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James Siplon Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

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Hope College
Polar Bear Oral History Project

Mr. James Siplon

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
September 18, 1979



Mr. James F. Siplon

The Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project was conducted from summer 1977 through fall 1979. Three undergraduate History majors, Ms. Nancy Johnson, Ms. Deborah Lenning, and Mr. Glen Johnson, researched the American Intervention in the Russian civil war, located the survivors, and did the interviews. They also typed the rough drafts and attended to the many administrative details related to getting the manuscripts into final form. The latter task was cheerfully completed by departmental secretaries Myra Jordan and Carole Boeve and their assistants. The students worked under the general supervision of G.L. Penrose of the Department of History. Ultimately, the project depended upon the diligence of the students and upon the willing responses of the veterans.

Department of History
Hope College
Holland, Michigan
1979

JOHNSON: First of all, were you drafted or did you enlist for World War I?

SIPLON: I was a drafted man.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about being drafted?

SIPLON: Well, I had no objections, although I enlisted. And to tell you the truth, I was in both services--both the navy and the army--'cause I enlisted in the navy in January of 1918 along with about thirty other young fellows from Muskegon. And we all went over to Chicago, to Great Lakes on the Alabama. We got stuck in the ice off Chicago for four days. It took us four days to get into Chicago. And when we got into Chicago, there was a great big snowstorm, and it took us two days to get to Great Lakes.

When we got to Great Lakes, why, they of course put us into the regular quarantine which was ten days to get your shots and all that sort of thing. When we got through with that, why, they put us in uniform. And when they put us out to drill for a few days, well, then they called us all back in for re-examination. And they picked in all the men that were registered for the draft and rejected them. So all of us--about half of those fellows that were registered for the draft--were sent back home. And as they said, the army will get you anyway. So they kept the younger fellows. The ones they wanted anyway were the younger fellows that weren't registered for the draft. And that's how I got out of the navy.

JOHNSON: Was that in 1918?

SIPLON: (nods) 1918. January of 1918. So then, the first part of June, they called me up for the draft. Then we left Muskegon in June for Camp Custer. Well, we were only in Camp Custer less than a month. Then they sent us overseas.

JOHNSON: What was your training experience in Camp Custer like?

SIPLON: Well, our training experience for the first ten days was supposed to be quarantine for your shots and all that sort of stuff, but we weren't quarantined. They just put us out for night-and-day drill because, unbeknown to us, they were training us to fill in the 85th Division which was going overseas. And they didn't tell us. So we were sent to Long Island camp, and we were there a week, and then we were put on shipboard. We went over on the S.S. Harrisburg with a convoy of fifteen other ships, including two cruisers and four destroyers.

JOHNSON: When you were at Camp Custer, you didn't know you were going overseas at all?

SIPLON: No, they never told us anything about it. They drilled us night and day and give us our shots and everything at the same time.

JOHNSON: Where did you think you would be going, even though they didn't tell you?

SIPLON: Well, we thought we'd have our regular sixty days' drill there or so, what they call "boot camp". Boot drill. That we'd get our regular sixty-day drill that they'd drill any of them before they'd move. But they used us for fill-in, to fill in the division. The division was going overseas because 'most all these fellows had been there all winter. But they had vacancies they had to fill in. There were about 125-30 from Muskegon that were used for fill-in for the 85th Division. And when the 85th Division went overseas, we all went with them 'cause we were all filled-in. So the Polar Bear Division--which was really the 339th, part of the 338th, the 337th Ambulance and Hospital Unit, and the First Battalion of the 310th Engineers--those were the ones that when they got

to France were detached and sent to England for three weeks' drill there, given Russian equipment and so on, and sent up to Newcastle, England and put on board transports there, and sent to Russia.

JOHNSON: Did you continue training in England then?

SIPLON: Well, three weeks' training in England.

JOHNSON: What kind of training activities did you have?

SIPLON: Well, training was awfully hard, you know: close-order drill, bayonet drill, and the ten-mile hike every afternoon with your gas mask on, and a full steel helmet and full pack--about forty pounds or so. And it was right in July, of course, and about ninety degrees in the shade. And there was a threat of court-martial for anybody that fell out, and men were falling out like leaves, you know. And they'd send a truck out behind them and pick them up. (laughs) But they never court-martialed any of them for falling out. But we were at Camp Aldershot. Stoney Castle Camp was the name of our camp, and Camp Aldershot was the big camp. It was about ten miles outside of London, see.

JOHNSON: Where did you think you would be going after England?

SIPLON: Well, we didn't know until they changed all of our equipment and give us Russian army equipment--rifles and machine guns and all that sort of stuff. And so then the rumor got around that we were going to Russia.

JOHNSON: What did you know about Russia at that time?

SIPLON: We didn't know anything about Russia. And we didn't know why we were going there or anything else. And we were sent up there in three or four old cattle boats--that were at one time called cattle boats, and we called them cattle boats anyway. And it took us two weeks to get up there.

JOHNSON: What ship were you on?

SIPLON: Well, I don't even know the name of the ship anymore.

LENNING: The Somali?

SIPLON: (nods) The Somali. Yes.

JOHNSON: What do you remember about that voyage?

SIPLON: Rough. You see, this boat was top-heavy. It didn't have any bilge underneath, and only soldiers on top. And I remember stopping at the Shetland Islands, and we were all sea-sick. And the North Sea is comparatively shallow to the Atlantic Ocean, you know. And when we got up in the Shetland Islands--probably not quite half-way to Russia, but it's in the North Sea--I know most of us were sick. I only got sea-sick once, as far as I can remember, and that was one night when I was on guard duty on the back end of the boat. And of course, that's the worst part of the boat to be on if you want to get sea-sick. And the boat was swinging back and forth, you know. But you're right. That was the name of the boat that we went to Russia on.

I believe that the name of the boat that we came back on was the Czar, that we came back to Brest, France on. And that was really a nice trip back because, you know, they fed us up. They wanted to get us fat or something like that! (laughter) And we took an inside trip and come all the way down the capes of Norway and along the shores of Norway and down through the English Channel. And so that was a beautiful trip, coming down through there. Going over wasn't quite so nice, but coming back in the middle part of June, why, that was a really nice trip. Coming out of Archangel, though, we had two ice-breakers up ahead of us to break the ice.

JOHNSON: On the voyage to Russia, was there an epidemic of Spanish flu on board

your ship?

SIPLON: Every other man had it. And we had, oh, maybe a hundred or more deaths with the flu there. Well, let's see--we really didn't land at Archangel because Archangel has no docks. We landed across the Dvina River at . . .

JOHNSON: Bakaritsa?

SIPLON: Bakaritsa, across the river from Archangel. And that had docks and everything like that, and that's where we landed. And so we never landed in Archangel at all because they don't have docking facilities there. Bakaritsa was where we landed.

JOHNSON: What do you know about the Spanish flu epidemic? Do you know if those who were stricken with it received any medical treatment?

SIPLON: Well, medical treatments didn't amount to much, I can tell you that. They had a few aspirins, or maybe a little grog, or a little lime juice, or something like that. And a little rum--a little English rum--a little dose of that. A little dose of lime juice. Things of that kind were about all they'd give us for the fever and for dysentery, if you had dysentery, you know. But until we got there to Archangel, there really wasn't much treatment of anything.

JOHNSON: Were there enough doctors to take care of the patients?

SIPLON: Well, doctors in the 337th Hospital Unit, that's just the same as they would in any unit, and so on. But they weren't overstaffed with them or anything like that. They just had the regular quota that they would have in any medical unit. But that's where Marxer was located. He was a supply sergeant, and he was in the engineers.

LENNING: Before you got to Russia, did you know anything about Bolshevism or

the political situation there?

SIPLON: Nothing was ever told to us or ever said to us about the reason that we were going there. There was one main reason that was given that we were going up there and that was this: we were protecting these ports to keep the Germans out, to keep their submarines from having bases in the White Sea and in the northern part of Russia. That's the only logical explanation that we were ever given that we were ever sent there.

LENNING: Did you know anything about the political situation in the country?

SIPLON: Nothing. We were never told anything about any political situation. Of course, they had two parties up there. They had the Reds--the Bolsheviks' parties--and they had what they called the White Russians.

LENNING: Did you know that before you got there?

SIPLON: Never told us anything about it, the reason or anything.

LENNING: Had you read about it in newspapers while you were still in the U.S.?

SIPLON: No. We were never told anything about any of those conditions, but we found out after we got there. They were training these White Russians to take our places and be the future Russians. And they were supposed to take the place of the Bolsheviks and overcome the Bolshevik revolution that was in there. They were training these fellows. But you couldn't depend on them because they were half Bolsheviks themselves. And we were supposed to take those fellows out and train them. But we couldn't trust those fellows, and so we couldn't send them into the front lines. If we sent them into the front lines and there was any gun-fire or anything like that, they'd turn around and run. So we couldn't depend on them.

Why now, we had others up there. We had Canadians, and we had English, and we had French, see. Now the Frenchmen were fine. They were fine soldiers, come right from the French front. And they were fine soldiers until the armistice was signed. And then they quit. Now, when the armistice was signed, they just quit everything, and they just said, "Finé la guerre!" They were done. They were aboslutely done, and they absolutely quit, and they couldn't do anything with them. And they had to send them back to Archangel. And they couldn't do anything with them 'cause their war was over. Then right afterwards, they took the English out, too. And then they left us alone there with the White Russians. So there we were.

JOHNSON: Where did you hear that you were in Russia to prevent the Germans from establishing a submarine base? Was that officially told to you, or just rumor?

SIPLON: Well, when we asked questions, that was told us by our colonel. Colonel Stewart was the commander of the regiment, and he had a regimental review and he told us as far as he could explain it himself, as far as he knew, that's what we were up there for.

JOHNSON: Was that before the armistice was signed?

SIPLON: Oh, well that was when we were going there, and the reason why we were going there when we were still in England, and the reason why we were in England, and the reason why we were being transported to Russia, just before we were shipped to Russia; and the reason that we were going there--to keep the Germans from having any access to any ports in Northern Russia for their submarine warfare.

The way it was located there, you've got Archangel, that was on the Dvina River. And the Dvina River, of course, emptied into the White Sea. And the White Sea, of course, emptied into the North Sea. And then you have Bakaritsa.

That was the loading place. And then you have Murmansk over to the right, off in Finland. Now, that was our objective there--our objective was on three parallel fronts. There was a railroad that runs from Archangel due south two hundred miles to Vologda, and Vologda was a railroad center where it branched off and went somewhat southeast to Moscow and to Leningrad. Well, then the Dvina River ran over to the left and then Murmansk ran over to the right.

Now, they sent expeditions three ways there. The Third Battalion went down the railroad front. Well, that's the one I was in. And Company "I", and Company "L", and Company "K", Company "M", they were all in the railroad front. Well, then the First Battalion went down the river--down the Dvina River. And then Company "H" and some of the other companies went out the other way, towards Murmansk. And so really, those fellows that went out towards Murmansk, why, they didn't strike much trouble over there. The most trouble come out down the river and down the railroad.

