

SIDNEY VERNON, MD

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War in the Far East, 1942-1945

Interviewed by  
Charles G. Roland, M.D.

8 February 1986

Oral History Archives  
Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine  
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Charles G. Roland, MD:

Then if you would please just....

Sidney Vernon, MD:

Well all right now, here's how it went. I'll start with the trip across the Pacific. I got these orders to go some time in late September.

C.G.R.:

This is 1941?

S.V.:

Yes. I fought like a tiger to try to get them changed, and it was no soap, so I just had to go; there was my little wife with about six weeks more to go, and she had to have that kind of disappointment. But one of the things I did, between the time I got the orders and the time I left, was to read like mad on tropical disease. Oh, I read like mad. I learned all about the parasites; [reading about] one particular type of parasite based on onchocerciasis, which causes blindness in people who live around the rivers in South America, stood me in good stead -- among other things.

Anyway, here I was going with the 803 Aviation Engineers Battalion Separate. It consisted of two companies that left Westover Field and we picked up another company in Hawaii. So there were three companies; there was a major in command and three captains for the companies, and I was battalion surgeon.

Unfortunately I was a captain at the time, so I had to go as battalion surgeon. Now, in those days doctors started as First Lieutenant, but I had done a certain amount of work that

justified them giving me a promotion as a reserve officer, so there I was a captain. So I had with me two lieutenants, one a medical officer and one a dental officer. The dental officer was Al Mohnac, M-o-h-n-a-c, and the medical officer was Herbie Coone, C-o-o-n-e. Well, when we got to Manila they broke us up, because we had to go to three different places and build airfields.

So I was sent with Company A and Herbie Coone was sent...no, I was sent with Company Headquarters, Herbie Coone was sent with Company A and Al Mohnac went with Company B. Of course, we had a complement of about 12 enlisted men with a staff sergeant in charge, and so that was the medical part of this Engineer Battalion Separate.

We assembled at Westover Field went and got on a troop train and went west. It took us a little over a week to get to San Francisco, and the first thing I did when I got off the train at San Francisco was to order a car and go to the Quartermaster Supply Depot and tell them I wanted some stuff. Now, I had insights that there I would be really separate and alone in the jungle, and being responsible for whatever happened, including tropical diseases, and I wanted to be prepared for it. But when I went into the supply depot in San Francisco, the commanding officer calls his major over and he says, give this man anything he asks for. You see, they felt sorry me or something.

Well, the major also felt sorry for me. He said, "Well, those Japs are going to get into you all right." Of course, I sort of half suspected that but to be told the truth in addition to suspecting the truth was, well, immersing you in a sort of a

cloud where optimism was less easy. One of the things that I did was, I had made up my mind that if the Japs went into us -- having remembered the Rape of Nanking and a few other odds and ends -- that I would sell myself as dearly as possible. So I went out on the market and brought myself a Colt .22. The purpose of having a Colt .22 was to have the kind of armament that is issue and still be able to [get practice enough with live ammunition to] handle it. I then figured I'd get at least two of them before they got me. That was the kind of a diurnal nightmare that I carried around. Well, at any rate, I used to do some target shooting [with the .22 ammunition] and all that crap.

At one time around Christmas -- no, around Thanksgiving time -- I went to Manila, to the Officer's Club; it was my time off and I was swimming, and some of the civilians used to have swimming privileges in the Manila Military Club. I talked to this girl and I said, "Aren't the Japs going to come here." She said, "Ah, no. They've been coming at us for years." Well, OK.

Then about two days later I saw a funny airplane flying through the clouds. I thought, well gee whiz, that's a Japanese surveillance plane. What do they call that type of patrolling, when they're intelligence-gathering? Well anyway, that's what, for some reason or other I couldn't recognize that. I thought to myself, sure, that must be a Jap plane. Why isn't somebody doing something about it? Well, OK, we all let our imaginations run riot, but on the other hand we could give a damn. We knew that there were a lot of rumors, and when you live with rumors you just ignore them.

Now, when December 8th came and we were getting messages to

be on the alert, our planes had already been bombed sitting on the ground. We thought, well, how dumb can our people be, but the funny thing was the planes had gone up and they'd come down but the bombers had been late and by coming late they caught them all after they'd come down and there they were -- not dispersed but just sitting targets. Well, it's a peculiar thing how you react to the first explosive sign of a change in condition -- I just laughed, I thought it was a mistake that would soon be corrected, but the commanding officer thought, "Oh serious, oh serious." He had a long look and I was giggling. It wasn't until the next day I thought that well, maybe this is the real thing.

So we just lived from minute to minute and day to day, and that was that. So we stopped sleeping in the barracks. Well, we still stayed in the barracks for the first few days but then, after two or three days we went out into the field and slept in tents right next to our airfield, to be where the men were, you see. We were stationed at Del Carmen. Have you looked at a map of the Philippines to see where Del Carmen is? Do you know where Clark Field is?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

S.V.:

Well, Clark Field is 12 miles away from, north of Del Carmen the way the crow flies, but in order to get there by road we had to go 22 miles. You go first to Angeles, down south to San Fernandes, and then come back to Del Carmen. That's how you got

there by road. But I remember on November 22nd the cavalry, you see the 26th Cavalry came through our bivouac, our place at Del Carmen -- we were on a sugar plantation -- so I asked for permission to ride with them. Well, that's all in the book.

C.G.R.:

Yes, skip things if it's in the book.

S.V.:

Well, let's get back to my coming home. I came late and I reported two diseases. One was nutritional melalgia, which was the painful burning feet syndrome, and the other was -- I didn't report the breast, but I did report the nocturia. Now, it seemed to me, I assumed that the nocturia was a symptom of Vitamin B1 deficiency.

One reason I thought of that was because, of course, I published that and I published about nutritional melalgia in JAMA and I published the nocturia in, I think in either Journal of the International College of Surgeons or somewhere. Now, there were 800 of us. Sometime in 1944 almost, early in '44, sent to Los Banos, south of Manila, to build an airfield. There was an airfield being built in Manila and our boys had been treated pretty badly there. One doctor had been pistol-whipped and his teeth knocked out because he tried to intervene when certain sick men were being sent to work by the Japanese sergeants. We didn't know what was going to happen. Well, we didn't go to the same place, they sent us somewhere else. But it seemed that we were being sent there late enough so that the Japanese were minding their Ps and Qs. Some very interesting things happened at that time.

Now, there I was with 800 men. We were quartered in four buildings -- 200 apiece. There was one enormous, or maybe four enormous sleeping-type forms in each one. There was a little tiny bit of circulation space but most of it was just the straw tatamis that we slept on.

Now, somehow or other we seemed to have good communication with the authorities, because they let us buy bananas and coconuts and other things on the market with the paper money they were giving us.

Well, one time their doctor came into...well, this is in the book too, so I won't tell you that either. At any rate, there came a time, we were getting good treatment there, and there came a time when I asked the doctor for some of the extract of ipecac that is used for the treatment of amebic dysentery. I forget the name of it.

C.G.R.:

Emetine?

S.V.:

Emetine. He said, "What do you want emetine for?" And I said, "Well there are a certain amount of people who have amebic dysentery." He said, "How do you know." I said, "Well, they had positive stools." A couple of days later I was summoned to headquarters and a bunch of Japanese were sitting around and they started asking me questions. A Japanese orderly comes in with some cold strawberry milk. Now, I hadn't had anything cold for over two years. I was wondering what are they making such a fuss about. Well, they wanted the truth out of me and they were too



scared to beat it out of me so they had to get it out of me the best way they could by being kind to me, because they were scared because they were losing at that time. So they knew that the handwriting was on the wall. That explains that.

Well, their Japanese doctor comes into camp one time and I was wearing a pair of clodhoppers, just a sole with a leather strap over it, a sole of wood and neatly carved out by someone to fit the foot, because the prisoners of war developed all sorts of handicrafts, and just a pair of shorts. I don't know what there was about that doctor, but I must have done something to psyche him, because a couple of days later he comes back and he says, "Get your clothes on, we're going to Manila." So he took me to Manila. Well, this is in the book too, because I have an illustration. Well, that's no good. All right, you better ask questions, then I'll tell you whether it's in the book or not.

C.G.R.:

OK, well what I'd like you to do then -- this may help -- is tell me about your trip to Japan and what you did there, even if some of it's in the book.

S.V.:

OK. Well, here's what happened. Before we got on the boat....

C.G.R.:

That was about when?

S.V.:

That was, well, they trundled us from Cabanatuan to Manila sometime before July 13. We spent three nights in Bilibid, Bilibid prison. Then on July 16th, they put us on their boats

and then put the boats out on the harbor. I was at the end of the line of 1500 people. By the time I got on the boat there were 60 people stretched out with heat exhaustion. Well, of course, it was obvious the doctor had to do something so I did this, that, and the other thing. But by this time the Japanese guards were half scared, because they didn't want these people dying on them because there was a different atmosphere. They felt they would be held accountable. They were pretty cruel but they didn't go the limit on their cruelty. So one of the things that I did was to move the [crowded American soldiers] up from the hold onto the deck and around and down the hold again, because there were 1500 men crowded into a tiny area that later on housed only 600 men. Well, now, by a bit of shouting and controlling and so on I got the men circulating and the Japanese soldiers didn't interfere at all.

