

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

**Question:** ok, we we're getting to Ofuna?

**Answer:** We got to Ofuna ok. Well, right away we found out that one of the big rules they had there was No talking. They didn't want anybody exchanging information between prisoners as so forth. 'cause they guys that had been there awhile wanted to know how're we doing, you know. How's things goin'. 'Course we didn't have any real good news to point out, 'cause we'd lost, at that time, I figured we had lost a carrier, but I didn't know which one, myself. To impress us by that, the next day they took us, the 4 of us out there, they had all the rest of the guys lined up there, and they made us hold our arms over our heads while they worked us over pretty good with an ax handle. I was black and blue from the middle of my back to my back of knees. In fact, they broke my tailbone. After about the 10<sup>th</sup> time, you don't feel anymore. I got a beating of my life that time. All 4 of us got the same treatment. That was to impress us that they were king, dog as it were. Well, we soon developed into a life that was very small rations. You'd get the equivalent of about a teacup full of cooked rice 3 times a day. That would be our ration, with some soybean paste soup with maybe a couple hunks of onion or, you've heard of radishes, these big radishes they grow, or some of that daikon. That would be our ration for breakfast. Lunch again, little bit of rice, maybe a piece of fish head or something like that, and supper the same way. That was our meals. One occasion, we had whale meat of all things. Hunk of whale meat about so big, and it was so rich, I mean, you were completely filled with that one piece of whale meat. Our big problem, though, was the vitamin deficiency and everything. But they had me working in the little garden they had there raising tomatoes. Anytime a tomato start looking pretty yellow, I'd swipe it and hide it till it got red, I'd eat it. So I kept myself from getting any serious ill, well, we all had a little bit of it. You could sink your finger in your hand and it would stay there for a while. Well that camp developed into.. Two or three things developed there that was kind of interesting. They would line us up morning and afternoon and come along and plug a cigarette in (mimics going down the line putting a cigarette into mouths of prisoners), believe it or not, and then come along with a match. The guy next to me says, Hey, don't refuse it. So I did. I just let the thing smolder. He'd puff, puff, puff, then we'd swap, see. Well, after about 6 months of that, a few months, I begin to get the habit, too, see, so at night when they would sweep the, had the last cleanup, they'd have sweep down with the brooms of theirs, you know, that were pretty rough. They weren't really brooms, they were kind of bunch of stuff on the end of a stick. They would sweep the halls and, I was, I was the buss pan. I'd get the end of the thing and they'd sweep the stuff in there and I'd go over to the guard quarters and they'd come and empty all their ashtrays. So I'd pick al the butts out of there. They'd be anywhere from this long to that long. Some were pretty good butts. So I became the butt king. Well, I'd also steal some matches when they weren't looking. So one of the uh.. the uh skipper of the submarine Perch, he lived down at the end of the hall from me there, and he would, I'd hear the clump! And I'd count, clump, clump, clump, I'd reach up and take my little container that had powder dirt there. Toothpaste was powder paste. I'd pick out a good butt, count about the 10<sup>th</sup> clump, I'd hold my hand, and pwhewt! He'd be on his way up to the benjo, which was the name of the Japanese toilet, benjo. Ok. Again, you had to learn Japanese in a hurry because when you had to go to the benjo, you had to go to the guard, bow respectably, and say (*Benjo et temori roshi deskah Phonetic*) Well, how in the heck do you learn that in a hurry, except when you gotta go, you do. If you didn't, you didn't. Lotta guys wet themselves before they learned that. So they'd go in there and light up and a few minutes later the next guy'd go in there and there was a knothole between the stalls and you get a light through the holes, so everybody'd

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

have a smoke up pretty good. One day a guard happen to walk by and saw all that smoke and he'd go in there and ran them all out, and he had everybody running around. That's how they hazed us, they'd run us around in a big circle in the morning, see, until we either dropped. Then they made us all line up, they'd all whip off their hats and bow to the emperor in Tokyo. While he was doing their gibberish emulating the emperor, up and down our line, screw you you SOB, up and down the line, you'd hear us mumbling. Anyway, but

