on and try to hash out a little bit more of exactly what was going on in China.

VS: No, I think you covered it well. Thanks.

BB: Okay. So I guess we'll -- if we want to go back and kind of pick up, because I would like to talk a little bit more about your role with the AGAS [01:32] once you were in China.

We concentrated on Fort Hunt [01:40] for a while, but we were on a nice roll there. Once you left -- well, let me start over again. How did you find out that you were leaving P.O. Box 1142 [01:51]? Did an order just arrive that you were being transferred somewhere, or did you request a transfer?

OA: No, no, I never [02:00] requested anything. There must have been an order go through the Pentagon [02:05] somewhere that I should go over to China. I never mentioned [unintelligible].

BB: When you were at 1142 [02:16], did you interact at all with the Pentagon [02:19]? Did you ever go to the Pentagon while you were here in Washington?

OA: Oh, yes. Well, I went to see the people from the embassy that were there. If we had a problem or anything, we could go to the Pentagon [02:39], get things worked out, like if I wanted to go home for a week or something like that. Yes, we worked with the Pentagon [02:53] fairly often, but it wasn't any of this escape and evasion [02:58] stuff. Just normal [03:00] activities.

BB: Just more logistics?

OA: Yes.

BB: Okay. Were you able -- while you were here in Virginia, were you able to take a furlough home to Reno?

OA: I never tried. I don't know. No, didn't do anything about that.

BB: Got you. So your tenure, it was almost like you were just visiting a training site to get training?

OA: Yes, well, that's the way I knew it. We were here for a month, and then we were out making these speeches, and then we took off.

BB: That's one of the reasons we've asked so many questions because, for most of the people we've interviewed, it was not a training; it was a permanent base where they were stationed, carrying out assigned tasks, whether it was making these escape packages or writing coded letters or interrogating German prisoners. That was an assignment, and they were there for years at a time [04:00]. We've only talked to a couple of people who were there for training purposes. So, again, you have to forgive us for asking some of these questions. That's why we're trying to differentiate between the two.

OA: Yes.

BB: So you received orders, presumably from the Pentagon [04:18], that you were being -- did you go straight from P.O. Box 1142 [04:23] to China, or did you stop off at another base for more training?

OA: No, right to China. We picked up a plane -- we went to New York, got a plane there, and headed out.

BB: And you flew, and no ships? You flew the entire time?

OA: No ships at that time, no.

BB: Do you remember your route? Was it kind of the reverse of the way you came back to the United States?

OA: Well, it was along the Caribbean? No, no. What's -- oh, God [05:00]. You go straight across land in Casablanca. Where are you?

EA: You crossed the Atlantic?

OA: Yes, we went right straight across the Atlantic. We stayed a night in Casablanca, went

through Egypt and down through South -- not South Africa. Saudi Arabia? Yes, and then we wound up in India, and that was a big waiting place to get in and to get over the hump into China.

BB: You had mentioned, I think this was before we were recording, was this the particular trip you were told to pack a tuxedo?

OA: No, no, no, that was the embassy.

BB: That was the State Department. Okay.

OA: Yes, State Department.

BB: So there was no tuxedos this time around?

OA: No. [laughs] [06:00] Not in the Army.

BB: Okay. Were you toting around a lot of gear, or just basic gear and everything else you picked up once you were there?

OA: No, everything you were going to take, you took, but it wasn't a lot of stuff. We had our regular uniforms and boots and that sort of stuff, but we didn't take an awful lot of stuff.

BB: But supplies like helmets and backpacks and sidearms, did you have that with you?

OA: No, no, that was all issued to you over there.

BB: That was issued once you were out there?

OA: Yes.

MV: When you went over, did you report then to a base there?

OA: Yes, there was a building that housed the AGAS [07:00], and we went there, and we got a bunk there and waited for orders to take off.

MV: Then would that serve as your base of operations?

OA: Yes.

MV: You would go out on a mission and come back?

OA: Yes, there were maybe five or six, seven or eight guys staying there all the time, practically.

BB: And so once you arrived -- I was going to use a more modern term and say in country, but once you really arrived there in China, where were you primarily stationed out of? Did you have a primary place, or did you shift around from town to town?