So I got a lot of -- what shall I say -- notoriety of some sort, because after that I had the run of the ship. The Japs felt that I had done something that benefited them. I had controlled the men, I had controlled them by alleviating some of their discomfort by making all of them share some of the topside cooling and sort of conquered all these, as I say, alleviated the problem. Well, of course, after that I was able to go anywhere on the ship I wanted.

Now, what happened afterward was that myself and two corpsmen were assigned that cabin-like area was 600 and the other 900 went into the cargo hold. We had [on the ship altogether] about eight medical officers and about twelve line officers. One

of the things that happened: on the way up, right after we left Formosa, at night, one of the ships in our flotilla was sunk. It made a big fire on the surface, because we could see the reflected light and the wavering light on the faces of the Japanese guards at the head of the gangway looking out -- we could look up and see that. So we were lucky.

We got to Japan on August 4th. For some reason or other I had an awful lot of baggage. I seem to have a propensity to collect it. Well, I managed to control it too. I remember one Japanese guard tried to take some of my stuff -- threw it on the dock [to try to] get to it before I could, but it didn't do him any good. I clung to my bags just like a woman clings to her children. I had a trunk locker and about three dufflebags. It was shameful [to be able to hold on to so much] but there it was.  
C.G.R.:

Do you remember the name of the ship?

S.V.:

[Tasker H. Bliss] There's something about you that makes you try and forget all this crap. And you see, when that Japanese doctor was kind to me, I started studying the Japanese language. And in two weeks, in two weeks I was making up for lost time and not being interested in their language. Then, when I was sent away from Los Banos to go back to Cabanatuan, I thought I was unlucky; at the end of the war I found out that out of that 800 [at Los Banos] only about 30 survived, and maybe two or three officers. And the two medical officers -- that is one dental and one medical -- did not survive. So that's what would have happened to me if I hadn't been dragged out of there. So I

more or less led a charmed life. It's amazing how many times I was in bad spots and was plucked out of there in time to avoid disaster.

C.G.R.:

Well, go ahead with your experience in Japan, then -- we've got you there and....

S.V.:

Well, when I got there here's what happened. There were two officers and myself with the 200 Americans that were sent to this place in Futase [Kyushu Island], which is a mining town. There were already 300 Javanese, and half Javanese and Dutch. They were all classified as Dutch, because one of the things the Dutch East India Company did was they never let the Dutchmen take their wives with them. So they had to have the Javanese women to bear their kids and there were plenty of them. There were a lot of Dutchman with Javanese blood. There was even one doctor of that sort. He was a sort of a nervous person. They didn't have him do any doctoring because they assessed him as, what the hell did they assess him, they assessed him as, well, affected emotionally or mentally by the experience.

So there we were, 500 people quartered in a miners' club in Futase; as a result we had these hot baths and so on, but we had to put up with the disciplining. One time I wasn't considered [to be] conforming to discipline and I was stuck in solitary confinement for four days, but on the third day the guy who got me into this trouble came, acting glad to get me out. At that particular moment I thought that I was really in trouble. [To

leave the cell, with the 3-foot high door, one had to crouch. I kept my eyes on his, anticipating possible foul play.] Another time, there was one Japanese guard who came in to see how I was doing, and he asked me to hand him a book that I was looking at and writing in. I knew that if I handed him that book, it was kind of a diary, and I had some uncomplimentary opinions written down, so I tore it up and threw it in the latrine and thought to myself, "Well, you so and so, if you want it go get it," but he didn't dare tell anybody about that because it would have reflected on him.

I remember the first time I went into solitary confinement; naturally, I was a little upset, but the first thing I was able to do was take all my clothes off and take four fleas out of my clothes. That was, you see, "It's an ill wind that blows no good" -- those were the dividends. You couldn't do that in a regular area.

Well, there was another time when the officers were lined up by some sergeant that was supposed to keep control, and he said in Japanese -- so that the interpreter had to tell us about it -- that we are responsible for the men disobeying the rules. And the rules were that they can't get up and walk around the barracks before reveille. Of course, some of the guys want to use the latrine, will do that. But it's against the rules, so this guy says we've got to punish you so we've got to punish the officers. I immediately start complaining. So the other American officer, "Vernon, Vernon, Vernon." He thought we might get in more trouble if some one of us didn't submissively conform. Well, I thought I can take any rap that they can give;

I tried to make it appear as if I was glancing off his fist, but I was trying to time it in such a way that I didn't get the full impact of it. But the blows were less severe than expected. So I decided well, they don't even know how to hit, and so on. That's how that went.

But when we were in Japan after the surrender it was interesting to see the way they [the American planes] delivered food to us. On the 18th [August, 1945] the first drops of food came and they came in 55-gallon drums. After that they learned how to do better, because a 55-gallon drum that hit anybody, killed them. There were some Japanese civilians who were injured by those drops, but later they were more accurate. They dropped them right inside of our compound, and they were just little crates so that they weren't lethal if they hit anyone. But I can remember people dodging them as they fell and getting out of the way as they came down with parachutes.

Well, after we had been there about a week or two.....

C.G.R.:

Excuse me, were you the only medical officer?

S.V.:

No, Barshop was there also. He'd been there before. Barshop was more or less taking charge. For example, the year before I was there, four men had died of pneumonia. All of them had slept on the windward side of the barracks. Now, that told me clearly that lowering of the body temperature during sleep gives a person pneumonia. I knew of some sulfa that had come there by Red Cross, and I told our commanding officer about it,

because they didn't let us take any with us. So he went out to some depot and he brought back 2000 tablets of sulfa. Then Barshop decided that only one medical officer should decide who gets it and who doesn't. I decided I agreed with him -- sure, you're here longer, it should be you. So he used to divvy them out to people who were suspected of having any kind of lung infection and we had no deaths that winter. So those 2000 tablets of sulfa saved a lot of lives.

I remember sometime after the surrender, some guy came into my care and obviously had a chest full of fluid. I removed -- you won't believe this -- 1800 cc of fluid from his pleural cavity with a 2-cc syringe. That was all that I had, and that's what I was trying to use to [draw off the fluid and still] prevent pneumothorax.

Of course, the men were working in the mine and one of the things that used to happen with malnutrition is that any abrasion became a local abscess. Well, when you had a local abscess you had to incise it. The tool that I had was just a piece of metal sharpened (I kept it very sharp), and the anesthesia that I had was something like this -- I made them then breathe in and out, in and out, in and out. Then, when I was ready I said to them, "Breathe all the way out and hold it." Then I'd make as fast a sweep as I could, and it would hurt, but by the time they had drawn in a breath to yell their control had returned so that by keeping their lungs empty I made them think that they had some kind of anesthesia, because they didn't hear themselves yell. Well, that was pretty good.

A funny thing happened between me and the doctor. I was

trying to psyche him and it wasn't working.

C.G.R.:

Was this Barshop or the Japanese doctor?

S.V.:

No, no, the Japanese doctor. I was trying to psyche him in some stupid way, but I was just sort of learning -- the hard way -- what works and what doesn't work. He was a little bit disgusted with the way I was obviously trying to get around him, so he called me "baka", which is "damn fool, idiot." Well, so I laid off, but later on he could see that my aggressiveness...

You see, here's an example: The commanding officer of the Japanese prison camp took some of us out to a country inn. Who did he take out? -- the interpreter, and me, and him. Now, you took your shoes off and went into the country inn. When we went out, we had our shoes placed in a certain way, but it was clear that of the three of us, I was ichi ban. Ichi ban is Number One Man. Well, I thought to myself, what the hell is there about me that suddenly I'm glorified? But it was, first, my childish, naive, unawareness of danger, a certain amount of self-righteousness, a certain amount of stubborn nonconformity or whatever it is. If I got mad enough I could do anything.

To come back to this doctor, you see, this doctor gave me a gift. There's one thing that I told the commanding officer, I said, "I want...." Well, I don't know whether I told the commanding officer, or the interpreter -- I said, "I want a Samurai sword, and I want it." So the doctor gave me his own Samurai sword -- he was an officer. And right now that's sitting



in the Museum of the International College of Surgeons in Chicago, 1516 Lakeshore Drive. I'm given credit for having, well, having donated it. But he gave me a nice porcelain set of dishes to take home. I carried them with me by plane all the way to the Philippines. But then, since I wanted to go home by plane from the Philippines, I wasn't going to go on any troop ship. For example, a troop ship set out October 10th, I waited until October 16th for plane travel, and I can tell you this, I got home much sooner than that troop ship, which took three weeks to cross. So I left all those dishes in the Philippines -- gave them to some of the GIs.

Well, sometime later, sometime later, the defense counsel for this doctor, who is being accused of war crimes, called me up to ask me to vouch for him. I just sat back and asked myself, "Which counts more, is it giving me the samurai sword, is it giving me the dishes which I gave away, or calling me baka?" I was just unforgiving enough and mean enough that I ignored that. I just said, "Well, I don't know, there isn't much I can say," because he was a kind doctor and when he called me "baka" I may have deserved it [laughter], because I was doing too damn much.

Of course, there's something to be said for being bold and brassy at a time when the majority are being prudent and timid. If you're stupid enough to be bold and brassy it can be to your advantage.

