

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Elvin Kanaina Mattson**

Elvin Mattson was born in 1922 on Pua Lane in Pālama, O‘ahu. At the age of four, Mattson, the second of three boys, and the family moved to Kaimukī. Mattson’s parents were James Noa Mattson and Inez Rosehill Mattson.

He attended Wai‘alae Elementary and Lili‘uokalani Intermediate schools before attending McKinley High School, graduating in 1940.

After working various jobs after graduation, Mattson, beginning July 28, 1941, became part of the Panalā‘au project as a member of the twenty-second expedition. He was on Howland Island with Thomas Bederman, Richard Whaley, and Joseph Keli‘ihananui on December 8, 1941, when the island was shelled by Japanese aircraft. Whaley and Keli‘ihananui were killed in the attack, while Bederman and Mattson survived repeated attacks on the island in the subsequent seven weeks. They eventually were rescued by a U.S. destroyer in January of 1942.

Mattson returned to normal life on O‘ahu and worked briefly for the Honolulu Fire Department. Beginning in 1943, he began a career in federal civil service at Pearl Harbor, working in the naval shipyard, the public works center, and the naval supply center. He retired in 1980.

At the time of the interviews, Mattson was living in Honolulu. He and his wife, Yvonne Lani Hussey Mattson, who died in 1999, raised three children.

Tape No. 38-17-1-03

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Elvin K. Mattson (EM)

July 29, 2003

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN) and Noelle Kahanu (NK)

WN: This is an interview with Elvin K. Mattson for the Panalā'au oral history project on July 29, 2003. And we're at his home in (Āliamanu), O'ahu. The interviewers are Warren Nishimoto and Noelle Kahanu.

Okay. Here we go. (Chuckles) Can we start? Can you tell us when you were born and where you were born?

EM: When I was born? I was born in July, 1922. I was the second son. Jim was the first son, and (William was the third). And I was born up in—you know where Pālama Settlement is at?

WN: Yeah.

EM: What's that area called right there? They have a lane in there, a small lane.

WN: By Pālama Settlement?

EM: Yeah, as you go up. There's a little lane that goes in there.

WN: Waipā [Lane]?

EM: Right next to the church, where the church is.

WN: Pua Lane?

EM: Pua Lane. That's the one. Pua Lane used to be all these little shacks, you might say, or houses they had up in there. I was born and raised up in there till, I think we moved out of there and a home was built up in Kaimukī, 19th Avenue.

WN: How old were you when you moved to Kaimukī?

EM: I must have been about (dog barks) four at the time. See, I think what they—at that particular time with the . . . (EM shoos barking dog.) Oh, stop. Get away.

Grandchild: Grandpa!

EM: Come and get him. He's in here, barking. He's not in the show.

(Laughter)

EM: He's going to be in the next—when they have the cartoon, we'll bring him in here for the cartoon. Okay, keep him down there.

But anyway, let's see, that was . . .

WN: You were four years old?

EM: Yeah, four, then I moved to . . . I went and lived with my aunt. She was from Kā'anapali up in Maui. I stayed with her for about three years and then came back. We were in Hāna at the time. And then I came back [to O'ahu] and stayed with the regular family until they passed away. It was like in a family with three sons, Jim, myself, and Bill. Bill passed away already. And there was a girl that was not exactly a miscarriage, but anyway, she only lived a little while. And we stayed up in Kaimukī. Let's see, at that time it was all cactus, and *kiawe* trees, and everything. And my dad was a great fisherman. That's all he did, go out and fish, although he worked in Pearl Harbor [Naval Shipyard] and retired from Pearl Harbor. But they used to go out fishing. And he had a canoe that he built and kept down at Kāhala there. And all they did, go down there, jump in the canoe, go out and fish. You had fish coming out of your ears. If you loved fish, wonderful. But I guess in those days, fish was the main source of your diet. But you had dried fish, you had raw fish, you had steamed fish, you had everything a fish can go. Plus octopus, any kind of fish [that's] dried up or salted. The bigger fish is salted. We had that. And of course there was beef, too, and everything, in our meals. But that's how we grew up.

And the funny thing about it, at that time, I went out fishing—my dad took the three boys out—but I was afraid of getting in the water. See, what he did to make us learn how to swim and everything, he would come in—and the water's only about three feet deep in the shallow spot—and he would make us jump off the boat, the canoe there, and swim to shore. Well, my older brother, he jumped in and he was gone, swimming. The younger one came in and he jumped in and hung around there. With me, when I went in the water, I had to hang on the boat and they couldn't get me off the outrigger.

(Laughter)

EM: I wasn't about to swim! And if I let go, I would be standing up in the water. But just the thought, I guess, of what it was, you know. That was something to really get you going.

WN: Where did he keep this canoe?

EM: The canoe was kept at Kāhala at that time. They only had a few homes, way up on the Black Point side. The rest of the places were mostly empty lots, *kiaʻwe* trees, and everything. So he kept his boat down there. And at that period of time, you could leave things around like that. Nobody bothered them. They had the park keeper that lived on the other side, and there was no problem at all. Until they started building in new homes, and then it became other people's property. So you had to move out and get on the sunny side of the road (chuckles), I guess.

WN: So moving from Pālama all the way to Kaimukī, that's like a big move, eh? Because he worked Pearl Harbor.

EM: Well, see, at that period of time, my dad worked down at the Inter-Island [Steam Navigation Company, Inc.] dry dock. In other words, the Inter-Island dry dock at that time, my uncle, Uncle John, he was a superintendent down in there. So you'd see all the Mattsons went down there and all worked in the place for a while. And that, more or less, was a step to [eventually] go into Pearl Harbor [Naval Shipyard]. I forget when my dad went into Pearl Harbor. I would say he went in there in the. . . . Let's see, if he had about forty years when he went out—he retired in either the early [19]60s or late [19]50s. I think in the [19]60s he retired from Pearl Harbor. My older brother worked there, until he transferred to the Mainland. He got married and went to the Mainland. And then he got into the military, and he stayed in the military and then he came back here, worked for a while, moved back up there.

