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JOE MICHALKO

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, World War 2

Interviewed by

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Oral History Archives

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Charles G. Roland, MD:

Mr. Michalko, I appreciate your being here. I'd like to start if we could -- if you'll just give me your full name, where you were born, when you were born.

Joe Michalko:

Well, I was born on January the 4th, 1919, in a little hamlet, well, on a farm in Makedo, Saskatchewan.

CGR:

And your parents' names?

JM:

My father's name was Peter, my mother's name was Victoria.

CGR:

And what was her maiden name?

JM:

Marchinko.

CGR:

Were you raised mostly in Saskatchewan?

JM:

Yes. I lived in Saskatchewan, raised in Saskatchewan, went to the school in Makedo, got my education there. Used to go out working for farmers during the '30s, late '30s, and then war came and I joined. It was 1940 when I went in. They didn't have [need], they sent us back. In '41, in May, I went again, and that's when they took us in. We got our training in Regina, Saskatoon, Dundurn. I joined in Saskatoon and did basic training in Regina. From there down to Dundurn, went to the machine guns; we got our training. Then when they posted on the board there was a platoon of us signed our names, volunteered. We didn't

know where we were going or how we were going.

CGR:

So you weren't with the Grenadiers initially?

JM:

No.

CGR:

How did you come to be with the Grenadiers?

JM:

Well, we went to Dundurn. We finished our machine gun training, and they posted on the bulletin board: "Volunteers." So then a whole platoon of us had finished our machine-gun training. We all went and we signed up. They give us a 48-hour leave, so all we had was a 48-hour leave.

CGR:

Shipped you off to Vancouver?

JM:

Well, we didn't know where we were going. We got on in Dundurn, got into Regina, and from Regina changed [trains] and then the whole bunch were gone, so we're going, what's the difference, we're going, and that's how we ended up.

CGR:

What was your first impression of Hong Kong? You'd never been to any place like that, I assume?

JM:

No, I never was any place like that -- I mean, I was in Winnipeg or Fort William here in Canada. But then we landed there; well, it was a nice place but it was still dirty. I couldn't get used to the idea that the main streets were bad,

some of these streets a little small, you know, people sleeping all over, all the garbage all over -- didn't care for that business very much. Otherwise in the main thoroughfare it was nice.

CGR:

But you didn't have much time to think about it anyway?

JM:

No, we didn't. We went up into the island. We were in Sham Shui Po barracks when we landed, and from there we went up to the island once, came back, and then we went out again. And we were up on the island when the war broke out.

CGR:

Where were you exactly? What company were you with?

JM:

B Company. Yes, Sergeant-Major Fry. We were up....See, we were not too far from Wan Chai Gap. There was a place, they called it Permanent Cemetery. The Chinese used to bury their dead there and it was all cemented. It was up on the hill, that's where we were.

But we used to come down from the cemetery down the hill during the night, with anti-tank guns. And then we walked up, we were going towards Wan Chai Gap, but it was taken and we had to go back. The Japanese were there. There was a police station before there and we said there was nothing to it. I guess Major Moore was in charge, Sergeant-Major Fry, Rusty Young, Lt. Rusty Young, from Winnipeg. We were going there and we come all the way through and just as we come around the hill that's when the Japs opened fire on us. So Major Moore told us to go back, and we went back part ways but you couldn't see -- just before then a

motorcycle rider come through and said it was all clear, there was nothing in the way. But who knows who that motorcycle rider was. He could have been one of their men and said it was all clear.

CGR:

Now was this the 19th? Was this the day the Japs landed on Hong Kong? Do you remember?

JM:

No, no. This was later. Yes, it was later. It wasn't the day that they landed, it was later, a couple of days later. They had already gone to where the Brigadier was and they had taken the place. And B Company was coming in to try and get it back.

CGR:

And where were you on the 25th when the surrender came?

JM:

Then on the -- after we had, we went back but we didn't go out, must have gone (I don't know what the place was, to tell you the truth, I don't remember the name of the place). We spend a couple of days, we were there on the 24th. For supper we had burnt beans and a big dixie [of tea], that was our Christmas Eve supper.

CGR:

Doesn't sound great.

