

**Robert Reppenhagen
Veteran**

**Lt. Col. Robert von Hasseln
Interviewer
Michael Aikey
Videographer**

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Q: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Reppenhagen, 20 February 2001, Connecticut Street Armory, Buffalo. Interviewer is Lt. Col. Robert von Hasseln. Videographer is Mr. Michael Aikey. Mr. Reppenhagen, tell me where you grew up and where you were born.

RR: I was born in Buffalo in 1918. I went to school in Buffalo and then I went to the University of Buffalo. I got my degree in history teaching in 1940. Actually, I was an isolationist until we got into the war. Then I registered for the draft and then I got a 3A deferment. I was working some part time jobs 1940 to '41. Then I went to Curtiss Air for a year. Then in August of '42 I enlisted in the Marines in the officer's program at Quantico. I went on active duty in October. In December, the course was over and then they said they didn't think I was the type for a Marine officer, so I went home.

In April of 1943 I was drafted and went to Fort Niagara then sent to Atlantic City in the Air Force. From there, they sent me to Fort Monmouth. They said that I would be a radio operator. I was at Fort Monmouth for about five months in '43 and I became a high-speed radio operator.

They shifted us down to Drew Field, Florida in aircraft warning. I was there a week or so and an officer came around and said they were looking for volunteers for hazardous duty. I said yes, I'd sign up which I did. Then when I got back to the barracks there, I talked to one of the other fellows and he said you know what you are going to do. I said no. He said you are going to jump out of airplanes. I never thought of that. I'm afraid of heights. I hate to stand on a curb, but I didn't want to back out then. So, I said well, we'll see what happens.

Then a couple of weeks later they moved us up to Washington. I went to the Congressional Country Club with the Office of Strategic Services with General Donovan. We trained at the Congressional Country Club. Actually, it wasn't quite as nice as it sounds. It wasn't bad but you weren't living in a country club.

Then we went up to a place called Area B. Area F was the Congressional Country Club. They had all kinds of odd stuff going on there. They had a fellow there named Major Fairbairn. He was from the British Army and he was very famous. He had a lot of books

about dirty fighting and all that stuff. He was an expert in that. He was a policeman in Shanghai.

Area B originally was a CCC camp. They cut it in half and half of it they made into a camp for the presidents and its now Camp David. The other half we trained in weapons, all kinds of weapons from pistols up to a bazooka. Then we went back to Area F. Then in the end of March they sent us overseas. We went to Norfolk, Virginia then we went to Casablanca. We landed there and went on these 40&8's and took the train over to Algiers. We had a camp on the Mediterranean near Algiers. When we arrived in the camp, there was a bunch who came to greet us. They'd been there already. They had all kinds of broken arms, legs and bandages. I said what's happened to you guys. They said we just had our jump training.

In a couple of weeks, we had our jump training in a place called Blida in northern Algeria. They had an airport there and the OSS had some planes. They used to fly people over into Italy and around there and drop supplies and all that jazz.

We trained for two days on mockups and that. Then we had to make four jumps. Sometimes the wind was bad. It took us four days, but we made four jumps. Then they said we had the wings of the American paratroops.

Then they said...they had people going into Italy, Greece and the Balkans and all of that. Then they shipped us up to England. We got into England just before the invasion and they send us to Brock Hall. It was an estate just north of London outside of Northampton. That was our base there. They had a bunch of Norwegians there. They were Norwegian Americans. They were going into Norway although first they sent a lot of them into France because they had too much trouble getting into Norway.

The head of the camp then was Prince Serge Obolensky. He was a Colonel He had been a Russian prince. He was a very nice fellow. He had a whole book written about him. He was sort of an odd character but very nice. His first wife was a daughter of Czar Alexander III. The second wife was one of the Astor's.

I was in what was called the 1st French Group. We were supposed to go into France. They had all these different groups. They had Polish, German and a lot of Italian groups, Greek, Balkan. In a couple of days, they sent us to radio school. They were always sending us to radio school. You had to keep your speed up. We went to a British camp in Henley. It was Fawley Court. It was a big old estate and they had all kinds of secret British stuff going on there, SO's and SOE's and all their spies and radio men and all of that. A lot of covert...