My younger brother worked off-island. At that time they needed workers. They would pick up workers from here and go off-island and work. And he went off and on, off and on. He got married about three times, two times. Let's see, they had seven children. The older brother had five children. They don't live here anymore. The youngest one, youngest daughter, lives down here. And they're planning—they already have moved most of the family to California. They bought something like, oh, those countryside [lots] have four or five acres or something like that, homesites. And this would be, they were in there for. . . . Oh, I can't remember now, but like I said, the trend, they all moved there. The younger brother, his family, his three sons still living here. The rest of the family have gone out to some other place. The older one, there's about four of them still living here, but they're making up preparations to move to California with him, see, with that big property he has.

WN: Where's your father from originally?

EM: My father was from Huelo in Maui.

WN: What about your mother?

EM: My mother was, let's see, in that family, that's the Rosehill family, there were eight or nine of them. Four males, five females. And there's one, oh, there's a judge down here, Rosehill.

WN: Right. Ambrose [Rosehill], huh?

EM: Ambrose, yeah. His wife just passed away. I think it was a year now, the wife passed. Ambrose. And I think there's only two of the adult ones in there. But they are big families, though.

WN: Yeah, but Honolulu?

EM: Yeah. They live up in Hawai'i Kai, I guess. You know where you pass, you go down the hill there, the mountain up there? They have a home up there. It's a beautiful home, big, expensive-looking place. You overlook the whole part of the world over there.  
(Chuckles)

WN: So what was growing up in Kaimukī like for you? What did you do that was good fun as a kid?

EM: Well, where the home was, next to the home was an empty lot. So there was a home. Our home is here in the front. In the back, that's 19th Avenue. On 20th Avenue, there's a home directly behind, and there's one, two, three, on that side. Towards that school—I think that was Wai'alaie School at the time—they lived on the outskirts. Harding Avenue goes down, then we have 19th, 18th, 17th. Seventeenth Avenue down was all Salvation Army. The Salvation Army was there, so we had places to go. We played around the places there. You could go into the school grounds to play, or you could go up to Kaimukī, in the park. We spent our time running around in there. But once we got into high school, everyone went out their own ways. We still lived there, but then, like I said, originally I was supposed to go to Kam[ehameha] School[s].

The intermediate [school] at that time went up to the ninth grade. High school only had tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. So I was in the ninth grade, and we took the examination. Everything was fine for the examination and going up there [to Kamehameha Schools]. And they gave you an interview. And the interview, I forget what it was, but they ask you questions. And then they ask you why do you want to go to Kam School? I says, "I don't want to go to Kam School. My mother and father sent me up here. They want me

to go to Kam School.” (Chuckles) So that set it off just right at the time. So I was never given an invite.

(Laughter)

EM: And I didn’t care. I didn’t care. That time, fine, I went McKinley [High School]. I enjoyed going to McKinley.

WN: What intermediate did you go to? What elementary and what intermediate?

EM: That was Wai’alae [School] right half block away from where we lived. Wai’alae School went up to the sixth grade. And from there they had Lili’uokalani Intermediate [School], was right in the corner of Koko Head [Avenue] and Wai’alae [Avenue]. It went up to ninth grade. I don’t know when they changed it. But anyway, McKinley was only three grades that I had in there.

My older brother went to Kam School for I don’t know how long. But then he pulled a disappearing act. He was always. . . . You see, the school was at the [present site of the Bishop] Museum, that old section in there. Well, usually at night, he took off. He wasn’t the only one, but it seems they had freedom, so they took off, went out, met the girlfriends and whatever they were doing, and then come back early in the morning, and jump in the cot and get up. But then it went too far, I guess. They checked the darn thing and tell, “You can’t be doing this all the time. You either want to go to school or we’ll have to get you out.” So he moved. He quit there, then went to Roosevelt [High School]. And that’s where he graduated from, Roosevelt.

WN: What kind of a student were you?

EM: Oh, I would say about average. You see, when I went to high school, what I took up is agricultural. It’s a double course. You have two periods in agricultural, and we took up anything in agricultural: raising pigs, chickens, whatever it was, we had all that. And in fact, we had a big incubator there. We made money through the place. We incubated the eggs in there, then sold [the chicks] to other people. We made money from that for the club there. So that was my main subject. So if anything, if I had kept on, I would probably have moved up to the University [of Hawai’i]. And, I don’t know, it just didn’t work out right. I wasn’t made for that.

(Laughter)

EM: You gotta fit in, you know, the darn thing. I wasn’t fit for that, I guess. But I didn’t go to it.

WN: So you were sort of leaning towards agriculture . . .

EM: Yeah. Agricultural, yeah. In other words, if you were really sharp on it, you could be an instructor or teacher. But I don't know. It was fun and everything like that, that's how I made all my credits. I just barely got through the other ones.

WN: Was Miles Cary your principal at that time?

EM: Yes. What's his name, what's that football coach? He was one of the teachers there.

WN: Hluboky or something like that? Frank?

EM: Frank [Hluboky], yeah, he was a coach. But then there was another one that was a teacher there. Oh, I can't think of his name. The wife was a teacher; he was a teacher. It was a big family they had, but they were all teachers there. He eventually became a coach. Coach of McKinley or Roosevelt, or something like that. Blaisdell.

WN: Blaisdell?

EM: Yeah, Blaisdell, yeah. He was the coach then.

WN: Oh, Neal Blaisdell?

EM: Yeah. Well, actually, like I said, he was one of the teachers in there at the time. From that, he went into the. . . . I don't know whether he coached McKinley or not. He might have, but I think he went to Roosevelt or some other school. You know, transferred. [Neal Shaw Blaisdell was teacher and athletic director at McKinley High School, 1927-31, and at Roosevelt High School, 1935-36.]