JM:

On the 25th, the colonel, a Canadian -- Sutcliffe (I think it was Sutcliffe) he come there and he said the island had capitulated. So a lot of us took our rifles, and put the barrel around it was like a small blade of steel. We'd hit the barrel

there and we got hell for that because if they're going to come we're going to throw them down the ravine. He said they're going to come and they're going to count how many guns we have. So there's some missing, so what?

We spent the night there. Then the next day we walked down to North Point. I don't know how long we stayed there, but we stayed in North Point for quite awhile. And from there we went back, they took us down back to Sham Shui Po and it's Osborne Barracks now, and that's where we stayed.

CGR:

Were you there from then till the end of the war?

JM:

No, no. We were there at Sham Shui Po Barracks, when they had that diphtheria epidemic. I was one of the carriers. So we were in a different place. Although still some of the boys, they were carriers, we'd go to bed and get up in the morning and they were dead. We had bad beriberi and most of the boys have sore feet, lot of boys, burning feet, soak them, couldn't stand it, feet swollen, and everything. That's when they have us going from Sham Shui Po Barracks.

They were building an airport and we had these, well, something like little mine carts, taking a hill down, and that's where they build their airport. After awhile they had us mixing cement, sand, and spreading it and rolling with rollers. And it must have been '43, '42 or '43, '43 I guess, when the first shipment of Canadians went to Japan. I was with the first contingent that went down there.

CGR:

Oh, so you did go to Japan.

JM:

Yes.

CGR:

Ah, somehow I misunderstood. I thought you spent the whole time in...

JM:

Oh no, no, no. I went to Japan. We got to Japan and practically everybody went different ways. We went down to, I don't know, it must have been because of the coal mine there, and that's where we spent the rest of the time, in the coal mines. We spent out time in the coal mines. We went only a few times down to the coal, but they had two shafts going down. They weren't good shafts. One was plugged -- oh I don't know -- maybe at a couple of thousand feet, so they had us going down and they had the air jack-hammers. We had to drill the rock, widening it out and loading all that in the trucks, dynamite blast, and take it up on a double track in there.

So we worked in one and there was some people who worked in the other shaft also, doing the same thing. Then after they have gone so far, when it was cleaned out, we were mixing cement and cementing the walls, oh, approximately four feet up, because then they would be putting in railings or something, cement the whole shaft down so it would be safe. There were a lot of cave-ins there. A few guys got killed in there, in the cave-ins.

CGR:

Now who did the blastings? Did the Japanese come into do

the blasting?

JM:

Yes.

CGR:

They didn't let you have dynamite?

JM:

There was a guy in charge there, like, call him Buntai Joe, he was the squad leader. There were so many guys. See, we drill the holes and he'd come in there and he'd stand there and show you how to do it. You had to put all the dynamite in, then you walked away and he'd come along, he'd hook on the detonator, throw the plunger, and then it would blow. Then in you go and start filling that rock up on the cars, all the cars.

CGR:

Hard work.

JM:

Yes, it was hard but -- what can you do? That was the name of the game.

CGR:

Well, let's go back to Sham Shui Po for awhile. Did you have beriberi then?

JM:

Yes, in Sham Shui Po I had beriberi.

CGR:

Tell me how it affected you? What did you feel?

JM:

The feet were really badly swollen and they were really tender. They were bad, but there were guys worse than me. So

every time they wanted, every day we had to go to move this dirt from the hill because they're starting the airport, you had to have so many men. They didn't care if you were sick. If you could walk, you could go. I think you had to be very very careful, and if you had maybe good shoes or something -- our company didn't, most of us already had pieces of board with a strap on, and that's all we had for shoes. The shoes were gone. Otherwise, it was a great experience.

CGR:

Why do you say that?

JM:

Well, I say it's a great experience, it's a million dollar experience, but I'd never go through it again! Never!

CGR:

No, I don't suppose so. Well what do you think you got out of it?