Q: SO being Special Operations?

RR: Yes.

Q: SOE. Special Operations Executive?

RR: Yes. Right. Some of them had two- or three-men teams. We were to go in as a group. We were at Henley and all of the sudden they called us back to Brock Hall. They said we were going to go to a British jump school. They sent us up to what was it Manchester at Ringway. We were to go through the British jump school. You had to do seven jumps.

The first two days you trained. Then you jumped out of a balloon up in these big tethered balloons. Then you dropped through a hole in the British method. We did two of those then you had to do a night jump. You had to do a jump with a kit bag that was strapped to your leg. You let it down then it hit the ground and you pulled it in. We made the seven jumps and then we got the wings of the British Paratroops.

Then we went back to Henley for a short time then they said we were going into France. What it was the mission that we were to go on. In World War I they used the harbor at Brest. That was their big harbor to ship everything in, so they figured they'd use it in World War II. Right near Brest there was a railroad bridge. They were afraid that when the American Army came in the Germans would blow the bridge. So, they said we should go in and hold the bridge until the Army got there. That was supposed to be a big operation. We had the Colonel Obolensky and our Captain. In the whole group there were about thirty-five of us and three planes.

In early August we got ready to go. What happened was the first plane had trouble and never left the ground. We didn't know that. The second plane flew over Brittany and they kept flying around. There was supposed to be a spy in there to alert us, but he didn't show up. That plane came back to England. So, we came up in the third plane. We had two lieutenants and nine enlisted men. I was the radio man. Incidentally, in the plane they put us in a British plane that we'd never been in before. In the American plane you jump out the side door. In the British plane you sit down and slide along and jump through a hole in the floor. In this plane you stand up and you run along and then you jump through the hole.

One thing I said to the Air (unclear) guys there, I said what's your rank. He said Tech Sergeant. He says what's yours? I says I'm a Corporal. He said what are you I said I'm a radio operator. He said so am I. Well anyway, I said can you hit your head, when you jump, on the other side. He said no, no, no. Sure enough I hit my head. Of course, I was never athletic. I was always sort of bookish. I spent more time in the library. Sure enough I hit my head which flipped me over so when the chute opened, I'm hanging upside down in the parachute. You've got all this equipment on. You've got a pistol and you've got code books and you've got cigarettes, canteen, 1st Aid Kit and two knives. You've got a pocket knife and another trench knife, and you've got a pistol which I think I said. You've got all this kind of stuff and if you get tangled in that you've got all kinds of trouble.

Luckily, I managed to summersault through it. We landed there. Finally, we realized there was only eleven of us at the bridge. We said well we'll just have to go over and keep an eye on the bridge. With the second plane flying around so long and our plane flying around, we kept flying without a signal and then some guy lit a cigarette on the ground, so we jumped. The Germans thought there were a lot of planes. They didn't know there were only two with one left. They didn't come near us. So, we held the bridge for a few days. Then we went into the town Landivisiau in Brittany. We stayed there while we got together with the Underground there, the French.

After a while we went out on a few little raids in little towns around there to clear out the Germans. We captured a lot of Germans. When the Army came through, I think it was the 8th Division, came up we met the general and we asked the General what we should do. We said we'll help you take Brest. It took them thirty-five days and a lot of fighting. He said you guys work with your French and pickup any Germans that you can running loose in these towns around here which we did.

Finally, we went back to England. We stayed there a while and they said do you want to go to China? Most of these guys... these guys most of them I liked them. If you said to jump into the Emperor's garden in Japan most of them would say yes when do, we start. Some of them were a little dumb I think but (laughs) that goes with it, I guess. But they were nice.

We had an awful lot of French Canadians that lived in New England. Outside of your specialists, your specialists were your medics and radio men. So, we said ok we'll go to China. In the meantime, at the Congressional Country Club months earlier General Donovan had inspected us. General Donovan was from Buffalo. He was quite a man.