OA: No, no, just this once place. It was in Kunming [07:54].

BB: Okay.

OA: We had bunks there [08:00], and they fed us, and we just waited until we got orders, played baseball, fooled around.

BB: I'm going to just flip across and reach over here -- well, actually, excuse me. I'm going to reach over by the phone, and these are some documents that I -- we've made copies for you. I'm just going to read real quick because they mention your name and a few others and where you were stationed. I may be pronouncing this incorrectly. I'm sure your Chinese is much better than mine, but they have you listed as being in Guilin [08:44].

OA: Guilin.

BB: Oh Guilin [08:48]. Okay.

OA: That was my last -- that's where we ended.

BB: And it looks like -- and again, my poor pronunciation -- it looks like it says the Uechow [spelled phonetically] [09:00] office.

OA: Uechow. What happened there?

BB: They have you on May 31, 1945. There was a memo sent out to the commanding general of the China theater, regarding the disposition of all AGAS [09:26] field personnel. So

basically they just wanted to know where everybody was, and this states -- they list you, a First Lieutenant Willis Urick [spelled phonetically].

OA: That sounds familiar.

BB: And a Private Edwin Vandenberg [spelled phonetically] as all being stationed in the same office.

OA: We weren't in an office. Well, was this after the war?

BB: No, this is in May of '45, so it was still going [10:00] on at that time. Yeah, no, it was.

There's a few other lists that have your name on it, but that's the only one that lists you at a specific location. So in fact, I'll pass that over to you if you want.

EA: Well, the name Vandenberg, that's one of the names on this team that went out on this last mission.

BB: Oh, is it really?

MV: I think it might have been the team that was grouped together for you guys to go out on missions.

BB: So that's why I was just curious if those names sounded familiar.

OA: Yes, they do.

BB: Do you remember, off the top of your head, the names of anybody else that you were stationed with, any friends or anybody in the AGAS [10:56]?

OA: No, I've been racking my brain for a week [11:00]. [laughs]

BB: I'm sure. Well, I hope nobody asks me 60 years from now what my next-door neighbor's middle name is or something like that.

OA: When you say things like Vandenberg, then they sound familiar. And we had, I think, three Chinese guys.

- BB: That was going to be one of my next questions, was did you use them as essentially translators?
- OA: Yes.
- BB: So they understood English quite well?
- OA: Oh, yes, they were Americans, but they were Chinese Americans. There were about three in this group, my last time out in the field.
- JJ: The names are here. John Chong Lin [spelled phonetically] and [12:00] Mr. Eu Fong Chin [spelled phonetically].
- BB: These were probably Chinese-born or maybe had immigrated to the United States.
- OA: Well, they were mostly like they'd been educated in the United States, and they happened to speak Chinese, and some of them weren't so good. [laughs]
- BB: Just because they had Chinese last names didn't mean they could speak Chinese. So could we talk a little bit then, do you remember your first assignment in China? Was there a time where a message came through that a plane had been shot down or something like that?
- OA: No, they just gave us orders on where to go, and they wanted us to [13:00] get close to the Japanese Army and just kind of follow the Japanese Army. At that time, they were stationed in this bombed-out city called Guilin [13:18]. We -- oh, it took -- had to cross a couple of rivers and all kinds -- that's when I was paying off all those people in that picture because they helped us get around and everything. And that's where we ran into the OSS [13:40]. They were walking on the same trail that we were on. But we landed -- well, we took this trail and [14:00] pretty soon we hooked up with the Chinese Army. They were chasing the Japanese by that time, so we just walked along with them, and

then we got to this place called Guilin [14:15]. It had been an airport for the Chinese and the Japanese and the Americans, and it was bombed. There was nothing left. It was gone completely. Now it's a beautiful tourist resort there. Well, when we got there, we got word from some Chinese guy, I think, that a pilot had been shot down just a few miles in back of the Japanese on a hill there. So we took off, and we followed up this little trail, and there were some bodies along where there'd been some fighting there and everything. We finally got to this little village, and they told us where to go up the mountain. We went up, and we found the plane and found him and buried him and everything, and marked our maps with his longitude and latitude, so they could find it later.