Now, you would think it was strange, but they were thirty, forty years or more behind. Like on the railroad there, they burnt wood in their locomotives, about four-foot cord woods, you know. And then about every ten versts--a verst is about two-thirds of our mile--there'd be a little stream of water, and right alongside that little stream of water would be a little village. And alongside of that little village would be piles of cord-wood for these engines that come along in there. And of course, there's where we would have our trouble, 'cause these Bolsheviks would dig in behind these piles of wood and behind these creeks, and they'd make bunkers and stuff like that, you know. And they'd inhabit these villages and so on, and you'd have to chase them out of these villages, you know. And that was our job going down the railroad. And the First Battalion, going down the Dvina River, why, they'd get ambushed all the time from the banks of the river. And that's where they were having their trouble down there.

LENNING: When you arrived in Archangel, what kind of reception were you given?

SIPLON: Well, we didn't get any reception at all--only from the natives that wanted something to eat! (laughter)

LENNING: So your first impression of the city was people asking for food?

SIPLON: People were hungry. But as far as a reception is concerned, we didn't get any reception at all. But here is something that's strange: people had a lot of money. That is, what they call their paper money--rubles, paper rubles. They had a lot of money because they'd opened up the banks and so, and they would go and help themselves. And no matter where you went, if you had anything in the line of bread, whiskey, sugar, flour, or anything like that, they'd want to buy it. And they had a handful of money. That money wasn't worth anything, but they'd pay anything that they could get for bread, or flour, or sugar, or especially whiskey, (laughter) if they could get hold of whiskey.

LENNING: When you got into Archangel on the fourth of September, did you leave immediately?

SIPLON: We were ordered out to what they called the railroad front lines immediately. The day after we got there, we were hustled aboard boxcars. And now, let me tell you something about these boxcars. They were half the size of our boxcars, and they had a couple little shelves on each side made for bunks that you could sleep in, and an old wood-burning engine, with a great big stack up on front. And then we were hustled on a bunch of these cars and sent down this railroad front, see.

Companies "I" and "M" of the Third Battalion were ordered out to Obozerskaya. Obozerskaya was still in the hands of what we called the Bolos. And these villages were usually alongside of a fresh-water creek. That's where the

people got their drinking water. They didn't have windmills or pumps or anything like that. They got all their drinking water right from these creeks. And another thing I'd like to mention was all the rivers and creeks flowed north. Most of your rivers usually flow south, but most all your rivers and creeks there flowed north toward the White Sea and towards the North Sea--just the opposite of what they naturally would.

Well, Obozerskaya was alongside--maybe a quarter of a mile--from a creek. And over that creek was a railroad bridge. Well, we had orders to take that railroad bridge and take Obozerskaya. Well, when we got there, they blowed up the bridge.

JOHNSON: The Bolsheviks did?

SIPLON: Yes, the Bolos blowed up the bridge. So it took us several days to rebuild the bridge. And of course, soon as they blowed up the bridge, they retreated. That's what they always did. And they got out of the town. But before we could get in the town, why, the engineers and the Russians that they could recruit there had to rebuild the bridge. The Russian men, all they were good for was to build bridges. They were good carpenters. You'd give them an ax and a saw, and they could go to work. They could do anything with an ax and a saw. But outside of that, they wouldn't do any work. The women did all the work, like building airfields and things of that kind, and pulling stumps out of the airfields, and leveling off the ground and all that sort of stuff. The women did all that work. They'd take a dozen women on the end of a big long chain and pull a stump out of the ground, and haul it to one side and make an airfield. The men would sit alongside the field, smoking and watching the women work. See, they wouldn't work. But they would do that. You'd take a dozen of them and give them an ax or a saw, and they could build a bridge and do a good job of it.

So, it took them several days to rebuild that bridge before we got into Obozerskaya. And after that, why, Obozerskaya was our field headquarters. And from there we went on: 444, 455, and so on. That was our next objectives to take. And to really tell you the truth, why, about 455 was about as far as we got before winter set in. And after winter set in, then it was just a case of building blockhouses over on the sides, and digging trenches around the bridges, and things of that kind--just solidifying yourself against any sudden attacks or anything of that kind. And there we sat for the winter. We were down this railroad front September, October, November without any relief of any kind.

LENNING: When you first got to Russia and they sent you down to the railroad front, who did you think you were supposed to fight?

SIPLON: Well, we were going to fight Germans. That's right. We were going to fight Germans. And really, there was some truth in it because these Bolsheviks were German-officered, and their aviators were all Germans. But the soldiers themselves were Russians. In other words, they were Reds, or Bolsheviks. But as soon as the armistice was signed, the Germans all pulled out. There were no more German aviators, and there were no more German officers. They all pulled out. And after that, they were just simply Bolsheviks, or Reds, as they called them.

LENNING: Did you know for a fact that they had German officers, or were you just told that?

SIPLON: Well, it's the truth, 'cause we captured some of them, and we shot down some of their planes.

LENNING: When did you first encounter fighting with the Bolsheviks?

SIPLON: Where did we first encounter it? Verst 446, at a bridge. At a bridge

over Verst 444, 446, and 455.

LENNING: Would that have been on September 16th?

SIPLON: Yes. Right around September 16th up into November. There wasn't very much action during the winter. It was cold weather. We had patrol action. We sent out patrols of a squad of men--seven, eight men--everyday. We'd make a patrol of two, three miles or so across the front lines and then come back in.

LENNING: Why did you think that the Bolsheviks were your enemy during your first battle with them?

SIPLON: Well, I don't know exactly what the reason was or what it was for, but I know our first engagement was Company "M". Company "M" was caught in sort of an ambush at Verst 444 in a swamp near a bridge there. And so the First Platoon and the Third Platoon of our company was ordered to the relief of Company "M" at this time because they were having quite a hard time of it. Well, we went up into this swamp, and it lasted, oh, probably late in the afternoon, and the Bolsheviks withdrew. And so we pulled out, too. (laughs)

And that's about the way it would go. You could always expect it at day-break, and it never would last more than a few hours or something like that, and if they saw they wasn't making any headway, they'd pull back and pull out. But it wasn't anything like on the Western front, although we had artillery fire and all that sort of stuff--preliminary--but of course, it wasn't nothing like it was on the Western front. And they had trenches. They'd dig trenches alongside these creeks, you know, and alongside these bridges--especially the bridges. There'd be a bridge over these creeks, and then they'd blow up these bridges. If they'd back up and retreat, they'd blow the bridge up. Well, we'd get the engineers to rebuild that bridge. It'd probably take them three, four days or a week to rebuild that bridge before we could cross over and get the train back

over again and go ahead again. That's the way we did it. We had orders to go to Vologda, but we never got there. We got about half-way.

LENNING: How did the Bolsheviks fight in these early battles around September?

SIPLON: Well, their fighting was--what would you call it? Swamp-fighting--skirmishes . . .company fighting. Never much more than a company at a time. Our companies were two hundred and fifty men, but there never was a full company in there--maybe three platoon fifty men in a platoon. Maybe three platoons would be engaged, and a couple of platoons in reserve in case we needed them. But imagine, we didn't have any rubber boots or anything like that to get down in there. And you'd get down into that swamp about half-way to your knees and wade around in that swamp. And those fellows were used to it. They had boots on. They never wore socks or anything; it was just their barefeet and their boots, you know. And they had boots about up this high (points to knees) and so they were used to it. They could navigate around in those swamps a lot better than what we could. So we were handicapped.

LENNING: Did they seem to be well-disciplined?

SIPLON: They were good fighters. But the trouble is, when we first went up there, we didn't have any machine guns. All we had was rifles. And they had machine guns. And we were handicapped there. If we'd try to get any advance, a machine gun would stop us. Then all we could do was fall down on our face in the swamp there somewhere so that they wouldn't kill a whole bunch of us.

And we were up there for three or four weeks before we had any machine guns. And then they took eight of us--there were four platoons in the company, and they took two men from each platoon, and I was one of them--and sent them back to Archangel and give them three weeks' instruction on machine guns, and then sent them back to the front to pick out their crew. And then they had to

drill their crew in their machine guns.

They had a machine gun on each end of the platoon to protect each end of the platoon when they went into these swamps. So if the Bolsheviks tried to get around one end or the other, we'd stop them with a machine gun. But the first month or so we were up there, we had only rifles and grenades, and we were handicapped 'cause they had machine guns. But they never stood up and fought. When our officers would say, "Blow the whistle and get up and charge them!", they'd retreat. They wouldn't stand. They wouldn't stand and fight you.

LENNING: How did their numbers compare to yours?

SIPLON: Well, they had more men than we did. Oh yes.

LENNING: Do you remember an incident when a group in Company "I" ran out of ammunition?

SIPLON: No, I never remember that. I'll tell you what we did, though. Towards wintertime, we built blockhouses wherever we were situated, on the end of the lines and so. We built up blockhouses to protect the ends of the lines and then put machine guns in the blockhouses. They'd build those blockhouses and then they'd put in firelanes. They'd cut out firelanes for several hundred feet, you know, so that they'd have their machine guns trained on those firelanes so that the Bolsheviks couldn't cross those firelanes without being seen. They did that when they kind of settled down for the winter. I don't know whether Colburn told you anything about that, 'cause he was in one of those blockhouses at one time when they were attacking 'cause Cleo was a machine gunman, too.

LENNING: During the early part of the campaign, how well-planned did your orders seem to be? Did things run smoothly?

SIPLON: (laughs) Huh! I wish I could answer that and say that they did, but they didn't. I think the whole thing was misplanned from the beginning. I'll tell you: we were under English command. Major-General Ironside of the British army was in command. Colonel Stewart was our commander of the 339th Regiment and the American soldiers, but he was only a colonel, see. And he was just in command of the American troops. And of course, the French had their commander, and the Canadian artillery that was in there had their commander. And of course, the English major-general, he was in command of the expedition. It really was an Allied outfit. I wish you could've seen that man. He was a man of about two hundred and fifty pounds, and about six-foot-six or seven. A great big man, and I guess he was a good soldier because he was the English Chief of Staff, in charge of the whole English army at the beginning of World War II.

LENNING: Do you remember General Poole at all? He would have been the one planning those earlier campaigns, because Ironside didn't replace him until later.

SIPLON: I remember the name, but I don't remember him. I have a personal letter from General Ironside. The reason for that was that at the beginning of World War II, the Polar Bear Post wrote General Ironside a letter of congratulations that he was appointed Chief of the British army. And I got a personal letter back from him. And we had an engraved plate made of it in the Polar Bear Post. The post should have it.

LENNING: You were talking about the planning of the earlier stages of the campaign. Do you remember the night march in September when "I" Company got lost?

SIPLON: Do I remember it? Huh! I should remember it!

LENNING: Could you tell us about that?

SIPLON: Well, that started at Verst 446, and the idea was to out-flank the next village. Those villages usually, as I say, were located alongside of a bridge and a stream, where they got their drinking water because they didn't have any wells or pumps or anything like that. They got their drinking water right from those streams 'cause their water was pure, about as pure as you could ever get. And they were usually within a quarter of a mile or so of a stream like that, and the people would all go down with their buckets and fill them up. And that's where they got their drinking water.

