

Albert J. Slagh \_ \_ \_ Rough Draft

Johnson - (Looking at pictures) Did you wear those big, long coats like that?

Slagh - Yes,

Johnson - What about your boots? Do you remember your boots at all?

Slagh - Canvas, like four buckles narrow but we had strings on them and we'd tie them around our legs you see.

Johnson - And the canvas would keep you warm and everything in the winter.

Slagh - Oh Yes, we had plenty of socks you know. And they had wooden soles, you know, and you could hardly stay on your feet!

Johnson - Did it get pretty cold in the wintertime?

Slagh - Oh my, cold!

Johnson - Do you remember what company you were with?

Slagh - Company 'D'. We had dog-skin coats you know, that is what they were made of.

Johnson - There were alot of American soldiers up there I imagine?

Slagh - Oh yeah.

We proceeded to go over the group picture of the Polar Bears taken here in Holland.

Johnson - Were drafted or did you enlist?

Slagh - Drafted.

Johnson - Did you go to a training camp at all?

Slagh - Oh yeah, Camp Custer.

Johnson - So, how long did you spend there?

Slagh - About two months. We went there in May and left in September I guess.

Johnson - That was just basic training?

Slagh - Yes.

Jphnson - Where is Camp Custer?

Slagh - It is in Battle Creek.

Johnson - Wha was your commander? Do you remember who he was?

Slagh - Lieutenant you mean?

Johnson - Yes

Slagh - Derms(?) was one of them.

Johnson - Do you ever remember seeing General Ironsides?

Slagh - No

Johnson - Did you ever fight alongside any French or British troops while you were in Russia?

Slagh - No

Johnson - So, where did you go after you left Camp Custer?

Slagh - We went to Camp Mills, New York.

Johnson - And how long were you there?

Slagh - It was about three weeks.

Johnson - Did they give you any information about who you were going to be fighting or where you were going at all?

Slagh - We didn't know a thing until we landed in England. We were supposed to go to France but the war was over and they didn't need us I guess.

(Looking over a list of Polar Bear members)

Slagh - Cox, I believe he was a sargent.

Johnson - Sargent Cox.

Slagh - Yes, McCann, I remember he was a corporal, from Detroit.

Johnson - Do you remember a Col. Stewart at all?

Slagh - Stewart? No. Gordan Schmidt (?), he was a lieutenant wasn't he. Sargent, he was. And this Lievensee, he hated him so.

Johnson - Was there alot of that going on?

Slagh - Oh yes.

Johnson - How about were you feed well over there? Were you pretty well taken care of?

Slagh - Where?

Johnson - When you were in Russia.

Slagh - Oh no. They kept our lives, that was about all.

Johnson - Do you remember crossing the Atlantic? Going to England? What was that trip like?

Slagh - Yes. Two weeks on the water. Going to England.

Johnson - And then from England you went to where? Straight to Russia?

Slagh - Yes, we were around Norway and Sweden there.

Johnson - But you didn't get to France at all did you?

Slagh - When we come back we did.

Johnson - When was the first time you knew that you were going to Russia?

Slagh - When the boats were up north. We took the same way as those convoys did. To Russia, you know, of all the boats in the convoy only three or four boats made it. The rest were all sunk, you know with war supplies for Russia you know. We got a little ways from England and the gunboats went back you know. And they was left on their own. Three or four of the boats got through and the rest were sunk.

Johnson - What was your first impression when you landed in Russia? Do you remember that in Archangel?

Slagh - Oh Yes. We had the flu.

Johnson- Did everybody have it or just a few people?

Slagh - There was three hundred sick on the boat. No medicine, nothing.

Johnson - So what did you do? What did they do for these people.

Slagh - It was pretty cold and everything on the top deck, that was the guy said, it was the best place. But it was cold but this would help a fella pull through I guess. But there was quite a few, some died yet of the flu.

Johnson - When you did get to Russia did you go straight inland, or did you stay in Archangel?

Slagh - No I stayed back.

Johnson - What battalion were you in?

Slagh - I guess I was with the first.

Johnson - Did you actually fight against the Russians?

Slagh - Yes I did some. Not much. The guys that went ahead they had little skirmishes.

Johnson - Basically, you stayed in Archangel and then you went south after a while?

Slagh - Yes and what do you call the Bears(?).

Johnson - Were you on the railroad train or were you on the river?