BB: Did you know going into this that he had been killed, or did you think there was a chance he would still be alive?

OA: Well, when we first heard -- no, I don't think so, because it was two or three days later or so [16:00]. I guess he'd been after the Japanese, and they shot him down. But when we got up there -- it was quite a high mountain. We got up there and found the plane and everything, and with binoculars we could see the Japanese cooking their breakfast and everything, or their dinner. So we didn't want to hang around there too long. [laughs]

BB: I would imagine that would have been a little bit disconcerting, and you were with a group of what, a half dozen people or so?

OA: I think there were maybe four or five of us. First, we had to get on a boat and go down the river a mile or two, and the boat was still waiting for us. But we did our job, and we bugged out as fast as we could [17:00], and we didn't go back to the village, because you never could be sure that somebody wouldn't squeal on you. That was my last official act, because when we got down -- well, of course, we had contact. I was kind of wondering -

- I was wondering if we used a code when we talked back and forth. We must have used a code. But anyway, the next day we got down, and we cranked up the machine and everything, and the guy came on, and he said, "We've dropped the atom bomb [17:54] on" -- the first one. What did it hit?

MV: Hiroshima [18:00].

OA: Yes. And we said, "What the hell is an atom bomb [18:09]?" And then a couple of days later, they said, "We dropped the bomb on Nagasaki [18:15], and the Japanese are surrendering." That was the end of it. But when they sent orders, they said, "Turn in your equipment at the nearest warehouse." We were 100 miles away from the nearest warehouse. [laughs]

BB: So did you do a lot of walking?

OA: Oh, did we do a lot of walking. We sure did.

BB: Was that the primary way you got around?

OA: It was the only way.

BB: Occasionally, you took boats, as we saw [unintelligible] in these pictures.

OA: Oh, well, the boats, yes. If it was a river, we had to go on a boat.

BB: But you weren't driving in cars or jeeps?

OA: Well, the funny thing [19:00], this Guilin [19:02] had a little air strip, but it'd take only little planes. So we had to go out one by one. One a day, we were going back and forth. Finally it got down to me and my translator, a little guy, scared to death. That night we were sleeping right on the airport, and when we woke up, we heard a car. This is way out in the sticks, and then here comes a jeep with a colonel riding in it. And I said, "For God's sake, how did you get out here?" And he said, "Oh, I was [20:00] following the

roads.” And he had a trailer in back of it. Said, “You want a ride?” We said, “Sure.” So we rode back with a colonel. Oh, God, there were bodies all along the road and everything. It looked like there’d been quite a bit of fighting there. It was getting dark, and we got to this river, not a big river, but it looked kind of deep, and I said, “You’re not going to go through that now. It’s getting dark.” And he said, “Oh, we can do it.” Plunged into the -- and we did, we got out. I said, “Oh, my god.” [laughs]

BB: So you were -- [21:00] throughout your whole time in China, you mentioned seeing bodies on the side of the trail and the fighting. This was all fighting between the Chinese and Japanese?

OA: The Chinese and the Japanese.

BB: So you were never any -- there were no American ground forces. You were the American ground forces, all four of you.

OA: Us and the OSS [21:22].

BB: So, again, to kind of recap, your job, it sounds like I guess you had a couple of roles. One was in the case of if a plane went down near you, you would go and see if there was a survivor. If not, you would bury the pilot and mark it on the map. But also you were radioing the position of the Japanese?

OA: Yes, we were to follow the Japanese.

BB: So you were just kind of literally sneaking through?

OA: Yes.

BB: Trying to just stay a few miles away, but [22:00] find out where they were?

OA: Yes.

BB: I would think, to me, that would be a little intimidating. I mean, maybe you got used to it

after a while, but --

OA: Yes, it doesn't bother you too much. And, as I say, we each got together with the Chinese Army, so we felt pretty secure with them.

BB: But you weren't assisting them in any way?

OA: No, no.

BB: You were simply there looking out for the U.S. Army Air Corps [22:34], and that was it.