One time when the Japanese -- I was telling a bunch of jokes and everybody was laughing; I told them all the jokes I'd ever heard. And there was a Japanese soldier looking in the window. Of course, the English corpsman was just dying with laughter and

rolling on the floor; somehow or other the paranoia that everyone has a little bit, and which the Japanese have to a large extent (they don't feel superior as a rule), made him think that I was telling jokes about the Japanese, so I was called to the guardhouse. Well, the same guy who was responsible for getting me into trouble that other time, so that I had to take the solitary confinement, he's bawling me out: I'm the worst officer there. I'm no damn good. And that jerk comes out and says, "And we're not afraid of you." No, no. This is my escape hatch. But, of course you can't show it, you can't do it. And I thought to myself...you see, I had done some kind of psyching. I psyched those little bastards, I psyched that one doctor but it didn't work with everyone. And, well, I came to the conclusion that the Japanese are afraid of anyone who is crazy because, or ex-crazy, or ex-abnormal, after all in a prison camp you're supposed to be long-faced and unhappy, and I came to the hunch or intuitive hypothesis that they think that when you're crazy you're in league with the gods. There's some special spirit that's in you that's protecting you. If you're crazy and affected by a spirit they've got to watch out because that spirit can harm them too and make them crazy, I suppose [laughter]. Well, anyway that's the impression I got. But, anyway, what else do you want me to tell you?

C.G.R.:

Was there any resentment in the camp at the fact that, you know, that you were different than the others?

S.V.:

You mean...Oh sure, sure. The commanding officer of the camp was a Dutchman. And he was managing to find fault with me in every which way. Well, of course considering the fact that my wife always found fault with me, I had to take a rather objective view about it, and think, "Well gee-whiz, maybe I'm not the nicest guy in the world but who the hell cares. I'm just going to do the best I can and I'm not going to....That's it." So, you see, here's the thing, they ask where does this son of a bitch [get all his brass], but if you want anything done, go to Vernon -- that's the way it was. They'd think, "I don't want him around, but God damn it if you need to get something done he'll do it for you." But, of course, that happened all the time. Oh I can name time after time when that happened. Well, but still, there was something about me that used to grate on people. So I must be egocentric. So my wife must have been right.

And, of course, she was a little demanding in the sense that she wanted me to fuss over her and she deserved it, there's no question about it. She was pretty enough, she was smart enough, and she was hard working enough. I never had a care in the world. It's like today I don't have a care in the world. My son takes over where she left off. You saw him come in, you saw how full of zest and vinegar he was -- and take care of this and take of that and so on, and how hyper he is. Well, there he is. Where she showed anxiety he showed vitality.

But they're both stubborn. For example, when he ordered me this morning, he didn't ask me whether I should take my car, he just told me not to take the car. Well, what the hell. Since I consider myself lucky to have him in my dotage, I just feel, why

not be passive. What have I got to lose especially when the kid, well, apparently does like his father and does look up to his father in some ways. But, I taught him to look up to me. There is one time when he said, "I wish I were dead." So I'd beat the living so and so out of him. He said, "What did you do that for. Don't you know how it feels like to be dead?" But, I'll tell you, he knows that his father loves him because I remember one time I was giving him one of his periodic punishments. I said, "Lay down. Open your pants." And there his cheeks were bare and I bent down and kissed his fanny instead of smacking it. Then he went around telling all his friends about that [laughter]! Well, of course, that's the way it is, you see. There's that ambivalent attitude. You're angry enough to do what you think is right and then you haven't got the guts to go through with it. But there it is.

C.G.R.:

Let me ask, what about sex?

S.V.:

There wasn't any sex, there wasn't any sex. There wasn't any homosexuality. I never heard of any. But here's what happened to me. After we'd been there, after the surrender about two weeks (just remember this, we didn't get out of there for about six weeks), and after about three or four weeks the captain comes up and he says, "Hey, Vernon, come on into town. The boys are taking over a Geisha house." "Oh no." Well, they kept at it and on the second day I went.

So there it was, in the geisha house, and the whole circle

of male, female, male, female, and a lot of the more aggressive GIs were there, and this officer and me. I looked over all the dames, "No, no, no." No, that wasn't exactly the way it was. Some dame comes in while were all sitting around and I realized that, since I was without a dame, that one was for me and I just didn't like her looks. Like an idiot I said, "Oh, oh, no, oh no," and so all the girls started shouting, "Go away, go away."

The next day they brought the sweetest little flower of a dame, and she was available all the rest of the time there. Now, whenever I wanted her I sent for her and that was that. But there again, maybe that's why they hated me, because they had to work a little bit harder to please me [laughter]. I'm not satisfied with this and not satisfied with that, but of course, since that was my only experience with....

Oh, I remember when I went to Mexico City with a bunch of doctors, there were three of us went out one night. The girls knew that we were going to go to a whorehouse, but I didn't -- there were three of us, my compadre and a guy that attached himself to us, and lo and behold I find we're going into the whorehouse. Well, I stayed in the car and my compadre, he went in and was served. The next day I saw the old fat guy and he had complimented me on having self control enough. Well, somehow or other I wasn't self-controlled, it's just that I wasn't quite ready for that kind of stuff. Maybe I was a sissy, who knows, but I never quite made it into a brothel. Even in Las Vegas, when the head orderly, what the hell do you call these men who carry your valises in a hotel?

C.G.R.:

Bellhop?

S.V.:

Bellhop came in and lifted up the shades and pulled the curtains and all this bull. "Is there anything else sir? Is there anything at all?" After awhile I realized that he wanted me to order one of these \$500 call girls, because in Las Vegas, you know, mirrors on the ceiling and on the walls, and all that crap, you're supposed to watch yourself and all that, but....Have you been to Las Vegas?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

S.V.:

Yes, well, you may have seen some of that around, but there it is. Well, I didn't fall for that either -- mostly because I'm screwy, rather than otherwise. Anyway, lots of times I feel that I'm not as strongly sexed as some guys, because -- I don't know -- my discipline is a hell of a lot better than average. I felt that that was one of the reasons I was able to get through medical school, because I passed up so many opportunities. But there again, frankly, that little bit of geisha-house experience colored my whole attitude toward the Japanese. I think there's something good about them. Otherwise I would have been cussing them forever.

C.G.R.:

And how do you feel about the Japanese?

S.V.:

Well, here's a funny thing. My brother was in the State

Department at the time that I was overseas. He was in the economics division in the State Department, and he had written a paper, he'd gotten his PhD, on the regulation of stock exchanges, way back, I think, in '30, somewhere in the '30s. So here he was in 1946, being sent to Japan to break up the Zaibatsu. So he called me up to get some of my ideas about them; being as glib as I am, I was able to put a bunch of opinions together which at least give him some guidelines. And he did a bang-up job.

Now, when I talked to him a few weeks ago he said, "Sid, you're going to hate me for this." "What's that, what's up." "Well, the Japanese Consulate gave me an award." "I'm not going to hate you for that, that's nothing." After all, you see, there was also one of our boys [in 803 Aviation Engineers] that the Japanese had been showering with all sorts of assignments. A boy who was a 2nd Lieutenant at the time we were going across. His name was Lieutenant Goldblatt, Sammy Goldblatt. Sammy is now at MIT as a professor of something or other. It has to do with the x-ray sterilization of food. The Japanese got hold of him and gave him all sorts of assignments and all sorts of money. I don't know if they underwrote his professorship or not.

I know the Ford Foundation underwrote my brother's professorship. He came into Harvard through the back door as full professor. So he had to be introduced as some guy that wasn't in the system, an associate and all that. But, of course, they think enough of him because when he was 65 they took him out of the school of business and put him in the school of government, and you could stay there until you were 70, and now they're still employing him as, I don't know whether he's

chairman of the admissions committee, when he could be a civilian of some sort and be over 70. So he's still got an office in Harvard even though he must be 73 by now. So what the hell.

How do I feel about them? Mixed feelings, because I bristle at the idea of their being able to sue the United States Government, trying to collect money. I think that's bull crap. But of course, I'm pretty much to the right of Marie Antoinette, just like our boy....Did you see that note he sent me?

[End of side 1.]

C.G.R.:

Could you construct for me, as best as you can, what a typical day might have been when you were at Cabanatuan, and a typical day when you were at Futase? What your duties would have been, what was your routine?

S.V.:

Oh sure, sure, I'll try that. Well, OK, in Futase, for example, in the spring, we were gotten up before dawn. We had to do setting up exercises. At night in the winter we had to do other exercises in front of the windows --that was to acclimate us. Well, when we were gotten up before dawn, of course, things were getting warmer and warmer, and I think it was in April or thereabouts, when I thought, "Well, geez, I don't need all the things I wear in the winter." You see, this warm air they had in Futase, it's a southern latitude of some sort and the winter isn't as harsh. It's one of these crazy places where you see snow on the ground and bamboo growing. So there we are, setting-up exercises. For some God damn reason I was supposed to salute



the sergeant in some sort of a formation, and there this one day it was cold as could be. I didn't salute him well. All they know is, when a recruit makes a mistake you beat him up, and this boob tried to beat me up. I went like this, and I went like that, so he wouldn't hit me in the ear, and I was shivering cold and he interpreted that as anger rather than coldness, and he jumped back. Well, the idiot had given himself away. He showed to everybody that he was afraid I was going to wind up and hit him. Well, I wouldn't dare; after all I know how far I dare go. So when he jumped back he lost face, and that was when the jerk called the sergeant and the sergeant said I was no damn good. He got the sergeant out of bed, of course, and didn't know what the hell to do. So when the officer came in after breakfast about 10 o'clock, the officer ordered me into solitary confinement for lack of sincerity.