**Question:** Still no talking among the prisoners?

**Answer:** Well, later on, you know, we'd been there so long it didn't matter so much anymore. We learned how to talk out of the corner of our mouth, see. The guard would hear you talking, but he didn't know who was doin' it, see. We learned a lot of stuff from the old movies we saw, you know, Sing Sing and that sort of thing. Well, every Sunday afternoon, when things got down. We got down, got down at one time when there was only 8 of us and 24 guards. Things were pretty easy for us then, of course. This one guard, he was one of the older guys, and they were the best guards. The young guards were the worst. First time they'd been given authority, see, so they really lorded it over us. This guy liked to eat snake. So he would come and get me Sunday afternoon. This means come in Japanese (gestures). I'd go with him, go out to the back, the woodshed, get a gunny sack and bamboo stick, go out snake huntin'. Sign and go out the gate. It was nice, wandering around the hills there. Down these big bamboo groves. That guy could hear a snake crawling in the grass. He saw me point, I had to go in there and find that damned snake and pin him down. I was scared as hell of snakes 'cause I got bit when I was a kid once, and they didn't know if it was a rattlesnake or not because I couldn't tell. I was too young, so they had to give me all those treatments, so I, anytime a snake startles me, he's dead! Anyway, he'd look it over ok, then it'd go in the sack on my back, see. Now a snake in the sack is useless. He can't do anything. He's all balled up and everything, so no problem with that. Well, one day there's a big crow fight going on up the hill, like the crows get together and have a big conference, and pretty soon this one crow came down right near us, half running, half flying down the hill, and I bonked him with a stick and knocked him out, so I tied him to the stick, go on back to camp, the guards took him, played around with him, threw him in the duck pond, scared the ducks, all that sort of stuff, came and gave it to me. It was mine. So I went to the cook shack, got some hot water, a knife, cleaned him up, took him in, put him in the oven, soy sauce, so I eat crow. Literally. Freshest meat I had in 3 years. Another question I like to ask kids or anybody, It's something that you probably eat almost every day that we never saw in 3 years.

**Question:** Bread?

**Answer:** Once in awhile we had something that resembled bread. In fact, in Truk They even gave us breadfruit, which was actually not too bad. No, milk, butter, bacon, eggs. Never saw in 3 years. Something you eat every day, practically. Ok. So that was the ration we had was rice, rice, rice. Well, the days at Ofuna. The first Christmas there was kinda grim. They led us into, they let us have kind of a little service, you might say. We had some Australians there that were picked up somewhere, and we had a couple of, yeah, they were Australians, I guess, New Zealand, and they let us put on a little kind of a ceremony there. And the presents they gave us was half an orange with a green pea in the center. That was our Christmas present. Ok. Well, the next, as we approached December, 1943, they