So, when we came back to the Congressional Country Club from England, he threw a party for us. It was a real nice party a dinner and they had girls there and drinks and entertainment. It was real nice. Then they gave us a thirty-day furlough. Then most of us went to China. They put us on a train, and we went to Camp (unclear) outside of Los Angeles. From there we got on a boat and the boat went to Australia. We docked there for two days. We'd been on the boat for about two weeks. They wouldn't let us off the boat. We could look down on the shore there and there's all these guys running in and out of the saloons and all that and women running around. They didn't want to let us off. They figured maybe we'd never want to get back on.

Then the boat went on to Bombay and then we took a train to Calcutta. Then we got on some of the oldest trains in the world. They were even older than the ones in Africa. They took us up to Assam. Well, our Captain Cook he was quite an eager beaver. He said that unless we are flying into China, let's take some trucks over the Ledo Road, the old Burma Road. There was really the new Ledo-Stillwell Road which left from Ledo in India. So, we got these Canadian trucks. We were carrying ammunition towing some howitzers. You go up and down these mountains you know. Some of the highest

mountains in the world. It was a pretty crude road. A lot of trucks went off the edge and there's no guards or anything. It took us thirteen days. It was ten hundred and ninety-seven miles. We went through Burma into Kunming.

We went over a bridge I think it was by Wanting. Salween (River) I think it was. It had a big sign up: ten-ton limit. They had Chinese soldiers there. In the meantime, our truck had broken down. So, we're being towed. We had twenty-seven tons. We said we can't go back to India we're going forward. We didn't think they'd shoot us which they didn't. So, we're going up and down over this bridge and finally we made it into China.

We got to Kunming and I'll never forget when we delivered the trucks. One of the officers there said now you guys can wash the trucks. We put up an awful row. We thought well we're combat troops. We don't wash trucks. We just brought these trucks in for thirteen days. They finally let us out of that.

The idea was, China was a mess. I think they might have been better off on the other side for us. Chiang Kai Shek was a crook. They were all crooks. Incidentally, they were going to setup commandos. A hundred and fifty Chinamen in each commando. There were to be twenty commandos. They said they're going to give us the cream of the Chinese army. We used to say to each other if this is the cream, we'd wonder about the rest of it.

I found out way later the Chinese (unclear) were all crooked. The first five commandos were picked troops but after that they sent in any old coolies that they had for the next fifteen. So, we were training them in rifles. We had a hundred and fifty Chinese to a commando as we called them. We were to work with the Chinese on raids and that.

We trained for a while and they also sent me again to some radio school there in China. Then, we only, the war was ending. We didn't know it. They only managed to get five commandos into combat. They sent in the first and second. The 1st went in first. Then they were going to send in a big group, the 8th, 9th and 10th commandos. I was assigned as radio man to the 10th. Most of the Americans who were in it had been in Burma instead of France. They put me in there. I was the only one who'd been in France. At first, they were rather unfriendly thinking Burma had been tougher or something.

The 8th, 9th and 10th we flew in. From Kunming we flew to...actually we were going to the Tanchuck airport. We didn't land there. We landed further away and had to walk in. I know we had some boats too.

In '44 the Chinese said and Chennault and those guys said build these airfields and we'll bomb Japan out of the war from China. That was one of the plans for the war at one time, but it changed. They built fifteen airfields. The Chinese were supposed to protect them. The Japanese got annoyed and they captured fourteen of them and eliminated (unclear). Our job was to take them back. There was one at Tanchuck.

With the 8th, 9th, 10th commando we attacked the airfield and captured it after a lot of fighting. We let the Chinese do more of the fighting, but we did some. There was a lot of follow up too. One commando, we put one commando down on the river and we said if these Japanese tried to sneak down the river open up on these Japanese. A couple boat loads of civilians came down, women and children. The Chinese opened up on the women and children and shot them all. We were trying to stop it, cut it out.

We had an inquiry later and they said we thought they were Japanese. We said the Japanese wouldn't have women and children with them. They said they were collaborators. They were working with the Japanese. Then they fired a mortar and dropped it in their own machine gun nest and a few other little errors like that. Some of them were real brave and hard working and amazed me. A lot of them, I don't know. They weren't that good.