It took me years before I could translate that. You see, lack of sincerity meant that I was deceptive enough to make that guy think he was going to be hit, and I trapped him, trapped him into revealing his inner feelings. Now, I laugh like hell. What the hell did he think? But you see, I was translating sincerity in a certain way, but as the years went by I began to realize how difficult it is to get an honest translation -- that was the best the interpreter could do when what the Japanese was probably saying was, "Sly deceptiveness." But, not bad sly deceptiveness -- an acceptable level of it. Well, so that's how it was translated into English, a "lack of sincerity." But the Japanese CO decides, "Deceiving my soldiers, if they make a stupid mistake, is not acceptable." The interpretation, you had a lack

of sincerity as a translation of it. That's how that went.

Well, anyway, so then we had breakfast and it was rice. And then there wasn't really much to do. You see, the poor soldiers, they had to go into the mines. We just sat around because we were officers. One of the things that I used to do was sit around on the upper level of the bunks, but there was no one there. I must have felt sorry for myself, because I would be reading, and the commanding officer, one day, came to me, he said, "Captain Vernon, why are you always sighing?" Obviously I must have been depressed and my respiratory center was undoubtedly not getting the autonomic signals to breathe well enough, so I must have been building up a little from the outside tension and then I would take a deep sigh, whenever the autonomic control told me to.

Well, of course, that was interpreted as depression, correctly, but with trepidation, interpreted as self-pity or something, but I didn't act like a guy who was sorry for myself most of the time. So, "Why do you sigh?"

Well, all right. Then when lunchtime came we chased the flies away and ate our rice. There wasn't much to do in the afternoon. There was nothing....I used to write my diary and look at a lot of crap here that I did write, but it isn't worth much. When I tell you that the book that I sent you [Sidney Vernon, Reach For Charisma: Totem Images for Communication (Willimantic, Connecticut: Rovern Press, 1983), pp. 96.] is the distillate of all the crap that I wrote. It was never good enough for any regular publisher to accept, and in order to

publish it -- because I felt that my child, my brainchild is one of the prettiest in the school -- even if I have to put it through a vanity press. The vanity press, of course, was my own press, and that was that. But we went over the thing that I was calling my opus magnus, and I may be able to just set up enough so that it will book itself into the public consciousness, and I ain't giving up.

You see, this ego of mine which reveals itself to me when I can turn around and look at myself, here's what I went through. Now, that book that I sent you took 14 months from first conference and intention to print and the time I got it printed. About the ninth month I was getting the kind of fever that Robby got. I have to get one of those books. Here's the book that I.....

C.G.R.:

Well, I'd like you to tell me a little more -- you were in the middle of the day.

S.V.:

All right. Now, I told you something about the day. It really wasn't much except that I will tell you this. When the surrender came they needed big mouth here to give all the speeches to see what it meant and to lift everybody out of their despond. I'd get up on a bench in the mess hall and I'd be very sonorous about the greatness of America, and the money that America can spend to build an atom bomb -- you know, homogenized horse manure, but I just laid it on thick. This guy who was the commanding officer, he used me for that. Well, all right, I've been used lots of times, because although in some way or other I

wasn't socially easy to get along with, I was sufficiently useful to have around. When they wanted something done, they asked Vernon to do it. All right, that's all right, I'm satisfied with that.

But now to get back to Cabanatuan, another guy and me, we ran a sick call. But they also had, on the other side of the fence, the hospital. There was a staff there, so I wasn't on the hospital staff. Well, of course, I don't blame them. What the hell was I, when the war was on I was just a stinking battalion surgeon; it was only after the war that I got my surgical credentials, FACS and FICS. I tried the American Board of Surgery but I still believe that politics prevented my getting permission to take the examination.

So I didn't have my surgical credentials then but I think the ace in the hole that I had was that I was publishing a lot. Before I started practice as a general practitioner, I published an article in JAMA on hematoma of the rectus abdominus muscle. Then, in no time at all, I published an article on paralgesia [paravertebral injection of alcohol for relief of pain]. Then I published an article reporting the second case of decerebrate rigidity after cranial injury. Then I published something on modified sling operations above the elbow. And lo and behold -- you see there was no Year Book of Orthopedic Surgery at the time in 1935 and that appeared in the Year Book of General Surgery.

I go down to where I had some surgical privileges in Norwich, you see, I had surgical privileges. My God damn rival didn't let me have any real surgical privileges here. So one of

the boys down there said, "Hey Sid, you're famous," because he saw an article of mine in the Year Book of Surgery." I wasn't getting the Year Book of Surgery. You see, the ace in the hole that I had, that I may be able to claim surgical competence, was my writing. It's an odd thing because, unfortunately, the amount of work I had in the hospital assesses me as a self-taught surgeon rather than a residency-taught surgeon. Well, that's kind of bad in a way, but I was sure taught enough to become a member of the American Board of Abdominal Surgery Board of Governors and that kind of crap. I remember with the American Board of Abdominal Surgery, for about 20 years I was abstract editor of the journal.

But somehow or other all their innovations I started, for example, I started the annual award. The American Board of Abdominal Surgery was giving an annual award to outstanding physicians before the AMA was doing it. They [the AMA] picked it up three years after we did. Well, it was my idea. Now, how the hell did I do that? This is an interesting story. Emanuel Leitehauser was the father of early rising after surgery. And he had been active during World War I. Since I had a lot to do with the program committee during the first year of the American Society of the Abdominal Surgeons, I had invited Emanuel Leitehauser to give a talk, and I had never gotten around to really inviting him. So the second year I did more than just invite him, I named him the Man of the Year, or the Surgeon of the Year, and we gave him an award, the American Society of Abdominal Surgeons. Then the second one we gave an award to was the father of gastric surgery, I forget his name [Lester], and I

picked those two. Then the third one that I picked was Nakiyama.

By that time some of our politicians, of the American Board [of Abdominal Surgery], wanted that to be taken over by him. He was always grateful to me that I had something he could steal from me. They were also afraid that I might become president, but the first year in the American Society of Abdominal Surgeons, I was chairman of the Surgical Motion Picture Committee, and I was also certainly appointed by default as reigning officer of the first symposium. So I was jumping between two things. You see -- if you want something done, get Vernon to do it. Of course, they were glorifying me because here I was, not an academic in any way, but they were treating me as if I was professor in a medical school. Well, I just didn't feel that I was up to it but they kept on prodding me -- "Oh you can do it, you can do it." Oh, sure, I can do anything if you prod me enough.

C.G.R.:

But let me bring you back to Cabanatuan.

S.V.:

All right, all right. Now in Cabanatuan one of the things that they had me do was to take the doctors who are over in the prison camp side and make them contribute to a symposium. That's how I got six guys to do it. I wrote papers for three of them, took a cheap little subject for myself which didn't distinguish me at all, and then two of them wrote their own papers. That was the way it had to be done. I gave the foot paper to someone. I gave the breast paper to someone. I don't remember what I gave

to another one. I gave a paper on tropical fruit, a suggestive try to say that the papayan in papaya is of some value. I didn't get very far with that. And then two people gave their own papers.

You see what happened, the guy who hated me was the guy who still told me to do that job. When they suddenly got a bunch of Vitamin B1 in and they had to figure out who to give it to, they gave that to me to do the figuring out. It was easy. It was just a matter of organization. I went to every barracks and I told the captain of the barracks, "Get the list of all the names in the barracks. Leave out the ones who go to work. Tell me the ones who are sickest and the ones who are lame." Those are the ones we gave B1 to. It took me just a few minutes to do that. But the dumb doctors couldn't figure that one out.

You see, my kid is a better organizer than I am, but at least he gets that part from me. He gets his meticulousness from his mother and the organization and aggressiveness from me. Well, all right. Now, we ran sick call, ran sick call. There was one day when we had another guy and me had to classified 1,200 men. They paraded in front of us and we said to them, "Fit for work, unfit for work, or partial duty," -- 1,200 men paraded in front of us and that was it. Well, there's something in the army called public inspection or general inspection. I don't know whether you've ever heard of it, but in 1946 and '47 it was still being done and I remember at Fort Monmouth, we were having to go to a certain barracks and have 1,200 men parade showing their genitalia and I was supposed to see who had gonorrhoea.

C.G.R.:

Short-arm inspection.

S.V.:

Short-arm inspection, yes, sure that was it, short-arm inspection -- we had to run that. Well, at any rate, the time came when everybody was well and we were surplus so they wanted me to go out and work on the farm. I said, "The hell with you. I'm not working on any God damn farm." Well, this is in the book. I didn't go out so they had to get someone to take my place, because they called for a certain number of men. After three days the major in charge comes in, "Well, Captain Vernon, are you going to go out and work on the farm?" Here's me dishing out the same old crap, "I'm not going out onto the farm even if I'm starved, beaten, or shot." I don't know how I worked myself up to even be that stupid, but there it was. But while I started the pose I had to go through with it. So he goes up to his commanding officer, a marine major, and pretty soon he says, "Wait here." Soon I come into the commanding officer and he talks to me; he says, "Look, what I have to do is turn you over to the Japanese. Then you're going to be court martialed, and then you're going to go to the hoosegow for two weeks, and then when you come out you'll be glad to go out on the farm. They're all watching you and they're letting you be the fall guy and why are you being a damn fool?" He gave me a cigarette and talked to me like one brother to another. What the hell, when anyone talks to you like that, you stop being a damn fool. But I had to be nurtured out of it, you see, to stop posing [like a hero-martyr]. But he was decent enough to give me that compassion plus



enlightenment. [He must have thought of me,] "He's a nice little guy. He didn't look like much, making an utter idiot of himself. Why don't I sort of straighten him out without having him go through the agony of it." So that's how that went. Well, all right. After I'd been on the farm then I got sent out to Los Banos with 800 men.