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

moved a bunch of us out of there because it got down to where we weren't useful anymore. A big bunch would come in like they'd bring in a whole crew from the submarine Grenadier, that was sunk. And the, most of the guys were shipped out within a short time to work camps somewhere, but the skipper stayed on, Fitzgerald. They had a lot of fun trying to develop his name, 'cause with the Japanese language, there's only, everything, like you say K, kah, key, cay, coo, coa, a,e,i,o,u, with a k in front of it see. All right, in my case, the Japanese do not have an L in their language. They have an R, so they use R, so my name was written out as N-e-r-u-s-o-n. They only have one consonant and it's N. Everything else has got a vowel after it. So that's the way their language is like. If you say, camera, cah-moo-rah, the way they did it okay. So my name was Ney-roo-san, but they had trouble with Fitzgerald, 'cause fee-ret-soo-ger-roo, is how it came out. Ok, fine. But, we did learn, I did learn, they even let us have a little bit of language classes here, and we learned quite a bit of the language. We had to in a way. And I even learned to write it, the katakata, and hiragana. The Chinese characters were a little bit difficult for me. I called them Chinese characters. The picture language. I started making a scrapbook. I still have it. It's on display up at McChord Air Base up there. I made up a kind of a dictionary but one character they have has 57 meanings. So the average Japanese has to use a dictionary to read the newspaper. Beside this picture, they'd have a little clue as to what it meant. You'd have to look in the dictionary to see what the clue was. Well, we learned how to speak fairly well respectably. They took us down to Tokyo after a little over a year there. Went down to Tokyo, and turned us over to the Army, and that was at Omori which was a headquarter camp. You saw a picture of it there. ok. The Army had farmed everybody out to do, to do work in various jobs. So after an indoctrination period of a few weeks, I was sent out to a railroad yard where we had, they had us stevedoring out there, unloading railroad cars. Everything from charcoal, to lumber, to logs, foodstuffs, pig iron, you name it. And I got stuck with the lumber and the charcoal and that sort of thing. And after we'd unload a railroad car full of charcoal, we'd look just as black as, so we'd go over to the water tower where they had the water tower for the locals. Four of us would lock arms and hold ourselves, one guy would go over and pull the chain and that water come down that big around, just about knock us down, but it was sure wipe off that charcoal. The Nips would come up there screaming, damii, damii, damii you know. So we.. so what, you know. Now this is where we started to become.. just because we were captured, we had not quit fighting. We became saboteurs. Now our honchos, or foremen, as you want to call them, were Koreans, and they didn't have too much love for the Japanese either. Therefore, if they saw us doing something like that they'd just say, Sabatogee! You know. They didn't dare do it, but we did. Every lose bolt, every cotter key was pulled or taken off. Any journal box on a railroad car that wasn't bolted down would have it spring loaded, it would be up that quick, it would have a handful of sand in there to help the bearings along. We did all we could. Now, toward the end of our stay there, a crew was developed, 10 of us working to unload 10 tons of pig, no 80 tons of pig iron a day was our quota. We had to unload from railroad cars or pick it off the deck and load it in to barges. They had a lot of canal systems in Tokyo. Quite a bit, maybe more than Venice does, but we would have to carry that stuff, and believe it or not, a pig weighs anywhere from 150 – 200 pounds, carry it on your shoulder. Doesn't take very long to do a ton. We'd have 4 lifting, there were two guys, two crews of two guys lifting and 6 carrying, always rotate around. Well, one day the barge, bargee we would call them, didn't stick around and put a lot of small stuff on the.. line the bottom of this barge first. He shoved off, so we selected the biggest damn pig we could find, got there on the flank, upended and shoved it. It went clear through the bottom of the barge. Then

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

we worked like heck to put another about 20 tons more in it and it sunk right there. Tied up 120 foot of dock space for the rest of the war. Well, we also were able to, because we got out of camp, and that was when the enlisted men in our case, had it all over the officers, 'cause we got to get out of camp. They were stuck in camp. We got out of camp, and the guys who worked on the food line up there were able to steal rice and food. And very simple, I wish I had a piece of bamboo to demonstrate it, but I don't. Take a piece of bamboo, about that big around, and slice it like a hypodermic. They would issue us socks, like tube socks. A sock (inaudible), jam it in a rice bag, whish! That quick that sock would be full of rice. Twist it and shove it in your belt. You'd have yourself a couple pounds of raw-ricky as we called it. We'd take it over and hide it in our, uh, we had built air raid shelters out of railroad ties and what have you. We had hidy holes in there. We'd take in there. Guys that were stealing rice up there in the rice line had a partner down there working on the, in the hardware like we were. During the day, they'd take the rice and leave it down there in the benjo, the benjo Was a little shack out there. All the inside walls were all like post office boxes. You'd slide it up there'd be a hole. Everybody had their post office box, literally. So he's give you the word that there's something there for you. Just before quittin' time, you'd go down there, get it, and hide it on your body. I had a hat that I put a zipper in the lid in the hat. I could carry a pound of rice on my head, and they wouldn't know it. That's how we got rice back to camp. But we had a boiler out there on the job, so we. I made a mess kit out of a 5-gallon metal can, I'd saw, cut up and made it, fold it. It would hold a little better than a liter. So I'd eat my breakfast and lunch ration at camp before I left. That made a decent-sized meal. Get out there, fill this in there, put a little bit of camouflage rice, the rice they gave us at camp was different, so we put that on, it would float to the top, and we'd eat it, and then we'd get back to camp, we'd have another rice, and that night maybe we'd have a fish head or piece of fish or some damn thing. You know, meat, so we were doing pretty well. Oh, that pig iron job was heavy, so they gave us a rice ball at 2 o'clock, we'd quit, which would be a hunk of rice about like so, so we were. Believe it or not, I gained weight. I was about 185 when the job came to an end.