OA: We were just walking along with them.

BB: Could you give any sense, how far from you would have been the next little band of AGAS [22:49] soldiers? Presumably there were other teams like yours.

OA: I have no idea. There were other teams, but [23:00] they -- we didn't come close to them or anything like that. We were on our own.

JJ: You probably don't want to know because if you're captured, you could give away [unintelligible].

[talking simultaneously]

BB: Did you -- when you were out in the field, did you correspond with a specific base? I mean, was there -- like in Kunming [23:30], was there an AGAS [23:32] headquarters in Kunming?

OA: Yes. Every day, a different time, we'd radio them.

BB: Were you ever stationed for a long period of time in Kunming [23:47], or were you usually out in the field?

OA: Going to Guilin [23:56], that was my only assignment [24:00] after I arrived there, and that was it. Then the war ended.

BB: So you essentially arrived at Kunming [24:12], and then were told to go out to Guilin

[24:14], and you really just had that one field assignment?

OA: Yes, that was all.

BB: So you were China for what, just a matter of a few months or so?

OA: Well, I stayed after the war ended. That was the fun time. [laughs] That was the fun time. But the reason I stayed was this graves registration. We had all the literature and everything on who was shot down, where they were shot down, and so they appointed us to this graves [25:00] registration deal. I took Hanoi and Indochina. Oh, boy, that was the best. We had a big house right in the middle of town, and then there was a family that had a ranch a little out of the town, and they were scared to live there because Ho Chi Minh [25:36] was running around killing everybody. Oh, it was a mess. So we said, "We'll take care of your ranch." So we went out, and half of us lived on the ranch and half lived in the town.

BB: When you were doing work with graves registration, were you going to crash sites [26:00]?

OA: Oh, god, yes. We dug them up.

BB: So you were exhuming the bodies and then they were being, I guess, sent off.

OA: We had a garage full of skeletons.

BB: Did you really?

OA: And, oh, sometimes the smell was horrible. But headquarters wanted the teeth, and so we'd have to tape up their teeth. That was the big thing to identify them. Then we'd send them off to Shanghai, where they'd do all the rest of the stuff. But we found quite a few. One little town called Hue, H-U-E [27:00], we heard about a plane there, and we went down there. We always talked to the mayor and that sort of thing. They had quite a

ceremony. It was kind of a churchlike building. Then they marched in with these little boxes, and that was the skeletons. There were about eleven of them. They all came in, and, oh, it was quite a ceremony.

BB: Did you get the sense that most of the American planes being shot down, were they fighter planes? Were they bombers? Were they transports? What were they?

OA: Fighters.

MV: Were any of them from the Flying Tigers [27:53]?

OA: No, the Flying Tigers had disbanded by that time. They'd [28:00] joined the regular Army.

MV: The regular Air Corps [28:02], right.

BB: So you were for several months, then, stationed with graves registration?

OA: Yes.

BB: When that assignment was completed, were you sent back to the United States at that point?

OA: Yes, I was down in Saigon at that time. There were -- we had found out that there were two people -- soldiers that had come through Hanoi, and we found on the wall someplace where this guy had written, "I'm so-and-so, and so-and-so, and I'm hiding out," and that sort of thing. There were two of them [29:00]. We went to another village, and we found the writing, and the natives said, "There's a grave up on the mountain there." So one of them the Japanese had killed, and we went up and got all his paraphernalia. And then this guy had written on the wall that he's going down towards Saigon. So I went to Saigon and was trying to find out. I didn't find out very much, but then orders came through that I had to go home. So I was there, and I said, "Hey, I'm trying to find this

guy. What happened to him? I don't want to go back." And the guy said, "You better [30:00] come back, or you might stay there forever." So I went back, and that was that.

BB: We only have about one more minute left of this tape. So if we want to just try real quickly to wrap up, you came back to the States and were discharged from the military at that point?

OA: Yes. I joined the reserve.

BB: Okay. You mentioned that you were called back up. Is it because you were in the reserves, you were called up for Korea?

OA: Yes, but I didn't go out of the States; I stayed here.

BB: Okay, did your role have anything -- were you in the Army or were you in the Air Force at this point?