C.G.R.:

Excuse me, on the farm -- you were physically working on the farm?

S.V.:

Well yes, sure.

C.G.R.:

I mean you weren't out as a doctor for the....You were there doing farming.

S.V.:

No, no. I was working the farm like any laborer. That was when, I gave you the red book, didn't I, a copy of the red book Reach for Charisma?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

S.V.:

At that time, as it says in the book, the totem that I used was the carabao totem; you see, [when we had to look for casualties on a field they might bomb again] I told the corpsmen to use the lion totem -- "Think like a lion, feel like a lion, act like a lion." But the carabao totem, "Think like a carabao, be as patient as a carabao, be as as enduring as a carabao, be as calm as a carabao." That's how it was. So when I was going down

to the river and picking up water and carrying it up the hill, and pouring it on the cucumber mounds, I was a carabao. That's how I got it, that's how I did it. That's why that totem business, I might tell you more about it, but there it is. It's in the book and it's apparently something I've had all my life, some sort of psychological trickery of psyching yourself.

Well anyway, I was out on the farm. There you were, barefoot, and there was cinders on the God damn track. They made you go barefoot so that you wouldn't spoil the plants as you worked on them and weeded them. One time I didn't quite get to where I was supposed to work, and I was messing around here, messing around there, and I did that all day long. Well, of course, here's what, all afternoon long, because you see you went out on the farm, came back for lunch, went out on the farm again. And this afternoon I was messing around and one of the God damn Japanese guards tried to figure out what the hell was I doing, and he came up and he thought I was bumming on the job, which was true.

He had a habit, if you were "sojering" [soldiering -- making believe you were working] on the job, he'd force you to get on your knees and he'd pound you on the head, give you a good headache. He went all around your skull. Well, he came up and he started questioning me, one-third English and two-thirds Japanese. So I jabbered back at him, one-third Japanese and two-thirds English. I stopped him.

You see, it was the rule that Governor Cuomo of New York sent out: "If you haven't got the facts, try to get by on the

law. If you haven't got the law, try it by maneuvering. If you haven't got that, dazzle them with bullshit." I was dazzling this guy with just that.

So he was saying, "Huh, huh," and I'd jabber back and forth, just about the time it was time to go in. And there was a miner who had been picked up and sent to prison camp with soldiers up in the northern part of the Philippines, up among the Bantocs and the Ifogauans. I don't know whether you know the five tribes -- Ifogau -- there were five tribes up there in the northern Luzon and that's where they get the word "boondocks," because the Bantocs were in the hills. This particular tough miner, he was in charge of a detail, and when he passed me arguing with this Japanese he says, "Vernon, get in line." I hopped into line and marched and I got away with it and didn't get beaten that time. But I didn't get away with all of that, you see.

I don't know, I sort of bared my soul to you and showed you, in my old age, that I've been very successful with that 15% of bullshit that you have to be able to pour on people's feet in order to have them get out of your way. It worked for me in prison camp and I don't know whether it will work for me in my new book. I don't think I was very, very popular because...I know I wasn't popular, because I'd argue about every God damn thing and I'd keep on arguing until the other guy would give in [laughter]. It's an awful thing.

C.G.R.:

Was there any premium -- no, premium isn't the word, I mean the opposite of premium, whatever that is -- was there any drawback?

[Blank segment on tape.]

S.V.:

One of the things that struck me, when you watch one of these autopsies, was how often agonal intussesception occurs. It seemed to be characteristic of prisoners-of-war. I remember there was one case of appendicitis where it was obvious that the man had a belly full of pus and they didn't have anything to do it with, and finally it became obvious that we had better try to do something. So what happened -- they operated. And so what happened -- he died very soon afterward. It was just a matter of chance, because there were no antibiotics -- they were unknown. I didn't get my first clinical contact with antibiotics until after the war and I went to work.

So then again, if you do something and the result isn't good, then do the other thing. But that was bad too, only it would take longer. One of the interesting things there was a diphtheria epidemic. Now, I didn't see any part of that but the most impressive thing about that diphtheria epidemic was the small amount of antitoxin it took to cure anybody -- 30 units, 50 units, 100 units, all of which indicated that in the starving person it doesn't take much viral load to produce disease, and since you have so little virulence it doesn't take much anti or immunity stuff to control the disease. And so there was that particular evidence of things.

Now, the article that I wrote on nutritional melalgia, painful burning feet, it was really something to see the agony these people went through. Big strong men, courageous men, they

had these painful burning feet and it wore them down. And the gingerly way in which they had to walk, because everything was agony, and they couldn't commit suicide. There was one thing that you could see, if two guys with painful burning feet massaged each other's feet, they both felt better. It was piteous to see them, caressing gently, just trying to milk a little tiny raindrop of euphoria out of the agony of intense neurologic pain.

Of course, when they discovered that quinine helped, that's sold as Quinam today. It is interesting that, let's see, what drug house is it -- I think it's Merrell that has Quinam. But the FDA got after them and the FDA made them....You see, Quinam was aminophylline plus quinine. The FDA investigated and decided the aminophylline was doing nothing, the quinine was doing it all, and they forced them to drop the aminophylline, so they still called it Quinam. So no, generic quinine is just plain simple quinine, but quinine that had been promoted as a high price [is Quinam], and quinine was just nothing. But still, it interests me that the big seller of quinine is something that was used 40 years ago by prisoners-of-war.

C.G.R.:

Do you still have reprints of any of your papers?

S.V.:

Yes, I have, somewhere around. I'll have to send them to you. Yes, I'll send you the war papers, nutritional melalgia, and nocturnal micturition in the elderly. I found nocturnal micturition in the elderly after having committed myself, you see, when I was at Los Banos, and there were 800 of us there --

the Japanese had a group of asiatics of some sort. I don't know which part of Asia they imported them from but they were the sorriest-looking, mousiest-looking crowd. But they used the same latrine that we did and it was piteous to see them walking all night, to and from the latrine, just to urinate. That was what instigated me to jump to a conclusion that malnutrition causes nocturia. When I reviewed what particular aspect of malnutrition I could blame, I decided it had to be [vitamin] B1 deficiency. In spite of the fact that nutritionists insist that when you need any one of the B's you need them all, I think a distinction can be made.

Remember we had October 23rd until December 8th before we knew we were at war, before there was any shooting war for us. There was one Filipino doctor that we had dinner with, and he was telling us about some of their experiences with the nursing children of mothers who had beriberi. Now, it seems that if a woman had beriberi and she nursed a child, her child would have convulsions. If you give the mother B12, the child stopped having convulsions -- no, not B12, B1, thiamine chloride. That was a small thing we learned from talking to a very, very nice, handsome, intelligent Filipino practitioner, who had dinner with us one time while we were there between October 23rd and December 8th.

Another time, there was some interaction between us and a Filipino doctor. You see, when the surrender came there was nothing to do. Now, I was in bivouac with Company A, and someone came down and said, "You'll be needed at the hospital. There'll

be a lot of wounded coming in." So I went to my CO and asked if he needed me, and he said, "Sure, there's nothing to do here." So apparently a number of other medical officers attached to outfits came to the hospital too.

The major who didn't like me at all, but who had assigned me to do the symposium, gave me a pass written by a Japanese colonel. You see, the odd thing about it was this. There were two hospitals, and in one of them the Japanese walked in and said, "Out on the road." People who couldn't walk, they died in their beds. People who could walk took their chances. Our hospital was left intact. We didn't know what the Japanese had in mind, but it was left intact. For the first five days after the surrender, while we were waiting to see what we were going to have to do in the hospital, this major comes up and says, "Here, Vernon, you take this. You go out there...."

What it was was this. The Japanese colonel had found a bunch of airmen hiding in the hills because they lost their planes, they lost their everything, but they were still an air pursuit squadron. And there were about 300 of them, or maybe 400. So I took a sergeant with me after he gave me that pass and said, "Go out there and take care of these men." All right, Vernon is allowed a highly honorable opportunity. So one of the days I came back to the hospital and I said to the commanding officer, "Let me take an ambulance out on the road. Things are pretty rough out there." I had never heard of the Bataan death march or any of that crap. I only knew that things were rough out there because, you see, I was moving around. I had a pass from a Japanese colonel; that colonel got so incensed -- you see,

this was after the five days was over -- that he said, "You go out on the road with them." I got so God damn mad that I went to the dispensary, told them that I was signing myself into the hospital, and that was it. In other words he wasn't going to make, he wasn't going to mickey-mouse me into something like that, and so I just got right around him. But when he found out that I committed myself to the hospital, he was so God damn mad that he ordered me to stay in bed. Well, who in the hell cares.