WN: Were there a lot of Hawaiians at McKinley?

EM: Very few. Because McKinley was, I would say, roughly 75 percent Japanese, the other 25 percent was made up of the other races. Hawaiian, Chinese, men from the moon, and all that stuff was all in that other 25 percent. Probably more than that. But strictly Japanese in there. Because you figure in that area where we were at, from Wai'alaie, there were a lot of pig farmers. They grew whatever they had to grow and they raised pigs, and it extended all through that valley down where they have those homes now, Wai'alaie Iki or whatever you call that. All in there, they were all nothing but farmers lived in there.

So naturally the children will go to McKinley. They went from, let's see, they also had Washington Intermediate School there, and in that area [i.e., McCully] there was Japanese, too. Majority Japanese in that particular area. So I guess you had those where maybe the father was in politics or the father was a little high up in there, you get them into Punahou [School]. Punahou was strictly the *ali'is* in there. And Roosevelt was mixed. Not like McKinley. In fact, at the time I was there, a lot of the kids that came from Farrington [High School]—again, it's all Japanese population in there—they all went to

McKinley until they had started up Farrington. I think was in '39 when they became a regular high school. And that took away a lot of the Japanese population at McKinley.

WN: And how was it for you, being a minority?

EM: I fit right in. No problem. We live among them. There's no problem at all. Although, you know, the problem is, if you get Japanese, at that time they're very—what's the point? In other words, you live in one area, and you play football, you play something else, and you form a team and something like that, they always have like clash in between. So you can get in trouble with people that live up in Pālolo and stuff like that, they have big football teams and everything. But other than that, had no problem.

WN: So you graduated in 1940?

EM: Forty.

WN: Yeah. What were your plans from that time on?

EM: Nothing. I had no plans. In other words, let me put it this way, the plans were to go to University [of Hawai'i], you see, because like I said, I had the credits to go in the university there. But [after] graduation, from say, June and July, '40, and '41—well, during that time I just ran around the place. I took odds-and-ends jobs. I worked at Inter-Island for a while, I worked down at the [pineapple] cannery for a while. But I guess I wasn't ready to work steady in a place. Then I worked for stevedores. In '41 I don't know where I was working at the time, but I think I was working for some kind of company down there, work along the shoreline.

But I got this urge to travel. You know. Actually, it wasn't my idea, but they were pushing, they were getting people off the Line Islands, getting them back to Hawai'i, so they had to take replacements. And, I don't know, I put it off, and then one time I went down. But the deal was, see, I would take this trip and go around these islands. There's four islands down there, like Howland Island, Baker Island, Enderbury Island, and [Jarvis Island]. There's four islands. You can travel through there, you can drop off at Samoa and have a sight-seeing in Samoa, and you go to Midway. Midway Island was another place you could go to in a trip. It was sort of like a circle. And normally, like the old-timers, what they did, they go down, they bypass Baker and Howland because that's the two above the equator. So they bypass those two islands, they go down to the other islands down there because they know when they pick 'em up, they'll make the circuit down this way and come on back. Whereas when I went down there—this guy got hurt or something. So he had to be replaced. And I went to Howland Island, and what's his name, the other young man that went down with me?

NK: Dickie [Richard Whaley].



EM: Yeah. He and I went down there and we stayed there until the war broke out. See, that was in July [when EM began his stay on Howland Island].

WN: In July '41, yeah?

EM: July '41. So I stayed there till the ship that came down picked us up at the end of January [1942]. I would say about 28th, 30th, was almost the ending of January. And I think it takes about three days or something like that. We got back here in the 1st or 2nd of February. That was the end of the excursion trip, you might say.

WN: Now how did you find out about this expedition? Do you remember?

EM: See, at the time, I'm not working steady, I was working stevedore at the time. And then this one friend of mine came by one time and said, "Hey, you want to take a trip to go down these islands and visit these islands?"

I said, "What you going to do down there?"

"Oh, just go around, ride around on the place there." So they were hiring at the time, you see. So, supposedly at that time we were extras. And the extras only go down and around and around [i.e., travel island to island aboard the ship]. But the first stop we come to, we find out this guy got burnt or something, had to come back. And then they had this other guy that he wasn't doing right. In other words, he wasn't going off his rocker, but when you with four people for that length of time, you gotta live together, work together, do everything together, see. Well, he wasn't. He was all by himself, I guess, you might say. So anyway, he came back, too, and that's how I got on Howland Island. Like, they said, "Well, it's only for a while." Yeah. It was for a while. But nobody came on after that. They made one more trip after that. They came down in, I think, it was in September [probably November 1941]. Howland Island was still intact. We were the only intact group. Baker Island, someone else came in over there. You heard of Blue Makua? Blue Makua, I think, was down on Baker Island. And there were a couple other boys, I can't think of their names.

WN: Walter Burke?

EM: Walter Burke was there, yeah.

WN: James Coyle?

EM: Coyle? Yeah, James Coyle.

WN: And James Pease.

EM: James Pease. If I remember, Pease and Coyle were replacements for that whole Baker Island. They came down at the time to replace them. I don't know the reason for that. I guess, the military or whatever it was, there was some kind of a—they knew something was gonna break out or something like that. And while we were there on Howland Island, we didn't see anything, any planes, nothing. Nothing at all. And the only word we got at that particular time was, see, Tom Bederman was our radio expert. He was the one familiar with shortwave and all that stuff and everything, and he did all the call-in and all that. So, normally he had three calls down to the station down at Wailupe [O'ahu]. And this is only a weather report. And he would give his reports. We would go out, let his balloon go up and take the weather and so forth, and come back in, and he would make the report to Wailupe.