Now I'm going to back up and say the reason it came to an end was because of B-29s. The first B-29 came in on the first of November 1944. We were out on a job; the sirens went off, so we watched. They didn't run us into a shelter or anything. One single plane went over. He was going like a bat out of Hades, 'cause he was in a jet stream, I guess. He must have been going 600 mile an hour. One plane. They sent up their fighters, never even got anywhere near him. We figure he must have been a photo, photo-Joe, as we called them. Ok. We figured he'd get back tonight, develop out the film, make the prints, make the decision, load up the plane, we figured how many days they'd be back. We had to run out of money? Alarms went off, they took us all, put us into boxcars, locked us into boxcars. We could hear the bombs coming down nearby. Sounded like a train going across a bridge or something. Funny sound. Then the explosion. When they let us out later we could see a lot of smoke nearby where we were. Well the raids at first were very spotty, a year in between, but later on it became day and night both raids, and we'd hear one plane up there at night. They'd have, set off the sirens and then everything would be quiet, everything would be dark. And they wouldn't fire a first shot. That first plane was the pathfinder. He was up there locating where they were going to start bombing that night. The minute he let his bomb go, then they'd open up everything, but that's when the other guys were just about there, see. He'd start that first fire, then they'd just carry on that way. They had us out there doing demolition. They'd take a whole block of houses and destroy them. They had us out there tearing these houses down. They'd moved the people out, and we had a crew of about 200 of us,

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

and a Jap house is composed of many 4 x 4s vertically, pinned in like this so they could swing with the earthquakes they had so often. And then the benjos, the, if they were.. they always had one on the second floor too that would just be a hunk of pipe coming down into the honey bucket below, see. So anyhow, we would locate where those damn things were and mark them with a flag right away. Guys would go around with a saw and cut those 4 x 4s halfway this way, halfway that way. Somebody'd go up on the roof and remove some of, all their houses had tile, remove some of the tile. They had big long rope, houses are about, oh, couple hundred feet long, go up there and tie it around that thing. Then we'd get on the end of that rope and start pulling on it. You find out what the frequency of that house was. Every house had a frequency, and so we found out what the frequency was and give 'er hell, and man, she'd crumble down in one big pile, and then we had to back up there and stack up all the tile and take all the stuff. That's why we had that benjo marked ahead of time, so you didn't end up knee deep in a bucket of crap, see. Well, we, the raids were interesting in a way, some of the first raid we saw were those napalm. They would, the cans would erupt up in the air and this flaming material would come down. It was like a.. spectacular. I mean, you never saw fireworks like that, but the trouble was that stuff would come down and hit the tile roofs and then run off and wouldn't do any damage. Soon as they hit the ground they'd put it out with sand or something. They tried thermite. They used a lot of thermite stuff. That would sometimes burn through something. So what they started doing then is they quit using that aerial explosion. They would put a delay in it, so that thing had to crash through that tile, then erupt. So instant fire of the house. It don't take long to burn down a house of that type. The big fire raid in early April of '45 eliminated about 20% of the area of Tokyo in one night, and that fire burned for 3 days, and the people were diving into the canals and what have you, and they were drowning, and corpses were floating up on our island for weeks afterwards. And logs, the harbor was full of logs, logs were cut loose. They had us out there on beach detail, recovering those logs. We'd have to get ropes. There were so many of us there that we'd just push those logs up and make a big stack there, and the honey dippers quit coming to camp. You imagine 700 were generating a lot of honey, so we went out there in the sand and they dug hole about 20 foot square and dig down 'til you hit water. It was right there in Tokyo Bay, then they'd have a detail hauling that stuff out there and dumping it in this pile. Every night they'd cover it with a little bit of sand. One day we had the thing up to the top with sand. We knew where it was. One day the guard didn't like the line we were lined up at, after we got through with log detail. He was trying to line us up, he backed off, he stepped right in that thing. He was up this deep all of a sudden. He climbed up out of there and disappeared. We brought ourselves back to camp. Everybody says, Why didn't you try to escape? Well, what would we do? We didn't speak the language really. I knew some of it, but we didn't look like them, we didn't have ration tickets. I mean, we knew what side of the bread the butter was on, so we didn't ever try to escape from there. No way out, not like it was in Europe. Well, next day that guy smelled like a French outhouse. House of ill repute. Whorehouse, to use the word. That was the other funny thing. You know, the men in Japan do all the funny perfume and stuff. The women were ok, we were, our camp there at (inaudible) Was right near the geisha district, so we saw lots of those geisha girls running around while we on our jobs there. Well, to hurry the story along, lots of different things happened around Tokyo. We got used to routines here. One peculiar day, I was back at camp. I got every tenth day off. That was your day, you had every 10 days off, so I, my number then was 3410, so I got the 10, 20<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> off, so 'course I got screwed in February in more ways than one, but when were at camp, then you got stuck on camp detail. So one day the guard came and got me to go with him and I had the