JM:

Well, I didn't get very much out of it. All I did was see the other side, of how other people live. See, we thought, even after coming back -- when we came back, I came back to Canada -- there's a lot of complaints, people started beefing, and for absolutely no reason. They have these ration coupons and "look we could only get a pound of butter a month," or "we can get only this much." There was one lady, an elderly lady. She was complaining but I said, "Lady, you get the pound," I said, "how would you like to get an ounce a year?" "Well, I wouldn't live." I said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Not only us, but the people themselves didn't have it." The Japanese people

towards the end didn't have anything. They did have, I know, after it was all over -- they had butter, some rice, but it was raw rice, it wasn't polished rice -- it was a purple color. They really could not supply it. They weren't eating better than us, because on top of the hill sometimes, you had to put in your shift, to tell us what it was. And they'd have little packages there about maybe 8 inches by 4, by an inch thick, but a little thing packed of rice with a piece of -- it was a pickled radish, what they called daikon, and that was their noon meal. They did not have anything -- well, they didn't eat any better outside of maybe some of the sergeants or whoever was in charge, the sergeant or whatever they were, maybe they ate better at home, but the guys in charge, even down in the mine they had the same thing -- a little bit of rice and that was their -- they just could not, they never had it, put it this way.

CGR:

How do you feel about the Japanese now?

JM:

Oh I got no hard feelings against them. I mean, there was some that were bad, where they shouldn't have been, but I feel most of them were average. They were just doing their jobs the same as we were doing ours. It was war. And they didn't know no different. Those people, they look different at things as we do, because I know there was a school not too far from our camp and those little kids when they start going to school, they already start their army training. Oh, they got them up with sticks on their shoulders and marching up and down for half an hour or so. And they were taught one thing -- that they are the ones and

everybody else are no good. We have some very good guys, you know, in Japan and still there were some that were, you couldn't look sideways because he was it. He was the guy in charge, he had the rifle and the bayonet and you listened, if not, well... So. But as I say, that's their way of life and you can't say that they're that bad because there are a lot of our people who are just as bad. They don't care.

CGR:

Can't argue with that.

JM:

No, I don't hold no hard feelings against them.

CGR:

Did you have any other medical problems? Everybody was hungry and everybody lost weight, and so on, but other than the beriberi, did you have any other diseases?

JM:

Beriberi. I had a bit of dysentery, but I was one of those lucky ones because it didn't last too long. Some guys had it for a long time. I don't know, I had it for three, four days and then it went away, a few times. But otherwise, well, let's put it this way, I really can't say that I was one of the bad ones. I seemed to be lucky that I was a little bit better off than some of the other boys.

When we got to Japan, from the start it was a little better. Then they started giving us some kind of a liquid they said was a vitamin, about half an ounce. We used to line up every morning and the guy gave it to us. Whether it was vitamins or what it was I wouldn't know, but that's what they gave us every morning.

CGR:

Something you drank?

JM:

Yes, for awhile. Then after that we didn't have that either. Whatever it was, I don't know. It was sort of a...so what we had mostly was green tea, boil it in a big pot, always boiling it, green tea. If you feel hungry, have a cup of green tea. No sugar, no nothing.

CGR:

Fill you up for a few seconds at least.

JM:

That's right. So instead of plain water you had green tea.

CGR:

Did you see any Red Cross parcels?

JM:

In (I don't know what year) it must have been 1944, we got the first ones. First things that come in, there's some come in from Ladies Auxiliary. But the way it was -- I know one of the boys he got a kit bag full of cigarettes, nothing else in there but cigarettes, a full kit bag. It was scattered around -- I got a box from the ladies auxiliary, it was razor blades. I think there was a little bit of food but mostly it was razor blades, socks and stuff like that. It must have been '44 when we got our first parcel. We might have got two parcels the whole time we were there. But actually, I couldn't tell you how many -- but let's say we got two.

CGR:

Did you get any mail?

JM:

Oh, had a couple of cards. They tell you, you come in, you write a letter home. And all you have to add on there is "I am fine. How are you? I am fine," sign your name. And when the mail comes in, do the same thing -- "We are fine" -- all the rest was blank, you couldn't say what it was [all censored out.] That was the mail. There weren't any mail you could mail just a few cards.

CGR:

Did you have a girl at home, or were you married?

JM:

No I wasn't married. I didn't get married till '47.

