

Today is December 21--

Stand by. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Slightly further.

Little more.

A little more.

Anytime.

Today is December 21, 1987. Mr. Hirayama, could you please state your name, address, and place of birth.

My name is Fred Y. Hirayama. I live--

I was born and raised in Port Allen-Eleele Kauai, Hawaii.

Mr. Hirayama, I would like to ask you the specific question. What was it like being a Japanese-American in 1941, prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Was there any form of discrimination or prejudice that you experienced?

For me, at my level when I was on Kauai, before the war it was an existence more of a plantation life type. So at our level, we didn't notice that discrimination. But we know that, or for myself, I knew I have to do something with myself. I have to get something to keep myself as well as my family going. And this is the extent of the discrimination as I experienced, not that drastic or traumatic type of experience that some people had.

But during the war, I've noticed that my brother-in-law was-- he had a tragic incident where he stood in line for an airplane ticket. And knowing that he's Japanese, he got thrown in the back. So, this is the extent of my discrimination experience.

But in 1941, you were aware of being a minority member?

Not really. Because we were more of a majority in our camp and at our level. But then again, if you get into the boss level, that's another thing again. You're somebody, and so I really wasn't too hateful, or you can say. But I did not experience that discrimination at the time.

OK, could you tell me a little bit about your pre-military involvement prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

Well, you see, I was a welder at a plantation before the war. And when the war happened, well, I was a welder. So I wanted to advance myself. I wanted to come to Honolulu. I couldn't come, because everything was restricted. And you have to be somebody to be traveling. And being a Japanese, no way I'm going to travel. Then again too, we had this Reverend Masao Yamada. He initiated a petition to have us Japanese-Americans be inducted in the service, to serve overseas.

And he was the chairman of the Hawaii morale committee. And we have to do something to serve our country. And so I was one of the many who signed this petition to have them induct, or to have us serve our country. And then after that, after six months or so, we found out that they did accept that. And they started to say that we are now being accepted. So if you want to volunteer to volunteer.

So I talked this over to my parents. And they said, yeah, you have to volunteer. So this is how I volunteered. And, of course, my brother wanted to volunteer too. So I said you, stay back, and I'm going. Well, you see, I had the travel in mind too, see? I wanted to travel, do something. Because in fact, I wanted to come to Honolulu and advance myself. But so the traveling agencies says, if you pass your physical and get inducted, well, we'll give you a pass.

Well, I'm going into service anyway. No, if I don't get accepted, then I'll give you a pass to Honolulu to work. So I

volunteered anyway because I think it was good for me and so for everybody. And I got with pass in flying colors. That's how I got involved. And I got inducted.

So my brother came. He stayed back to stay with the family. But later on, of course, he volunteered too. So he went to the MIS. I went to overseas there.

OK. Mr. Hirayama, could I go back to the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed? What were you doing? What did you experience?

Well, it was on Sunday. Early in the morning. Of course, I used to go during weekends. We had a boat. In fact, I made a boat, 15-footer, you see? And my brother and I and my father made a 15-footer boat. So every weekend we used to go out and fish. That Sunday morning, after we came back, we started early in the morning, about 4 o'clock in the morning outside, and come back. And we see all these National Guard people coming on. Hey, you guys come back. Put the boat over there, and go home, and just listen to the radio, and see what's happening.

He says, oh, just go home and listen to the radio. And you just stay home and just listen to the radio. And we all went. And I saw my friend. He was in the guard too, and my classmate. But so, anyway, and then of course, I found out that there was a war going on. But it's a shocking experience to find out. But of course, we knew that we had lots of troops on the island. So we knew these tensions.

But to have war at that time was almost unbelievable.

Were you shocked personally?

Yeah, I was shocked. But you just have to face the cold fact. Because this is a war. This is the real McCoy. And everybody thought it was maneuvers. But this is the real McCoy. So you just have to believe it, and that's how it was.

Did you feel that as a result of Japan attacking America, that it was your duty and every Nisei's duty to volunteer and to fight for America?

Yes. I thought, gee, this is the Japanese must be really foolish to be bombing here, Hawaii. This is my immediate thought. But there's a war. So I figured I'll have to go into service sooner or later. But it's just a matter of being accepted. Because I wasn't drafted. I wasn't quite of draft, well, maybe I was, of draft age. But I wasn't drafted. And it's just a matter of wait and see attitude. But because we know we cannot do anything.