Well, on that particular weekend, now, he couldn't get Wailupe, because this was Sunday morning. The time with us down there is the same like back here. See, we're not over the equator. So he couldn't get any calls or anything like that. Everything was all like in a blackout. Because when you make the call, it's something like eight o'clock or nine o'clock in the morning, you see. Well, he could get nobody at all. As much as he tried, he couldn't get anything. He couldn't get a hold of Baker Island 'cause Baker Island had something wrong with their radio, so they couldn't call out. We had to call in, and he finally got hold of somebody up in California. Because when you shortwave, you can make calls all over the place. They got hold of this person in California, and the guy gave him the lowdown. He said, "Oh, Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese about a couple hours ago." He said he doesn't know what happened. Everything is blacked out over there. There was no word on the place there. And that went on and on and on all day, he couldn't get anything. And finally it was toward the afternoon or late hours, we got the shortwave radio and made connection to someplace up in California or whatever it was. That's when the president declared war on Japan. That's the last word we got. After that, everything was blackout. We didn't get anything more. We let the boys know on Baker Island what was going on—not the same day.

The next day, like I said, the next day would be the eighth, Monday the eighth [of December]. We went out. We had no inkling there was gonna be a raid or something like that. We knew the Amelia Earhart Field [on Howland] was in there, but the Earhart Field was nothing but tall grass about four or five feet tall, all along the place. And then the other areas had all shrubbery and stuff around. So we decided that if the planes came over here to bomb Howland Island, we would run to the middle of the island. Wrong decision when we went there.

And anyway, when the planes came over, there was a formation of four, eight—twelve planes. One formation flew all the way away. These two planes dropped their bombs in the place that they had right in the middle of the island all the way through the place. They had this cluster bomb, where [when they] drop one bomb, everything scatter the

place. They had big bombs that left craters about ten feet deep. I don't know how long the thing lasted. You fly over, drop your load, go to one end, come back, drop whatever load you got in there. They strafed the island around the place and they were gone. That's the two formations, and there was another formation. Like I said, I don't know whether they went to bomb Baker Island. But that one came back and disappeared. We really didn't see it. But the other planes took off. And where we were at, I didn't see any of the planes. I only saw it when they came in. Because we were on sort of like a mound like this, and there was sort of a shrub all over the place there. So we burrowed underneath that, Tom [Bederman] and myself. All this was going on, we didn't see anything. You know, there's noise of bombing and all that, and we were just petrified or just scared stiff, you name it. But anyway, after it was over, and these two boys, Dickie [Richard Whaley] and what's his name?

WN: Joe [Keli'ihananui].

EM: Joe. Dickie and Joe were like fifteen feet away from us. And like I said, it was all mounds and stuff like that. So apparently they got up, they must have got up when they started dropping all the bombs because they had shrapnel on their chest. Dickie had shrapnel on his chest. It went right through. In fact, both of them like that. They [were] hit above. Now, if they were laying down, they wouldn't get wounds like that. So they had to get up to see what was wrong. Because, you see, when the plane flew over, the last one flew over, there was sort of a lull for about five minutes. And I guess from that they got up, or they might have been hit after. But they were up on the higher ground. So when the planes were gone, we went to look for them, both of them had these wounds. (Pause)

WN: We're gonna stop right now.

EM: Give me about a couple of minutes, I'll be all right. It's just whenever I think about it I get all . . .

WN: It must be really hard for you.

EM: Yeah.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

WN: Okay.

EM: Okay, where did we leave off at?

WN: Oh, you were talking . . .

EM: Oh, we left off at when we found Dickie and Joe in there. Both of them were actually in shock, well, because of the bleeding and stuff like that. Dickie was just sort of mumbling.

You couldn't understand him. But he wanted to be moved up on the top [of the mound] so he could see the ocean. Joe apparently got hit the same way, too, but he was sort of unconscious at the time. So anyway, what we did, we went back, got some blankets, got anything we could to pick them up and carry them back. Like I said, we took them both back and just in the corner of the storage yard, where we have the government [house] and the galley. And over here's the rain shed, in that corner there, there was a big bomb crater. The bomb crater is where we took them, we put them in the bomb crater and covered them up, made a little cross for them. That was the end of those two boys until they were brought back here. But it's a sad, sad thing when you think about it. Why? Why them? But I guess it was in the books, you know?

During that span of time, from until they picked us up, Tom and I lived like, what do you call it? We moved out from that area there because there was a Japanese bombing plane. It was a four-engine plane, it came over the island, and it dropped one or two bombs. One bomb hit the shack that we had, the government [house] shack in there, and that blew the thing up. There was a big crater there. The other [bombs were] all over the place. But he [i.e., the Japanese bomber] would come by, I would say, roughly about once or maybe twice a week. Prior to that, the first night, we were going to stay in the [government house], 'cause it had everything in there.

We had sort of an underground place that we kept all the food from getting spoiled and stuff like that. We were gonna stay in there until that second Tuesday night, [when] we saw the outline of a submarine out there. And the submarine waited until early in the morning and then they shelled the lighthouse, they shelled the shack, they shelled all those places in there. And they were gone. And from what I understand, they went to Baker Island and did the same thing, too. That made us say, "Well, if that's the case, we have to move." So we moved to the north end of the island. And over there you have high shrubs. The shrubs are about, oh, maybe about six, eight feet high in some spots. So what we did, we hollowed out underneath the place and then covered the thing up. Had our blankets, put our blankets under there, and that's where we stayed during the day, sort of hid out in there. 'Cause we never knew when the place would be bombed again. And this went on until. . . . Well, we also had another place along the shoreline where we could go out. There's a big log there. We hollowed that out, and we could go in and see what the situation was, or if we wanted to go fishing or get any type of thing like that it was right there for the asking.

