

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 238-003

Interviewee: Bob Johnson

Interviewer: Clover Koopman

Date of Interview: October 29, 1987

Project: Veterans Remember "Tokyo Rose" Oral History Project

Clover Koopman: —to Bob Johnson, who was with the Marine Corps in Midway, and I'm at his home in East Missoula. It's October 29, 1987.

Could you start by telling how old you were when you went into the service and what rank you had?

Bob Johnson: I was 18 when I went into the service. I, of course, went in like everybody does, a private. Was discharged to corporal.

CK: And you were a Marine?

BJ: Yes.

CK: Where did you join up?

BJ: I joined right here in Missoula, went down in San Diego, served my basic there. Immediately after basic training, I was shipped overseas and wound up at Midway for 15 months.

CK: What were you doing at Midway?

BJ: I was with the, what they call, Six Marine... (laughs) Can't even say it anymore. Sixth Defense Battalion, which did the security work for the Navy base at Midway. I was primarily an anti-aircraft.

CK: So you were helping to build a base?

BJ: No, just to the defense of the island. It was a submarine base for the United States Navy during World War Two, and had Marines...It consists of two islands, and they had Marines on both islands, protecting the submarine base against enemy attack.

CK: Okay. I just wanted to say, we're using this tape as a notebook. It doesn't have to be perfect, or...don't let it bother you, because whatever I need I can take out. Transfer it to reel-to-reel. What happened when you first got there? Was Midway being bombed?

BJ: It would be attacked periodically by Japanese submarines that would surface, usually, at dusk or at dawn and lob a couple shells and then duck away before they could receive counter fire from the island.

CK: So it was submarines that you were out...that you were looking after?

BJ: That was one of the things. Never did happen while I was there—the Japanese air attack—but it was possible that a Jap carrier could have gotten in range and had aircraft come in.

CK: What years were you there?

BJ: '43 and '44. First part of '44.

CK: What did you do when you weren't on duty?

BJ: (laughs) There wasn't a lot to do on island. Sand Island is the island I was on. Three-quarters of a mile across to the wide point and a mile-and-a-quarter long—it was pie-shaped. Nothing there but bird sanctuary and thousands of gooney birds.

CK: (laughs) Did they fly entertainment in for you at all?

BJ: Just before we left there, we had our first U.S.O. show, which would have been in the very latter part of '43, as I remember.

CK: So did you listen to the radio?

BJ: Yes, that was evenings. That was a big thing.

CK: And who did you listen to most?

BJ: Well, we get a lot of shortwave broadcasts from the United States, and in fact, even got one of our local stations here, one time on it. KGVO with a fellow that I knew personally was radio announcing at the time—Bill Strothman.

CK: Did that make you homesick?

BJ: Oh yes. We knew just what time Tokyo Rose came on, and we'd listen to her quite often.

[Noise in background]

CK: I'm going to wait until that settles down. (laughs)

Unidentified speaker: (Unintelligible)

CK: I know. I didn't either.

Okay. Tell me about hearing Tokyo Rose. Did you listen to her?

BJ: Oh yes. Like I said, quite often in the evenings, we'd listen to her. I guess the thing that always amazed us is where she got all her information about the things that were happening, because we got more information about other campaigns in the Pacific from her than we did from any other newscast, it seemed to me at least.

CK: Was her information reliable?

BJ: Very reliable. She told us things that happened, and we would get—the day or two later—we would get newscasts on the particular items.

CK: Could you believe everything you heard?

BJ: Well, the things that we knew of that happened right on Midway there, she told of different submarines that came in that particular day, or day before, and ships that came in like submarine sub-tenders, that could go out to sea and actually do service work on these subs. She'd tell us just when they were...had arrived.

CK: What kind of voice did she have?

BJ: I don't know how to describe her voice, other than a very strong voice that...easy to understand.

CK: Any accent?

BJ: Not that I recall of any accent, no.

CK: Did she have a sense of humor?

BJ: Well, I don't remember any sense of humor in it. I know we didn't think it was very humorous, having somebody tell us what happened there, and there was actually no civilians at all on Midway. It was just military personnel. So we were really concerned as to how she was getting her information. The only way that we could figure out is that Japanese submarines laying off the island out there was watching everything all the time. But they had to have been close enough to ships to read the names on the ships as they came in, because she knew just exactly the name and number of ships that came in.