OA: Well, at that time, it was the Air Force, and they were changing uniforms. I was trying to get by as cheap as I could. I was always out of uniform. [laughs]

BB: So did your role in Korea [31:00] have anything to do with what you had done during World War II [31:04]?

OA: No, nothing at all.

BB: All right. We're going to have to call it quits.

(End of Tape 2B)

(Beginning of Tape 3)

BB: We're recording. Okay. Today is January 3, 2008. This is the third in a series of recorded interviews for the Fort Hunt Oral History Project. We are here interviewing Mr. Oliver Aymar from Reno, Nevada. He is here in town, and we're actually interviewing him at the George Washington Memorial Parkway headquarters. He is joined by his son

Ed. This is National Park Service Historian Brandon Bies, as well as Parkway Cultural Resource Manager Matthew Virta. We're joined on the phone by Chief Ranger Vincent Santucci, and we're joined right now shortly by the assistant superintendent, Jon James. With that, we'll go head and get started, Mr. Aymar, just with probably wrapping up just a few last questions because [01:00] it really sounded like you were telling some pretty fantastic information about your last -- well, it's really very, very interesting information.

OA: That graves registration, that was quite a time.

BB: Did that bother you at all at the time, seeing all these bodies, or did you get fairly used to it and it didn't really affect you that much?

OA: It can't help but bother you. It can't help it. As I say, if you had the one that smelled, oh, God. You seemed to never get rid of it. But we found quite a few.

BB: Most of the bodies, had they been already buried?

OA: Oh, yes.

BB: So they weren't still in the wreckage of planes?

OA: No, no, no. The ones we found were all buried. [02:00] The natives would help us out quite a bit, show you where they were and everything. Of course, we'd give them a few bucks, and they loved that. [laughs]

BB: So this graves registration process, that essentially went on for, what, would you say three or four months or so?

OA: A little longer than that. I'd say maybe seven or eight months, something like that. They had teams, and they went different places in China. And I spoke up, said, "Hey, hey I want to go to Hanoi."

JJ: That was your adventure.

OA: Oh, boy, with all those little French ladies running around there.

[laughter]

JJ: The real reason.

[laughter]

BB: So did you -- were [03:00] you -- you were based out of Hanoi then for most of that time?

OA: Yes, we lived right in Hanoi. We had a beautiful house. That's where I took the golf clubs.

BB: That's not where you ran into the golf clubs the second time around, is it?

OA: Yes.

BB: This is a fascinating story. So these golf clubs you left in Chungking [03:29]?

OA: No, in Hong Kong.

BB: Oh, in Hong Kong. Okay.

OA: Yes. They talked me out of it in Hong Kong.

BB: But now was -- you left those golf clubs when you were leaving the embassy?

OA: No, when I was going to the embassy.

BB: Oh, when you were going to the embassy. So you didn't have the golf clubs?

OA: We got as far as Hong Kong, and everybody said the --

BB: Got you. So you left the golf clubs in Hong Kong on your way to the embassy.

OA: Yes.

BB: And then five years later [04:00] --

OA: Came back.

BB: -- you came back, and --

OA: There were the golf clubs.

[laughter]

JJ: Maybe you've already answered the question, but how come they told you not to take the golf clubs?

OA: Well, there was no golf in Chungking [04:24].

JJ: Oh, no golf courses in Chungking, yeah.

BB: Not to mention they were being bombed.

JJ: Yes, I know. There was a lot of crater holes, I'm sure, but not golf courses.

OA: I actually should have taken them because we could have worked out a little golf course and everything. I was sorry I didn't take them afterward, but it was too late.

JJ: What did you do for recreation there if you couldn't golf? What else did you do? And French ladies, of course.

OA: We had parties [05:00] and dances and stuff. There was the Chungking Club [05:04], and we played poker there and everything, and had dances, and we got along. There were quite a few English girls with their group.

MV: That was one thing I was curious about. Did you intermingle a lot with other nations or other nationalities that had people, maybe, stationed there, like from England or France?

OA: Oh, yes. This was when I was in the embassy. In the Army, no, but in the embassy, we had a lot of good times.

