August B. Habighurst
U.S. Army Air Corps — World War II  Pacific—CBI
225 Medical Dispensary Aviation
Sergeant

August B. Habighurst
Veterans
History
Project
Transcript

Interview conducted
April 30, 2008

Niles Public Library
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Veteran: August B. Habigurst

Branch of Service: U.S. Army Air Corps

Rank: Sergeant

Theater: World War II – Pacific, CBI

Unit: 225th Medical Dispensary Aviation

Interview Date: 4/30/2008, 3 p.m.

Place: Large Meeting Room B

Equipment: Philips Digital Pocket Memo Recorder

Interviewer: Neil O’Shea

This Veterans History Project Interview is being conducted on Wednesday April the 30th in the year 2008 here at the Bethany Home in Morton Grove, Illinois, just north of the Niles Public Library. My name is Neil O’Shea, and I’m a member of the reference staff at the Niles Library. And I’m honored to be speaking with August B. Habigurst.

Gus.

Thank you, Gus. And Mr. Habigurst was born on December the 24th, 1922, in Baltimore and now lives here in Morton Grove. Gus learned of the project through a newspaper story, I believe. And he has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Prior to this interview, Gus was taking me through his album of military memories. And he has a veritable library of experiences gathered, assembled, and clearly remembered, from his almost four years in the U.S. Army Air Corps. So, Gus, you entered the Service in 19--?

1942.

I think it was April.

April the 5th, yes.

So, at that time, you were living in?

Baltimore, Maryland.

What were you doing before you went in the Service?

Well, I was going to school. I was going to be a, at least I hoped to be, in the medical field somehow. Johns Hopkins is in Baltimore, of course. But I was working in a food
company, Kraft Foods, at that time. And it led to my, what do you call it, I can’t think of the term.

*A deferment or a--*

No. No.

No.

Where they put you in a number, you’re a certain area. I was a medical technician. That was what I was put down as because of my work with Kraft, in the food industry.

*So you had from graduated high school by then?*

Not yet, no. No. I finished school after I got out of the Service.

*So--but, even though you were still in high school, you had an idea that you wanted to work in the medical field?*

Yes. Yes, that was my goal. My mother was a nurse. My daughter is now a nurse. And I was a nurse. I graduated as a nurse in 1943 in Walter Reed Hospital in Maryland. In Bethesda, Maryland, I think it is, if I’m not mistaken.

*And you were employed by Kraft, the famous food company?*

Yes.

I worked there for twenty-five years, but anyhow--

*So were you-- were you drafted?*

Yes. Well, I went to enlist right after Pearl Harbor. And I wanted to go in the Navy, because my cousin was in the Navy and he was traveling all over the world. And I wanted to see the world. And when I went down, they wouldn’t take me, because I wore glasses. And they said I had an umbilical hernia.

And the Army said, “We’ll take you, and we’ll give you glasses, and we’ll take care of your hernia.” Well, they gave me glasses, but they never took care of my hernia. But I was very fortunate. Being in the Air Corps, I did get to get all over the world. And if I’d been in the Navy, I’d of been probably stuck up at Great Lakes or something for the whole duration. So no qualms.

*You were a good swimmer? You weren’t worried about the water?*

Not really. I’m not that crazy about the water.
Okay.

But I would do anything.

Yes. So you were-- how did your, well, I guess your mother was kind of sad or understood the situation?

I was an only child.

An only child.

I was not supposed to go, because I was supporting my mother and my grandmother. But I said, “Eventually, I’ve got to go anyhow.” And she says, “Well, you won’t be, you won’t pass the physical, because you have a hearing problem.” I was born with something wrong with one of my ears, but I had extensive lip-reading as a young child in school. I had a very sharp teacher that noticed I wasn’t hearing. And she sent me to lip-reading. And when it came time for the hearing tests, if somebody put their hand over their mouth, I said, “Put your hand down. I can’t read your lips.” But I passed my tests that way. I falsified it. But I’ve had hearing aids ever since.

So if you had declared your hearing deficiency--

I probably would not have been 4F.

You would have been 4F, most likely.

I’m guessing.

Yes.

And, even with your hearing deficiency, you were still a capable, alert--

Oh, sure.

soldier.