CK: Did it scare you?

BJ: It had us concerned. (laughs) What else to say about it.

CK: Did you find the programs entertaining?

BJ: I don't know I'd call it entertaining. It was something to look forward to at night, just to see what was happening and if she had any more information of things that happened right within our own island there.

Example of one of the things there, one day we had a...One of our fellows went out to a 40-millimeter gun position that was cribbed up on the inside, and the all the way around the gun tub was ammunition storage. It was all built up with railroad ties, and then coral pushed up around that to protect it from low-strafig airplanes. It had become so bug-infested in there, that one of the fellows took a blowtorch and was going along the edge of it trying to kill some of the bugs that was in there. Wound up set fire to the thing, and it exploded. As I recall it was that evening, if not the next evening, she told on the air about the 40-millimeter gun position explosion, and there was no other way that it was ever broadcast on any of the other news medias. But she knew all about it.

CK: Did it make you think that somebody in your company might be a spy?

BJ: Oh yes, we thought that quite often. In fact, it was a little humor passed around once in a while about somebody being Tokyo Rose's sidekick. That was used as something to poke fun at somebody every once in a while.

CK: Did you take it seriously?

BJ: No. No, nobody took it seriously.

CK: So it was just at the level that it made you wonder, but you didn't really get into it.

BJ: Anybody in our own outfit had no way of getting that message...getting that material out to her.

CK: Did you have any idea what she looked like?

BJ: No, I did not.

CK: Nobody had, sort-of (unintelligible)–

BJ: I did see pictures of her after the war, but I don't even really remember now what she looked like there.

CK: You were aware of when the treason trial happened? Did you pay any attention to the trial?

BJ: Oh, I suppose I did, but like I say, that's been quite a few years back there and I don't recall too much about it.

CK: What did you think she was doing with these broadcasts?

BJ: I think everybody did, just assumed that she was getting a good pay from the Japanese government to do these propaganda broadcasts, and that money was her only objective. I don't think she really had that much against the United States, or anything like that, it was just that...She had to have had some incentive for doing it, and we always thought it was just money was the object of her.

CK: Did it occur to you that she might be a prisoner of war?

BJ: Not that I can recall, no.

CK: Would you say you liked her or disliked her?

BJ: Well, we certainly had no love for her because of her taking sides with the Japanese.

CK: How about the music?

BJ: She played a lot of the popular American music and would make comments about...Oh, if they played a song that had the name of city in it, like San Francisco or something like that, comments about, "Don't you wish you guys could be there," or something like that.

CK: Can you remember anything else that she said?

BJ: Not too much about what she said. Like I said, that's quite a few years ago. She certainly didn't do the morale of the people, or the servicemen, any good. I can tell you that. Some of them took it real serious, I think.

CK: How?

BJ: Well, just that...making them homesick, I would suppose, more than anything.

CK: Did she make them depressed?

BJ: Yes, I'd say that, yes. I was 19 myself at the time, but there was others, I'm sure, that really became homesick and very depressed because of it—listening to her.

CK: Did she say anything about your...Were you engaged or anything at the time?

BJ: No.

CK: Did you have a girlfriend waiting or anything?

BJ: No, I did not. (laughs)

CK: Because that was one of the things people say, is, she'd say, "What are your wives and sweethearts doing back home while you're—"

BJ: As I remember, she used all kinds of tactics like that, yes, to try to break down the morale.

CK: So when you think of it, it was mostly the news that bothered you about the fact they knew too much.

BJ: That was the thing with us, because like I said, there was no civilians at all on either of Midway Islands, and how she was getting some of her information was a little puzzling to say the least.

CK: Did you think it was kind of spooky?

BJ: Oh, yes. That's a good way to put it.

CK: Well, let's take a break from this.

[Break in audio]

CK: What kind of comments?

BJ: Well, she'd play some song that...Oh, I would say, make someone homesick anyway, and then she would elaborate on it afterwards, talking about that particular thing and the fact that wouldn't they like to be there, something like that, at home with either a girlfriend or just the hometown.

CK: Did it make you feel that way, hearing the music?

BJ: (laughs) There was nothing, of course, from our area here. It was more the big cities that she would relate to. Other than talking about our families would have been the thing that would have bothered me—whether you get a chance to see your folks and things like that, brothers and sisters.

[End of Interview]