Those two sites we stayed at up until the first signs we had of the Americans. Coming in was a flight of two planes that flew over the island. And what we did in the morning, we spread our blankets out on the side there, dry it out if it's wet. Well, the plane flew over, and I think it was the day after that the plane was looking out for the survivors, I guess. I think the following day the ship, *Itasca* or something like that. No, it wasn't the *Itasca*. It was the *Helm*, what you call, the destroyers. Well, the *Helm* came there. They

launched the boat, and they came down. They wanted to know where “the natives” were. “We’re here to pick up the natives of this island.” Of course, we had beards and wild hair. We look a sight, you know? (Chuckles) But anyway, they picked us up on the boat, took us out to the ship there. Well, we went aboard ship for about five or ten minutes, and that same plane came over and started bombing the ship. But the destroyer is fast, zigzagging, zigzagging, shooting back. They said they hit the plane, but they didn’t knock it down. They knew they hit the plane when they fired. During the day there was a zigzagging route. At night, straight through. I forget how long it took, I think three days, I think it was.

WN: You had to stop by Baker first?

EM: Oh, yeah. We stopped by at Baker to pick up the other four people there. And the six of us came back.

NK: You know, there was probably about a month and a half . . .

EM: Span.

NK: . . . you guys were on the island when you were initially bombed to when you were rescued. So, what were you thinking? Were you thinking the military gave you guys up for lost?

EM: I don’t know. I was thinking right then about survival. We had already been shelled by a [Japanese] submarine, and we had this [Japanese] plane that flew over. During that period of time we were there, for about a month, well, that plane came over like every week, or twice a week. Sometimes it would come twice, but every week it came over. And if it came over the island, it would just drop one bomb on the place, just picking spots or something, but that’s all he did. Like I said, fortunately, we had a lot of food, canned food. We could just open up a canned food and survive on that. We had cases and cases of pineapple juice. Our beer was all gone by then. We had drank up all the beer, because normally when the coast guard comes down and picks up or transfers the passengers, Tom will get a call from whoever was the skipper on the boat there that he wanted his lobsters. So we would go out at night. In a matter of, say, half an hour or less than that, we’d fill up a gunny sack of lobster, maybe two bags of lobsters. And when the ship came in there, the first thing they took aboard ship [was the lobster]. That went to the captain. But of course, we got what we wanted, though. We got the cases of beer, anything we want, they would give us all that. But that was a good trade-off, you know.

NK: And, you know, you have these wonderful photographs. And I think one of the things that happened in the Panalā’au is there’s really not many people who took cameras. And on your trip, you guys were lucky enough to have, someone brought a camera. Right? They’re just amazing pictures.

EM: Yeah.

NK: Can you talk a little bit about the dynamics of your group? Because from the pictures it really looks like the four of you got along.

EM: Oh, it was—we were fortunate when we got there because Tom and Joe were old-timers, you might say. Tom had been there for about over a year. So he was anxious to come back home. The same thing with Joe. Joe supposedly was, he was supposed to get married to—I can't think of the name there. A family at that time living down—you know where the [*Honolulu*] *Advertiser* is at? There used to be sort of like a Hawaiian village in there. I don't know whether you remember that, eh? You too young for that?

WN: Too young.

EM: Oh. Well . . .

WN: Wait, right on Kapi'olani [Boulevard]?

EM: Yeah, right on Kapi'olani. You know how the street goes up like this, one goes this way, one goes the other side, well, up on the *mauka* side in there was nothing but coconut trees, grass, probably, and stuff like that. And they had these—well, they call 'em "squatters," at that time. But they weren't squatters. They had been living there for, I don't know, since day one, or the family had. So these people were living in there, and they were trying to get them out of the place there. So one of the—oh, I can't think of the guy that's in there. He was a great hula dancer and he used to teach hula in that place. But one of the girls [living] in there was the girl that Joe was supposed to get married to when he got back, which never happened. But other than that, the other ones, like I said, let's see—I wasn't married either. And Dickie wasn't married. See, we were all unmarried people at the time. (Chuckles)

NK: Wasn't that one of the requirements? That you be unattached? I don't think they took up anybody who was married . . .

EM: I don't know, I don't know. Like I said, got railroaded in, see. So I don't know. Because this Jimmy [James F.] Bruhn, he was the one that railroaded me on that. He was supposed to go on the damn trip. But then, they say, "Oh, we can only take so many." So if he had stayed on there at the time, I wouldn't have gone down. But apparently they got this call, you know, this guy [got] hurt, and I guess the coast guard know about that. So that's when they dropped us off at the island.

We came back [from Howland] and we were in Pearl Harbor for about three, four days. And when they did release us, "Don't say anything. Don't say this, don't say that."

What the hell you going to say, then? So anyway, naturally, we not gonna say anything, except to friends and family and stuff like that. But that's the way it went.

NK: But there was an article in *Life* magazine. Wasn't there some coverage of your return in the newspapers?

EM: Yeah, they had that. They had that. I think these people in the magazine were, too, on the lifeboat, or something. They were in the lifeboat for about, I don't know how long, a month, maybe longer. But they were rescued about the same time that we were brought back here. So when they took—they took a picture of the four of us—no, no, not four. Six, six of us.

WN: Six of you.

EM: You have that picture there?

NK: Yeah, I have.

EM: Yeah, six of us. Right in the front, that's the first picture they took.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

EM: They kept all those pictures. And we weren't supposed to talk to anybody. Why, I don't know. I don't know why. But anyhow, that's the way it went. And actually, [except for] family, few people knew when you came back or knew anything about it.

WN: The short time that you knew Dickey and Joe, what type of person was—what kind of a person was Joe, first of all?

EM: Joe? Joe was, like I said, he was older. I think he was the oldest there. He might have been in his early twenties or something like that, see. Tom was a year older than I am, so if I was nineteen or going on to nineteen—I was only eighteen—Tom must have been about twenty. Dickey was about my age, and he was a very quiet person. He was a canoe paddler and surfboard paddler. We had no problems as the four of us living there, like I said. We drank beer together, went fishing. We had the cooking. Tom and I, we would cook—we only had two [meals]. We didn't have breakfast, like you have breakfast. We had midday one, and one in the late evening. Two dinners. And then we ate whenever we want, later on at night if we wanted. We had those two dinners. But anyway, being in the pairs, Tom and I would do that, for say, like two days. Then it would shift to Joe and Dickey for the next two days. And normally, when we cook it was

either corned beef—we had tons of corned beef, corned beef and onions, bags of onions, we had that. We had pork and beans, we had macaroni, you name it. We had oodles of canned food.