There was another one of our boys who collapsed in front of the hospital. Well, that was another way of making it. I made it defiantly, by resenting the fact that this chicken CO was scared of doing what I was too dumb to be afraid of. But that's how it went. So I was attached to that particular hospital and didn't make the Bataan death march. While I was in the hospital I got jaundiced. So I was sick for awhile and I couldn't do anything. I couldn't eat or anything. I don't know what kind of hepatitis it was, it could have been "A." But it was a lucky thing for me to be there because if I'd been out on the march, the results might have been different.

But then, when this hospital was being broken up I was one of the first to leave there.

To show you evidence of how I wasn't wanted anywhere, I was one of the first to be sent to Japan -- they didn't want me around. OK. What would happen when I was saying good-bye to everyone? When you say good-bye to someone and he's turning his head away, and he acts as if he's holding the hand of a dead man, you get that eerie feeling of what his body language is telling



you. Well, I do know this, they were looking upon me as a dead man and, unfortunately, those poor guys were the dead men. Nobody knows who's going to be the one who's dead. As I remember, a third of those guys that were looking upon me as a dead man, unfortunately didn't make it. Well, all right, so I get sent to Japan.

So then I turn out to be the hero on the boat. OK, so the Japanese doctor in Japan used to call me "Big Voice," because I did develop an ability to project my voice and sometimes they thought I was way the hell out there using a megaphone, because there is a certain amount of resonance there and I kind of articulated, and so, "Big Voice." Well, I used it from time to time. It stood me in good stead. But it isn't a welcome quality in civilized inter-reaction. They don't really resent it, they just feel it's totally out of place and beastly. Well, all right, but over there I got the sort of half-complimentary cognomen of "Big Voice."

That's how I was able to get that crowd of people circulating [on the day I embarked to go to Japan, 16 July 1944]. But it took more than that, it took a little doing and organizing. There was one doctor that jumped in and started giving the orders that I was giving, and it looked ridiculous for us both to be doing it, so I stepped aside -- let him have the glory. But he fumbled it, and I jumped in again and straightened it out; then he lost face and he had to get the hell out of the way, so my hard-earned spurs won me a place on the pony's back again.

That's how, on that particular ship, the Japanese after that

gave me the run of the ship. I was practically a tourist while everybody [else] had to stay below. If I wanted to go on deck and wander around, they let me do it. If I wanted to change places with anyone, they let me do it. They just looked upon me as someone who could solve a problem, because they knew damn well they had a problem [on that day we embarked]. They'd have to start bayoneting some of these guys if they went too berserk or hysterical. But at least, by spreading out a few hundred men, it had a calming effect. It had an organizing affect. It had an optimistic expectation type of promise in what was going on. Well, it was a matter of sharing the agony and sharing what little wealth there was. It was a kind of a triage of circumstances rather than a triage of patients. That was the way that went.

I only tell you this because I was being picked when they -- there were other crazy things. Not being liked, I wasn't given any jobs of authority, just jobs of difficulty. One of the reasons I was sent out of that hospital is because the Japanese had a big problem [they needed us to solve]. They had a big problem in a place named O'Donnell. There was one day when 500 Filipinos died of starvation and dysentery and malaria. They got us there to stop the dying.

So that was one time when I came in contact with Filipino doctors. And that was one time when one of our own doctors was put in charge of us. Well, all right. The time came when we got these guys well and it was time to send them home. It took a little doing to get them out of bed, to turn them from lying down

zombies to walking zombies to marching zombies. Then they stopped being zombies as long as they were marching. Well, somehow or rather I found the words and the wheedling to get them to line up and to march off.

Well, the guy who was an authority assigned me to do it because he was afraid to. When he saw how I had done it then he tried to do it -- couldn't do it, fumbled it. There are certain skills and communication and organization that is nice to have in stringent situations. Somehow or other, if you're brash enough and cunning enough and organized enough....It's like surgery -- you have to make quick decisions, you have to know how much to cut out, you have to know when to quit and all that stuff. And that's how it was.

C.G.R.:

Let me ask you about something else. What about coping?

S.V.:

Coping? C-o-p-i-n-g?

C.G.R.:

Yes. For example, there are two seemingly identical people, one of whom survives and the other doesn't. Where does the survival come from?

S.V.:

I can tell you this. You have to believe in yourself. You have to be irrationally optimistic. If you say you're going to make it, you improve your chances. If you think you're not going to make it, you're lessening your chances. It's as simple as that.

Coping -- when they say positive thinking, that's it. You

see, Mohammed Ali did it. He'd look in the mirror and say, "You're the greatest." And his self-esteem went up notches just by inflation. Now, you have to do that, you have to do that.

Let me give you an example. In one of the articles I wrote, which made me able to claim that I'm expert in treatment of pain (which today is a big deal, you know -- pain clinics and what not) -- one of the first articles I wrote was on paralgnesia and injection of alcohol. Well, I'd make rounds and this guy had cancer of the prostate from the testis to the spine. I'd go to his bedside, "We're going to fix you up." By the third or fourth day I realized I was a God damn liar. Why the hell did I say it? Well, because it's nice to hear, it's the proper kind thing to say. When I realized I was a liar, then I had to save my face.

So what I did was to think back about what a certain doctor who graduated in '27 -- you see I graduated in '30 -- this doctor by the name of Swetlow used paravertebral injection of alcohol for angina pectoris, and somehow or other the results were good. Well, I used it later in practice but this time I went back to Swetlow, and I gave this patient with cancer of the prostate and metastases to the spine, paravertebral injection of alcohol. Lo and behold, the poor dying painful man was better. I had destroyed some nerves. I had destroyed...I don't know which nerves I destroyed but I put enough alcohol in there to destroy some nerves. Then I had two other cases, the others were non-cancerous cases, or maybe one other was, I'm not sure. But I'll never forget that I walked in to this guy and said, "You'll be all right." And then I had to "unliar" myself.

All right, now, the crux of this whole thing is this -- first, you think of something that you want. Then you make up your mind that it exists. Then you do your damndest to make it exist -- and that's coping. Now, when I rationalize it this way, the idea is to be euphoric. Now, there are times when you are endogenously non-euphoric. You don't know why, but you've got a lump in your belly or something like that, or something sticking in your throat, and you try to think out what's making you feel so rotten, and you're not quite sure. You say, "All right, you son of a bitch, you feel good. Put a God damn smile on your face. Walk around and act as if everything is fine." Then, slowly, the endogenous dysphoria disappears. Well, that's coping.

You see, what you do is try to take something that you have to call your will and erode your pessimism -- dilute it, flush it away, kick it away. One of the things that thrilled me when we were in that ship between July 16th, 1944 to August 4th, 1944....  
[End of side 2.]

When we were going north from the Philippines to Japan and we were having these vespers, these sessions in the evening led by the chaplain, those were some of the admonitions that he'd offer. It would thrill me to hear one of the GIs growl out, "Defy the the enemy at all times." That's what the marines were taught. Now, I don't know how many times I've told patients to defy the enemy at all times, even when the enemy is within, even when it's your own fear. Coping really is an innate skill for mobilizing all of your inner strengths to achieve successful confrontation with whatever is threatening you.

Now, if you let the chink of your armor leak fear into your system, well then you're diluting your courage and you have to counteract it with some sort of an immune thing. And the immune thing can be an idea. It must be, if you defy the enemy at all times and make up your mind that's the way it's going to be, I'm sure that the endorphin level increases. And there must be other hormones that are undiscovered besides those that mediate pain or relief from pain. There must be some that mediate vitality or mediate love or mediate optimism, or mediate some kind of positiveness. It's just that the chemists haven't found them.

But here's a remarkable thing, here's a remarkable thing. The mystery of life is the capacity for something spiritual to reshape and be a template for something material. When you think what consciousness is, and when you take consciousness and add it to something which we have to call religion (now, of course, religious is a mysterious, is a mystical experience), but anyway, it's characteristic of the human animal to lose consciousness, produces a belief in a higher power and he feels he's got to propitiate it in some way or other, or in some way or other have the higher power cover him with a wing of acceptance.

If you take positive feeling plus religious feeling, it seems as if spirituality becomes a template of material things. I know that's a crazy thing to say and I know it's almost cabalistic, it's almost quackery. Maybe I do sound like one of these prairie preachers or something, or maybe some sort of mystical priest who wants them to put more money in the pot. But the point is, when you are trying to explain what there is about

the conscious mentality of a human being that can overcome an idea and affect material things, those are the words you use. There isn't any question but that certain thoughts produce certain hormones and there's the chemistry of it. But how the hell that came about? When you take the history of a planet -- of course, the history of the planet is the history of the solar system really -- we will remember that life is only on one of the planets, that Venus is too hot and dry, and too toxic, that Mars is too cold and dry, and we've got just the perfect combination. And with that perfect combination, somehow or other if you took methane and carbon dioxide and ammonia, and strokes of lightning went through it, pretty soon you had a primordial soup with compounds that they have to call organic.

But how everything went from one step to another, so that you finally discover that there are certain bacteria that can do recombinant engineering themselves because they splice out or edit out a piece that's damaged. It's just tremendous. But I have to admit, either God did it -- but we never came face to face with him so we don't know, but there must be a God, and probably he's not anthropomorphic. But it's impossible to decide that all the things that happened in the universe that ended up with living creatures that have consciousness, that that doesn't involve God. It's just impossible. Because when I hear myself saying, "The spiritual template shapes the form of matter," I also think, what the hell are you saying, you dumb priest, you prairie-town preacher.