After we took Tanchuk, right after that they dropped the atomic bomb and the war was ending. Shortly after that, in the meantime they'd given me the wings of the Chinese Paratroops. I think I got the 11th officer's in the Chinese Nationalist Paratroops. They're in there, I think. There wasn't too many of us that got the wings of the American, British and Chinese paratroops.

Then they took us back to Kunming and then they flew us to India. In Karachi we got a boat and took us home and sent us back to the Congressional Country Club and we were discharged.

Q: What happened to you after the war?

RR: I went back to college. I'd started my master's degree in history. I went a year and I didn't quite finish it. That was '40-'41. In '46 then I went back for a half year and they said they'd give me my masters if I went back from February to June which I did. I got my masters then I got a job teaching in Buffalo that September. Then I just became a school teacher.

Oh, I joined the reserves. Then we were discharged at Camp Meade, Maryland, when they asked people to join the reserves most of the time, they got sworn at, but ninety percent of our guys joined the reserves. I joined the reserves. I was assigned to the 98th Division infantry. They made me a 2nd Lieutenant. When the Korean War came along, I was still in the reserves. I was in from '45 to '54. Then they said I was too old in grade for combat. They didn't call me luckily and in '54 I got out of the reserves. I continued teaching until I retired.

Q: Where did you teach?

RR: I taught in Buffalo for about seven years, then I went to Kenmore. It's a suburb just north of Buffalo. I taught there until I retired.

Q: What have you been doing since you retired?

RR: My wife is blind. I didn't bring her with me. She's got a lot of problems. I didn't think she could walk that well. She got involved in a lot of, after our kids were grown, she got involved in a lot of activities with groups volunteer work with the blind. I did a lot of that.

Q: You had children?

RR: We adopted three children.

Q: Any grandchildren now?

RR: Yes. I've got five grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. Their great. They all are.

Q: Eight great grandchildren.

RR: Yes. Eight great grandchildren.

Q: You still interested in history?

RR: Yes. I read a lot. I've just been reading one of Tom Brokaw's books. I read a lot of history especially on World War II.

Q: Let me come back and ask you a couple of questions.

RR: Sure

Q: You said you were an isolationist.

RR: Originally yes.

Q: Did you belong to any of the organizations?

RR: No. In '39 and '40 I started to read and read all the time, but I read all these horror books of World War I. (unclear) Siegfried Sassoon and Remarque and all those guys. You read all the horrors of the first world war you know. I thought we should stay out of it, but I wasn't in favor of Hitler or anything. I didn't join anything. We did have a big meeting at UB. We had some speeches and that before the war. After the war, I changed my mind.

Q: You said you had a 3A deferment?

RR: Yes.

Q: What was that?

RR: I was supporting...I managed to get a job in time for...I was supporting my mother and my sister. When my sister got married, by that time I was ready to go.

Q: What were you doing at Curtiss Aircraft?

RR: I was riveter. First, I was an inspector, then I was a riveter.

Q: What kind of planes were you riveting?

RR: Oh, P-40's and C-46's

Q: How long were you doing that?

RR: I was there about a year.

Q: What was it like working for Curtiss in those days?

RR: Well, it wasn't bad except they put me on nights. At first, I was on days, but I had the 4:30-1:00 shift and I didn't like that at all. It wasn't so bad. At first, I had a job as an inspector for a while. I had nothing to do. I had about twenty minutes work a day, but you couldn't sit down, couldn't talk to anyone, couldn't read. You just had to stand there for eight hours.

Q: Do you remember any special activities at Curtiss or in Buffalo about the war like war bond rallies or (unclear) drives or scrap drives. What was life like?

RR: I guess that was it. I don't remember much about it. One thing I remember that got me. When I was home on furlough, I read in the paper they had a blood drive. They were short of blood. So, I went down the next day. I went to give blood. There were three of us that showed up. There was a Navy officer and some civilian, a woman, she came in and she was drunk. She turned around and left. She wasn't going to give blood. It was just the two of us. Not a lot of blood coming from the home front.