So at the time I knew that many of the aliens were being transferred someplace. But we just didn't know.

Were you aware that any of the Japanese-Americans had been interned in relocation camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

Yes, I heard about it. But I didn't know for a fact. Because, you see, I lived in front of a Japanese school. And every New Year's, I used to go to the principal's place, and we used to play this shogi, you call it. Checkers, chess. So I used to go there and play all the time. So he and I were good friends. And he had a few sons. And we used to be good friends.

And I heard that they were transported someplace, likewise this Buddhist priest that used to teach at this Japanese school. He got transferred. He had a son too. And his son is presently a priest here in Honolulu. But at that time, he was very resentful too. This is what I heard. And they got transferred someplace. But we didn't know.

And when I was in the stateside, I thought maybe I looked him up, but-- anyway, that's the extent of what I know of people being interned.

How did you feel about that when you discovered that fact?

Well, I knew that it's going to happen because Japanese schoolteachers and priests were all suspects. They were all

corralled. This is what I heard in Hanapepe where they had a big Japanese school over there. I knew they were suspects. So they were transferred elsewhere, and we didn't know where they went.

Was your family scared?

No. We just stayed where they are, and didn't think much of that, because they can't do anything. You're with a crowd, and you move as a crowd it was. So it's just a matter of existence at that time.

Can you tell me a little bit about the time that you enlisted? Was your family proud of you, proud to see you serve?

Yes, I think so because I talked with my father. That either my brother or myself would have to go. So, I said, let me go and he stay back. Because two going at one time is not very good. But of course, as the war went on, maybe it was-- well, he didn't want to stay back too. He heard everybody's going. So he wants to volunteer. So he volunteered. And he got thrown to Camp Savage, Minnesota.

And then he went into Japan, when the war was over. So he went there as an occupational troop [INAUDIBLE]. So I'm over in Europe.

Did you have any members of your family who were in relocation camps?

No. No one in our family, but just the Japanese schoolteacher and the priest who hopefully I thought I could see them when I was in Camp Shelby, because I made a trip to Jerome Relocation Center. And I was hopeful that maybe I can see them over there. But it wasn't the case. But we went there more as a social thing. And we had a nice thing. We went for dancing and we made the best of it. They made the best of it. And you just have to enjoy things what you have, so no sense being miserable and resentful about everything.

And I was hopeful that I can see some of my friends over there. But they were at some other relocation center. To my feeling, the relocation center was, it looks like a camp, but not as well, those who really have been parted, the families have been separated, I would think they would be very resentful as I found out. But with me it was a social event. So I did go there to enjoy and socialize with many of the ladies over there.

So I think I had a nice time going over there. So mine is an enjoyable experience over there.

Were any feelings of anger expressed to you by some of the mainland Nisei?

It's strange, because many of them did experience. They go to Harrisburg, and some other places. They did have that kind of experience, but unfortunately I'm not the traveling kind, go on pass like-- I'm more like a stay put type, you see. So I didn't get these adverse kind of reactions as how many of them did have. It's more of a pleasant affair with me, so I can't give you much on that kind of adverse thing.

Mr. Hirayama, I'd like to ask you. When you were inducted into the 522nd, and you went to Camp Shelby, did you experience any form of discrimination by virtue of the fact that you were Japanese?

I experienced that only by hearing while I was in Camp Shelby. And you see, I'm not a drinking type, see? I don't go to these beer gardens. But every time guys go to the beer garden, they started to cuss about the Caucasian group on it. That's the 69th division, you see? That's a proud division to be in. After all, the 69th is the fighting 69th. So those guys go gung-ho. So the 442nd and 69th were more like on opposite ends. They go in a beer bar, sometimes they have skirmishes. But that's the extent of that, see?

Maybe it's not that great of a-- it's just a beer bar squabble. But that's the extent of my experience in that thing.

Had you heard of any other people being called names or experiencing a hard time because they were Japanese-Americans?

No. Some have gone to Harrisburg, and they say they will stay away from certain places, and this and that. So I tried to stay away from those areas, and tried to stay in the middle of the road kind of a path. Yeah. So I really didn't have those Black guys and bust. You know.