But when you ask me questions about coping, that's how I have to answer it. So you see, Norman Vincent Peale, when he

stated the power of positive thinking, he stated it in other terms. But you have to fine-tune and hone and experience these things to realize that the guy hit upon the truth.

So the question always comes up, "Well, how do you get people to believe it and how do you get people to do it?" That's why I wrote my two books. In one I said how to understand people, and in the other I'm saying, reach for charisma, self-management. Well, what the hell. When I get my real opus, I call it emotional fitness of success. You see, the system of coping is imperturbability.

C.G.R.:

Which I've heard William Osler call equanimity; "Aequanimitas" was one of his best essays.

S.V.:

Exactly, exactly, exactly, sure.

C.G.R.:

Let me ask a different question -- maybe the last question. Was it, as far as you can tell, an added disadvantage, when you were a POW, to be also a Jew?

S.V.:

No, except this. I was always afraid that the Germans would inveigle the Japanese to pick the Jews out. I was always afraid of that. When they asked me what my religion was, I said methodist. But I suppose I'm not as good a Jew as these really religious Jews who made the Jews famous. I'm a lousy Jew, you see, because I wouldn't go to Israel to live there for all the money in China. I just couldn't. They'd throw me out. I've



been thrown out of every place I've ever been, and they'd throw me out too. But I'll fight, yes. I won't put up with crap and I might puff up my bravery, just like the bullfrog puffs up, and be safe for a little while until I collapse or I'm talked out of it. "I'm not going out to work on the farm if I'm starved, beaten or shot." I can maintain that pose for a little while.

I can tell you another story about what happened to me. I used to be afraid to go to Russia. I was afraid to go to the other side of the Iron Curtain. I once read a paper in Vienna, and the next year I got an invitation from the Prague Medical Society to give a paper in Prague, in Czechoslovakia. I was afraid to go. I didn't want to go behind the Iron Curtain. So one year I saw something on the board about a trip to Russia, and I thought, well, this is the time for me to go, this is the time for me to go. When I went I found that five people from Willimantic were going. The funniest damn thing. There were two physicians, a member of the hospital board, and her husband, the two physicians' wives, and me.

But just to show you how things went, one day I came to the table with the hospital board member and her husband and the physician and his wife, and I wanted to join them. Logical, I know them, I should join them. So this God damn woman board member of the hospital board said, "Oh we're saving that for Dr. So and So." Well, OK. So I went elsewhere. So I had sit with a bunch of strangers who didn't welcome me at all because I was a total stranger. I thought, there it is again, this God damn bitch trying to throw me out. Now, I don't know what point I had in the beginning when I went to tell you that silly story, but it

had some spider thread of relevancy, but the thread has been torn [laughter]. I'm sorry.

But in a way the introspection has forced me to dissect my soul, but I don't care if I bare myself. After all, I trust you. And I do know that you are treating it like a neurosurgeon -- purely objectively. And I don't care. Besides, if you're going to look at me in days ahead as if I'm crazy you won't even be around where I have to face you [laughter]. So what the hell, I can afford this. I couldn't tell this to all the people I know around here because they would look at me as if I'm crazy. It's what the British call privacy, but it's soulful privacy. It isn't the kind of privacy that, well, you see that's why you have to have privacy, because we're weak, we're unbeautiful.

In spite of the fact that I could always manage to get out of trouble, I never tried to stay out of trouble. I was always willing to take the risk of getting things done, feeling that whatever trouble I get into I'll manage to get out of. Then again, it's a sign of a show-off. Here's an example. On December 11th, we were out in bivouac. All right, there's an air-raid alarm. Everybody goes to the foxhole. All right, I was sitting at the table, I said, "Piss on you, boys, I'm sitting right here. I don't see any planes. I don't see anything wrong. I'm going to sit here. I can dive over there as fast as necessary." So while those poor bastards were staying in the trench they're watching me eat. I finished and then the all clear signal came and they all looked like fools.

Now, that became more general. I remember one time we were

on a chow line and we had an encampment and we were in the kitchen area. We heard the airplanes buzzing over, and who gives a God damn about it. Then we hear the bombs unlock, and coming down, and then we knew they would come near us and we all start running. Well, it hit the camp but we were in the kitchen area and it hit our camp among the tents and there was nobody there. There was another time when I was sure that same commanding officer that ordered me to go out on the road, I'd been seeing a lot of him, he was part of the hospital, and I was coming in from the field and coming into the hospital to take a shower and I was right in the deep woods, and one time when an alarm signaled for getting under cover I didn't pay any attention, I was in the shower -- piss on them. Then I heard the God damn bombs coming right near where I was standing and I got flat as a sheet of paper. Now, of course, it did go through the walls of where I was standing. That CO I mentioned got a Colles fracture racing to a foxhole. I remember this, when we were in Japan they used to push us into the air raid shelter whenever airplanes came over.

Now, of course, you had to have a little optimism, but let's remember this -- you can't cope if every time you fall on your fanny it's the end of the world. When you fall on your fanny, all right. You have to be willing to die as long as you feel that if you die fighting you've won. That's coping too. Because most of the times you don't die. But you have to have, somewhere within you, the feeling that the acceptability of total defeat has got to be acceptable because, you see, if you die gloriously you become immortal. Of course, these dumb Arabs that think

they're going to go to heaven by dying in battle, it's one thing to say the way Nathan Hale did: "I regret that I have but one life to give to my country." He didn't say I'm glad I'm going to have a lot of good sex up in heaven. There's a time to live and there's a time to die. There's a time to be born and a time to die. There are times when life isn't worth continuing because it's too uncomfortable and then death is welcome.

I once read a fairy tale of some sort in which a man had achieved immortality and he found immortality very burdensome. Well, there it is. Here I am in my 80th year and I'm perfectly willing to exist as long as God wants me to be around, but it's up to him. I only live on my own terms, and he can have me go at his terms. That's all right.

C.G.R.:

I believe that's a good place to stop.

## INDEX

Abdominal, 27, 28  
Abdominus, Rectus, 26  
Abrasion, 13  
Abscess, 13  
Admissions, 22  
Aequanimitas, 46  
Aggressiveness, 14, 29  
Agony, 31, 34, 35, 40  
Airfield, 2, 4, 5  
Airmen, 37  
Airplane, 3  
Airplanes, 49  
Air-raid, 48  
Alcohol, 26, 42  
Ali, Mohammed, 42  
AMA, 27  
Ambulance, 37  
Amebic Dysentery, 6  
America, 1, 25  
American, 8, 11, 12, 26, 27, 28  
Americans, 10  
Aminophylline, 35  
Ammonia, 45  
Ammunition, 3  
Anesthesia, 13  
Angeles, Los, 4  
Angina, 42  
Angry, 18  
Anthropomorphic, 45  
Antibiotics, 34  
Antitoxin, 34  
Antoinette, Marie, 22  
Anxiety, 17  
Appendicitis, 34  
Arabs, 49  
Asiatics, 36  
Atom, 25  
Autonomic, 24  
Autopsies, 34  
Aviation, 1, 21

Bacteria, 45  
Bamboo, 22  
Bananas, 6  
Banos, Los, 5, 9, 31, 35  
Bantocs, PI, 33  
Barracks, 4, 11, 12, 29  
Barshop, Dr., 12, 13, 14  
Bastards, 16, 48  
Bataan, 37, 38  
Baths, 10

Bayoneting, 40  
Beaten, 30, 33, 47  
Bed, 23, 38, 40  
Bellhop, 20  
Belly, 34, 43  
Beriberi, 36  
Berserk, 40  
Bilibid, 7  
Bivouac, 5, 36, 48  
Blindness, 1  
Blood, 10  
Body, 12, 38  
Bomb, 25, 31  
Bombers, 4  
Bombs, 49  
Book, 5, 6, 7, 11, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33  
Brainchild, 25  
Bravery, 47  
Breakfast, 23, 24  
Breast, 5, 28  
Breathe, 13, 24  
British, 48  
Brothel, 19  
Brother, 20, 30  
Bullfrog, 47

Cabalistic, 44  
Cabanatuan POW Camp, 7, 9, 22, 26, 28  
Camp, 7, 14, 16, 17, 28, 33, 49  
Cancer, 42  
Carabao, 31, 32  
Caressing, 35  
Carmen, 4, 5  
Cases, 42  
Casualties, 31  
Cavalry, 5  
Cell, 11  
Chairman, 22, 28  
Chaplain, 43  
Charisma, 24, 31, 46  
Chemistry, 45  
Chemists, 44  
Chest, 13  
Chicago, 15  
Chicken, 38  
China, 46  
Chloride, 36  
Chow, 49  
Christmas, 3  
Cigarette, 30  
Civilians, 3, 12  
Clark Field, 4  
Clinics, 42  
Coconuts, 6  
Cognomen, 39

Colles Fracture, 49  
Confinement, 10, 11, 16, 23  
Connecticut, 24  
Consciousness, 25, 44, 45  
Consulate, 21  
Convulsions, 36  
Coone, Dr., 2  
Coping, 41, 43, 45, 46, 49  
Corpsmen, 8, 15, 31  
Courage, 44  
Credentials, 26  
Crimes, 15  
Cross, Red, 12, 31  
Cruelty, 8  
Cucumber, 32  
Cuomo, Gov., 32  
Czechoslovakia, 47