Sure.

I didn’t get hearing aids right away, of course.

Yes.

I got them later on. But the ability, and as I say the smart teacher that sent me to lip-reading class, in those days, you know, what, sixty, seventy, years ago, I picked up that lip-reading. And it helped me. It’s always helped me all my life.
I just want to say I can’t tell that you have a hearing deficiency at all. And we’ve been talking for almost an hour now. So it was a wonderful teacher.

Sometimes the batteries go down. It doesn’t make any difference at all.

What a wonderful teacher!

So what were your first days like in the military? Was it a shock?

Yes. Very naïve. I was brought up by parents in the Depression years, of course. We had-- we were poor, but we were healthy.

And I had no brothers and sisters. And I-- my father died. He was eighty-- he was seventy-two when I was born. And he died while he was eighty-eight. And I took care of him for four or five years, dressed him, fed him, because he couldn’t manipulate.

And my mother was a double amputee. She had diabetes.

And I didn’t think I would ever go in the Service. But I did. But I sent home my pay, of course. It had to be done. But I felt I had to give something. Because we were-- my patriotism, I guess, was on top of everything else. It’s just that I couldn’t stand it. I will never forget Pearl Harbor. I will just never forget it, never forget it.

The-- so where was your boot camp or training?

Fort Meade, Maryland.

Oh, not too far away.

No. No. But that was like introductory. I wasn’t there very long. They sent me to Tampa, Florida, for Air Corps training, and then they sent me up to Walter Reed Hospital for the medical training. And I had extensive medical training, as I said. I graduated as a male nurse, registered male nurse anywhere in the United States at that time. And I went for further training for flight surgeon’s assistant. I worked in an operating room.

So they made the decision? So the Army Air Corps made the decision? You were drafted into the Army and then, somehow, you wind up in the medical--?

Well, see, I had to make a decision, because of my MOS – Military Occupational Specialty. I had to make a decision, did I want to go to medical school and graduate, whatever it was, and go on further? Or do I want to go to officers’ training to be a second lieutenant? If I went to Officers’ Training School, and I’d failed, I couldn’t go to medical school, but if I went to medical school and passed, I could still go on to officers’ training. So, I chose the medical, because I wanted to go on further, but I never got there because they sent me overseas.
So the Army realized your abilities and inclinations?

Apparently.

With other veterans, they say they wind up doing exactly the opposite of what they might have been skilled at.

No, I was very fortunate.

Yes.

Very fortunate. I thought I would get in, what do they call it, the Aberdeen, Maryland, the facility had to do with poison gases and things like that.

Yes. Toxic weapons.

I was afraid I was going to get into that.

Yes.

I didn’t want to kill. I wanted to help. And I did.

Did you have to tell the Army that you didn’t want to be in a situation where you would be killing people?

No. No.

It didn’t--

It never came up.

Yes.

So what were the other people like in the boot camp? They must have been-- was that your first time away from home for any length of time?

Oh, yes, it was.

You must have met all kinds of different people?

It was rough because, in Baltimore, we’re right on the Mason-Dixon line and, at that time, the negro people were in the back of the bus and in another part of town completely. Of course, it’s different now, of course, but I was in the barracks taking my basic training with colored people, which was new to me. But, to me, it was fascinating. I mean, it was interesting, because I’m a people person. I like people. And I was scared to death I was going to do something wrong. But I got through it. I got through it.
So then, after boot camp, then you got some more medical training?

Yes. Yes, as I said, I went up to Walter Reed, finished that. I was getting ready to go to OCS. They sent me back down to Drew Field, Florida, which is right adjacent to Tampa, Florida, to the Air Force-- I took more training in the Air Corps. And I got sent right overseas, so it was quick, it was fast. All in a few months. See, we were originally going to Sicily, the invasion of Sicily, and we left from Hampton Roads, Virginia, in a Liberty ship to go to Sicily. And we got sunk by two ships in the Atlantic. It was awful.

*The German submarine?*

Yes. And just-- we were picked up. We were full of oil, and it was horrible. Anyhow, they picked us up, and took us to Oran, North Africa to the hospital. And we never got to Sicily. Our orders were changed. After being in the hospital recuperating, they said our orders were to go to India, and we went around, as I said, through the Suez Canal.