Did you get in any fights yourself?

No, I'm the peaceful type.

OK, Mr. Hirayama, after you left Camp Shelby, could you tell me what was your division, and your rank, et cetera?

I was a PFC and more as a driver. And so I used to be a Jeep driver, just about right through. So I used to be with the liaison group, where I would drive the sergeant, the captain, and make the contacts, from the forward to the headquarters. So that's the extent of-- I'm not the forward type, to be associated with the infantry. The nearest where I've been experiencing was in the lost battalion where they were fighting right across this mound right here. I'm right in the back. But I felt as safe as can be with the infantry in front of me, and I'm in the back of them. So why should I be afraid?

They said you have to dig in. But I'm foolhardy. You see? So we would be playing chess above the Jeep. And whereas they said to stay underneath, and whenever you see the German ack-acks or 88s coming over. They just go boom. You know he's going to come back, see? So when I hear a boom, we jumped down in here, and before the shrapnel hit you. You have to run and stay on the shelter.

So I was rather on the foolhardy side. Let's put it that way. And still, I knew I was so confident I'm going to come back, see? So I just never did think much about being hit. Being single, nobody to-- if I go, I go. See? So and we all had that attitude. And so I volunteered to go up for at that time. My major told me, Fred, you're crazy. But I said, I want to stay back. I just want to be up there. So I go back and forth.

As a young boy, I'm full of excitement, let's put it that way, but I didn't want to be with the infantry, because that's a little more daring. But getting to the more grim side, I know that I'll have to put my hand down in the hole.

Associating with the French people or Italian people, they tell grim stories. So, I'll have to stay that way, and we accept it as such, and keep on going. And so long as we move forward, well, I just followed the leading. Wherever he goes that's the way it is.

How did--

[AUDIO OUT]

Either I go or I don't go, so it was [INAUDIBLE] freedom.

OK. Mr. Hirayama, I know that the 522nd served first in France, and then was the only Nisei battalion to fight in Germany. Now in Germany, what was your first contact with a concentration camp?

Well, at that time, we were traveling so fast. We advanced towards Augsburg and then going down to Warburg. And probably at one of the stops, we noticed those striped uniform people lingering around our mess area, and seeing them eating out of garbage cans, and they looked very starved. So after eating, well, I couldn't very well throw whatever I had. So I gave to them.

And then the following day, probably, they said we could go and see that camp there. So a group of us went to see that Dachau camp. And that was in the afternoon. And when we went in there, we saw the mound where the prisoners would be kneeling down and shot. And that was one area. And there was a gas chamber as high as maybe the ceiling is, slightly lower, maybe about seven feet ceiling. And you see those pipes sticking out here and there.

And as we heard, people would be shoved in there, all naked. Of course, they would take a shower first. You see, they would wet them, and then they would shove them in there cramped up standing upright. And they would let loose the

gas, and of course it was empty at that time when we saw. The stench of death was so awful. We just couldn't stand it. But I wanted to see it. We all wanted to see that.

And from there, the bodies would be brought into the ovens. And the ovens would be where the bodies would be cremated. And the stench was really awful. And we saw the other place, those barracks still. But they're still around, but the stench of that was awful. And after we came back from over there, I couldn't eat supper because thinking about the human beings being killed and cremated, and it was unbearable. So that afternoon, that night I couldn't have supper. You feel funny inside.

And after that, you see many of them roaming around the place, and gee, you feel better. And yet feel sad for them because they have no place to go. Where are they going? Gee. And they were told that we cannot feed them. And what are you going to do? This is the question you think about.

But we're still at war. So we still keep on marching. And before that, we were advancing so fast. At times the artillery was ahead of the infantry. And it just happened at that time, maybe I volunteered for detail, I think. I rode in 2 and 1/2 ton truck full of us. We were going back towards our unit, our fort. And here we passed a small plaza, a small two story plaza kind of a type.

Hey, we saw a group of German soldiers. They had blue uniform, and so we stopped. And sure enough there were some German soldiers over there, wow. And well, I think we better pick those guys up. Or maybe we'll have to check whether they're going to be-- they're still in the war or what. But as we backed up, we found out that they have laid their arms. They've given up way back. Because our infantry is up there. And the Germans were retreating so fast.