Dames, 19  
Dead, 18, 38, 39  
Death, 37, 38, 50  
Deaths, 13  
Decerebrate, 26  
Deficiency, 5, 36  
Dental, 2, 9  
Depression, 24  
Diary, 11, 24  
Died, 12, 34, 37, 40, 49, 50  
Dioxide, 45  
Diphtheria, 34  
Discipline, 10, 20  
Disease, 1, 34  
Diseases, 2, 5  
Dispensary, 38  
Dissect, 48  
Distillate, 24  
Doctor, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 31, 36, 39, 42  
Doctoring, 10  
Doctors, 1, 19, 28, 29, 40  
Drug, 35  
Dufflebags, 9  
Dutchman, 10, 17  
Dying, 8, 15, 40, 42, 50  
Dysentery, 6, 40  
Dysphoria, 43

Ear, 23  
Eat, 38, 48  
Economics, 21  
Edit, 45  
Editor, 27  
Elbow, 26  
Embarked, 39, 40  
Emetine, 6  
Encampment, 49

Endogenously, 43  
Endorphin, 44  
Enemy, 43, 44  
Engineer, 2  
Engineering, 45  
Engineers, 1, 21  
Enlisted, 2  
Epidemic, 34  
Equanimity, 46  
Escape, 16  
Essays, 46  
Examination, 26  
Exhaustion, 8  
Eyes, 11

FACS, 26  
Fanny, 18, 49  
Farm, 30, 31, 32, 47  
Father, 18, 27  
FDA, 35  
Feet, 5, 33, 34, 35  
Fernandes, 4  
Fever, 25  
FICS, 26  
Filipino, 36, 40  
Fitness, 46  
Fleas, 11  
Flies, 4, 24  
Food, 12, 21  
Formosa, 9  
Foxhole, 48, 49  
Fracture, 49  
Francisco, San, 2  
Friends, 18  
Futase, 10, 22

Gastric, 27  
Geisha, 18  
Geisha-house, 20  
Genitalia, 29  
Germans, 46  
Girls, 19, 20  
GIS, 15, 19, 43  
Goldblatt, 21  
Gonorrhea, 29  
Government, 21, 22  
Governor, 32  
Guard, 9, 11  
Guardhouse, 16  
Guards, 8, 9, 32

Handicrafts, 7  
Handsome, 36  
Handwriting, 7  
Harvard, 21, 22



Hawaii, 1  
 Head, 9, 19, 32, 38  
 Headache, 32  
 Headquarters, 2, 6  
 Hematoma, 26  
 Hepatitis, 38  
 Hero, 39  
 Hero-martyr, 30  
 Home, 5, 15, 40  
 Homosexuality, 18  
 Hoosegow, 30  
 Hormones, 44, 45  
 Hospital, 26, 27, 36, 37, 38, 40, 47, 49  
 Hotel, 19  
 Husband, 47  
 Hypothesis, 16  
 Hysterical, 40

Idiot, 14, 19, 23, 31  
 Ifogau, 33  
 Ifogauans, 33  
 Immortal, 49  
 Immortality, 50  
 Immune, 44  
 Immunity, 34  
 Imperturbability, 46  
 Incise, 13  
 India, 10  
 Infection, 13  
 Injection, 26, 42  
 Injured, 12  
 Injury, 26  
 Interpreter, 11, 14, 23  
 Intussesception, 34  
 Ipecac, 6  
 Iron, 47  
 Israel, 46

JAMA, 5, 26  
 Japan, 7, 9, 10, 12, 21, 38, 39, 43, 49  
 Japanese, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 23, 30, 32,  
 33, 36, 37, 39, 40, 46  
 Japs, 2, 3, 8  
 Jaundiced, 38  
 Javanese, 10  
 Jews, 46  
 Jokes, 15, 16  
 Journal, 5, 27  
 Jungle, 2

Kissed, 18  
 Kitchen, 49  
 Knees, 32  
 Kyushu, 10

Laborer, 31  
Lame, 29  
Latrine, 11, 36  
Laughter, 15, 16, 18, 19, 33, 48  
Leitehauser, 27  
Lightning, 45  
Lunch, 32  
Lungs, 13  
Luzon, 33

Malaria, 40  
Male, 19  
Malnutrition, 13, 36  
Manila, 2, 3, 5, 7  
Manure, 25  
Marched, 33  
Marching, 41  
Marines, 43  
Martialed, Court, 30  
Massaged, 35  
Medical, 2, 8, 9, 12, 13, 20, 28, 37, 47  
Megaphone, 39  
Melalgia, 5, 34, 35  
Merrell, 35  
Messages, 3  
Metastases, 42  
Methane, 45  
Methodist, 46  
Micturition, 35  
Milk, 6, 35  
Miners, 10  
Mines, 24  
Mining, 10  
MIT, 21  
Mohnac, Dr., 2  
Monmouth, 29  
Mother, 29, 36  
Muscle, 26  
Museum, 15

Nakiyama, 28  
Nanking, 3  
Neurosurgeon, 48  
Nightmare, 3  
Nocturia, 5, 36  
Norwich, 26  
Notoriety, 8  
Nursing, 36  
Nutritional, 5, 34, 35  
Nutritionists, 36

Officers, 8, 9, 10, 11, 24, 37  
Onchocerciasis, 1  
Operated, 34  
Operations, 26

Optimism, 3, 44, 49  
Orderly, 6, 19  
Orthopedic, 26  
Osler, Sir William, 46  
Overseas, 21  
O'Donnell, 40

Pain, 26, 35, 42, 44  
Pants, 18  
Papaya, 29  
Paper, 6, 21, 28, 29, 47, 49  
Parachutes, 12  
Paralgesia, 26, 42  
Paranoia, 16  
Parasites, 1  
Paravertebral, 26, 42  
Peale, Norman Vincent, 45  
Pectoris, Angina, 42  
Pessimism, 43  
PhD, 21  
Philippines, 4, 15, 33, 43  
Physicians, 27, 47  
Pistol-whipped, 5  
Planes, 4, 12, 37, 48  
Planets, 45  
Plantation, 5  
Plants, 32  
Pleural, 13  
Pneumonia, 12  
Pneumothorax, 13  
Politicians, 28  
Politics, 26  
Porcelain, 15  
POW, 46  
Practitioner, 26, 36  
Prague, 47  
Preachers, 44  
Priest, 44, 45  
Printed, 25  
Prison, 7, 14, 16, 28, 33  
Prisoners-of-war, 34, 35  
Professor, 21, 28  
Professorship, 21  
Promoted, 35  
Promotion, 2  
Prostate, 42  
Psyche, 7, 14  
Published, 5, 26  
Publisher, 24  
Punishments, 18  
Pus, 34

Quackery, 44  
Quartermaster, 2  
Quinam, 35

Quinine, 35

Rape, 3

Rationalize, 43

Recruit, 23

Red Cross, 12, 31

Religion, 44, 46

Reprints, 35

Resentment, 16

Respiratory, 24

Reveille, 11

Rice, 24

Riot, 3

Rovern, 24

Rumors, 3

Russia, 47

Samurai, 14, 15

School, 20, 21, 25, 28

Self-esteem, 42

Self-pity, 24

Self-righteousness, 14

Sex, 18, 50

Short-arm, 30

Sick, 5, 26, 29, 38

Skull, 32

Soap, 1

Soldiers, 8, 23, 24, 33

Spider, 48

Spine, 42

Spiritual, 44, 45

Squadron, 37

Starvation, 40

Starved, 30, 47

Starving, 34

Steal, 28

Sterilization, 21

Stools, 6

Strawberry, 6

Strokes, 45

Sugar, 5

Suicide, 35

Sulfa, 12, 13

Surgeons, 5, 15, 27, 28

Surgery, 26, 27, 28, 41

Surrender, 12, 13, 18, 25, 36, 37

Surveillance, 3

Survival, 41

Swetlow, 42

Swimming, 3

Symposium, 28, 37

Syringe, 13

Tablets, 13

Tasker, 9

Tatamis, 6  
Teeth, 5  
Temperature, 12  
Tents, 4, 49  
Testis, 42  
Thanksgiving, 3  
Thiamine, 36  
Throat, 43  
Totem, 24, 31, 32  
Tourist, 40  
Toxic, 45  
Translate, 23  
Translation, 23, 24  
Treatment, 6, 42  
Tribes, 33  
Truth, 2, 6, 46

Urinate, 36

Valises, 19  
Vanity, 25  
Vegas, Las, 19, 20  
Venus, 45  
Vespers, 43  
Vienna, 47  
Vinegar, 17  
Viral, 34  
Vitality, 17, 44  
Vitamin, 5, 29, 36

Wealth, 40  
Weeded, 32  
Westover, 1, 2  
Whorehouse, 19  
Wife, 1, 17, 47  
Willimantic, 24, 47  
Winter, 13, 22  
Wives, 10, 47  
Woman, 9, 36, 47  
Work, 1, 5, 14, 16, 19, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 47  
Working, 13, 14, 17, 30, 31, 32  
Wounded, 37

X-ray, 21

York, New, 32

Zaibatsu, 21  
Zombies, 41