*The Suez Canal? The Red Sea?*

Yes. Yes, different Air Force, this time. See, a different Air Corps, because they kept changing our-- I was in several Air Corps in a short time.

*So you were a valuable man. I mean--*

Well, I don’t know about that. No, no. It was just coincidence.

*So, at this time, are you a private or a corporal?*

I might have been a corporal by then.

*I know you come out as a sergeant.*

I was going in, as a matter of fact, it’s immaterial now, but I understand I was up for, in those days, they called it a battlefield commission for a second lieutenant when I was captured. It never went through. My papers never went through. And it never materialized. But I had that honor bestowed on me. So I ended up as a sergeant, which was fine. Ninety-six dollars a month.

*So your final, the mission that you, the outfit that you served most of your time with, that was the?*

225th Medical Dispensary Aviation, yes.

*And that group and that meant that you were in Calcutta, was it Calcutta then, or?*
Well, we were formed in India, in Bombay, and then we went to Calcutta, working as a unit, and then, excuse me, excuse me, Bombay is on the west coast. Calcutta is on the east coast.

Was that a train ride from Bombay?

Train. Troop train. Then we drove Burma Road from Ledo, which was in Burma, to Kunming into China. And that was our introduction into China. And we came, we flew back, I drove it twice. And the last time we stayed in Chengtu, now I hope I get this continuity right, Kunming is the end point of the Burma Road, but I was in Chengtu which was north a little bit in the center of the city, the center of the country.

Was that also reached by truck at night, Chengtu?

No, I think we flew in.

Flew in there.

I think we flew in.

Incidentally, the big weapons carriers and the ambulances, Neil, they had to be flown in, and they were taken, cut them apart in Bombay and Calcutta, weld them, cut them apart, put them in a plane, fly them into China, weld them back together again, because they were so heavy, they couldn’t fly over the Himalayas.

And you were saying everything in that war zone in western central China that was all—everything in there had to be driven in or flown in.

Well mostly flown.

Flown in, because the Japanese?

Yes. Mostly flown. The Burma road was really nothing, really, I mean for materials. And we lost a lot of men even driving over the precipices. The precipices were so high. The roads were narrow. I’ve seen them go down 10,000 feet, jeep and everything, right over the side, right down, right down, horrible, horrible. It’s an experience of its own.

So, learning, did you learn to drive? Was that also--

I never learned to drive in my life! They put me in a jeep, and I said, “I don’t know how to drive.” “You’ll learn.” I did.

So you’re driving stick and all that?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We had to have the oil changed and everything, of course, maintenance, and you’ve got to go up a ramp to get your jeep up there. I went off it, because I didn’t
know how to drive, but that's a long time ago. I drove ambulances. I drove everything after that. When push comes to shove.

Yes.

*How was the Army food? Pretty good?*

Yes, well, yes, it was all right. It was all right. Of course, I'm a food person. And it was all right. We survived.

When we were in China, it was bad. It was reverse lend-lease in those days. I don't know whether you've heard of that term or not? Reverse lend-lease. Roosevelt would give so much money to pay for food, and to pay for billeting, and so forth, for us, for GIs, and if the Chinese, if the indigenous crop was, say, cabbage, everybody ate cabbage. If it were peanuts, everybody ate peanuts. It was just what was available locally. And, sometimes, it was just eggs. You had eggs that would come out of your eyes! But we ate. We lived.

*So, most of the time, you were stationed in China?*

Most of the time in China.

*Did you have one particular base?*

We stayed in the Chengtu area. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

*And so in Chengtu--?*

We built our hospital right there. We had our slit trenches. That was where I was hurt during a bombing. I was in a slit trench, and I had a bad-- my head and my ears were concussioned. See, we had to evacuate our people in the hospital. When there was an air raid, we took them out on stretchers. And we had sick trenches, and we put them in slit trenches. We had one raid-- I had malaria very bad, and a high fever, and I was out of my mind.

*And that was, also, you contracted that in China, yes?*

But malaria was very prevalent.