Slagh - The river. No I wasn't on the railroad train.

Johnson - Do you remember the town of Kodish?

Slagh - Kodish? Yes, I didn't get there.

Johnson - What did you actually do there? What were your duties?

Slagh - Guard.

Johnson - Did you ever guard any Russian prisoners at all?

Slagh - No. We didn't keep no Russian prisoners.

Johnson - Were you in Archangel a long time?

Slagh - Archangel? Yes I was there.

Johnson - What did you think of that town?

Slagh - Oh, we didn't see so much of it.

Johnson - What about the government in Archangel? Do you remember that at all? What do you think the people wanted?

Slagh - Arch angel? They was hostile to us.

Johnson - Not too friendly in other words?

Slagh- The English they wasn't too friendly.

Mr. Slagh brings out a group of postcards he has saved from Russia. These are photocopied and should be on file.

Johnson- So how far did you advance in to Russia from Archangel?

Slagh - No, just around Archangel.

Johnson - So, you basically stayed around Archangel?

Slagh - No, I got about 150 miles down the Dvina River.

Johnson - Who was your commander? Was he British?

Slagh - No. We was under the English they say.

Johnson - What reasons did they give you for being there?

Slagh - Yes, what reasons did they have for going to Vietnam? You see they didn't accomplish anything there either.

Johnson - What did your buddies over there think.

Slagh - What could you say? You couldn't get out anyway. I know that one general he said that this wasn't our show and then the sergeant said, "Then what the hell are we doing here!" What was they doing in Vietnam?

Johnson - Did you ever have any Red Cross or Y.M.C.A. or anything like that come and do anything for you at all?

Slagh - Well we got some cigarettes from the Red Cross. We got a bag from the Red Cross.

Johnson - Did you come up against any Bolshevik propaganda at all?

Slagh - You couldn't talk to them. But we had Polish guys you know, they could talk to them you know. The Russian Women do the work.

Johnson - Did you ever get into any Russian homes at all?

Slagh - Oh yes. We slept in them.

Johnson - What was that like? What was the average home like?

Slagh - Loghouse.

Johnson - A big fireplace?

Slagh - No. A big oven. Something like a big oven. It was about as half as wide as that, (gestures about five feet), and this long,

and a hole in front you know, and they'd build a fire in there and then when the fire was going then they'd put their bread into bake and stones in to heat water. This is where we got into trouble with the English ( picture of the boat that took them home) that was in Murmansk. We started to throw stones and potatoes at each other!(laughs)

Johnson- What did you think of the city of Archangel?

Slagh - Oh , it wasn't too bad.

Johnson - Now let's see, you were still over in Russia when the war was over, weren't you?

Slagh - Yes

Johnson - What was the morale of the troops then? Did everybody want to go home once they knew that the war was over?

Slagh - Oh yes. But they would like to kept us there.

Johnson - But you had to stay after anyways.

Slagh - The guys were determined to go but they had to wait until the ice broke out in the Dvina river you know. And we got an old boat that was burnt out you know. And we got an old tug that pulled us, and that's the way we got out. They would have liked to have kept us there. There were people here that were hollering about it.

Johnson - How were the prisoners treated? Had you guarded?

Slagh - I don't know. I don't know nothing about that.

Johnson - Did you ever hear about any dissent in the troops? Were there any quarrels, mutinies or anything that you know of or were the men pretty good spirited.

Slagh - I don't remember.

Johnson - What was the food like? Do you remember the food?

Slagh - We had what they call stew. That was our main.

Johnson - How about in Archangel did they get plenty of food there?

Slagh - I don't know what they ate but I think it was worse than what the dogs eat here.

Johnson - How about during the wintertime, did you go on patrol or stay inside most of the time or what?

Slagh - I would say no. We was out on the front.

Johnson - You said that you stayed at some Russian homes. Did you or anyone become good friends with Russians? How did they accept you?

Slagh - Yes, they was pretty friendly.

Johnson - I think some soldiers brought home wives from Russia; didn't they?

Slagh - Not all of them! I know the one guy was standing guard one night and they came up from behind him and knocked him in the head with an axe.

Johnson - How about the medical facilities? First aid?

Slagh - I don't believe we ever had any. Some of the guys were supposed to be medics.

Shows some souvenirs he has saved from France.

Johnson - Did you get a big reception when you came back from the war? What was that like?