So we lined these up, we lined these people up. And we had to hold these people someplace. So we hauled them to headquarters and they took care of that. Of course, we had to confiscate all their weapons, and whatever they had, at that time. Of course, that was a big gamble because they could have easily taken potshots at us. But sensing the way how they were sitting around and the people watching them, we knew that they're not going to-- well, we took a gamble anyway. Because being friendly at first, so they didn't put up a fight. So that's the extent of our real closeness to being shot at, if you may call it that way.

OK. Mr. Hirayama, could you describe to me your first contact with Dachau or any prisoner that you saw at the camp? How did that come about?

Well, that was when I saw them coming towards our mess area. This is the extent. But that's about all the nearness to that camp.

What happened when they were coming near the mess area?

Well, they look hungry. They need something to eat. So you know that they wanted food, so we were told not to feed them. So whatever we had left, we would give it to them. And those things, well, it's acceptable to feed them. So I didn't eat too much anyway.

Did any of them speak to you?

No, not really. So I tried to converse with them with hand motions and that sort of thing. But I couldn't very well speak German, and they couldn't converse in American. So it's more of a pantomime situation.

Did you go inside the camp at all?

Yes. Yes, I did go inside and see the place. But the stench of that is-- the stench, the smell, it's unbearable. But we wanted to see the place.

Who did you go with?

Well, we wanted to see the specific points where they were being exterminated.

Did you hear about the concentration camps before, Mr. Hirayama, before you went there?

No. We haven't heard of that. We knew that they had prisoner of war camps. But to the extent of extermination, my knowledge of that is very big in that area. But with the people talking around, and congregating around, and knowing then it struck my mind that these people were being starved and ready to be exterminated. Stories do come out. So it got me interested. So I tried to pick up from there on.

How did you feel about that? What thoughts ran through your mind?

I thought because of the war, and the Jewish situation, to me, I thought it wasn't that bad. But associating and looking at them, it was a big, big problem. And that problem is not going to go away overnight or years. It might maybe centuries to really solve this problem. But of course, at that point in time, it just didn't dawn on me.

Just you see, I'm the kind of a type-- I'll take things as how it is. I have to be pragmatic about things, being hateful, or what. I can't do anything about it. I'm just a man in the bottom.

They press the button and I move, and that's about the extent of it.

Was there snow on the ground? Could you describe what it was like?

Yes, where I saw them walking around the area, the sad thing about it is that they didn't have much clothing. And here when we were in France, I had the trench feet, you see? And it's cold as it is, them walking without barely just cloth around their feet to keep it warm, walking in the snow.

Gee. Oh, my goodness they must have trench feet by now, I thought, because my feet were cold and I had almost trench feet during the war.

So with them I felt really sad in that. You just can't do anything if you don't have shoes. And that's what they'll have to bear.

About how many prisoners did you see in your time at Dachau?

In Dachau, I didn't see anything at all, because it was after the fact. I've seen them marching away, walking away here and there. But they said, well, they're on their own. So we cannot do much about that.

Were most of them Jewish to your knowledge?

No, I didn't know what type or where they came from. But as we stayed there, as an occupation troop, I've noticed that each German family had one-- let's say servant you may call it or a yard man or something. Each German family had one either a Polish or maybe I don't think it was a Jew, because they would be in a concentration camp, maybe a Russian probably, or Romanian, or some sort. I didn't know. But that was a thing.

I thought, gee, each German family had one slave, well not slave, because they enjoyed the comforts of a home. So that was the outstanding thing I've noticed. But after the war, they lost track of that. And they emigrated to elsewhere. We don't know where they gone.

So we've been trying to check on each of these travelers going here and there, somewhere anyway.

Were most of these prisoners that you saw young or old? Could you tell us about that?

It's more of the elderly group. It's more people older than us. This is what I've seen. None of these children or women. I've seen all men. Strangely enough, I didn't see any children or women, strictly men. Because maybe they did survive

the hardship.

Did you see any German personnel while you were at Dachau?

No, I haven't seen. I suppose they've just gone away, skipped away. And we're more the after, or come-lately type of troops. So some of our people, they've been in the advanced groups, so they would be exposed to that people.