CGR:

How did the camp run? How did people adapt to the camp? Most people aren't used to living in POW camps.

JM:

I'd say, well, maybe some, but most just took it in their stride, I'll say just took in their stride. It was just that things happened and that would end the story. I mean you couldn't do anything about it. You're inside a fence, there's guards all around. Like from North Point there were four that escaped. I know we were called out after midnight, everybody was called out, no time to dress or anything, just out of there, line up and they were counting, and they were counting, and they were counting. Next day they found the four boys that escaped from North Point. I presume they were caught, but nobody knew. If somebody did hear, well, I never heard nothing.

CGR:

They didn't come back to the camp, your camp?

JM:

So I presume that they were -- actually, I suppose if it was on the mainland they would get away, but from the island I doubt very much because there'd be some way you'd have to go across the channel to get to the mainland, and I doubt very much if they...

But at Sham Shui Po it was the same thing -- get up in the morning, give you the count. Go back. Just sit and wait. Whatever you had, some of us had food, some of us didn't. For a while there weren't any cans or anything. Some guys had glasses, tumblers, where they come in there and you have a tumbler of rice. And that was your share, no matter where you were. It wasn't very good-looking, but it wasn't walking anyway. Sit down and count how much worms there were.

CGR:

Were there any bad apples in the camp, people who were making life miserable for others?

JM:

Well maybe there was. I never ran across any. I never ran across anybody. The guys who were in our company, a good many of the boys, while they were different companies from, one from the Grenadiers and from different companies. But the people I met there, no they were -- I could not say that they were bad or they tried to make things bad for people, or anything like that. I'll say everybody was pretty decent. Under the circumstances. There was no -- sure there would be some arguments here and there

between the guys, but there was nothing -- argue for a while and then quit. The next thing you know they're good again, so there was no hard feelings.

CGR:

Were you in hospital yourself, or were you sick enough with beri beri or with the dysentery to be in hospital?

JM:

No.

CGR:

So you didn't have much contact with the doctors?

JM:

Actually, no. As far as that's concerned -- sure I had beriberi, so did so many. The sergeant come in, well, I need so many guys. He had to pick from guys who could barely walk around, but if you could walk around, why you come on...so, because they wanted so many men out there [to work]. And that was the end of the story.

CGR:

Did you lose much weight?

JM:

To around about 113 lbs.

CGR:

What was your normal weight?

JM:

Oh,about 175 lbs.

CGR:

So you lost 60 lbs.

JM:

Yes. But, like I say, some things were bad but that was the name of the game. When we joined up, we didn't know where we were going. Some boys were worse, they never come back.

CGR:

How did you find things here when you came back? Were you well looked after?

JM:

Well, when I first came back I wasn't, but then after awhile we went to Regina and we weren't too bad in Regina. There were quite a few of our guys in one ward and it was pretty good. But after discharge I used to go to Saskatoon for anything at all -- medicals and that. It wasn't so -- Saskatoon did not, they looked after the outfit from Saskatchewan. I belonged to the outfit from Manitoba. Oh, they count but no that wasn't quite it. If I had been in the Saskatchewan outfit, I know that there's quite a few of the boys, they were overseas and they were looked after a lot better.

CGR:

Doesn't seem sensible, does it?

JM:

No, it doesn't seem sensible and it was not right. But well, why? I don't know. Some of those, just why you come in, so you're not feeling well. At that time I didn't know, if I had known I would have transferred all my papers back to Winnipeg here to Deer Lodge. I'd be fully ahead, because going to Saskatoon I got the train in the morning, get there in the evening, couldn't see nobody, spend the night and then you get there maybe

11:00, at 1:00 o'clock you see a doctor. I was sent in there one time, I wasn't feeling good and I went to see a local doctor, and he listened to me and he says, "You know, you'd better get to Saskatoon. See, you've got a murmur in your heart." So I got on a train the next day. But sure, I spent the night; next day; I spent two nights and a day and about 2 o'clock when I saw a doctor. Well, he says, "Nothing wrong." Once I quite agree, maybe it wasn't. I was working hard, but once you've had the 48 hours rest, well there was nothing wrong with it.