We were supposed to have a night march and outflank this next village. I don't know just what verst that might've been anymore--around Verst 455--but we were given aerial maps that showed that there were paths on each side going through. Well, there were paths for about halfway. And when we got up there in about the middle of the night or a little later, why, we heard something up ahead of us. And I didn't know--couldn't make out what it was. It was just like a "swish, swish, swish" or something like that. It was like something going through straw. The gun crew of course, had light machine guns, and some of the fellows and I carried them. They must have weighed about thirty pounds or so. And then the extra men carried extra belts of ammunition over their shoulders, and so we were loaded down. There was a sort of a path there that we were going down, and when we got to this noise, it was water. It was a deep creek, and the men **were** wading the creek. And the most I can remember, it was during the last of October, the first of November, around in there. And so that creek was waist or chest deep to most men, and we had a little top sergeant that wasn't much over five feet, and he was trying to wade that creek and it was practically up to his neck! And the men were all carrying packs on their back. Imagine that and trying to get through that creek!

Well finally, they were all soaked, but they got through. They got through for about another half mile, not any much further than that, and the path stopped

and they got into a deep swamp. And there they all were: one or two grabbing a tree here; one or two grabbing a tree there; and in between, trees here and there. It was swamp up to your knees or deeper here. And when daylight come, instead of being outflanking the next village, we were in front of it. So as soon as daylight come, they opened up on us with their artillery. Well, we weren't going to outflank the village at all. The only thing we could do was retreat. So the officers gave us the order to go back. Well then we had to go back through that creek again.

JOHNSON: You had to retreat the same way you had come?

SIPLON: We had to retreat the same way that we came.

LENNING: How well-supplied with maps were you?

SIPLON: All they had was aerial maps that they made. The airplanes would fly over, and the only thing that they had was an aerial map. And you could see what good an aerial map made from an airplane flying maybe several hundred feet in the air would be, with maybe a little opening of a few trees. How would they know whether there was a path going through a few trees or so? They just took it for granted that there was a path there. And they would ask the natives or something like that, and the natives would say, "Ne ponimaju, ne ponimaju." They don't know--"ne ponimaju". So they just took a chance that those maps would show that there was a path there. There was a path part way, but when we got out beyond the creek--evidently the path went to the creek--but when we got out beyond the creek, there was no more path. There was a swamp.

LENNING: Do you remember Major Young?

SIPLON: Oh, Major Young was commander of the Third Battalion.

LENNING: Did he direct this march?

SIPLON: He directed this march, and he pretty near got thrown out for it. Major Nichols superceded Major Young. But the trouble with Major Young was that he was drunk when he planned this march. And it wasn't long afterwards that Major Young was called back in. And Major Nichols took his place. But Major Nichols was a real officer. Major Nichols was really a wealthy man, but he was a real officer.

LENNING: What do you remember about Major Young?

SIPLON: Well, I don't want to say too much about him. (laughs) But that's the real truth--that he was called back, and the real reason that he was called back was drinking. And Major Nichols took his place and so from there on Major Nichols was in control.

LENNING: Did things run better after that?

SIPLON: Yes, things went a lot better after that. Like when we had Major Young, why, we never could get any coffee. They were just feeding us this British tea all the time. So all we'd get was tea. And after Major Nichols got in there, we asked our officers to ask Major Nichols about getting us coffee. He got us coffee again, see.

LENNING: Did he take pretty good care of the soldiers?

SIPLON: Yes. And we had what we called British grass--alfalfa grass--for stew. Instead of having beef stew or something like that we had alfalfa stew, see, without any meat or anything in it. Well, after Major Nichols got in there, we got beef stew; we didn't get any more British alfalfa. But when Major Young was in there, he just went alongside of what the British rations sent us. Well, Major Nichols cut that out and sent us American rations so after that, why, we got American rations. Major Nichols, he was a real officer. He was for the

men. Major Young didn't care.

LENNING: Do you remember what happened to Major Young after that?

SIPLON: Well, he was called back to Archangel. I had heard that he was sent back to the States, but I couldn't vouch for it. I don't know. I'm not sure if he was ever sent back to the States or not.

LENNING: Who commanded your platoon?

SIPLON: I was in the Third Platoon of Company "I". Now, maybe you might be interested in knowing that the captain of our company is quite a noted author-- Horatio G. Winslow. Did you ever read anything by Horatio G. Winslow? He's written a lot of books and a lot of articles and so on. As far as I know, he's living yet. I guess he's around close to ninety years old. He's out in California. Big, long, tall, lanky fellow.

LENNING: What do you remember about him?

SIPLON: Well, I remember one incident of Captain Winslow. And that is, he was on the front lines one night. And it was, well, toward morning, it was sort of dusk yet, and we had a patrol attacked over on the front lines. And they called the captain--you know, where his headquarters was. And in those days, we had wrapped leggings, and Captain Winslow come tearing out of his headquarters. He had one legging on and one legging off, and didn't have a hat on or anything--supposed to have a helmet on. Boy, he didn't have a helmet on or anything. And he had a 45 in his hand, and he says, "Where are they? Where are they? Where are they?" (laughter) I remember that incident. And the fellows got more kick out of that, 'cause he was always talking to the men and telling them how to act under fire and all that sort of stuff.

LENNING: Who was the lieutenant in charge of the Third Platoon?

SIPLON: Forest McKee. I could tell you who had charge of all the platoons, for that matter.

LENNING: You were talking before about how you captured some German aviators and officers before the armistice was signed. Do you remember any of those incidents? Did you participate in any of them?

SIPLON: No, I really didn't have much to do with them. They were taken immediately to Archangel, of course. They were questioned there. I didn't have anything to do with that part of it. 'Course, we captured quite a few Bolsheviks, and a lot of them were young fellows, sixteen, seventeen years old, but just a few of these German officers or so that we captured. They took them back to Archangel, you know, and we didn't see much of them. Of course, the average soldier would have no chance to question them anyway. They had security officers there who would question them. We didn't have much to do with that.

JOHNSON: When were you first trained to be a machine-gunner? Was that when you were in Archangel?

SIPLON: In October. First part of October. That's right.

JOHNSON: So you never had any training before October on the machine gun?

SIPLON: No. You see, we only had about three weeks' training at Custer. And all that was only just regular close-order drill, and gas-mask drill, and all of that preliminary stuff that they would give for boot training. Of course, we had rifle firing, and things like that, but we were just rifle soldiers. We found out right in the very beginning we didn't have any machine guns. We had a machine gun company, but they were detached other places, like down the river. They

found out that we were very much handicapped with only rifles and a few rifle grenades. So they decided we had to have some machine guns.

So, they took eight men, two men from each platoon. There were four fighting platoons in the company and one headquarters platoon. 'Course, this headquarters platoon took care of all incidentals like supplies, medicals, and all different things like that, you know. But they had four fighting platoons. They took eight men--two men out of each platoon--and sent them to Archangel to go to what they call machine gun school. And we went there for three weeks.

JOHNSON: For only three weeks?

SIPLON: Yes, to learn these machine guns. We had to learn those night and day, take them out on the range and fire them. We had to learn to take them apart, and all you had to take them apart with was a cartridge. You'd take them apart with a cartridge and then put them back together again if they'd stop firing. There were only three different positions where they would stop firing for some reason or other, and you had to know which position that they stopped firing and where to take them apart on the different positions. And you had to do all that with a cartridge. Just pull the cartridge out of your belt, just insert in a little notch here or there or someplace, and then put it back together again when you found the trouble. That's what they called the Lewis guns. They were magazine guns, about twelve inches around. And they had three tiers of cartridges, sixty cartridges in a magazine. And we carried four magazines.

We had four men laying behind you. They all had rifles. Then they'd have a man laying to the side of you when the number one gunner was firing the machine gun. This number two gunner's duty was to tell you--he watched to see where you were firing--whether you were high, low, right, or left. Then he would tell you, "You're high, drop your fire a little bit. You're low; raise it a little bit. You're right or left; bring it over this way or that way." 'Cause the man

that was firing, although he had sights on the front of his barrels, on account of his magazines that were on a post about half-way on his barrel, couldn't really see where he was firing. All he was doing was aiming his gun. And the second gunner alongside of him was telling him where he was firing.

These Lewis guns, they were called machine guns, or magazine guns, and nowadays they really call them sub-machine guns--like the automatic guns mobsters carry. And the difference between those and one of the big Vickers or Browning machine guns, they fired about three hundred shots a minute from one of these big long belts that ran through. But these (the Lewis guns) were practically sub-machine guns. The difference with the big machine guns was that they were water-cooled. These sub-machine guns were air-cooled, so they were more practical up there in the cold weather. They had a barrel about thirty inches long, and they were about six inches around, and they were hollow. The barrel was made of steel, of course. And of course, your rifle barrel came in the center of that, underneath. And the pressure of the air going through cooled it off. So, that's just the difference between the big machine guns: one was water-cooled, and the other was air-cooled. The one I was on was the Lewis, air-cooled. And that's the kind of gun they used always in airplanes at that time.

As fast as you emptied that magazine, your second gunner took it and passed it back to the fellows behind you. And they had loading handles, and they had extra belts of cartridges over their shoulders, and they would reload these magazines and keep passing them up to your second gunner all the time. As fast as you'd empty them, he took them off and put a fresh one on, locked it in place, and handed these magazines back to the men behind you. And that's the way that worked. And the object of the firing would be to fire in bursts. You'd fire in bursts of eight or ten, and you'd stop, and you'd look to see where you were firing; fire eight or ten more, then stop and look around and fire eight or ten more--something like that. Now, the big machine guns, they'd fire fifty, sixty,

seventy--"brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" It'd be like that. But these sub-machine guns, they'd probably just fire eight or ten at a time.

We had two of them to a platoon, one on the right flank, one on the left flank. And if they went into action, they were supposed to protect each end of the platoon, to save--well, call them the Bolos or call them the enemy--from getting around you--from surrounding you, from getting around you, this way. And if they started to go around you, why, you'd give it to them from this end or that end to keep them from getting around you. That was the objective.

But when we went up there, the first month we went out, we didn't have that. All we had was just regular old Russian army rifles. All we could do was "pop, pop, pop!" with them. But that didn't stop them very much. But afterwards, we had it a little more even. They had machine guns, and they'd stopped us more than once already with these machine guns. But we kind of evened things up a little bit after we got back from machine gun school and had these machine guns. Of course, then we weren't out of it yet, 'cause we had to pick a crew of five men and we had to go out and train them how to fire them. In case anybody got hurt or anything else, you'd have to take their place. You had to drill those fellows on how to load those magazines and how to pass them up to your second gunner. And they had to learn how to feed your gun. So, it took time, but they finally got it.

JOHNSON: How long did you spend training them?

SIPLON: Well, you were training them all the time. You'd take them out every-day, train them all the time. When you were in reserve, then you'd train them.

JOHNSON: How did that system work out when you were actually fighting the Bolsheviks? Did you have any problems because of the lack of training time?