Did you speak or any of the other members of the 522nd, to your knowledge, did they speak with any German civilians around the camp about why did this happen. Why did you treat these prisoners like this?

I spoke to one of the civilian people there. And they tried to dodge the subject, because they would say I did not know. And I would think I would have believed them, because most of the people there not told a true story. And if they did know the story, they tried to keep it quiet. Because after all, it's something they'd like to forget. And they know it's not a good story. So to those people that I've talked to, I try to be friendly with them, and they try to be friendly.

So after the war, I tried to go back to where in 1984, when we made a trip back to Germany. I tried to reminisce where we've tracked, especially in Donauworth where I've known some people there. But they've moved on. So that was the extent of my association.

Were the prisoners there eventually, were you there when they were eventually fed?

No I wasn't. To that extent, I wasn't too knowledgeable, or I haven't been exposed to that time.

What was your last impression that you can remember of Dachau, when you left it? Can you recall anything?

Well, I thought it was awful. I thought it was almost inhumane to think that you're going to be burned. No, you're going to kill, and then burn them. And we knew that it was on a mass production basis. But how could the people be exterminated that much and that fast? And later on, as I found out that they had 30 or so more camps around the whole of Europe. Oh, it was almost unbelievable that people would do that.

But Hitler is how it was. He had to exterminate every one of them. So he'll do anything. So you accept the fact that that's how cruel they are so. But hopefully that these things will not happen again, is what my thinking was. I cannot ask why it did happen. So we'll have to figure the future that this cannot happen again. How can we prevent it? This was always uppermost in my mind. We cannot happen, but human beings is how they are. It will happen again, not to that extent. But if we can prevent it in a lesser scope, maybe we might have done something to improve that.

Did any of the prisoners express any joy or relief that the 522nd had been their liberators?

Well, most of the prisoners were not the emotional type, I think, because everything is gruesome with them. Everything is not that happy. They just want to exist. And so you would rarely see a smile come out of them. So long as they eat something, they can keep themselves alive. Of course, on a lighter moment when they've been fed, I think. Because I've seen them talking to the youngsters around the neighborhood. But they may have smiled, but I would think it's rarely they would have smiled. There's nothing to smile about at that time.

It's sad, but that's the way it is.

Did you hear of any stories of the prisoners ripping meat off dead horses?

Well, I haven't seen them, because they may have gone that way. I've gone this way. So mine was not where I do go in the full area that much and get exposed to that.

Were you, Mr. Hirayama, were you aware that you were 522nd division had indeed liberated the oppressed prisoners at Dachau? And if so, were you proud of that fact? I haven't realized the fact that we have liberated them. But knowing that they're in our area, well you ask the question, where did they come from and all that thing. And who did This and

who let them loose? And these are the questions. And nobody seems to have known at that time until somebody said that they did it.

But at that point in time, not many people knew about it. And even if they knew, most of the veterans are tight lipped. They don't want to say much about the war story till a few years back. It's a sad thing about it, that.

Mr. Hirayama, why don't you tell me about your reunion back in 1984 with respect to the Dachau experience? Could you give me your feelings and impressions of that meeting?

Well when, our ultimate goal was to get through [PLACE NAME], but on its way we stopped over at the Donauworth, which is where we stayed during our occupational time there. And we made friends over there, strangely enough. You always make friends. You try to make friends, whether it's enemy or a friend. You try to make friends.

And this is, as you may call it, a place we called home, home away from home. Let's put it that way. So we had a happy reunion at that time with some of the families who had good friends over there. And it was a joyful experience, where one guy had a picture of a baby boy and a baby girl. And they were sisters and brothers. And that was 40 years ago. So John Sugano who made the arrangements to have them notified that we're coming around, these two made the appearance at that time, when we were there.

40 years after, this is a before and after kind of situation, where this was a real happy occasion. This is something too we'd like to talk about. Then after that, then we must see Dachau. So we made a trip there. And it's a well-improved museum piece now. The barbed wires were all replaced. And I think it's been modernized. And it's you see the barbed wire fence, and some of the barracks being rebuilt, and the cement emplacements where they had all the barracks over there

[AUDIO OUT]

Rolling. Oh, we want to kill the AC. Go ahead.

Could you please--

Wait.

What was it like being a Japanese-American in 1941? Did you experience any kind of discrimination or prejudice at that time?