Same as my feet. They were sore before but I could still walk around, sit down and have a little rest and go on. Last fall it got so bad I just couldn't walk across the room, I had to sit down, I couldn't make it back. So I went on sick leave, and I went to doctors, went to chiropractics. Well, it helped some. One day I got up in the morning and it was so sore, my right foot got so bad I could not get out of the chair. And Donna come over and said, "What's the matter?" I couldn't get up, so they finally helped me to get up. I sat in an easy chair. And instead of getting better it's getting worse. She said, "I'll phone a doctor." I said, "Why phone a doctor? Maybe it will get better." Ten o'clock at night she took me, got an ambulance, took me down to hospital, Seven Oaks. I got in there, they put me on a stretcher bed and stayed there. A doctor come along, about 11 o'clock, he gave me a needle. It didn't help anything. I told him where the pain was. I didn't like the idea that they never, never tried to find out what the trouble was. So then I stayed there the night, he gave me three needles, to kill the pain. She came to pick me up in the morning and he gave me a hundred 292s

and said take these for pain. Well, I was kind of rocky and I didn't know. But he wasn't my doctor, he was just a doctor taking his place. So I waited for a couple of days and I went to see the doctor and he asked if I'd taken the pills and I said no. He said, "You should never give him that." And I told her, she went up there and he said he told me to tell you, sorry, doctor, I don't need. So Sunday morning he phoned the chiropractor. Because that business of giving pills -- I mean sure, I came into emergency, they should have tried to find out why.

CGR:

Yes. It's too easy to just give you pills.

JM:

Just give the needles to kill the pain and you can go. And that's the way it's been. I mean, it's a little bit better. I don't work as much as I did. I didn't go back to work. I told the company that was it, I couldn't give them an honest hour's work. I walk around a bit. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. In the mornings when I get up, it's pretty good.

CGR:

What sort of work did you do after the war? What have you been doing?

JM:

Oh, after the war I worked in construction, worked on a farm a bit, and for a couple of years I bought grain, and then I came to Winnipeg here and I got the job at Canadian Bronze as a plater, and then I went to shipping. They sold the plating line out. First we were auto plating, well did mostly bumpers, did a lot of car bumpers. And from that they put a big line in, they got new

guys up there and they went into aircraft parts, but mostly what I was doing was silver and lead.

CGR:

Where were you when the war ended? At this mine in Japan?

JM:

Yes.

CGR:

Do you remember what town or city that was near?

JM:

Well, I guess it wasn't too far from Nagasaki. That's where we got on our boat, Nagasaki. We got off at Nagasaki and we got back again. So I'll say it's about three, four hours train ride.

CGR:

Now that's where they dropped the second atom bomb, wasn't it -- Nagasaki?

JM:

Was that the second or the first?

CGR:

I think the first was Hiroshima and the second was Nagasaki.

JM:

Well, one of them anyway. That is where we were when the war ended.

CGR:

Did you see the city at all after the bombing?

JM:

Well, we just went back, you could see something, but what could you -- I mean you're going through -- actually we knew they were bombing, but we knew nothing about an atom bomb being

dropped. So we're coming and there's buildings with twisted steel and all this, but they could have been done by ordinary bombing. Nobody knew till after we got out, then we knew it was the atom bomb, something new had come out. Then from there we left Nagasaki and went to Okinawa, I believe. From Okinawa we went down to the Philippines and spent a week in Manila in a camp where they kind of checked us over, gave us clothing, American clothing, and towels and all that was needed. And got on a British boat, the Gloria.

CGR:

When you were in the camps, what about sex? Did people talk about sex? Was this something that was in your minds?

JM:

No. It just seems to me that it wasn't there.

CGR:

Maybe too hungry to be thinking about sex.

JM:

Some of the guys used to joke around, but, I mean, there was nothing else, nothing going on too much, outside passing an odd one at work, you know -- this and that, that's about all the sex that was involved.

CGR:

Was there any homosexuality that you know about?

JM:

No, I don't know of any.

CGR:

It's interesting. That's what pretty well everybody says. You know of all those men together for years, and so on.