SIPLON: Well, we might have had if we really got into it too heavy, but just as

I say, these Bolsheviks weren't the kind of fellows that would stay for any length of time, you know. They would fight for a couple of hours, and if they saw that they were being pressed kind of hard or so, why, they'd beat a retreat. They'd back up. They wouldn't stay and fight. Whether they were trained that way or not, I don't know, but we never had anything like what you could call a pitched battle, you know, like they'd have on the Western Front--a bayonet battle or anything like that. Well, we never run into anything like that. I never heard of a soldier up there being bayoneted or anything like that. So, they might've gotten a few hundred yards apart or something like that, but if it got so they'd see that they were probably getting a little bit too much of it so, why, they'd pick up and beat it. (laughs) I'd say that maybe a few times that we did the same thing, if we saw that we were outnumbered or something like that. If our officer told us to get back a little bit or something like that, we did the same thing. But our officers didn't do it very often. They usually made us stick there, but the Russians did it usually quite often. If the fire was getting too heavy for them or so, why, the first thing you know they'd disappear.

JOHNSON: Once you got the Lewis guns, how were your weapons in comparison with the Bolsheviks? Did they still have better weapons? Were you outranged?

SIPLON: After we got the Lewis guns and grenade throwers and things like that, we were pretty well on a level with them then. But the first month or so that we were up there, we were pretty well outclassed. As far as that's concerned, why, we were what you would call outgunned. We really were outgunned there the first month we were up there. And I really think, myself, that that stopped our progress. I think we could have made a lot more headway if we'd a had the equipment to go ahead with. But I think that really stopped us.

JOHNSON: Do you remember when George Albers of Company "I" was captured?

SIPLON: I should. I was right in reserve behind him. He was on outpost that night that he was captured. In other words, he was a sentry on outpost, probably about fifty yards ahead of the reserve lines. Now, I was in the reserve line, of course, when I wasn't out there with him. And he was surprised there at the time. These fellows crawled up on him, and they had white sheets over them. And in the snow, why, he didn't see them. Well, they cracked him over the head and grabbed ahold of him. And for a little while, he didn't know anything. Yes, I was right out there that same night that he was taken, but they treated him pretty good, though.

JOHNSON: Was there any attempt to rescue him?

SIPLON: Well, there was a little patrol action to try to see where he went. There was no chance to get those fellows. It was just a patrol that took him. It was just patrol action. We sent out a patrol to see if they could see him or find him, but they never saw anything of him.

JOHNSON: At that time, what did you think happened to Allied prisoners of the Bolsheviks? What did you think would happen to George Albers?

SIPLON: Well, we didn't think we'd ever see him again. That was our thoughts of him because of so many stories that you heard. And so we didn't think that we'd ever see him again because we'd just figure that they would, oh, probably torture him to get any information out of him and probably mistreat him or something like that. We had our misgivings about the whole thing, and we were pretty down-hearted about it at the time. And we all felt, you know, that we really didn't expect to see him again, see.

But from what he said and what he has always told us, they treated him fine. And he says they took him all over, wherever they went. They took him to Leningrad and they took him all over. And he says civilians and everybody

treated him fine. He said he never had any trouble from them. Nobody ever treated him rough or mishandled him or anything. He says they always treated him fine.

Now, we had other fellows, too, that were taken prisoner, you know. And there was one other Muskegon man that was taken prisoner, too. Walter Huston, I think, was taken prisoner, too. I don't know whether he's living anymore or not. He used to live over here on Huston Avenue. But I don't know whether he's still living or not.

JOHNSON: What kind of stories did you hear about what would happen to Allied prisoners? Who would you hear them from?

SIPLON: Well, I don't know. The only thing that we would hear them from, of course, would be from, oh, natives a little bit once in a while that we could talk with, and also from soldiers that we'd mix with a little bit. Now, we'd mix with a whole contingent of French, British, and Canadian soldiers. We were all a mixture there. You'd get talking about this or that or another; they'd all have their story about it. One would say this and one'd say that. And so naturally, the stories'd be all different, one way or another. But as far as any mistreatment is concerned, as far as I'm concerned, in talking with those fellows that were prisoners, there wasn't one of them that ever told me that they were ever mistreated there at all.

LENNING: Did you ever hear of a captured Bolshevik ever being tortured or mistreated by the Allies?

SIPLON: No. No, I never did. I've seen them shot. I've seen them shot, and I've seen them have to dig their own graves.

LENNING: Who would make them do that?

SIPLON: Well, I don't know. Because they were considered traitors or something like that. I don't know. I've seen them where they would make them dig a low-lying trench, and line up a dozen of them and shoot them for spy work and stuff like that. Traitors, spying, and so on like that. That town was full of that stuff, you know. Sure. A lot of these White Russians--and some were Bolsheviks.

JOHNSON: What troops would shoot them? Would it be the Americans, the White Russians, or the British?

SIPLON: Well, now, they were trying to raise a White Russian army, you know, to overcome these Bolsheviks. That's what the Allies were trying to do. But they never had much success with it. After they overthrew the tsar, they were trying to raise a White Russian army or tsarist army, you know, to rule the country. But the Bolsheviks were too much for them, as far as that's concerned. But they did make them dig their own graves.

JOHNSON: Do you know who actually gave the orders?

SIPLON: Well, I wouldn't dare say. But I would say that the orders come from the military. That would be my guess, and that's only a guess. I don't know. Where else would it come from? There was no other rule there but military.

JOHNSON: You don't remember which ones were the troops shooting the Bolsheviks?

SIPLON: No, I don't. No American troops ever did it. To my opinion, it was the White Russian troops that did it. And I don't think any British or French troops ever did it.

JOHNSON: When did you first find out that the armistice had been signed?

SIPLON: Well, the first news that we got was about the seventh of November, when there was a false rumor coming through. That's when the French first quit.

(laughter) The first inkling that we got of it was the Frenchmen coming out with their jugs of wine. They got a ration of wine every week, and they used to quite often share it with us fellows. They were quite good companions, you know. And of course, we used to get a drink of lime juice or a little British rum once in a while, but the French used to get their quota of wine every week. And this morning, there was something different. Not only did they come out with their flasks of wine, they come out with jugs and everything else. They were dancing around and hollering and whooping, "Finé la guerre!" And we said, "What's the matter with you guys?" and all that. "Armistice!" They were all done, they thought. But that was around the seventh of November, and it was just a rumor, so they finally quieted down about that.

But then on the eleventh of November when they did come through, why, then they quit for good. And then they wouldn't fight anymore. They wouldn't go back to the front lines at all anymore, so the only thing they did was send them back to Archangel. And so they stayed back there until they sent them back to France.

LENNING: Did the French artillery unit also stop fighting?

SIPLON: Yes. The only thing we had back out there then was the Canadian artillery. There were Canadian and French artillery both. Yes, the French quit entirely. The French wouldn't fight at all anymore. So, then we had the Canadians with us after that. But the French quit entirely.

JOHNSON: How long did it ~~take~~ for the news to reach you that the armistice had really been signed?

SIPLON: Well, we knew it the next day. Oh yes, we knew it the next day. They had pretty good communications there.

JOHNSON: How did you find out?

SIPLON: Well, right through the army news report there.

JOHNSON: What impact did that have on the morale of the American troops?

SIPLON: Bad. Bad. Everybody thought they were through then. Everybody thought then that they were going back to Archangel. But they knew they couldn't. They knew that the White Sea was frozen over, and they knew they were stuck there for the winter, that they weren't going to go back. There was no way of getting them out of there. The only way of getting them out of there was that railroad to Vologda, and the Bolsheviks had them stopped there half-way down there. So there was no way of getting them out.

LENNING: Were you told by the officers that there was no way of getting you out?

SIPLON: Well, we were told, but they didn't have to tell us. (laughs) We could see that for ourselves.

JOHNSON: In your diary, you wrote that an airplane flew over the Bolshevik lines twice with peace messages.

SIPLON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Could you tell us about that?

SIPLON. Yes. Well, that was after the armistice was signed. We had airplanes flying over there, of course, everyday; that is, when the weather was good at any time. And of course, once in a while, we'd have one of our planes shot down, too. And of course, if it was anywhere near the front lines, that would provoke a pretty good fight because we'd go in there and try to bring the aviator back. And of course, they'd be determined to try to take the aviator, and we'd try keeping him. And that would provoke a fight. But that didn't happen

very often, but it happened once in a while.

But when the armistice was signed, why, they got out some--they had French up there in Archangel--and they got out a bunch of leaflets and stuff like that to tell them that the war was over, that they quit fighting and stuff like that. They sent them up in a plane and scattered them around the lines there and come back. Of course, as far as that's concerned, I suppose, they got them all right, but that didn't have much effect on them as far as we were concerned. That didn't have much to do with us. It had to do with the Western Front, I guess, not with us. We were a different front.

JOHNSON: Is there anything else you remember from the fall offensive on the railroad front that you would like to tell us about?

SIPLON: Well, I don't know whether I covered much of it in my diary there or not. But I remember one incident that us fellows didn't like very well. They had a couple of English sergeants there that were running the railroad. And so they were going to give those fellows medals for running the railroad. Obozerskaya was our field headquarters, and we just happened to be there one day--that is, the company was--and that was the reserve headquarters there. And so then they come around knocking at the log cabins around there, "Everybody out! Everybody out!" with rifles and belts. So we lined up--we didn't know what for. Well, then they finally told us what it was for. We had to all line up to give these two British sergeants medals for running the train. And boy! did you see a rumpus around there after they did that, for giving those British sergeants medals for running the trains back and forth . . . (laughs) That's one incident that I shall always remember. The fellows all raised a ruckus about it. They were all pretty sore about it.

LENNING: Were those the only British officers on the railroad front?

SIPLON: We didn't have very many British officers of the railroad front. Once or twice, General Ironsides come out for a review or something like that. But outside of that, why, it wasn't very often that British officers come out there. But the fellows always used to say that they better not come down on the front lines because if they turn their back, they'll get a bullet in it. (laughs) But no, we didn't have very many British officers out there. Most of them stayed in Archangel pretty well.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about the British officers who remained in Archangel?

SIPLON: British officers were not too well-liked by the troops. We didn't have any British troops with us. 'Way down the river front, I think they had British troops with them. But we had mostly French troops with us--French artillery. The Canadian artillery, I think, was on the river front, too.

LENNING: Do you remember Colonel Lucas? He was the French officer.

SIPLON: Yes, I remember him. He used to come around once in a while with the French troops. These French troops that came from the Western Front, they were old, worn troops, you know. They were taken out of the Western Front because they didn't want to send them back into the front lines there again. So they thought they might have it a little easier by sending them up to Russia. (laughs) I don't know whether they did or not, but anyway they sent them up there.

LENNING: Was it in October that you got to Archangel to learn how to operate the Lewis gun?

SIPLON: Yes.

LENNING: What do you remember about Archangel?

SIPLON: Well, we didn't see much of Archangel, I'm sorry to say. We didn't get back to Archangel until late November. We got in the barracks back there, and we were there from November 23 to December 6. We had just begun to enjoy ourselves a little bit. We formed a basketball team; I was on the basketball team. Each company would form a basketball team, and they would play a basketball team. And then they had a Y.M.C.A. there, so that they scheduled games and parties and things of that kind.