Anyhow, they told me this. They put me in a slit trench. And I'm out of my mind. I didn't know what was going on. And the raid was over. It was all quiet. I woke up, and I see stars, and I don't know where I am. And I went, My God, they thought I was dead and they're burying me!

*Oh, dear.*
I had that horrible feeling. But those things happen. My buddy that I told you about, we were walking back from a raid. You know what a P-38 is?

Yes, mustang.

They were over there using strafing. And you could get, in fact, I know the sounds of the engines. As we were walking back one night, there was a raid, and a small road, and I said, “Dick, drop!” He went to one side, and I went to the other side of the road. And this “B-R-R-R” came down. This just strikes right between us. We both could have been killed.

That was a Japanese zero or something?

No. It was a P-38.

An American.

Yes. Yes.

Why would a mistake like that happen?

Oh, a lot happened.

That was you and Mr. Dick--

Silviera Yes, Dick Silviera, yes.

So what was a typical--was there such a thing as a typical day when you were in Chengtu?

No. It was anticipating the next run, planes coming in, going over, coming back, we were active. And we, it is awful to say, but there weren’t enough serious cases for us. They were all--mostly, they were either dead or they were not very serious, except this one chap I said was so bad that I tripped over his--

And I was walking in the mud at night looking for bodies and I tripped over his ankle, foot, his foot, we finally found his body later. He wasn’t dead, but he was burned very badly, very badly, and he was burned so badly we could not take care of him completely, because he needed skin drafting and intensive care, and he had to be flown back to India for further treatment.

He had to be flown back to India.

For further treatment. And I was to chaperone him back, because I had been taking care of him, more or less his guide. And we were in a B-29, going back. They have a blister.
They called it a blister, a bubble plexiglass, I guess. And he’s sitting there, and I’m sitting there. We were going back, and, all of a sudden, we had to dive, because we were being attacked, apparently, I guess, by strafing. And as we dove out of the atmosphere, the pressure, the bubble pulled out, sucked out, and pulled him out as well. But I had to work instantly, and I grabbed him, and pulled him back in again. And I didn’t realize, at the time, when I looked at him, I’d pulled all the skin off of him that he was growing on. And just a horrible, horrible story, horrible! But he survived and he lived, got married. We corresponded. He lived in Coffeyville, Kansas, and we ended up calling him “Lucky.” So, but it was quite an experience, quite an experience! And if I just saved one person, you know, I did my job.

Yes sir.

I did my job.

So, Chengtu was primarily for the Air Force base. And those B-29s, they were carrying out bombing raids on Japanese positions.

They were going to Japan?

Yes. Yes. Incidentally, Chengtu, it is not a very, well, it is bigger now. It wasn’t a very large city. But, one runway, Neil, one runway! And our beloved government, I hate to say this, made such a boo-boo, in my opinion. They had big, huge gasoline tanks on each end of the runway. Well, one time, they went up.

No runway. Where were the planes coming? How were they to get in to land? There were some problems, logistic problems. But I wasn’t running it. It wasn’t mine to do.

Did you ever have to assist in an operation?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I’ll tell you one incident, if you’re interested. This is in India now. We’re in India, we’re not in China. But it’s relevant. I was taught, in my schooling, I could suture anything above the cuff or below the collar. I couldn’t do hands, or neck, or face. Anything else I could do. My training, I was in CQ one night, CQ, charge quarters, and it’s in India. A Ghurka, do you know what a Ghurka is? A Ghurka wears a big turban and a big knife.

They were great fighters.

Oh, yes. They were fighting somewhere. And one came in, he had an awful gash here, terrible gash, he could have bled to death very quickly. And, so, I went right to my commanding officer. They were playing cards. It’s a true story, playing cards. I said, “Major, there’s a Ghurka out here. He needs surgery, but it’s above the collar. I can’t do it.” “Oh, you can do it. You can do it.” I said, “You know I can’t do it.” “I’m telling you, I’m commander. You do it. I’m busy!” So, I did it. And it was all right. I was scared to death, but I did it. But can you imagine?
Callous.

True story.

I got a lot of them.

Yes.

So you were able to stay in touch with your family?

What’s that?

Were you able to stay in touch with your mother back home and grandmother?