At my level, I have not experienced that.

Don't look at us. Always look at him.

That grim discrimination that I've heard about.

Now, ask another question?

How did you feel when Pearl Harbor was attacked? Could you please tell us your experience?

When it was attacked, I thought it was-- why does it happen?

Another question.

Keep going.

What was your first contact with a concentration camp in Germany, and in particular, with Dachau? Could you relay that experience to us?



When I entered Dachau to look at the place, I thought it smelled awful for one thing. And the grimness of getting to see that and entering the place--

OK, next question.

Wait. Let me get--

Stand by.

Go ahead.

Mr. Hirayama, could you tell us about your reunion in 1984 with the survivors of Dachau?

This was in Dachau camp itself where the survivors, one of the survivors at least, came over.

OK. Next question.

Mr. Hirayama--

Wait a minute.

Hold on.

Go ahead.

Mr. Hirayama, if there is anything that you could tell to the current generation and to future generations as a result of this experience, as far as your contact with the concentration camps in Germany, Is there something that you could tell to them or that you would like to tell to them?

I would say for them to get to know what has happened in the past. I think this has to be repeated constantly.

Now different angle.

Stand by. And refocusing. Andy, hold your spot for second. What are you going to be? Is that were you are?

Yeah.

And now, your question?

OK.

OK. Go ahead.

When did you first become aware that the Japanese-Americans had been interned in relocation camps, and how did you feel about that?

I knew that my Japanese school teacher and the priest that were constantly involved with the Japanese tradition, teaching the tradition, they seemed to have disappeared. So we knew something has happened and--

Tell a funny story. Think of something so you look at it and--

Smile.

I mean no, just like you're talking. Ask a question that related to some comical incident or something?

OK. There was a funny incident that Mr. Hirayama had spoken about. Do you--

The prisoner?

Go back to something that happened in the camp when he was talking about the relocation camps. And he went there for the dances. You can smile about that with the women, remember he said he went to party.

Oh, right. Mr. Hirayama could you tell us about your-- Mr. Hirayama, could you tell us about your experiences when you were at Camp Shelby in visiting the relocation camps for the Japanese-Americans?

We went there to meet the people there, to socialize, and to see any of those friends there. Hopefully that I thought maybe I could see some of the people I knew back home. But we did go there to enjoy ourselves more, and they enjoyed just as much too. So it was an enjoyable trip.

OK, good. All right, now let me just-- I want to go in a slightly different angle. And you can ask maybe another question.

OK. Is there some question that I should--

In particular?

Remember we want to do this.

I did.

OK.

OK, we just-- we stopped it. Give us five seconds.

Stand by. Speed.

Mr. Hirayama, could you tell us about your pre-military experiences in 1941?

Well, that was back in December 7, 1941. We used to go fishing during the weekend. And that Sunday morning, we were out fishing. And early in the morning, we were out there. We came back. We were told that we'll have to go back home and leave your boat there. And then just go home. And so we asked them, what happened. They said, just go home and listen to the radio. And you'll find out.

And so we went home and then we found out that there was a war going on. And we thought it was just maneuvers. But no, this is the real McCoy. They've been saying that this is the real McCoy. And so, we accept the fact, there's a war going on and we thought it was well, it's thunders. But maybe it was expected because you see troops all over the place. But not--

Another question. Just one off the top of your head.

How did you feel when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

I thought, gee, these people must be foolish. But war is war. And we'll have to face the fact that we'll have to serve our country now. And but being there we cannot serve in the service that's the problem. So it's just a matter of wait and see an attitude. I thought I had. We can't do anything. So--

OK.

OK.

OK.

Oh, wait. How are you doing? OK, good. There we go. That's good.

OK.

OK.

So we're just going--

[INAUDIBLE].

Tape is rolling. This is recording right now. Try not to move your hands now. What are you [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, you can move your hand, actually. Try moving your top hand out. Just move that thing down. Can you take it off?

Put it on your side.

Even for-- that's good. That's good.

Let's keep it going.

OK. So now are these blanks? These are blanks?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And we're going to have to get more tape. Because it is very nice. Now I can give him more warning.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

That's good enough. What do you think?

Yeah.

OK.

Yeah.

We need the light.

Got it.