Q: You went to Fort Niagara briefly?

RR: Yes.

Q: What was that like?

RR: That was interesting. On a Thursday morning we met at the museum in Buffalo and they put us in busses and took us over to Fort Niagara. They ran us through a lot of stuff on Friday and Saturday morning. Then we were through from Saturday noon on. Monday, they shipped us out.

Q: Your initial training for OSS. Let me see if I've got this right. You were in the Marines in the officer training program and they told you to go home.

RR: Yes. Right.

Q: Then you were drafted into the Air Corps.

RR: Yes. Right.

Q: Trained in radio telegraphy.

RR: Right.

Q: Then somebody asked for volunteers.

RR: Right.

Q: Its kind of interesting because the OSS was always looking for academics and you were from Buffalo but the way you get into OSS is being asked to volunteer out of and Air Force school. Was Congressional Country Club the first training you took in the OSS?

RR: Yes. That was only about three weeks. You had the Tommy Gun...

Q: What other kind of people were you dealing with? What were the other trainees like? Where did they come from?

RR: As I said in our group, we had a lot of French Canadians. Many of them had been in the original paratroops and they came from the regular paratroops into ours because they could speak French.

Q: What kind of training did they give you at...

RR: A lot of it...we would run around in the dark and there was map work and Tommy Guns, knife fighting. It was Major Fairbairn who had us run through the woods and stab trees and stuff like that. He was quite a character.

Q: You learned how to use the Fairbairn knife.

RR: Yes, and they had a special building at Area B where you had to run through with your pistol and your knife and things would fall out at you. I said I was never very athletic. I was rather clumsy. The lieutenant told me when I ran through it with my pistol, you're going to kill yourself.

Q: Did they ever send you off post on any of those simulated raids? Rock Creek Park or going against civilian targets to see if you can get in?

RR: No. They did in England though. I sort of wonder if it was phony. We sneaked up on some stuff in England. We got in too easily, I think. I wonder.

Q: Anything else you can recall about your OSS training?

RR: It was interesting and there were a lot of characters in there. I mentioned Colonel Obolensky. There's a lot that I read about. I met Captain Chapel a couple of times. There's been some reunions I've seen Captain Chapel. There was a whole book written about him. He was originally in a German unit. They didn't use it, so they went into Italy. He fought in north Italy with the Italian Partisans.

Q: What about some of the other European officers, Dulles or any of the others?

RR: I never met any of them. I just met the OG what we called.... there was about twenty-five thousand people in the OSS maybe twenty to twenty-five thousand. A lot of them did paperwork or library work of stuff like that. Some were getting their uniforms ready and the paymasters who make sure that you have all of the stuff that you can pass as a spy in Europe.

They had this group in Burma you know, North Burma, Detachment 101. They did a lot of fighting in north Burma and used the natives there and give the Japanese a lot of trouble.

Q: How was training different from Country Club to Camp David? What was different about Camp David?

RR: It was a lot more weapons, heavier weapons, more weapons.

Q: Did they teach you anything about incendiary devices?

RR: Explosives? Yes, we were always blowing trees down. In fact, we had several guys blow their hands off. We had a lot of accidents. I was lucky I guess because I wasn't...

Q: What kind of radio equipment did they give you?

RR: We had little radios...oh, incidentally when I jumped in, that was another thing, when I jumped in France, I had the radio receiver. For some reason they had four transmitters and they put them on the first two planes. When we landed in France, I didn't have any transmitter. I only had the receiver. So, I couldn't send any messages back to London. Then I found out way later too...every night I was tuning my receiver in, but they had changed the call letters in London. They never told us, so we didn't have any contact with London at all while we were in France.

Q: When you were dropped to secure the bridge on the road to Brest, did you hook up with the Maquis then?

RR: Yes. There was a lot of underground running around. They were real nice except they weren't trained. They had a tendency to make a lot of noise and shoot at nothing a lot, but they were good.

Q: How long was it before the American Army was able to relieve you?

RR: It wasn't long. About three days, I think. They came through.