And they had a wonderful toboggan slide there. That river was about a mile wide where it run across the river to Bakaritsa. Bakaritsa wasn't much of a place. They had all the docks there. That's where the boats docked, across the river in Bakaritsa. That's where the engineers were, over there on the docks. And so this toboggan slide was built up on the banks of the river. We'd get up there evenings mostly, of course. Dark, you know--three or four o'clock it would be, in the afternoon there in the wintertime. But they would ice those slides everyday. So it was cold; so what? They really didn't have to do much icing because they were ice all the time anyway. And they had long toboggans. We'd get eight or ten on a toboggan, and we'd get all the Russian girls up there. We'd all have partners and all get on that toboggan. And we'd go down those slides and go down the banks of the river, and we'd almost go across the river. Then they'd have to come back, and that was the worst part of it, climbing back up. (laughter) We'd probably only take three or four slides a night because you had to come all the way back. But you'd slide about a mile, I guess, when you'd

go down. That was really a thrilling toboggan slide.

And the Russian girls, they really had a great time of it with the American soldiers. Now, they were a sight for you. They'd have their big high boots on, you know. They had barefeet. They didn't have socks on, just their barefeet in with these boots, and it was about twenty, thirty below zero most of the time-- although, they had warm clothes on. Flocks of them would come out there to go on the toboggan slides. And they had a lot of fun.

There were some companies there from the Second Battalion that were kept in Archangel there for guard duty. They had a lot of fun--a couple companies, I guess, that didn't get out on the field much. They had a lot of fun there. But those companies, like in the First and Third Battalions that did get out in the field, they didn't see much of Archangel.

And we didn't get back there again until March 11 to March 30. March 30 was the date Colonel Stewart addressed the Company "I" men and the men agreed to go back to the front after talking it over with Colonel Stewart. Nothing was ever heard about it again about the so-called mutiny. They pulled us out from the lines on May 24. In the last part of May, they sent us back to Archangel, though we didn't stay in Archangel. They sent us out to Economy Island on the river there. It was quite a big island, and we stayed there ten days. I know we had baseball teams and everything out there. We were waiting for transports to come in and take us out. And we would start a baseball game at ten o'clock at night and end it up at midnight. You could sit out in front of your tent and read a newspaper at eleven o'clock at night. Right at that time, around in May and June, it was daylight about twenty-four hours a day.

LENNING: I was wondering what you remembered about the city from your brief visits. Would you say that the businesses, the banks, and the factories were functioning normally?

SIPLON: There was no industrial work there that I know of. The banks were open after we got there, but before we came there, they raided the banks. And all the peasants--or White Russians, if you want to call them that--loaded themselves with rubles--paper money, paper rubles. And everybody had paper rubles. Pretty near anywhere you went, no matter who it was, they had a handful of paper rubles. And there peasants were poor, of course, and they were hungry most of the time. The kids would hang around our barracks, and they'd hang around our mess tents and so on. And they'd even dig around in our garbage pails for something to eat. Well, if there was anything left over, and there was sometimes, those in the mess halls would feed the kids. And the kids knew it. The kids were always hanging around; they knew when it was mealtime.

And the peasants were all in there, what we called the White Russians. They were always around with a handful of rubles--paper money--wanting to buy flour, wanting to buy sugar, and above all things, wanting to buy liquor. They'd pay anything for a bottle of liquor. Like, I pretty near got mobbed one day when I come from Bakaritsa when Rudy Marxer give me a quart of liquor to bring back to the fellows in the barracks over in Archangel. And I went over there to visit him when we were there. I had a dozen of those guys even come up to you, you know. They'd see something in your coat pocket. They come up like that, "Skol'ko rubles? Ya? Skol'ko rubles." Boy, it's pretty near a mile across that river, you know. (laughter) But I made it all right. But of course, they didn't dare take it away from you or anything like that. They wanted to buy it, you see. They'd pay you any amount of money for it.

Now, a lot of these fellows would get ahold of flour and sugar and things like that--surplus. And they'd sell it to these Russians. And they accumulated hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars of these rubles, see. This was a wide-spread operation among the troops. Well, the officers, they got wise to that, and before we left, they put a limit on what they could take back with them.

These officers told them to get rid of it before they left.

But some of the fellows were wise and didn't believe them and didn't do it. And when they got back to France they unloaded it. Like, I know one fellow who had enough of this Russian money when he got back to put him into business. The officers would allow them a hundred dollars or something like that. But a lot of these fellows had as much as three or four thousand dollars or more in paper money--in rubles, you know. And it was good, see. Of course, they had to take a discount on it, but it was good.

And some of these guys with the supply company there--the supplies would all come in there, you know. And they would have these droshkis--you know what a droshki is? A Russian cart with a pony. And they would pile bags of sugar and pile bags of flour and stuff on these droshkis and take the supplies out to companies. They'd take so many droshkis out to the companies, and they'd take one and send it out to a warehouse that they had. (laughs) To a warehouse every time that they sent them out! So they got this warehouse supplied up, and when these natives come in there and wanted to buy that stuff, they'd sell these natives flour, and sugar, and whiskey, and that sort of stuff. (laughter) They made a regular business of it.

LENNING: What else do you remember about Archangel or the people there?

SIPLON: The people? Well, you'd be surprised. Mostly uneducated people, but now and then, you'd run across some of them that were not. Now and then, you'd run across people that were very musical and were very interested in ballet and things of that kind. But they were really the exception. As a general rule, they were average--poor, most of them.

LENNING: What would you say their attitudes were towards the American soldiers?

SIPLON: Well, as a general rule, good. But you couldn't trust them. Like as

I told you before, when the Bolsheviks overran the tsar there and the tsar rule, they tried to form what they call the White Russians and form a White army. And of course, the Bolsheviks, they called them the Red Army. But that's where the Red comes in. The Bolos played on the imaginations of especially the younger White Russians and made some progress, and the change looked better than what they had before. So they got these fellows to join all right--mostly young fellows, as a general rule--but really what they joined for was to get something to eat. But when we had to take them out in the field to train them, why, you couldn't trust them.

Now, we used to go out in the fields and practice in the field headquarters like at Obozerskaya there. And we had a great big long wire, maybe a hundred feet or more, and then we maybe had a target of paper or tin or something like that that might represent a person or figure or something like that. And we'd tie that on the end of a wire or a rope or so. And we'd get on the end of that rope, a hundred feet away or more or less, and pull it along a wire. Then you would shoot at that target with your machine guns.

Well now, in training those fellows, you couldn't trust them. There was several times they'd turn the machine guns on you. So that was the kind of proposition that we dealt with there. And that was the kind of Russians that you dealt with. Most of the people were so hungry they'd do anything for something to eat, and so they later joined these so-called White Russians. But every time they put them in relief up there on the front lines or something like that, the Bolos would come with a platoon of fifty or a hundred men or something like that at daylight for an attack of some kind, the White Russians would turn around and run. And the Americans or French or somebody would have to back them up; so you couldn't trust them.

LENNING: How did this made you feel, since you were supposed to be helping them and they were unreliable?

SIPLON: No, they were not trusty. They were not reliable at all.

LENNING: How did that make you feel?

SIPLON: Well, you can imagine how we felt. Several times we had to come up from reserve, you know, to support those fellows when they'd turn around and run. And so you can imagine what our fellows said when they had to do that. And you can imagine what they thought about it and what their feelings were. They didn't feel too well about it. As a rule, our soldiers were not in favor of backing up these White Russians.

But they found them in Archangel, too. You had enemies there in Archangel, and you had what they called spies in Archangel. And I told you about time there that they made them dig their own graves? The firing squads shot them. So you see, that was the kind of people we had to deal with. In other words, they were insecure. Not all of them, but quite a few of them.

LENNING: What would you say the Archangel residents wanted in the form of a government?

SIPLON: Well, I would say that fifty-fifty of them were Reds. Fifty-fifty were probably in favor of revolution--that they favored the Red revolution. They probably had so much of the tsar regime there, that when the Red revolution come, at least fifty percent of them favored the Red revolution. And the other fifty percent didn't say anything. (laughs) They just kept quiet.

LENNING: How would you say the Archangel residents felt about the other Allies--the French or British? Was their attitude any different than towards the Americans?

SIPLON: No, I don't think so. Now, really, when it come right down to it, I think the Americans were really their favorites. I don't think the British and

the French were--well, I don't mean to say that they hated them or anything like that, but I mean they were not as well-liked as the Americans. Of course, we couldn't converse liberally with the Russians 'cause we didn't talk their language entirely and so on, but you would go along and talk with them a little bit, and they'd say, "Kak poshivaite. Dobro Amerikantsky. Net dobro Amerikantsky", and things like that--a little sign language and so. We got along pretty well with them, and they liked us pretty well. But you never saw any English or any Frenchmen stopping and chewing the rag with them. And so the mutual feeling was they liked the Americans a lot better than what they did the French or the English.

LENNING: How much did you know about the political situation in the city of Archangel?

SIPLON: Well, really, I couldn't answer too much about that, no. I suppose that some of our officers that stayed there in Archangel found out more about that in conversing with the different political leaders there. But us fellows in the ranks never got a chance to talk with any of those fellows there about that. All that we ever knew was what they told us about the situation there. So, as far as what the political situation there was--as far as we knew--was that the Reds overran the country there. And the people there, as a general rule, didn't say anything, or went along with them. But what the political leaders there thought of it, of course, us fellows that were just soldiers, why, we didn't know. They didn't tell us anything about the political end of it. I suppose there's some of our head officers who found out more about it than what we did. But they never told us anything about it.

LENNING: Did you have any idea who was in control of the city?

SIPLON: No, I wouldn't say so. I wouldn't really know.

LENNING: Did you spend Thanksgiving in Archangel?

SIPLON: Yes, we did.

JOHNSON: When you were in Archangel, did you ever look up any of your friends from Muskegon that were in other companies like Rudy Marxer?

SIPLON: Well, we never were close enough to look up any friends. 'Course, I knew Rudy. I knew Marxer; I knew he was over there. And I had several friends in my own company, of course, from Muskegon, and we had company among ourselves. And really, to tell you the truth, we didn't mix very much because we had fellows from Muskegon that were in the First Battalion--"A", and "C", and "D" Companies. And they were 'way up the Dvina River, up miles away from us. So we never saw them.

JOHNSON: Did you know at that time where your friends in the other companies were?

SIPLON: No.

JOHNSON: You didn't have any idea what the other companies were doing?

SIPLON: No, we didn't even have any idea that they were even in the regiment or anything like that. It's just the way it is, the way they shoved us into the fill-up, because that's what we were. We were used for fill-up in the 85th Division because they were going overseas in a few weeks. And therefore, when we went overseas, outside of our own company and fellows from town here--of course, we knew all of the fellows from town here. There were probably a dozen of us fellows in Company "I". We knew each other, of course, and we visited each other. But other companies, we never come in contact with them because they were scattered all over, one in one direction and one went in another direction. And

you never saw anything of them, and we never got together again until practically after the war was over. Even when we got back to Detroit, and they had a great big parade and a great big celebration over there, we never got together because they kept us together in the companies. So, we never knew who was in this company and who was in that company, or anything about it until we met after the war. And then we found out one by one who was in that company, who was in this company, and (laughs) who was in that company. We never knew anything about it.

JOHNSON: So you had no idea the whole time you were there what the companies were doing or where they were?