MV: And this was at Hong Kong?

OA: No, this was Chungking [05:49].

MV: Oh, this is Chungking; I'm getting mixed up.

EA: They had to go to Hong Kong [05:53] to get to Chungking [05:54].

MV: Oh, I see. Okay, I get it. Okay. [06:00] Any particular individuals stand out in your

mind that you can remember from that time period?

OA: The ambassador, Nelson Johnson [06:08]. He had a sedan chair that four Chinese guys had to carry, and we used these seats that they carried on their shoulder.

BB: With a cart behind it? They put the wheels, and then they pulled it?

OA: No, no, they'd just hold them up, just hold them up. We lived -- it was very hilly there, and it was about, oh, I don't know, 200 steps from the river to our house. But there was always [07:00] the guys that carried these things. They were all lined up when the boat landed as it came across the river there, and they'd holler at you and all that. They were always after me because the next guy might be 200 pounds.

[laughter]

MV: They liked the lighter ones, I'm sure.

OA: They were always after me.

JJ: And I'm assuming it was very affordable. How much do you think it cost to get one of these people to carry somebody, to take you around?

OA: Oh, in American money at that time maybe, 25 cents, something like that.

BB: Wow. Pretty amazing.

OA: But, oh, their money at that time was really -- \$100 was nothing.

BB: In Chinese money?

OA: In Chinese money, no. God, they carried bundles of it around.

BB: Could you talk a little bit -- we were talking about this a little bit before the cameras were running [08:00]. You mentioned some of the [James] Doolittle Raiders [08:03] happened through Chungking [08:06] while you were at the embassy.

OA: Yes, they were. I'd say I saw three or four of them. The Chinese had helped them all to

get out, away from the Japanese, and around, and they came around a long way.

MV: Did they ever -- a couple of questions there. Do you remember any of the names of these individuals?

OA: No.

MV: And the other thing is, did they ever talk about how they got to Chungking [08:45], some of their adventures?

OA: Oh, yes.

MV: Can you remember any particular story about that?

OA: No, not really. We'd take them in and feed them up and give them [09:00] toilet articles and everything.

BB: When they got there, were they pretty emaciated?

OA: Well, not emaciated so much; just tired out. They'd marched halfway across China.

BB: Switching subjects completely, but just to ask a few more follow-up questions on your experience with AGAS [09:32], your few months of missions throughout China. You were going around with this team. You said there were probably about four or so Americans?

OA: No, there were about six.

BB: And about half of them were Chinese Americans?

OA: Yes.

BB: So about three Anglos and three Chinese Americans.

OA: Yes, that's just about it. It might have been seven. I can't remember now [10:00].

BB: You were an officer, obviously.

OA: Yes.

BB: Were you the commanding officer of this team?

OA: Yes, I was the only officer.

BB: So everyone else were enlisted men?

OA: Yes.

EA: What rank were you?

MV: Second lieutenant at first. I got first lieutenant before I got out of China.

BB: I assume your group always had a radio with you, obviously.

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: Was it usually -- we have the one photograph we were looking at, the large cranking, with the big aerial antenna.

OA: That's right.

BB: So you were having to haul around just this group of six or seven men. Did you have native Chinese who were helping you move around, haul equipment?

OA: Yes, because we had a lot of equipment. We were supplied with enough stuff to last, oh, four or five months [11:00].

BB: Including food and --

OA: Food and everything, even Scotch.

[laughter]

MV: Essential supplies.

JJ: How were you resupplied? Whenever you needed more food or whatever, how did you get that?

OA: Oh, we never got to that -- the war stopped before we had to --

JJ: Before you had to do that.