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

bicycle cart. They used a lot of carts, two-wheeled carts that would hook on the back of a bicycle that they would use over there for hauling stuff, so I was operating as the cart operator. I had to hold up the end of the cart and tow it along across the bridge to the city and we went down the street quite a ways, went to the fish market, and several tubs full of stinky sardines about yea long, see. Well, we started back toward camp and the guard wanted to stop at this little shop and go in there and get his watch fixed of something. Well, he had his sidearm and he had his rifle, and the door of that thing was about that wide and he couldn't get through, so he turned around, hands me the rifle. So there I am standing on a main street in Tokyo with a danged rifle, guarding his load of fish. I wish I'd gotten a picture of that. No way, of course, but that would have been something to have all right. So anyway, there I was, back to camp, you know, with the fish, so that night, of course, we had fish, and they didn't know how to rake fish. They would steam the damn things, so you've got slimy fish, head, guts and tails, everything. Boom. I mean that was.. that was vitamins.

**Question:** Did you, so at this point, your wife still didn't know...

**Answer:** uh, I should, ok. When we went down to Tokyo, that was December of '43, so I'd already been declared dead, which was a year and a day after I was shot down, so October 27, '43, I was declared dead by the Navy. I have the documentation from the Secretary of the Navy and also President Roosevelt's document saying that. So, when we went to the Army camp, then they did turn our names in, but it took awhile for our names to get back to the States, and then when the Navy got your names, then they had to double-check through and make sure everything was copasetic before they'd turn you in. Now as it turned out, a friend of mine that I grew up with had a friend that was working back there in Washington, D.C. on that detail, and he just made a message, Hey, if so-and-so's name ever shows up, let me know. So he did, he said, Hey, his name came in. So this friend of mine came and visit.. he knew my wife real well. He came and visited my folks and my wife, but he couldn't dare tell them. He tried to, he hinted, but he couldn't tell them. He didn't dare tell them, ok, something was wrong, ok. Well, within a week or two then they got the telegram saying that I was alive, but that was in April of 1944. So it was almost 19 months before they found out that I was alive. My wife had still been fairly true blue, because she had been dating a little bit, but very limited, and didn't get involved with anything, and so of course, she was ready when I came home, but.. a lot of wives weren't that good. We had one guy in camp that got a letter, believe it or not, from his wife, saying, Hey, they said you were dead. They paid off the insurance. I'm remarried, so stay dead. Well, obviously, he started paperwork right away to have a divorce, so she had to end up paying back the insurance, I guess, because, in my case my wife had received the first installment of the insurance papers. My Dad was fairly savvy, being an attorney, and he said, Just don't cash it. Just hang onto it. It's good she did, 'cause they wanted it back, but they did, when I was declared dead, they did give 6 months gratuity of pay, which was a fair amount of money in those days because I was being first class I was flying, you get flight skins, which was 50%. I was getting another 15% for longevity, and another umpteen % for being married, so I was getting \$250 a month back in 1942, 3, and 4, and so forth. Now I asked a lot of people. What would you do if you lost your 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup> year? Think of what you were doing when you were that old. Missing. I'm still playing catch-up, as the saying goes, 'cause that's about what I lost, 'cause I was about 25 ½ when the war ended. Well, back to the story. When we got, Tokyo got pretty well burned up with all the 29's coming in, and so they decided to move 300 of us up north to another camp