Oh, no. No.

No letters for you?

No. We had V-mail in those days. Like birthdays, and Mother’s Day, and things like that. We would— but I would write. We had very poor mail service, very poor.

So did you feel—

Isolated. We were really isolated.

So was it-- did you feel like you were under pressure or under stress?

No. Forgotten. Forgotten, and I mean it in a, not in a, well, I’ll give you an example. I don’t know what it was. I couldn’t tell you the day it was. But I remember we got an order. We’re medics. Now, we have, you know, Geneva, Red Cross, we were not armed. I never had a pistol in my life, never.

You ever trained in that?

Never. Never. Never. They gave each of one us a carbine. Do you know what a carbine is?

A rifle, isn’t it?

Yes, a rifle. It’s semi-automatic. They gave us forty rounds of ammunition, and forty can go, fire, “B-R-R-R,” that fast it could go, and an extra pair of shoes, and said, “We’re leaving you. You better start walking back to India. Be careful of the communists going over the Himalayas.” God’s truth! And that was it. Literally abandoned. I mean, I don’t know what month it was or anything else. I couldn’t tell you. But I never had a gun in my life.
Why were they doing that, because the Japanese were getting close, or--

Oh, yes, oh, they were right at our doorstep. They had kamikaze paratroopers. They would come down in a parachute. That’s how I got captured.

Shortly after that?

Oh, yes, and they saw the gun and everything. You know, it was a wonder I wasn’t killed, but they couldn’t understand the Red Cross and a gun, and I don’t blame them. But not a good situation.

No. So, you were captured then in 1945?

Yes. Just a few months before the end of the war.

So that was in Chengtu, was it?

It was in Chengtu, but they moved us. I don’t know where they moved us.

How many of you were captured at that time, do you recall?

Oh, maybe twenty-eight of us, I’m guessing.

Was your commanding officer captured, also?

Oh, yes, yes, but only two of us survived. My friend and I were the only two left. The others died or committed suicide. It was awful. It was awful. It was very, very, very, very bad.

I didn’t think he would live, but I knew I was going to live. I was stubborn. I’m Dutch and I’m very stubborn.

Yes, and very adaptable and very resourceful.

I knew I had to get home.

Yes.

Excuse me. My grandmother had died while I was, you know, overseas. My mother was very ill, my father was gone, and all alone. And I knew I had to get home.

Is it okay if we talk about this?

Oh, sure.
So they put the twenty-eight of you on a truck and then they ship you someplace?

Oh, we walked.

Walked.

We just walked, and walked, and walked, and walked, and walked, and walked.

Missed the truck. I’ve got to tell you a funny thing. I told you I learned how to drive. I had to drive well. They had all kinds of weapons carriers, and dump trucks, and whatever. And, one day, I had to take a bunch of GI’s, our own men, I think this was in India, I think. I don’t remember. I had to take them somewhere, point A to point B. I had to drive and there were about fourteen difficult gears to shift.

Yes.

And they were all on the back of the truck, and I start off, and I pressed the loader. It dumps them all, dumped them all on the floor, on the ground. It was funny then. But it is funny now to me. But I didn’t know what I was doing.

Yes.

Nobody taught me.

So you-- I think you mentioned that the fact that you were a medic and the Japanese knew that, that might have helped to save your life?

Absolutely. They needed our training. Oh, yes. Otherwise, I would have been gone. Oh, yes.

Would you have been shot, or worked to death, or starved?

Yes. Be killed somehow.

And the torture we had was minimal. We were all tortured. They, at night, they put our feet up and bamboozled the soles of our feet so we wouldn’t walk, walk away. See, it was open area, just a little fence around. And you’d get up in the morning, Neil. And sometimes you’d look down. On the field, you’d see a couple of them hanging up. Anyhow--

And they put you to work on the Yangtze River,?

Yes.

So you were a prisoner of war then, for a few months?
Just about four and a half months. It would have been longer, but it was--repatriated. You see, it was August, you know, the second bomb.

_August 6th? August 9th?_

Something like that. Yes.'45. But if we had lived, as I said, we would have gone to Japan.