Q: Did you ever get the feeling that the Army didn't know what to do with you given that you were OSS instead of military?

RR: I don't know.

Q: This isn't what they called the Jedburgh operation was it?

RR: I've heard of the Jedburgh's.

Q: He was

RR: We were called "OGs". Operational Groups. Actually, they had a few people in Indo-China at the end of the war. They had contacts with Ho Chi Minh. General Donovan was quite a man.

Q: We'll talk about that in a minute, but I've got a couple of other questions. Were you ever issued the L-capsule? Did you ever hear of those? Did they ever give you a capsule in case you were going to be captured?

RR: No. General Donovan had one. He was on the beach on Normandy on D-Day.

Q: Tell me about General Donovan. How did you form an opinion that he was quite a man?

RR: I had heard about him. He seemed friendly. He didn't come up and pat you on the back, but he seemed approachable. I spoke to him and I told him I was from Buffalo. I read a lot about him. He had quite a career. He got the Medal of Honor in World War I. One day....his aide was Joyce Kilmer who was killed next to him. The next day his new aid was killed next to him and he was badly wounded. He was the highest decorated soldier or officer in World War I of the Americans. He was quite a guy.

I got a letter today from the OSS Society. There were a lot of big wigs in there. Some of them are probably phony. I don't know. There was some criticism but it didn't apply to us. None of us. But, they formed a society and we've had some reunions. I was at one in Cincinnati a few months ago. A lot of these men worshiped Donovan. You can see that. They have these dinners and all of that. I get these letters of course but I can't fly to New York City for a \$75 dinner or lunch.

Q: Do you ever feel sort of a pride or empathy for Donovan because you were from Buffalo and he was from Buffalo.

RR: Yes. Oh yes.

Q: Local boys make good.

RR: Oh yes.

Q: How many men in a Chinese Commando?

RR: A hundred and fifty.

Q: Were these the units they called the (unclear) Rangers or was that a different command?

RR: No.

Q: While you were in China did you ever run across another OSS officer John Birch?

RR: No. I heard of him later but never....I heard of him later.

Q: Well

RR: General Wedemeyer inspected us once.

Q: What impressions did you form of General Wedemeyer?

RR: We were just training these Chinamen and firing. We were sort of hired to teach them the M3 rifle which was a good rifle. They had a little path in back of the pits there

and some civilians came down and the Chinese opened up on them. Ah live target. We had to try to squelch them from killing the other Chinamen.

Q: If you had it all over again who would you rather fight alongside the Maquis or the Chinese commandos?

RR: I don't know. They were both...I think the French.

Q: After all these years looking back what stands out the most when you think of your time in the OSS?

RR: It amazes me that I ever jumped once.

Q: Did you ever hear any of those nicknames for the OSS?

RR: Oh So Social

Q: Oh So Social. Where was that from?

RR: I don't know. Maybe some people got in like that. Of course, Donovan was a big New York City lawyer. He had a lot of contacts with people. A lot of them joined up. As I said there were twenty to twenty-five thousand in there but only a thousand "OGs" & "SO's". There was probably only a couple thousand combat people. In about any group only one tenth are combat.

Q: We're running to the end of the interview tape. Can you hold that up so you can see the camera? Can you just point out the different objects?

RR: This is the Chinese flag we had with us to let the Chinese civilians know in case they ran into us to be helped. This is Special Forces. That was one of our badges. This is the British Paratroops. You wore it on your left chest. This is Chinese Paratroops that we had. I was a Sergeant at the end. This is the Chinese wings. Here's are the American wings. This is some Nazi thing I picked up somewhere. This is SHAEF, Supreme Headquarters. At one time they said we were connected to SHAEF indirectly. This is the 98th Division when I was in the reserves. Here's my ribbons. Here's an arrowhead and a battle star for EOT and two battle stars for the Pacific Theater. This is the Victory Medal I think.

Q: Any last thoughts or anything else you'd like to add?

RR: Well it was very interesting. I'd do it again. It was very interesting. I'm glad I got through it alright.

Q: We are too.