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

there near Sendai, which is the north end of the main island there, and we were supposed to go out the night of the Memorial Day Raid, and that day the B-29's, the Air Force really put up a show. They had 600 planes that day, and they came in wingtip to wingtip, 10 at a time like a big scythe covering the waterfront clear from south of Yokohama clear up through Tokyo. We were actually in the Tokyo area, and they just panted everything. By the time they got up, the ones that were over our heads, we didn't even see the planes there was so much smoke and fire, but some empty napalm cans landed in camp. Denver Ordnance Works. Boy, that was a thrill, I tell you! Home!. So we survived that raid ok, and we.. had nobody in camp got hit that night. All those darned, they had anti-aircraft guns mounted right on our island, right outside our fence for Pete Sakes, just asking for it, you know, but they knew where our camp was, because some of those B-29 pilots that were shot down and captured, we got to, sneak talking to them, What camp we in, so we'd tell them, Oh, good, they know where that is. But there were 30 camps in Tokyo, approximately, and several of them did get hit, and it was bad thing, another thing that was kind of bad sometimes, was some nights those B-29's would take a real licking. One night we saw one that just must have been hit directly 'cause all of sudden, it was just a big flash, the whole plane just, bombs and everything, that was the end of that. And one night we saw 9 of them shot down, 'cause they were coming in at low altitude and they would drop their bombs and then they would turn on the power and go out, and the Japs would wait till they did that, then they'd flip on the search lights and the zeros were waiting up in the dark, and they'd come down then and nail that plane when it couldn't see. We saw 9 of them go down one night. One of them came down real near us. He was in a flat spin. He came down and hit the water right near our island. We were on this log detail. We had kind of a raft, so couple of us paddled out there and we could look down and see right into the plane, and the pilot and co-pilot were still sitting in their seats, and so I forgot. I wrote down the tail number of that plane, but I lost it after that. It was, that was, let's face it, war's no fun, no picnic. But that night, they moved us out the night of that 600-plane raid and put us on this railroad train and hauled us up north and we spent all night on that train and all next day they stopped once like for lunch and gave us some rice and that evening we ended up at Sendai, and then they took us up further north into the mountains there, and we got up to this new camp where we were going to be. There was still snow on the ground. It was about the first of June then, so we figured, boy, this is gonna be bad next winter. Wow. The detail there was.. we worked in a factory where they manufactured pig iron from the raw material. The iron ore came in over the hill on these conveyor, overhead tram things, and they had the charcoal and the limestone and coal and whatnot to make up the ingredients, and they had a big arc furnace there and they had a powerhouse on the river there that generated the power for this, for these furnaces. And that's how they would generate, reduce the iron ore down to iron, then they would get a big (inaudible), they'd go to tap the hole, several tons would run out and they would use the old pig and sallow method they'd call it. They'd form in the sand the main line that'd have all these pigs out of there. Pig is about yea long by so wide and about so deep and weighed about 150-200 pounds, and that's what they'd do. They'd get that iron coming out and they'd use wood and sticks actually, diverted... ok. After a few days of that, I could see they had a weak point in their system, 'cause I had studied metallurgy.. back in Tokyo I had a textbook. I had originally been going, while I was going to the University of California, I had learned, I was technically an Electrical Engineering student, but I talked to this friend of mine who I'd met there in Tokyo who had been a mining engineer, was working out there in the Philippines, and he had been picked up on Corregidor treated just like an Army person, so he ended up in our camp. He and I became buddies 'cause we're from