I had written back to my mother and dad to send me some fishing line, hooks and stuff, which they did. That's when we caught sharks. And this particular time we caught an *ulua* that was about, I would say close to eighty, ninety pounds, you know, big *ulua*. And all the fish that we got, we dried it. We had a throw net that my dad had sent down. We would get mullet by the tons. I hated that, because I was never a fish eater, anyway. I like fish, but not when you have tons and tons of the darn thing. But you go out one time with the net and drag it in, and you have about fifty to seventy-five pounds of mullet. And these are not small mullet—huge mullet. And the thing about it, the fish there had wormholes in it. I don't know why, or what they have. It seems like being in that particular area, or the birds go there, but they have wormholes. But that didn't stop us. What we did, we got the mullet, cut out the backbone, cut the head off, and just filet and dried it. Boy, that went over huge. We had these big five-gallon cans where they had all the—what you call these big crackers that they had in those days? [Saloon Pilot Crackers.] We had those, and we saved all the cans, and what we did, load it up in the cans there, and this is what we gave to the ship, we sent home. And we must have sent home tons of the darn thing [i.e., dried fish], you know. That was our job. We were supposed to be doing something else, but we was drying fish for everybody who wanted fish. "Hey, how about a couple of gallons of fish?"

"No problem."

Ah, that was good though. With the exception of the skipper aboard the ship, his was lobsters. He wanted lobsters. You give him a couple of bags of lobsters, you got it made. (Chuckles)

NK: So what would you do at night? Would you. . . .

EM: Well, we stayed up at night. Like I said, we—Dickie and I—slept outside. There's a big rain shed. There are two bunks. We slept bunk to bunk in there. We slept outside. In the house there, Tom spent his time practically on the radio there. He would be calling this person, calling that person, doing this, and doing that. So the only time he would probably take a rest is when he go down the beach.

The other thing, we go down and look for shells when they come in. And we had just that one area in the front of the camp. It was about, maybe, I would say, half-mile area, maybe less. But it was all sand. And you go there during the day, in the morning or at night or something when the water washes in, you find all these shells. They had some beautiful shells. Red color, orange color, all different colors. I wasn't a shell collector so I



didn't care about the shells, but Joe had these boxes, cardboard boxes, he must have had about a ton of those shells in there. There also was, you know, that Ni'ihau shell? They had tons of that down in there. You go at night and the rocks are just covered with them, all different colors. You get the darn thing, fill up a bucket, come back, bury it in the sand for I don't know how long, then wash it out, let it dry out, put it away. And he had boxes and boxes of the darn thing in there. And every so often he would send it home, from what I understood. Well, this last time when the planes [bombed us], that never happened. Everything was destroyed, but he had a lot of those shells. Beautiful shells.

Coral, we had coral, too. Oh, you know, the other thing we had was these big shells. What do you call it? I don't know. You know, like big clam shells. Huge shells. They must weigh about twenty-five, thirty pounds apiece. But anyway, apparently Japanese fisherman, or whoever the people were, they come there and pick up the shell, scoop out the meat, and throw the sand on. So one portion of the island, those shells were stacked up. Could be a ton or more of those shells, they just wash in and stay on the beach there, wash in and out. But we tried it at one time, but it wasn't too good. You know, we scooped out the damn thing and boiled it, but I didn't like it. (Chuckles) But it was food, though. You can get all of that. So you don't die for lack of food over there.

NK: What about the birds?

EM: Birds, same way, too. The terns, there were millions of them. And I didn't get any. I didn't want it. They were too squirmy for me. Joe and Tom used to take a big pan or something like that. So many squabs, wring their neck off, put them in there. After they get this whole thing all filled up, they go back, and they skin it all up like that. It fits right in the palm of your hand, the squab that they have in there. And they would fry it and cook it up, and we had that for *pūpū* and drinking beer. Wow, that's something, boy. But I would never do the darn thing. I can't imagine tearing the skin off, pulling 'em off, and cooking the darn thing. But I don't mind eating it. "Look, if you not gonna clean any of this stuff, here, you not eating this stuff here. Just drink beer." (Laughs)

NK: What about the eggs?

EM: The eggs, you had to go. . . . Again, you can get practically any of those eggs there, but you take like the bigger birds, I guess the eggs take longer to hatch or whatever it is. But most of the eggs, if you go there and you crack it, there's a bird in it already, you know, coming up. Very seldom can you find an egg without any bird in it. The terns, see, they fly up, and they're gone, and they just circling the air for, say, a couple of days or so, then they come down. And then when they lay, there's thousands of eggs all over the place there. And they lay one or two eggs. And how they find their own eggs [when they] come back, I don't know. But these eggs, when you go there early, you can pick the eggs up. You can have bowls and bowls of eggs to make omelets, or anything you like.

It's just a matter of gathering them. And the birds don't bother you, except they come over, and you gotta be careful when they fly over. If you go under the mass there, every so often you get dub-dub, the doo-doo's falling on you. (Laughs) But we ate the squabs, and we ate the eggs.

It's something different, but like I said, the food went down. Whenever they [supply ship] come down, they give you a slab, of—not pork, but beef. And it's probably the hindquarters. The hindquarters are the best, or they give the front quarters. And you just cut out the thing there. And all we had to keep 'em in there was refrigerator. So, if you have one hindquarter, and you cut all the meat off and stick it in the refrigerator, you can't put anything else in there. And it's a gasoline refrigerator. We would go out, and, like I said, Joe was the one that's really good in—I guess he was used to doing all that type of work. But we couldn't do it, at least I didn't. He'd be good. Took us up there, I chop it up in chunks in the place there.

"That's for stew you're making!"