SIPLON: No. Well, just hearsay, you know. You'd get word once in a while from some guy that had heard it: "Well, "A" Company got massacred up here on the river. Somebody bushwhacked them up on the river. Only seven or eight of them left out of the outfit." You'd get news like that every now and then. But that's the only thing that you would hear. But you didn't know those fellows in Muskegon or Holland or Grand Haven, or who they were until later years.

JOHNSON: Did you ever visit anybody in the hospitals in Archangel?

SIPLON: Never got up to the hospital. I never was in a hospital.

JOHNSON: In December, when you were sent back to the front before Christmas, how did the men feel about being sent back after the armistice was signed?

SIPLON: Well, I'd hate to say. Lousy. (laughs) They felt very bad about that because they felt that they had earned a little rest period. In other words, you'd say they felt imposed upon, and they felt that some of these other companies that had been just on guard duty around Archangel and Bakaritsa and some of those place could replace them. Instead of turning us fellows around that had been out there three months and sending us back again. And so, they felt it

wasn't right; they felt that they should send one of the other companies out.

JOHNSON: At that point, why did you think you were remaining in Russia and fighting after the armistice had been signed?

SIPLON: Well, as I told you before, the only reason our officers ever give us was we were going up there to keep the Germans away from those northern ports up there--Murmansk, Finland, Archangel, and so on--from having any submarine bases in the north. That is the only true solution that has ever been given for any reason for sending us over.

JOHNSON: But after the armistice had been signed and the Germans were no longer a threat, why did you think you were staying?

SIPLON: The only reason we thought we were staying was because we couldn't get out. The rivers were ice; the White Sea was ice; there was ice in the North Sea, and you couldn't get a boat in there. And we were told that we couldn't get out until spring, until they got a boat in. As soon as they could get a boat in, why, they'd take us out. So that's why we had to stay there. In other words, we were fighting for our lives. As long as we were there, we had to fight for our lives.

JOHNSON: When you got back to the front, did you notice any change in the situation there? Like in the way the Bolsheviki were fighting.

SIPLON: No, no difference.

JOHNSON: Were the Bolsheviki becoming better disciplined?

SIPLON: No, I don't think so. As far as discipline is concerned, they didn't have any. There was no discipline at all. They would fight as long as they had the advantage, and when they didn't have the advantage anymore, why they'd run

away, that's all. And the old saying is, You run away to fight another day. That was their policy. They didn't stay and fight if they didn't think that they were going to win.

JOHNSON: How did you spend Christmas on the front?

SIPLON: Same as any other day.

JOHNSON: Nothing special about it?

SIPLON: Oh, the cooks fixed up a little special dinner at Christmas. Otherwise, we didn't have anything special for Christmas. But earlier in the fall, a flock of geese come over and we shot a couple of geese. And we almost got court-martialed for shooting those geese because we almost caused a riot in the front lines by shooting. (laughter) And the cooks fixed them up.

JOHNSON: Where were you housed on the front?

SIPLON: Did you see some pictures in some of those (laughs) reunion programs there? Log houses--all log houses or shelter tents. And we had sleeping bags. 'Course, we always carried the sleeping bag. You've seen these heavy sleeping bags--the heavy wool sleeping bag. There's three, four buckles up on the top, and you unbuckle them and crawl into them. 'Course, we'd take our coats off and take our shoes off, crawl into them and use our coat for a pillow, and then buckle up over us and sleep on the ground lots of times in the shelter tent. The fellows would never carry full tents, which they used a lot of times. They'd each carry a half a shelter tent. They had partners, and your partner carried the other half of the shelter tent. Well, two fellows slept in the shelter tent--just one fellow on one side and one fellow on the other side. And those shelter tents were around about six, seven feet long. Just pitch them up, of course, with a couple of guide lines or so that you just drive in the ground with stakes,

if you can get them in the ground. But otherwise our sleeping bag was the only thing we had.

JOHNSON: Were you fairly warm at night?

SIPLON: Well, there were those sleeping bags which had four or five inches of sheep wool. You never froze in them. Besides, all you did was take your overcoat off, spread your overcoat--big, heavy, warm, fur overcoat--spread that over your sleeping bag, and you'd be plenty warm. Sure, we could sleep right in the trench, right in the snow, and you wouldn't get cold. And you'd take that sleeping bag and pull it right over your head. So, with that sleeping bag, you wouldn't get cold, that is, you're in a field if you couldn't find a log house somewhere. There were all log houses there.

The fellow went out awhile one night--I was telling you about a forced march that we got stuck in a swamp? Well, we had to retreat on that. And when we got back to the advance base there, there were three or four log houses there. And the fellows were all wet and dirty and everything, and all of them were piling into those houses as fast as they could get in there. That crew that was with me noticed one building there that the fellows didn't seem to be going into. And they said, "My gosh, I guess we're lucky." I said, "Look over there. Nobody is going into that building over there." He said, "Ah, let's make a beeline for that. Let's get in there before anybody else gets in there." So we made a beeline for there, and it was still pretty dark. So we went in there. "Boy," he said, "There's nobody in there." I said, "Boy, ain't we lucky." So we went in there and threw all of packs off and lay down. We were all dog-tired, of course. Come daylight, we found out why nobody else was going in there. (laughs) We were sleeping in a manure pile! (laughter) The other guys knew that it was a cow barn, but we didn't know anything about it. But we didn't care, as long as it was an empty building. Well, those are the

the experiences you go through. (laughter)

JOHNSON: What was your clothing like? Was it pretty warm?

SIPLON: Oh yes. We had big fur coats that were mixed wool--mostly wool. Of course, it would come down here, about to almost your ankles. And then we had boots--what they called the Shackleton boot. It had a big, thick leather sole on it that come up about eight inches high with a one-inch sole. And you'd fasten them up here, on top. Then we wore a couple pair of heavy socks, and then we had a big fur hat.

JOHNSON: How common was frostbite?

SIPLON: There was a lot of it. Yes, there were days you had to keep your ears covered, and you had to pretty well keep your nose covered, and so on. So you couldn't go out in thirty, forty below weather without getting your nose frost-bitten. They had quite a bit of it there.

JOHNSON: What was the quality of the food?

SIPLON: Not so good. We didn't have very good food until our battalion major was changed. When we went over there we had Major Young. And all he was striving for was his own glory, I guess. He was the originator of this swamp march--so-called--that we had there. And we got stuck in the swamp there that night. And after that, why, he got recalled. They put Major J. Brooks Nichols in there, and after that we began to get better rations. You see, we were under English command, and we were getting English rations. Although we kicked about them, Major Young never did anything about them.

And the English rations that we got--instead of coffee we got tea, "tay" we called it--tea. But we never got coffee. And we got alfalfa, that is, that was a sort of canned hay, but it looked like alfalfa--hay. And you'd dump it in your skillet that you carried along with you, and stir a little oil with it and try to warm it up a little bit; try to eat it. Then you got a little mutton stew once in a while. Mutton and cheese was English, you know, and nobody cared about that. Once in a great while you'd probably taste a potato, but not very often.

But after Major Nichols got in there, why, we began to get our American feed again. Then we began to get our Irish stew again. Bully beef--that's--you know what that is--that's canned beef, and then you could take that canned beef, of course, it'd come in pound cans, and they'd issue you that for what they called iron rations. You were supposed to keep that for the field, and you're not supposed to use it; only when you're in the field. When you're on the base or anything like that, well then you had your cooks and so on like that. And they took care of your meals then. But then, we begin to get oatmeal and things like that for breakfast. And even once in a while we'd get pancakes--and them after Major Nichols came in. And we'd quite often get beef stew, and a few potatoes, and things of that style. Get, that is, like regular American army feed.

JOHNSON: Did you have enough food to eat for the amount of physical labor that you were required to do?

SIPLON: Well, sometimes not enough. 'Course what you got for field use was your bully beef, your cans of bully beef, and hardtack. Of course, if you didn't have good teeth, you'd break your teeth off on the hardtack, unless you'd take your drinking cup and take a little coffee or so and you would put in it and warm it up a little bit and then put your hardtack in there and soak

it for a little bit. And eat it that way. More than one fellow broke his teeth on it, trying to--just a hard cracker, you know. Hardtack is just the name of it, just a hard cracker. Just like that poem will tell you something about--it'd get mildew on it. (laughs) But I want both of you to read that poem when you get your leisure time sometime.

JOHNSON: Did you ever hear of any cases of malnutrition?

SIPLON: Oh yes. Not so much, though, because--I'll tell you, when--we had a lot of flu up there, you know. We had quite a few deaths from flu over there. Especially on the boat going over there. We slept in hammocks down in the hold of the boat. And about every other guy--you know these hammocks were bumping into each other all the time, you know. And you couldn't get out of your hammock once you'd bumped somebody else. And it caused a lot of deaths there, in Archangel, from the flu. Of course, that's never mentioned in the fatality list. That fatality list is all from action in the field. Then a lot of pneumonia along with it. But they had a hospital in Archangel, of course, and they had their medical corps there, and their doctors, and everything like that. There was--oh, I wouldn't say too much of it, but there was some--faking. Some faking. They would fake; fellows didn't want to be out on the front, and they'd fake the flu, or fake they were sick, or something like that, so they could be sent to Archangel to the hospital, you know.

JOHNSON: Did you ever hear of any cases of food poisoning?

SIPLON: Food poisoning? No. No, I didn't. I never heard of any food poisoning. They didn't get food enough to get poisoned. (laughs)

JOHNSON: You had tonsillitis, right?

SIPLON: I had tonsillitis, yes.

JOHNSON: What kind of medical care did you have?

SIPLON: Oh, pills. Iodine.

JOHNSON: You were on the front at the time, right?

SIPLON: I just--I could go to the medics. They'd swab my throat with iodine, and give me some pills. I was never in the hospital. I had tonsillitis a couple of times, I guess. Two or three days, and they'd swab it with iodine, give me a few CCC pills or something like that, you know.

JOHNSON: What about the soldiers who were wounded on the front? What kind of medical care did they receive?

SIPLON: Well, about all they got on the front was just the medics that were on the front there. And about all they had there was just forms of iodine, and maybe a little whiskey, or a little grog, or a little rum. Of course, they had rum, English rum. They'd give them a little rum once in a while to tone them up. Of course, they had forms of iodine, and stuff like that, for a sore throat. That's about all they had outside of sending them to Archangel, to the hospital.

JOHNSON: Did you know of any cases of neglect by medical supply officers or doctors there?

SIPLON: No. No.

JOHNSON: Didn't they have enough to work with?

SIPLON: I'd had never heard of any mistreatment or anything like that from our officers. All the medics were very good, as far as I know. Of course, I can't vouch for all. I was just on one front. 'Course there were three fronts there, you know. And as far as I know from talking with fellows that were on the other

fronts I've never heard any complaint. But--of course there were times where men were wounded that they couldn't get to them right away. Impossible, probably, to get to them right away, but I never heard of any neglect or anything about that. That wasn't possible; they got to them as quick as they could.

JOHNSON: Did you ever stay in a Russian family's home?

SIPLON: No.

JOHNSON: Do you remember anything about the peasants' attitudes toward the Americans?

SIPLON: The Russians, you mean?

JOHNSON: Yes. Not in Archangel, but the peasants in the interior. When you spoke about the night march in the last interview, you mentioned that the peasants wouldn't help with directions.