_Right._

Because they were ready to take us, but the whole, almost the whole, country was Japanese. The poor Chinese people really have, through the centuries, have suffered. Oh, my. Did you ever read _The Rape of Nanking_, that book?

_Not all of it, no. Yes, I--_

It was something else.

_Yes._

In Burma, I saw atrocities in Burma. The Burmese changed their name, too. It is no longer Burma.

_Yes. Myanmar or something._

I don’t know what it is now.

_Yes. They call it Myanmar._

I’ve seen women hung up, their breasts cut off, men hung up, and their genitals, as the Japanese went through the villages.

_And that was just to terrorize the population you think?_

_Sure._

I don’t mean to make all this morbid.

_No. Not at all. Not at all. The--maybe, on a lighter note, you did have some famous entertainers make it to?_

Yes. Yes, not many. But Ann Sheridan, a movie star, at that time, she was very, very big. As a matter of fact, I didn’t know she sang. I thought she was just a dramatic actress. And I’ll never forget the song she sang to us, because it stayed in my memory. “I’ll be seeing you.” It was very popular during World War II, apparently. But, of course, we didn’t have any radio. We didn’t know what was going on. But I’ll never forget that.
Falkenberg was a professional tennis player. I don’t remember what she did, Pat O’Brien. Paulette Goddard. A few people, but few and far between.

PX supplies were minimal, minimal. Cigarettes, beer, toothpaste, things like that, just minimal. And Chengtu, the city itself, when I had a pass, I had a bike, I bicycled. I’d go all over town. I enjoyed that.

*Did you*-- *I don’t know if you want to mention it, the time that you made some special preparations for Ann Sheridan’s visit?*

Oh, yes. We knew, a day or so before, Ann was coming. And, of course, everybody was all excited about that. And they built a little latrine for her, just for her. It had her name on the top of it. I can see it now. Well, she came. She did her thing. And she never used it, she never used the latrine. So when she left, they put another sign up that said, “Ann Sheridan didn’t shit here.” And that’s in our memory.

*So that’s a humorous recollection.*

Pardon the vernacular, but that’s exactly what it said!

*Yes. Gus, you said you don’t, as far as the medals go, you would have been entitled to a Purple Heart now, right?*

I don’t know why--I’ll tell you, Neil, back up a little bit.

*Sure. Please.*

I’ve had so much trouble with the military. That’s one of the reasons I’m here. Long story short; apparently, there was a fire in--

*St. Louis?*

Somewhere.

*Yes.*

And many records were burned. And my records were, some of them were burned. They had no record of my malaria. They had no record of my surgery. I’ve had an awful time with the VA. It’s not their fault. But to try to prove something--

*Yes.*

What was I getting at?

*The medals, the Purple Heart.*
Oh.

Yes.

And I was supposed to get the ribbons for whatever it was. And I don’t know where I got that. I have no idea. I have no idea. And then eventually get the medals that go with them. They were to come. I never got them. And I don’t know what they were, anyhow. But so what. So what. It doesn’t bother me. I’m just lucky I got out.

*So when you were a prisoner for four and a half months, did you know that the tide of the war had turned against the Japanese, and maybe there was a chance you would get out?*

Well, we heard rumors, of course. There was no more Chicago. There was no more New York. Everything was bombed out. The president was killed. Of course, Roosevelt had died.

*That’s right.*

And he had, legitimately, had died, but they laid everything on their own head, don’t you see.

Yes.

Just to lay it on. And we couldn’t believe anything. As a matter of fact, do you remember the term Tokyo Rose?

Yes. Yes.

When we landed in Bombay, whatever it was, before we ever got into any of this, as we got off the ship, we were walking down, this speaker, “Corporal So and So, this is Tokyo Rose, don’t you wish you were home tonight having a milkshake with your girlfriend?” “Sergeant so and so, this is Tokyo Rose, don’t you think your girl is out with somebody tonight?” Can you believe it?

*No, I can’t.*

They knew us by name. Eerie. Eerie. And then there was one over in Europe, too. I forget her name. Sally Axis.

Sally Axis, but that’s another story, don’t you see. But this Tokyo Rose, she was American. She was from San Francisco, I think.

Yes.