- OA: Yes, and we got a wire, "Turn in all your stuff at your nearest warehouse." [laughs] We just gave -- we were carrying extra rifles and guns and pistols and grenades and all that stuff for the -- to give to the guys that were going to help us get the guys that were shot down out, so we gave all of that stuff to the Chinese Army, and just, that was it [12:00].
- BB: So you must have been carrying, as you mentioned, a tremendous amount of supplies.
- OA: Oh, yes, there was a picture in one of them, isn't there? There's about 20, we called them coolies that carried the stuff for us.
- BB: At any given time, although there would have only been six or seven Americans, your entire group would have been 20, 30 people that carried all this equipment?
- OA: Oh, yes, but they'd go one day, and the next day they'd go back, and then you'd pick up another bunch.
- BB: So, I figure, as you mentioned a little bit earlier, you must have been carrying a fair amount of money.
- OA: I was. There was a lot of it. I had a bag full of it.
- BB: So you personally carried the money?
- OA: No, no, no.
- BB: Did you trust the coolies to carry the money?
- OA: More or less. They couldn't go very far [13:00].
- BB: That's fantastic.
- OA: Yes, I had a lot of money there, my God.
- BB: Were you ever in a situation where you had to fire your weapons or anything, or were you always far enough away from the --
- OA: No, we never --

BB: So you were never engaged in combat?

OA: Never fired, no.

JJ: Can I ask --

BB: Sure.

JJ: -- there's one particular picture here where you're paying off the coolies, it looks like, and one of the things I notice is that there are these poles, obviously that that's how they were carrying the materials around?

OA: Yes.

BB: It was the poles that they sling things with. But I'm noticing in the background here, it looks like there's a village or the ruins of an ancient -- some sort of ruins. That's one of the questions; in you going cross country in China, did you ever go through villages [14:00], and how did people receive you there, or did you ever go through any of the ancient ruins of China?

OA: Well, not so much the ancient ruins, but we went through villages all the time.

JJ: How did they --

OA: Oh, they liked us.

JJ: They liked you? Did they know what you were doing, or did you tell them?

OA: Oh, yes, sure.

JJ: Scotch, money. Okay. I'm just curious. Did they come out and greet you, or did you ever stay overnight?

OA: No, no, but -- well, they'd be sitting outside their little hut and everything and nursing their babies, and we'd joke with them and talk. We could always send them off laughing when we tried to talk Chinese.

[laughter]

MV: I'm sure. Did you ever run across people in the villages that spoke English, that were really [15:00] pretty good speaking English?

OA: No, no, not in the villages, no. Of course, in Chungking [15:09], we --

MV: Yeah. You'd have people that could probably speak more than one language.

JJ: Did you speak French, as well? You mentioned later --

OA: No. Well, I got pretty good with French.

JJ: Was that from just being in Hanoi?

OA: No, I'd taken French in university, and when I got to Hanoi, I got pretty -- I could read the newspaper and rattle away.

JJ: That's pretty good.

BB: You had mentioned -- obviously, we have these photos we've been looking at, so this mission you went on, there was a photographer the entire time?

OA: Yes, yes. As I say, I still don't know why he got [16:00] hired.

BB: He was an American Anglo?

OA: Yeah, he was a regular guy.

EA: He was a PFC from the public affairs office.

BB: So he would have been one of the six or seven Americans. He would have been a photographer?

OA: Yes.

BB: I would have to imagine that there would be more photos. If he went on this entire trip, more than just probably, hopefully, maybe exist in the National Archives or something like that.

OA: Yes.

BB: And they have the photographer's name on this?

OA: Yes.

BB: That might be something that can be researched.

OA: Yes.

BB: [unintelligible] photos for the entire mission or something.

MV: Do you have any idea how many photos he may have taken over that period of time you were there?

OA: I couldn't tell you. Well, at least 20, I would say, maybe more. I don't know.

JJ: Given the technology at the time [17:00], he must have been carrying --
[talking simultaneously]

JJ: I assume he -- how did he develop his film?

OA: When he got back. He didn't develop it on the way.

JJ: Any other questions? That's why -- I just wanted to do --
[talking simultaneously]

VS: Did you capture on tape the discussion of his encounter with the Russians?

JJ: The trip to Beijing [17:38].

MV: No, I think that was between tapes.

BB: I think I missed that one.

OA: This was in the grave registration period. Well, I had left Guilin [17:58] and [18:00] gone to -- I finally got back to Kunming [18:06], where our headquarters were, and one of our guys came over, and he said, "Don't unpack. We're going to Peking tomorrow." And at that time, there were only about 10 people, 10 of us in Peking. We were some of

the first up there. So we got a plane and went up to Peking, and oh, God, we had a great time there too.