SIPLON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Didn't they give you directions because of communication problems? Or was it that they didn't want to have anything to do with the Americans?

SIPLON: A little of both, I think. The only maps--as I said before--were airplane maps, that were taken from airplanes, flying over fairly low. And they were probably flying over five hundred to eight hundred feet, or so. But they could possibly see a clearing in the trees; but what could they see--whether there was really a trail through there? Where there wasn't, you know. And as far as the Russians there were concerned, I've always said you couldn't believe them. And it wasn't all in communication because we had men with us--quite a few Polish men and they could talk Russian. So we could communicate with the Russians. Because a lot of these Polish fellows could talk Russian and could

talk with these fellows. So, it wasn't so much a matter of communication, it was just a matter off-I don't know-- (laughs) They don't want to tell you, see.

LENNING: Didn't want to get involved?

SIPLON: Didn't want to get involved. You got the word there. They don't want to get involved. (laughter)

JOHNSON: How did the peasants initially react to the troops?

SIPLON: Well, they were friendly enough. We never had any trouble with them in any way. They were always, as far as the Americans were concerned, they were always happy enough with us. I couldn't say about the English and French, because I never say too much of them. That is, with their doings with the Russians. But, as far as any doings that we had with the Russians, they were always fairly cordial. We never had any thing in the line of disputes with them or anything like that. They were fairly friendly. But, I don't know as to whether I would say that, absolutely, that they were glad that we were there, or whether they weren't glad that we were there. (laughs) They were just in a position where they were glad to get something to eat. (laughs) That's the whole thing--the way I look at it.

JOHNSON: How would you say the peasants in the interior compared to those in Archangel, in their attitude towards you?

SIPLON: That's be hard for me to say.

JOHNSON: Was it the same, or was there much difference?

SIPLON: I wish Goerge Albers was alive. He could tell you, 'cause he went all through. He was in the interior, and they took him all over the whole country, and then treated him very well.

JOHNSON: How about around Obozerskaya?

SIPLON: Obozerskaya? We didn't have any trouble at all. I'll tell you--as a general rule, they were very good to us. You know, they had log houses, and quite a few of them would have a little room in the back end of the house. And they leave their pigs and chickens back there, in the back room of the house. And you'd come around and if they like you, you could get some eggs once in a while. And if they didn't have them, why, of course, you didn't get them. But, as a general rule, I'd say the French and English didn't get that. But they treated the Americans pretty well that way.

LENNING: Did you ever witness the forced evacuation of a village?

SIPLON: Not on the railroad front, but I understood on the river front that that happened a couple of times. But, to the best of my knowledge, that never happened on the railroad front. You mean the citizens would have to be evacuated?

LENNING: Yes.

SIPLON: No, no. As a general rule, when any of these villages were outflanked or were attacked with artillery, the villagers would stay right inside their log cabins and they wouldn't go outside at all. And if one of those villages were outflanked--and then we entered the village, or anything like that, why they'd still be there. They never evacuated the building, not to my knowledge. I never saw them leaving the village. But, I understand that that did happen a few times over on the river front--that that happened there.

LENNING: Out of all the various allied troops that you served with--English, and French, and White Russians, and Canadians--which one would you say that you got along with the best? And which ones could you trust most in a battle situation?

SIPLON: I hate to draw the line, but we didn't get along with the English too

well. But, outside of that, we got along fine with the Canadians and the French. You know we had a few Italians up there, too.

LENNING: On the railroad front, or in Archangel?

SIPLON: Not on the railroad front. That was around Archangel. There were a few Italians. Not very many of them. There were a few of them around--mostly in Archangel.

LENNING: You mentioned in your diary that the French gave you lessons in French? What was that like?

SIPLON: Well, I don't know just what you mean. (laughs)

LENNING: Were you allowed to "fraternize?" Were you welcome over there? Did both your officers and theirs approve?

SIPLON: Yes, yes. Yes. We didn't fraternize any with the English. There weren't very many English with us. A few English officers. On the railroad front, we really didn't have any English troops iwth us. We had French and French artillery with us, on the rail road front. One of my sidekicks, a fellow by the name of Barret, found a relative of his among the Frenchmen there. Can you imagine? A cousin or something of his, among the Frenchmen there. So, you know, we were welcome. We were just like brothers there, then. You can imagine, there were French and American cousins there--like the same family. And those fellows, those Frenchmen, you know, they got a nice, big issue of a quart of more of Vin Rouge--wine, every week. We didn't get anything. Once in a while a little bit of a taste of English rum. And if you've tasted that stuff--you burn your throat out every time you tasted a little unless you put half water in it. This Vin Rouge, this wine, that was great stuff. We were great friends with the French there. We knew what day they got their wine supply--their wine ration. We'd go over and visit them at night. We couldn't

talk French and they couldn't talk American, but we got along all right. They'd share their wine with us, and so on. And that's one main reason why we got along good with the French.

LENNING: How much French did they teach you to speak?

SIPLON: How much French did they teach us? Oh, parlez-vous, and a few things like that; yes and no, and good bye and things like that. We could talk the same way as in Russian.

LENNING: How did you feel when the French refused to fight, after the Armistice was signed?

SIPLON: We felt the same as they did. We didn't want to fight any more, either. But, what could we do? 'Course, the French had been in so many years, why, we couldn't blame them. And their officers never made any attempt to stop them from celebrating, you know. Well, our officers did with us. They said, "It don't mean the end of it for us." As far as their officers were concerned, why they didn't say anything. Practically were right in it with them, so they never did anything about it. As far as a mutiny was concerned, why this little idea of a mutiny that we had was nothing alongside of those guys. Those guys just walked right off from the line and never went back. And they never did anything about it, because the war, as far as they were concerned, was over. And it wasn't over for them any more than it was for us. But it was, 'cause in a few days they sent them to Archangel.

LENNING: Did you fight with any Cossacks on the railroad front?

SIPLON: No. No, we didn't have any mounted soldiers there.

LENNING: Did you ever encounter any Bolshevik propaganda?

SIPLON: Oh yes.

LENNING: Of what sort?

SIPLON: Oh, they used to send airplanes over and send out leaflets and stuff like that. Asking us what we were there for, and so on. And just telling us that they were going to wipe us out and we didn't have any business there, and so on. Russia belonged to the Russians; that kind of propaganda.

LENNING: Did this happen frequently?

SIPLON: Oh yes. That happened quite often. They had quite a bit of propaganda along that lines.

LENNING: What effect did it have?

SIPLON: No effect. Fellows just laughed about it.

LENNING: During our last interview, you said that after the armistice was signed, the Allies dropped peace messages on the lines.

SIPLON: Yes.

LENNING: Who ordered those planes to drop peace messages?

SIPLON: Well, those allied planes evidently were ordered from the military headquarters. They were under orders from the headquarters in Archangel. And, I suppose, any orders that come from General Ironsides or from the military authorities there more than likely come from the Western Front. 'Cause I imagine the Western Front commanders were in touch with General Ironsides there, right along all the time, you know. And anything that was sent in the line of communications or propaganda or anything would be ordered in that way. I know there were leaflets and stuff like that dropped--I never got one or--really don't know just what was in them. But I imagine there were overtures in those leaflets that now that the armistice was over, why fight anymore--something like that.

And I have no question to what they more or less come from military headquarters. And they more than likely come from headquarters in France, from Western Front. Maybe right from Pershing himself, maybe.

LENNING: Did the British employ propaganda?

SIPLON: British? Propaganda? Well, not that I know of. They might have. Not on our front that I know of, no. They were on the other fronts--possibly so. I know there were British on the river front. Whether there were British over on the Murmansk front or not, I'm not sure. I don't know.

JOHNSON: Did you ever receive copies of American newspapers when you were in Russia?

SIPLON: Not very often. (laughs)

JOHNSON: But you did once in a while?

SIPLON: Yes. Once in a great while.

JOHNSON: Were there ever any news reports in them about the expedition?

SIPLON: Oh yes. Toward the last there we didn't get much of anything because the ships and mail and stuff wasn't getting through. Practically the whole winter. Weren't any ships or any mail getting through. But, up to the time, up to November or so that the ships were getting through...

JOHNSON: Did any of those newspapers that you received say anything about the Polar Bear expedition?

SIPLON: No.

JOHNSON: Nothing in there about that at all?

SIPLON: No.

JOHNSON: Did you ever receive any letters from home mentioning news reports about the expedition?

SIPLON: No.

JOHNSON: Was your mail ever censored or checked for content?

SIPLON: Always. Always. Every company had a censor. And your mail was always censored. And so, if there was something in there they didn't want, they'd cross it out so you couldn't read it. Sure, every company had a censor. Everybody's mail was censored.

JOHNSON: Was that both outgoing and incoming mail that was censored?

SIPLON: Oh, not the incoming mail. The outgoing mail.

JOHNSON: You never received anything that was crossed out?

SIPLON: Not the mail coming in. No, just the outgoing mail. They were afraid that--they didn't want you to say anything that they didn't want you to say. That was the main thing.

JOHNSON: What kind of things did they censor?

SIPLON: Well, anything that might be said against any project, or anything against any officer, or anything against anything up there. And anything against the service, or anything that they didn't like, they would mark it off. You know, they had a lot of birch-bark trees up there--white birch bark trees. And we used to run short of writing paper, so we used to take our knives and strip these birch-bark trees and make post cards. Then we used to take and print our message on these birch-bark post cards. I wish I had some of them left, but I'm pretty sure I haven't. I sent several of them here to my folks here--to town here. They had them around for a long time, but I looked around to

see if I could find any, but I couldn't find any. They really made pretty good post cards, too. They got them; they sent them through.

JOHNSON: Did you ever see a copy of the American Sentinel at any time when you were in Russia?

SIPLON: No. We'd see the Stars and Stripes once in awhile out of France; that's all.

JOHNSON: What were your experiences with the Y.M.C.A. at Obozerskaya and Archangel?

SIPLON: Well, they had a Y.M.C.A. in Archangel, and they had Y.M.C.A. men on all the fronts there, you know. And if you were lucky enough, why, you know, you could buy tobacco, some cigarettes, maybe some candy bars--if you got there before they run out. But as a rule, they did a pretty good job up there. And on the railroad front there, of course, I told you about these little boxcars that they had there. They had them in one of these little boxcars. And of course, when they come around there, there'd be a rush for--probably they'd run out of stuff, probably before they got half through. If you were lucky enough to get there and you heard about that they were there, then you could get something.

JOHNSON: Did they ever give you anything for free, or did you have to buy everything?

SIPLON: Oh, you had to buy it. But everybody had these paper rubles. (laughs) You might pay ten or twenty rubles for a chocolate bar or something like that. Of course, you didn't get any of that in the army. They didn't issue any of that stuff. And once in a great while, they'd issue you a package of cigarettes if you smoked, but I didn't. And once in awhile, they'd issue you a little can of smoking tobacco if you smoked a pipe. But they never issued you any chocolate bars. And, of course the Y.M.C.A. would have chocolate bars, but they usually

didn't have half enough. As I say, if you were lucky enough to get there when they had some, then you'd get some. But they would take American money, or they'd take Russian money. You'd have to pay about double or so to get a bar, but they did pretty good. They got up there about as often as they could get supplies, I guess. That's about the size of it. But they had a "Y" in Archangel. I was kept pretty busy there. And as I said, the fellows in the companies--the two or three companies that stayed in Archangel for guard duty--they had a bash there, I know, 'cause they had a "Y" to go to, and entertainment, and everything.