I say, "Well, what's the difference? It's meat." (Laughs)

WN: Did the squab taste like fish?

EM: The squabs?

WN: Yeah.

EM: Oh, gee, no it doesn't. To me, there's no fish to it, because like I said, you pull the skin right off, there's only the meat in there. And then we have some kind of sauce, like vinegar and something else. We soak it in the sauce like that. And then after a while, after we have it in a pan, then we take it out, and bread it—we had lot of this breadcrumbs—bread it all up and fry it. That was our chief meal in that. That was delicious. That type of thing is for the kings and queens. (Chuckles)

NK: So what was it like living so far from civilization? I mean, you must stand there on the beach and look out and know that . . .

EM: At first, you get homesick because, you go out and you say, "What in the hell did I come here for?" There's nothing there, you know. You don't see anything, and the ship comes in, drops you off, and then the ship goes out. You look at the ship there, and they waving and go, "Hey, hey, hey!" They waving at you. I said, "What the hell?" I wish I was aboard that ship so I could go with them. But you get used to it. You get used to that type of living. If you're the type that you want to go out and do things at night, hard to survive like that on there. You gotta be—well, like I have always been a loner. I went around, but I always stick to myself. If you by yourself, it don't matter to you. You

don't care. It's a way of life. And like I said, there's always something to do. You can go walk along the shoreline, look for squid, you can go there get fish, you can get shells. Those big shells in the ocean there, you can get those.

But it's something that it's good for the while, if you know that you're gonna be picked up so you're not gonna be there all the time. It's when you, like, I would say, we were stranded there. Stranded there during the war and everything. We're supposed to be picked up before Christmas [1941], that never happened. And it was after the New Year's, still nobody came. And finally this one morning we get up and here's this boat sitting outside there. We look for it and here's the ship, little dinghy comes in to pick us up. They say, "Well, we better be going. There's a [Japanese] plane flying around here. We better be going," and stuff like that. So like I said, from there we went to Baker Island, pick up the four boys, and we just get 'em aboard ship and we're taking a shower and stuff like that, that's when the ship started firing. I guess it's hard for a plane way up high trying to get a ship zigzagging. So I don't know. They said they hit the plane, but it didn't go down. But that was the last we saw of that plane.

NK: Were you able to take anything off the island with you?

EM: You couldn't take anything. You couldn't take anything at all. I had a box in there, toolbox, big case like this, had shells and clothes, and all kind of junk inside like that. That stayed right there.

WN: When did you realize that the *Helm* was American? Did you think at first that it was Japanese?

EM: Yeah. In other words, you see, I think the only reason we didn't come out was because where we were at, we were on the far side of the island. The middle part of the island where the lighthouse stood, there's that sandy beach area, and that's the only place you can come in and land with a boat unless you go to the other side of the island and it's all rocks and everything. You take a chance with your boat get all busted up. Well this boat came in, and they had the boat out in there, and I don't know what made us look up, or what it was, then we saw this boat outside there. And the first thing came to our head was, Japanese boat coming in there, they're going pick us up, take us to Little Tokyo or someplace like that. So we didn't come out. We just stayed there, where we were at. And then, how they found us is beyond me, but I think this was good because when the plane came over, we had our blankets spread out around the place. So I don't think we picked up our blanket at the time. We just left the thing there. And we went under this—we were living under the shore break. Well, they started to come over. That's why we knew they weren't Japanese when they got closer, you see, because they're talking in English. But they could have been Japanese talking in English and we never would have known the difference.

WN: Do you remember how you felt when you knew that it was Americans . . .

EM: Ah, hell, it was great. The only thing was, they thought we were natives. We were natives, because, hell, I guess we looked horrible. Can you imagine being out there for about two months? The only bath we had is dump water over yourself, your hair growing wild all over the place, wild, shaggy looking, eyes, and everything. I guess they figured we were natives. They said, "Well, we got orders to take you natives off this island."

"Fine." That didn't hurt me. Off we went into the boat. Went to Baker Island. See, Baker Island was already certified that it was citizens over there. So they picked up the boys there and we headed back. At that particular time, that was the time that this airplane, this Sikorsky plane or whatever it was, went around and started firing on the destroyer. Well, the destroyer took off, never heard no more about the plane. They said they had hit the plane, but I don't know whether they did or not.

But they questioned us, the captain questioned us. Wanted to know if we needed anything. Said, "No, we just glad you picked us up."

Said, "Well, we had the orders from there to pick you up."

I think if those planes didn't fly over the island there, they would have never figured there's anybody left on the island. You know? But when those planes flew over, and they saw the blankets like that lying outside and the mattress—we had the single mattress lying around in the sun to dry up—well I guess that was enough to say there's people living on the island. They didn't know what kind of people it was. That's why they were sort of skeptical when they came down. They had guns and everything all ready. It could be a front or something. But based on that, still, they came down, picked us up and went down to [Baker] Island.

NK: Did the military say anything when you guys first came back, about going back and retrieving the bodies of the . . .

EM: No, no. They didn't say anything like that, no. In fact, they didn't even know that there were bodies in there. They didn't even know that. Because they interviewed me, and they wanted to know if I wanted to go down there and if there were bodies and all that. I said, "Yes, there's two boys that are down there." I gave them all the information, and that's all they needed. They went down there right to the spot there, and they know where the bodies was. They picked it all up and brought it back [in 1954]. I don't know whether they—they might have [consulted] the parents at the time. But they took the bodies and buried them in Schofield [Barracks]. So I understand, the families were kind of—they didn't agree with that. I don't know, there's still something going on.

NK: You mean, the families didn't agree at the time that they were [to be] buried at Schofield?