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

the same home town, Mill Valley. And he talked me into becoming a metallurgist, so I new metallurgy then, so, ok, saw a weak point in their system. Everything came into a scale house from different sources, and everything went over to this scale and got weighed in. So many pounds of or kilos of iron or so many kilos of coal, so many kilos of limestone, the flux and so forth. Ok. All went across scales. We had guys working in the scale house that would pick up pieces that would fall off the belt, that sort of thing. Hey, when they're not looking, hold up the thing on the scale for a little bit. Count maybe 30 or so seconds, and when they're not looking, then later in the day, hold it down and just keep doing that all day long, all these different scales, ok. Well, all that material went to a master belt which was way ahead up in this building, 10 stories up into these big bins that came out and fed the furnaces. Well, it took awhile, but pretty soon their production started dropping. Started out at about 75 pigs per pour, and started dropping 60, 55, 50, 45, and they were going crazy. They were going all over sampling. Everything came out at the end of the day, tonnage was correct, but segregated, so they'd tap the furnace, they get tons and tons of green glass, but no iron. Well, they kept boosting the power. Pretty soon they burned the bottom out of that furnace, and it spilled out on the deck, got into that wet sand and exploded. Ten-story building shed all over the tram site and went whip! Fortunately, none of our people got hurt. Killed 3 of them. Oh, and within about a month and a half, all 3 furnaces were down. They made us go down and repair that furnace. We had to go down in that hole, red-hot rocks, and fill a bucket. That's all we did for a shift was one bucket of hot rocks. It was probably a couple hundred degrees down there. They put stuff on your shoes so you didn't burn your shoes, but you learn to put a 2 x 4 under your shoes or something. And shove that crap in the bucket and get it out of there. We finally got everything out of that furnace, they re-lined it with graphite, so and so on, and put it back together again. The only furnace we didn't shut down was the one that generated carbide, 'cause we didn't know how to handle it. I was familiar with carbide because my grandfather had been in mining, and my father knew a lot about it, and I'd even done some of it, but you use that carbide in those carbide lamps, you know a little bit of water generates gas, which then you use in your light, and that was kind of dangerous stuff. We didn't mess with it, but we had all three of their iron furnaces shut completely down. And then a few weeks before the war ended the Navy planes came in there early one morning and dropped a few strategic bombs in the right places and really put them out of business. Particularly the area they had me working in was in the centering department, where all this raw material with (inaudible) all went together. Bucket was about, oh, 15 feet in diameter, and they had it about that deep, and then they would suck air through it and set it on fire with a flame thrower, and the my job was to run this thing, the crane would pick up these pots and set it on the deal. I worked, clamp it, then I worked the thing that turned this thing over and dumped all that stuff down the chute. Guys down below would be raking out those chunks, looked like sponge. It was partly iron. That would go in one of the charges of the furnace, and they had our guys down there doing that, see. Well, one night I didn't shut that clamp quite tight enough, so the whole damn pot when down the hole. Created a consternation. Took them a half hour of so to get the thing back out and squared away again. So guess what. From then on we had a planned outage every night. And we usually did about 7 a night, so we decided ahead of time. I'd tell them ahead of time, ok, it'll be number 3 tonight. So they'd count, they guy'd happen to be looking up and see me, he'd kind of look like, say, I wouldn't set the clamp quite tight enough. Sure enough, down the chute. Ah, tak san byouki which means very sick. He'd say, tak san byouki. I got away with it! I mean, that was our method of fighting. Subtle, but it worked. Really put them out of business if we could.



## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

**Question:** I'm going to have to cut just a little bit here. We've got about 5 more minutes.

**Answer:** ok. Well, I'm just about the end of this anyway. Well, a few days later, they had me out working on the garden detail. When I came back to camp, everybody else was already home. I said What happened. I don't know. They took us all into the lunchroom and they'd locked us in there and the emperor made a speech, and they all came back crying and everything, walked us back to camp and that was it. So, next morning no railway, no nothing, the camp commander was still there. All the Japs disappeared. Guards all gone. He just said, Sensougo which means The war's over. So it's ok, bring on the food, so we had them hauling the food in. We ate all we could eat. Every third day we went out and commandeered another oxen, cattle, brought it into camp, slaughtered it, had fresh meat that night. We didn't even hang it, we just ate it. It was good. Well, I went from 110 to 125 pounds in one month. Well, to get out of there, we had a radio. They kept saying, Stay where you are. We know where you are. We'll come and get you, but they never showed, of course. So finally we commandeered our own train and got out of there. That's a long story, but we got there to Sendai and we wanted to go to Tokyo. By then I understood enough language to talk and the switch he said, Bridges have been bombed out since you came up, there they were all American ships in the harbor, so we said, Ok, if you're wrong you're going to have to back this thing out of there, so we came over the hill and sure enough, there was a hospital ship, LSTs, the whole works in the harbor. We pulled into the station, the lieutenant had a clipboard there, said, What camp you from. 10D Wakisan. Oh, you're not on my list, but welcome aboard. So we went on an LST. Never seen an LST, didn't know what they were. Up to the hospital ship, processed through there. Anybody that wasn't really sick was then put on a transport, which in my case I went to the transport. Next day we went down to Tokyo, went through the parade. They gave us a full parade down there 'cause they were all prisoners, and then they separated us. The Marines, the Navy, and the Canadians all stayed together, went to Guam for processing, and then got whatever bill for transportation. Luckily, I got to fly from Guam. All day, all night, stopped at Kwajalein, Johnson Island, and finally ended up at Pearl later that afternoon, and then were there about 3 days getting squared away, then took off and landed in Oakland. Now, my wife and folks were there because every plane that went ahead of us had somebody on it I knew. I told them to call my folks. It turned out I found out later my brother was also one of their pilots that was flying the Naval Air Transport Service. He was also flying the planes from Oakland on into Olathe Kansas, see, so they phoned my folks and said, about 2 in the morning, Well, he'll be there about 6 this morning, so they picked up my wife and they were there. I tell you, when I came off that plane and saw them, I about collapsed. So we got, they took us up to the hospital, started processing, had to go through 10 things to get done. Well, everybody kind of, since my wife was there, they let me go right up to the head of the line. I went to the head of every line, got done there to the gate to go to San Francisco. They gave us a couple days leave, you know, and the Marine said, I'll get you a ride, so he stopped everybody instead of letting them go. Finally, a captain came down there. A 4-striper, had a big old square back, stops, Where you going? San Francisco. He said, You've got two passengers. Well, I didn't have any uniform then. No rank, no nothing, see. The guy didn't know what the hell I was. I was wearing Navy grays. I was a, then a chief, E7, Chief Petty Officer. I had the hat and everything else. So he took us over to San Francisco. Said, You don't mind if I leave you up here, do you. I don't like the traffic. I said, Oh, that's fine, sir. He didn't know who the hell we were. So we

## Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

Tape 3 of 3

got down there. First thing I saw was a uniform store, so I went in there and got the right one, so the wife was working there in the city, so she'd been trying to get a hotel reservation, but they'd only give you 5 days then, period, so she had it all arranged so they were going to say, Here he is, ok, so we got. There I was, back at home.

**Question:** So you didn't see your, how long were you in the camp? How long were you a prisoner?

**Answer:** Almost 3 years. I hadn't seen her, of course, from early August in 1942 until October 6, 1945, so a little over 3 years since I'd seen her.

**Question:** Wow.

**Answer:** So from then on we lived it up. Every time another friend would come in, they'd call me, we'd have another soirée to San Francisco, man, we really did that place in, and then shortly after that we took off and went down to Yosemite for kind of a little trip with this friend of mine that I'd met there and saw the firefall, and everybody was leaving 'cause some the snow would come down. We had our choice of the whole damn place. Nowadays you can't even get in there. We selected a camp, ok, that's yours. Later on, we went on a honeymoon trip on down through the southwest, went down to the Grand Canyon, that mule trip down to the bottom of the Canyon. There was only two couples went on that trip. Again, today you can't even get on it hardly.

**Question:** Not any more.

**Answer:** We were down there Thanksgiving, 1945. If you went down there and looked at that logbook they have there, you'd see our names there. Just the wife and I and another couple. And all the, we had a big table, all the Thanksgiving dinner with all the mule handlers and skimmers and all the people there. Just had a nice Thanksgiving. No ends the war. Later on, though, I graduated from Berkeley, I went up to get my degree in metallurgy. I ended up at Hanford for 19 years. Actually built the big ones. I managed the plutonium development operation then. We were making the actual plutonium components for all those tests. So I've been around a few. I left Hanford about 1967 and went to work with my brother building cranes, the big cranes on top of dams and powerhouses? Built those for several years. I retired out of that at the age of 59. I've never been so damn busy since.

**Question:** That's what everybody says, they say I don't know how we ever worked when we had a job.

**Answer:** That's right. I mean, time just goes, goes. Well, anyway, that's my story. I'm stuck with it.

**Question:** Let me get you unmiced here.