Slagh - We didn't get no reception.

Johnson - So what happened? You just came home and that was it?

Slagh - Yes, we just came home on the streetcar! Right from the boats to the train in Boston. We landed in Boston, then we got to Battle Creek where they had that sâderail. No we didn't get no reception.

Johnson - Where did you get your orders from?

Slagh - I don't know. When your'e in the army you know you don't ask no questions. You just do as your told.

Johnson - In Archangel, what form of government do you think the people wanted? Do you think they wanted to be like the Communists or more like the United States?

Slagh - No, the people, Russians, they had a guy that was supposed to be their government... Kerensky he was in that city there, what was it...

Johnson - Leningrad?

Slagh - Yes, Kerensky, he was the one, like the government, different ones. But they was too strong for him you know. We was coming around from the north, and then there was a bunch coming from the east.

Johnson - Czechoslovakians?

Slagh - Vladivostok we had them.

Slagh - They had a bunch there too. (Vladivostok)

Johnson - What was your impression of the city? or villages?

Slagh - I'd have sooner been home.

Johnson - Did you notice the peasants reactions to the Americans, or British or Canadians at all? Was it different in any way?

Slagh - You know this country here, the czar, they was mostly prisoners he sent them up over there, punishments you know.

Johnson - Which company was in the most action?

Slagh - 'A' company lost the most men.

Johnson - Did you get mail over there while you were in Russia?

Slagh - Mail? Yes.

Johnson - Was it ever censored at all? Looked through?

Slagh - Oh yes.

Johnson - What do you think they were looking for?

Slagh - Yes, sure they did.

Johnson - Do you remember that newspaper called the American Sentinel?

Slagh - My brother-in-law he sent me two boxes of cigars in the mail but I never got them. The supply company, them guys, they kept them you know. No I didn't get a single one of them. They kept on to them. There were rough proplr there you know, they'd snitch everything from you you know.

Johnson - Did you ever hear of any arguements within the troops? What was the morale like? Did everybody want to go home?

Slagh - There was no use talking about it because you couldn't get out anyway. It was too far to walk. I remember one guy, he said he was going home one day. He did too and he died that one night. He was a little out of his head you know. It would take alot to stay out there, he would have gone mad or, they couldn't take that temperature.

Johnson - Has it ever been that cold here in Michigan as it was there?

Slagh - You could almost say that it was just as cold but that too you know you didn't feel it there so much.

Johnson - But you were always dressed properly and had good coats to wear and everything?

Slagh - Yes, we had a warm place to sleep allright that is if you was back from the front. But you had to go 2 on and 4 off, that is 2 days on and 4 off.

Johnson - Did you get down to the front at all ?

Slagh - We had a little coop where we sat in you see with our machinegun you know. That was our front. You couldn't do nothing there you know. No digging nothing. Froze there all day.

Johnson - Looking back on the whole thing, what do you think was the purpose for the expedition.

Saagh - Who was boss in England then? Wilson was president here. It was just like the last war; the heads of state you know they get together and figure such things out you know. It was doomed from the start see. There was Italians there too, Scottish, English, French.

Johnson - What do you mean it was no good from the start?

Slagh - I don't know.

Johnson - How did you feel about intervening in a Russian civil war?

Slagh - There wasn't much you could say you know.

Johnson - Would you say that your experience in Northern Russia has changed you alot? Was it a big impact on your life?

Slagh - I had been in it. When it was over see,

Sometime and pictures later...

Johnson - Were the Russian homes warm?

Slagh - Oh Yes. They didn't freeze inside them. The logs would crack but

Johnson - Were there some really nice Russian people that you met there?

Slagh - Oh yes.

Johnson - Is there anything else you want to add? Is there anything that really sticks out in your mind about Russia that you remember?

Mr. Slagh now relates some other small anecdotes about Russian life and a story about John Volkers that he remembers.

Johnson - How about the supplies? Were they pretty regular?  
You were always warm and never hungry?

Slagh - We got rations for four days and it had to last for four days. But it wasn't so much, if you didn't take care you could have eaten it easily in a day.

The Russian guns we had. The English guns, ho they were Russian; they didn't shoot so straight.

If we had to move you know then we'd get a bunch of these people you know

Oh it was a great, great life if you didn't weaken.

Johnson - What happened to those that did weaken?

Slagh - Oh we didn't have so many. Not our company.

The story of John Volkers.