JM:

I don't know of any. It used to be five guys to a row sleeping -- nothing that I know of. At least I never heard of anything of that kind, till after, once we were free we were still there, a lot of the boys laughed and it wasn't far (I don't know where they had an air base) the Americans had a planning, anybody that wanted to go as soon as you come there, they always have planes coming and going taking the guys, oh, I don't know if they're taking them down to Okinawa or where, but a lot of the guys left earlier, didn't go there, the Americans were there. We didn't, we waited (I don't know what there was of us), we waited till the last came in, the Americans were in. All the Americans, it must have been early '45 or late '44 they brought a whole bunch of Americans. As soon as the war was over, the Americans just took off immediately. They had the Americans come in, the Red Cross come in and saw Americans with them; they took off immediately. And then a lot of Canadians too. Well, it wasn't too bad. We already started getting the food drops, so we had the food, we're safe till they come along and took us (I don't know if it was August 15, some place) that's when we left the camp. Whether it's still there I don't know. I never was back -- the wife said a lot of times, "You know, we should take this trip to Hong Kong," and I said, "No."

I've had enough of it and I don't want to go, and I don't want to see no more. But I know I don't want to go there no more.

CGR:

What do you think was the worst thing that happened to you

in this experience? What would you say if you had to say one thing that was the worst thing?

JM:

Well, we were in Japan -- anyway we were on night shift, we have our supper and (I don't know), it was 9 o'clock or so, they had a roll call. I went up to our room there, I guess I laid down and fell asleep because I never heard the bell ring. Anyway, the sergeant come along, Sgt. Coutts, George Coutts, "Come on Joe," he says, "roll call." So I come up there, I come in and the Japanese sergeant come along and wanted to know where I was. I told him where I was. So he counted everybody and everybody was there, he count the second time and everybody was there. He come to me, "after roll call, come and see me." So after roll call we had a room upstairs and the officer's there, sat in a dining hall there waiting. I went up there, he asked me what happened. I told him, "I don't know; I had supper, went and laid down for a rest before going to the shift and I guess I must have fallen asleep when they rang the bell." So he gave me a good clout and told me to remember never to fall asleep again. He was a big guy, about 6 footer, standing on the bottom step. "Don't fall asleep again." That's about one of the worst things.

CGR:

Does the experience bother you at all?

JM:

No.

CGR:

Do you think about it much now, or dream about it?

JM:

No. No dreams, no thoughts no nothing. Just out of my mind. Sometimes I'm asked, "well how was it, how was it?" I said, "Well, how was it? I'm back here. If you want to know. Try it on your own."

CGR:

Right.

JM:

I don't know what I can tell you. Well, it's a thing that's hard to explain, very, very hard to explain. A lot of people thought, "Well I'd have done something." What are you going to do? You think you're in Canada and you can do something, go here and there. You're in there, there's nothing there, you can't speak the language. If you go between the people there and they see that you're different, so what do people do, where are you going to go? But a lot of them, "Oh yes, I'll do this, I'll do that." Some of those people think that they just stay here, they just have to jump in the car and go down to Selkirk, take a look at Selkirk, you don't do those things. You're inside the fence and that's the end of the story, whether you like it or not, and the one on the outside, he controls them.

CGR:

Well, very good. Is there anything else you can think of that might be of interest.

JM:

No, I think that's about all. I don't have nothing against the Japanese. Like I say, there were some good ones and there were some that were bad, but on the majority they weren't as bad

as people as some might make out. They had their way, they had their things to do. Like I know a couple of these, when we worked in the mines, squad leaders we'd call them, Buntai Joes, some of them were the bad ones. They were just mean, but the one we had was a good guy. We'd go to work and most of the time he'd be sitting on the road, dozing off, but that was his way. As long as we, see, we had so may cars to take out. If we did that thing, well okay; if you didn't, well you just kept on working until you got those cars, that's the story. That was his quota and that's what he had to -- because if we didn't get it out he was the one that got it in the neck.

CGR:

Did you have good officers, in your opinion?

JM:

Yes, our officers, the Canadian officers were good. They were good officers. No complaints against the Canadian officers. They did what they could and that's as far as they could go, they couldn't do any more than anybody else. They had no say either. They were in the same boat as we were. Well, that's about all.

CGR:

Well, very good. Thank you.

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