EM: I think they had no choice. [They were] just taken in there as where they took like soldiers or something like that. There was a burial site [i.e., cemetery] in there. Now if they wanted to take the bodies, they would have to go through some kind of—I don't know what they do. But understand, the Whaley family, they're very, very—not *huhū*, but they wanted to take the body, have their own burial. I don't know how long it stayed. Like I said, the bodies, the remains stayed in there for years. It wasn't until just recently that they did that, did something for it. Joe now, his family, I think he had only a few in his family, I don't know. The only time we met was down in the—where we had the reunion them folks had. That's when I met them and all. We never knew just what would happen.

NK: Can I ask you? Do you feel like a veteran? I mean, you were there and it seems like military activity was going on in the area. And you survived conflict . . .

EM: No, I don't think that. Because, see, you're talking about the removal of the remains?

NK: Well, just from your personal experience.

EM: Oh, no, no.

NK: Do you feel like you were almost kind of a veteran surviving some sort of a combat situation?

EM: Well, in a sense. Well, we were, at the time, civilians. We stayed civilians. We had no—because when we came back now, the [U.S.] Coast Guard, one of the things they asked me, they said, "You want to come aboard the coast guard?"

I said, "Well, let me think it over." They asked Tom, Tom said, yeah, he wants to go in the coast guard. So after I went home and everything, I thought, I came back, I said, "I don't want to go in the coast guard. Thank you anyway for asking me." And there they go. That's the last I heard about it. Tom went, but I forget how long he was in there. Then it seems he didn't fit in over there. He still was under a big stress. Then they moved him to that lighthouse up over here in Waimānalo—what is that, Koko Head lighthouse or whatever it is. They moved him up there. That's where he stayed for his duration until he got out, and he never renewed to go back. He stayed out. I forget how long it was, three years or something like that.

Did you meet his wife? Not his wife, but his . . .

NK: Niece?

EM: Was that his niece that came down?

WN: How much time do we have? Five minutes?

NK: Well, we're just almost at the end of the tape. Is there anything else that you wanted to add or talk about?

EM: No. Not unless you have a treasure that you got hidden away and give me a bag of treasure.

(Laughter)

EM: No, I don't have anything.

WN: I was wondering, one question is, you folks sort of paired up when they started to shell.

EM: We always paired up.

WN: Why did you do that?

EM: We always were like that. You stay together. In other words, we were paired off, like I said, from the beginning. That's for the cooking, you go out. Because you can go out by yourself on the shoreline, but if you going in the water, make sure you get somebody with you. So that's one of the reasons why we paired like that. And most of the time, I didn't need Tom with me. I just walk around. Walk around the island a couple of times. That was too much for me. Then I went to this side, picked up shells, did this, get birds. You had things to do if you weren't that type where you get all heated up. Like I said, this one guy that was in there, he was the best guy you could think of in there, but as he stayed longer, and the isolation, the guy was going off his rocker, so they had to take him off the island.

WN: I was wondering, two people died, there's two of you left. We're in war, planes coming over, what went through your mind? Did you know that you were coming out of this? Or did you think you were gonna die? Anything like that?

EM: No. You see, the thing was, what we couldn't understand is, why. Why did they bomb the island? But then we finally found out after we came back. We didn't know that this was a field, the bombing was for that field, that Amelia Earhart Field. It was already made. All they had to do was come down and trim it, they could use that. But, you know that they never used Howland Island. They used Baker Island for their troops and everything like that. And Baker Island is not a big island, but it's sort of like a square island. But when they brought troops down to work off the island, it was Baker Island. Howland Island was never filled up. Why? I don't know. Maybe it was too easy for the Japanese to bomb or something like that. But they never did touch that.

WN: Did you pray at all?

EM: A little. I said a prayer over the burial. Other than that, like I said, we were fortunate to have Tom, Tom and I together. Because we'd sleep at night in the place there, sleep when the sun go down. And we would yak and talk. I guess you had that comradeship or somebody to talk to. But if say, I had died, I guess Tom would go bugs, or I would go bugs by myself. Kind of hard to stay by yourself with whatever's going on. You didn't know what was happening.

WN: Did you ever think what would happen if the Japanese, say, came onto the island? Were you ever prepared for anything like that?

EM: Well, that's the reason why we went to the far end of the island. We went over there. The only way they could—I don't know whether they could find the place or not, but they probably could at the time. I don't know. The thought never came through our mind. We were wondering, when the hell are they going to pick us up?

WN: What did you learn from this whole experience?

EM: Gosh, I didn't learn anything. The only thing, I probably feel a little different about what happened. I don't hate the Japanese for what happened. I probably couldn't do that because, you know, I lived in a Japanese community [in Hawai'i]. I have uncles and aunts that are Japanese and all of that. I guess the first part, it was kind of hard. But then when I moved into Pearl Harbor, from the fire department I went into Pearl Harbor and worked, there were only a few Japanese there. You could count them on your hand at work. Most of them worked up in the engineering portion. They had a lot of Chinese, other nationalities, but very few Japanese. And I forgot when the—I think after the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team] went over and came back [from the war], then the Japanese came into Pearl Harbor. But it's different, I tell you. Different. You grew up with them and all this. I never felt any hatred and stuff like that.

WN: You feel lucky to be alive?

EM: That, I probably feel, yeah. It makes you feel—see, when you run, you gotta watch where you gonna run to. Gosh. Yeah, that was an experience.

NK: The museum is gonna do another book on Panalā'au.

EM: When?

NK: We're gonna start working on it probably in the next couple of months. But you know it's gonna be more like the exhibit. We're gonna use more photographs . . .

EM: Yeah, yeah.

NK: . . . and just kind of excerpts. So, for instance, the transcripts from this interview or from the last one, we'd like to quote you and . . .

EM: That's good.

NK: . . . share with people.

WN: Thank you for your time. We appreciate it.

EM: Oh, thank you for coming.

WN: We're done. Oh, okay. Thank you.

EM: Yeah.

WN: Oh, boy. What an experience.

END OF INTERVIEW



**HUI PANALĀ'AU:  
Hawaiian Colonists  
in the Pacific, 1935–1942**

**Center for Oral History  
Social Science Research Institute  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

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