JOHNSON: Did you ever have any dealings with the Red Cross in Russia?

SIPLON: No.

JOHNSON: You never saw them?

SIPLON: No. We had no dealings with the Red Cross, of course.

JOHNSON: How about the Salvation Army?

SIPLON: I never saw any Salvation Army up there. If there was any Salvation Army in Archangel, I never saw them. And I don't think there was.

JOHNSON: You were saying earlier that the purpose of the expedition was to keep the Germans from establishing a submarine base near Murmansk. Did you know at the time that the United States sent troops over there on the stipulation that they would not interfere in Russia's internal affairs?

SIPLON: Oh, yes. As far as that's concerned, I think that's true.

JOHNSON: Did you know that at the time, or have any suspicions about it?

SIPLON: No. It was never told to us, unless it was briefed to the officers. Of course, that could be. You know, the average soldier was never told anything about internal politics or anything like that.

JOHNSON: Did any of the men ever have any suspicions about the legality of their orders?

SIPLON: Oh yes. Oh yes. Sure. You know, your enlisted men come from all walks of life in those days. He might have been a high school graduate, he might even have had some years of college. And he might have been a worker. He might have been a machine hand. He might have been anything, you know. So there was a lot of difference of opinion there, and you heard a lot of arguments. And you heard them right along all the time. And there isn't any question about that. There were lots of arguments about what we were sent up there for, and whether there was any legality to it or whether there wasn't, and so on. Sure, everybody that was sent up there--the American army was not like the French, or German, or Russian armies, you know, that they were just simply a tool, or anything like that. They were all fellows that could speak their own piece, you know, if they wanted to do it. And, well, some of them couldn't, and some of them could. There was lots of pretty smart men in those outfits. And I heard a good many arguments, (laughs) nights when fellows were sitting around and stuff like that. And they had a good many reasons that they were arguing about. So, they didn't all agree on the reasons that they were sent there for. No, you're right on that. There was a lot of difference of opinion.

JOHNSON: Then some of them did suspect that there was a discrepancy between what they had been sent to Russia to do and what they were actually doing?

SIPLON: Right. That's right.

JOHNSON: How did this relate to the supposed mutiny on March 30?

SIPLON: That had nothing to do with that. The mutiny was all hatched up really through the White Russians that were out there. The White Russians relieved us on the railroad front up on the front lines there. And the Bolos made several

small attacks up there, and the White Russians begin to run.

JOHNSON: And you had been sent back to Archangel at that time?

SIPLON: Yes. And so the first thing that the commander in Archangel thought was to send back all the experienced men, to back these fellows up--which they had been doing right along all winter. You had to back these White Russians up all the time right along. Well, when they did that, the fellows got mad. And they started passing around among the fellows that they wouldn't go back--that they had promised us a vacation, and they had sent the White Russians up there to take our place, and they had had plenty of training, you know, and all that sort of stuff. And that we were supposed to be relieved to have a vacation, and had to be sent home, you see. And that we weren't going to go back there and relieve those fellows. So that's what they argued with their officers.

Well, our officers, of course, called Colonel Stewart and talked to Colonel Stewart. Well, then Colonel Stewart came down there to read the Articles of War to them and to talk with the men. And they made the agreement that they would go back. So the same day they packed up and went back to Obozerskaya and the front lines. Well, that's really what the whole thing amounted to was that they were promised relief and they were promised a vacation, and the White Russians got in trouble up there and then started retreating and started to run. And they wanted to shoot us back up there because we had experience. And they renegged on their promise to give us a vacation. And instead of sending somebody else up there--they had companies up around Archangel there and so on that they could have sent, but they didn't have much experience, you know. They'd just been around Archangel doing guard duty, so they didn't have much battle experience. And they knew that we had, and they knew that we knew the field, and so they immediately wanted to send us back there. We wouldn't go back. (laughs) But they never did anything about it. So, it was really blown up all out of proportion in this country.

JOHNSON: Nobody was ever court-martialled?

SIPLON: No. No, they never did anything about it. I could show you that part about it, that they never did anything about it. (Mr. Siplon shows us his certificate of honorable discharge. Tape is momentarily turned off.)

JOHNSON: Did Colonel Stewart have anything else to say to you besides reading the Articles of War to you?

SIPLON: No, he just wanted to hear the complaints and any of the suggestions that any of the men had, and something like that. And 1st Sgt. Whitney Maquire-- the first sergeant in command of the sergeants, and he's really the fellow that does the talking for the company, really, you know. He's the man that--his duty is to assemble the company and then reports to the captain. In other words, then he assembles the company, then he takes the roll call, and then he says, "All present and accounted for" to the captain. And he usually does the talking. Well, he kind of talked for the men and made the men's condition on the proposition: that the men were perfectly willing to go back to be in reserve for any emergency or anything like that, and they weren't refusing to fight if they had to, and that they just simply were disappointed because they were renegeing on their vacation proposition like that. And Colonel Stewart says he understood that, and then he said that if they were just willing to go back to the base and be in reserve, they'd just simply forget about it. The Company went back to the front that P.M.

JOHNSON: At that time, did any of the men ever demand an explanation as to why they were in North Russia?

SIPLON: Oh, they demanded an explanation from their officers a dozen times, or maybe a hundred times, (laughs) but the only answer that they ever got was just that answer that I give to you. That's the only real answer that they ever got. Nobody has ever had any answers. I have seen books on it and like that and so.

Maybe you have, too, seen books on it. That's the main reason: the main reason was to try to keep the Germans out of Russia after they overran the Russians and Russia surrendered there in 1917.

LENNING: Shortly after this incident, when you returned to the front, there was a conference held with the Bolsheviks.

SIPLON: Yes.

LENNING: Do you remember that conference?

SIPLON: I had nothing to do with it, so I wouldn't remember much about it. It had something to do with exchange of prisoners. Probably it was held with the officers; probably the men wouldn't have anything much to do with it.

LENNING: Shortly before you left Russia, you helped build a corduroy road in North Russia.

SIPLON: Yes.

LENNING: Do you remember that?

SIPLON: Well, that was done several times, of course. That's done with a couple of horses. And you lay them logs right in the swamp, one on the other. That was done right along there. That had been done several times.

LENNING: We were wondering why it had been built at the end of your stay instead of at the beginning.

SIPLON: Well, I suppose that's probably just something that they did to help the Russians along a little bit more. And I think it gave the men something to do to keep them busy. (laughter)

LENNING: How did you feel about interfering in Russia's internal affairs?

SIPLON: Well, I'll tell you. As far as I was concerned, Russia--as far as the Russians were concerned--didn't involve me. I wasn't interested politically in anything that they did. I've been a good historian all of my life 'cause it was one of my main subjects in school. History and geography were my main subjects. In fact, they never could beat me at it. I always stood at the head of the class in history and geography. When it comes to math, I wasn't always so good. So I never bothered by head much about the political end of it, the internal part of it and so on. I didn't consider I knew anything about it, so I didn't worry much about it.

LENNING: Did you feel that American involvement in North Russia was justified?

SIPLON: No. Absolutely not. And as far as I may be one that's concerned, we had no business over there. Maybe the military leaders thought different, and maybe the reason that they said that we were sent up there--to keep the Germans out of there--maybe that's the reason. I don't know. Maybe they thought so. But my personal thoughts is we didn't have any business over there.

LENNING: It has been claimed that the British used the Americans for their own purposes in North Russia--that they put the brunt of the campaign on the Americans in order to pressure Washington into sending more troops. What is your opinion of this claim?

SIPLON: Well, I'm not a general. (laughs) I never had much military experience. Maybe those that have studied the military end of it might think different, but I really don't--from my angle of it, I really don't think much of it. But military men probably look at it different.

LENNING: Looking back, what do you understand to have been the purpose of the whole expedition? Do you look at it the same as you did back then, or do you look at it differently now?

SIPLON: Well, I don't look at it any different now than from what they told us. I know there was an awful lot of objection in this country. I know Senator Hiram Johnson from California was the biggest objector of all of them, and he was the one that certainly raised a lot of trouble in Congress.

JOHNSON: Did you hear anything about his activities while you were in Russia?

SIPLON: Yes, we had rumors. We had lots of rumors that they--especially Senator Johnson--was getting up in Congress every now and then making a speech about it and so on like that, that we had no business over there, that the sooner they get us out of there, the better.

JOHNSON: So you heard about that then?

SIPLON: Oh, yes. Yes, we heard about it, heard a lot about it. All winter long, I'll tell you we didn't get much mail, but you know, they had communications with the Western Front--with France, you know. And we'd get news that way, from the Western Front. And we had news right along about what Senator Johnson was doing. Then, fellows would come around and say, "Well, Senator Johnson's at it again. He's going to get us out of here." He was one of the main ones in Congress that-- I don't know whether he was really responsible because it was their duty, militarily to get us out of there, anyway, 'cause the war was over, as soon as they could get us out of there, which they did.

LENNING: When you returned to the United States, did you find that many people knew about the expedition?

SIPLON: Huh! About fifty-fifty. Yes.

LENNING: The people who had heard, had they heard accurately?

SIPLON: Well, yes and no. I heard some people say, "Never heard of it. What

outfit was that? Never heard of such a thing." And then of course, others that were closely connected with it, why, they naturally knew more about it. So I would say, if you talked with people, about half of them knew about it, and half of them didn't know about it.

LENNING: Would you say that your experience in North Russia changed you in any way?

SIPLON: No. Why? (laughs) Why should it? I wouldn't say that for everybody, though, 'cause I know it has. I know personally that it's made Communists out of some persons that I know. But it never bothered me any. I'm sure that I wouldn't want to follow their line just 'cause I was up there.

JOHNSON: Why would they become Communists? Was it because they were bitter?

SIPLON: Possibly. Possibly. I don't know. But probably from what they went through up there. I don't know. I just figure that that's what I had to do. That's what they told me to do. You know what Sherman said about war, and so I just figured that's what I had to do.

LENNING: What was your return to the United States like?

SIPLON: June 2--we had a Regimental Review by General Ironsides and General Richardson--who had replaced Colonel Stewart--on Economy Island. June 3--embarked on S. S. Czar and sailed out passing U. S. cruiser Des Moines outside harbor. Much cheering from both ships. Entered White Sea with ice breakers. Brest, France, June 12. We left Brest, France, June 22, 1919, on the Van Steuben, a long low 680 foot former German cruiser Crown Prince Wilhelm interned by the U. S. and made into a troop ship. This ship was fast and we came back in six days or so. Ocean smooth all the way. New York June 30. Detroit July 4--big celebration on Belle Island from all over Michigan, 339th given Honorable Discharge

at Camp Custer on July 7-8, 1919. Thus ended the North Russian Expeditionary Expedition of World War 1.

LENNING: Is there anything else you would like to add?

SIPLON: Well, I haven't too much I would like to add, I guess. I'd just like to say that I wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience that I had, but I wouldn't take a million dollars to go over it again. (laughs)

LENNING: Thank you very much.