BB: So you were in Peking prior to the Marines getting there?

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: Because the entire Fifth Marine Regiment ended up going to Peking after the war.

EA: Tell them about the Russians bringing you down and giving you lunch.

OA: Well, I said, "Why don't we fly up to see what Mukton looks like [19:00]?" So we went over the big Wall and everything, and when we looked down, and my God, here was this farm of Russian soldiers all over the place, and the pilot says, "Jeez, I don't think we better land there." And I said, "If you don't want to get blown out of the sky, we'd better land there." So we went down, and this big sergeant lady came in the plane. She said, "Come." And I said, "We're coming." The pilot said, "I think I'll stay with the plane." "You come," she said. So we went out and marched between these lines of soldiers and everything, [20:00] went into -- there was a general in the office there, and oh, he looked like he was mad as hell. He said, "What are you doing here?" something like that. And I said, "Well, I won't try to lie to you." We used to say that we heard of some Americans being captive, so we'll investigate. But I said, "We made a mistake. We came up here. We shouldn't have landed, and if you let us go, we'll go." So he looked and then he started to laugh, and he said, "You're not going to go. You're going to have lunch." [laughs] He spoke pretty good English. So we had lunch, and oh, my God, the vodka was flying.

[laughter]

Oh, we had a ball.

MV: Hope the pilot didn't have too much vodka [21:00].

OA: No, no, I put him over in the corner. "No, no vodka for you today."

JJ: Designated driver.

BB: What were you flying in? What was the plane? C-47?

OA: It was a -- oh, God, it had two motors, and the inside was more or less empty inside.
They put some chairs in and stuff, but the --

MV: So you saw the Great Wall of China?

OA: Oh, yes, flew right over it, down it, and up it and everything.

MV: When you first saw it, what did you think?

OA: Oh, God, it's amazing [22:00]. And then when we were in Peking -- well, we went up and took a walk along. It's unbelievable, really. That Wall would sit there for all these years and everything, my God.

BB: Well, any other -- I think, again, I think we can all agree we could probably tell stories [unintelligible], but at the same time, we all have to eat dinner at some point, too. Vince, anything else from you?

VS: I think we're good to go. Thanks.

BB: Sure. Anything that you think we've skipped, or any good story that you haven't told us yet?

OA: Well, after, when the war ended, this grave registration deal [23:00], as I say, we'd use that for an excuse. I told you the guy said, "Don't unpack. We're going up to Peking." From there, we went to Jensin and Chingpao [spelled phonetically], and we just went all over the -- that was our excuse. We'd say, "We heard some Americans" -- and the captain, "Well, go investigate right away." So we went to these different places and had

a great time. Then they moved our offices to Shanghai after -- and oh God, Shanghai, we owned the town down there. [laughs] We had a [24:00] -- we had a great time there.

Then we went out on these trips. So the end of the war was really something.

BB: How long were you there in China? How long was it?

OA: Altogether about five years or -- no, six years, something like that. At the end of two and a half years, the war two years, three -- about five years, five and a half years.

MV: So you got to see quite a bit of China in that period of time.

OA: Oh, yes, yes.

MV: Wow. That's pretty amazing.

BB: Have you gone back since?

OA: No.

BB: So since 1946, you've never been back to China?

OA: No. I'd love to go, but [unintelligible].

JJ: Been there, done that, right? No need to go back.

BB: Well, you might be able to find -- of course, did you bring the golf clubs back [25:00] or are they still there?

OA: No, there was another -- by that time, they had -- the State Department had a representative in Hanoi, so I gave him the golf clubs.

BB: So they might be floating around somewhere.

OA: Could be.

[talking simultaneously]

BB: All right. Well, thank you so much.

MV: Thank you.

BB: This has been outstanding.

OA: Oh, good God, what was that?

BB: It sounded like a chair.

[laughter]

Vince, are you still there?

MV: Turn everything off.

VS: I'm still here.

[end of transcript]

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