Oh, well. There was so much going on.
So how about that day, so do you remember the day that you were released to the Chinese or American Forces?

I didn’t believe it. I didn’t believe it. We had heard there was some bombing, some big bombing. Well, you know, so what. You hear everything. And, Neil, really it’s the expression “living day to day,” You’ve heard that. It was almost hour to hour. And we didn’t know what, that’s why I’m so tense most of the time. It has been bored into me I’m ready to defend myself, this is, I don’t sleep. I have amnesia. Well, it’s awful, but, anyhow, we didn’t believe it. And, finally, a Japanese who spoke broken English, as we called them, said, “We friends. We friends.” That’s all he said. And I thought, I wonder if the war is over? It just hit me. It just hit me. I’m sorry, but that was it, an awful experience.

Was that American troops then, or was it American troops who, or British troops or--

Americans came in later. Yes, they must have. I don’t know where in the world they came from. They had to have been flown in. They had to be, because it was only a couple of days.

Yes.

But we still didn’t believe it. I remember seeing the first GI. God, we were so thin. I weighed a hundred and nineteen pounds when I came home, at almost six feet.

And you still have a memento from that awful experience when you were a prisoner of war, right? You brought home

Yes.

the stones.

That’s what I’ve got left.

And we have a picture of that which we’ll put at the end of the interview in the appendix.

It’s not much, but it’s something.

Oh, yes. So--

I just want to say one more thing.

Most certainly.

We were supposed to fly home finally, but we didn’t. The troop ship from Calcutta to Fort Lewis, Washington, I don’t know, another twenty-one days, I had shorts on. We
didn’t have any clothes. We landed in Fort Lewis. And I’m telling you, the first meal we just ate, and ate, and ate, until we got sick. And you know who served us our meal, German prisoners of war.

Wow.

And this is in December. We had to get clothes to go home. I made it.

You had a very good friend, a Chinese officer, Mr. Young.

Oh, Jimmy Young, yes, yes. He was a captain in the Chinese Army and he spoke excellent English. He had to speak English. And we were friends, and he would take me, when I had a pass, he would take me to a Chinese wedding or a Chinese funeral. He taught me Chinese etiquette for eating. And just very good friends— but he didn’t make it.

And I think you mentioned that one time you were standing next to the famous American war correspondent?

Ernie Pyle. We were in a slit trench, it was during a raid. I didn’t know who he was. It was during a raid.

In Chengtu?

No, this was in Burma.

Another raid, and, again, you know, we were packed in there, and I didn’t know who he was. We got to talking, and I recognized who he was. I introduced myself, and I said, “I appreciate what you are doing, and I really admire what you are doing very much.” And he thanked me, and off he went, off he went, busy, busy, busy, but that was it. That was nice.

And you made it— you were able to see Shanghai.

Shanghai?

Yes.

Just very briefly, very briefly, but I went back, as I said, since then, and I really saw it. Oh, yes.

So—

I went to Hong Kong, Beijing, it wasn’t Beijing then, it was, what was it years ago, Peking, Shanghai, Hong Kong, all over. I love it. I love it.

Why?
I love the people.

Why?

I really do I think I'm part Chinese.

I thought you were Dutch.

Somehow. No, they were were and are-- It's a different China today. It's too westernized, in my opinion. I was lucky. I saw it before it went. But they were very helpful, truthful, they believe in family, and just wonderful people. They helped me a lot.

I'll just tell you one thing. When we first got there, they, some of our GIs, had red hair, and they had never seen red hair before, and they wondered how they got their hair red. Now, we were in a farmland, Chengtu was in a farmland. And the horizon, that's the end of the world. There's nothing beyond that horizon in their mind. On top of that, a fellow took out his false teeth, and they almost fainted! They had never seen that before!

Yes.

True but, of course, that's not today.

No, no.

So the-- where were you demobilized at or released from the Service?

Where did I get out of -- I think it was Fort Meade again. I'm pretty sure.

Back in Maryland?

In Maryland.

Yes.

I was in the hospital for a number of months after I got home. I got back in '45. I wasn't released until '46 sometime. Neil, I don't remember the date.

Yes. Late February, I think, in '46, you said.

Could be. But I know it was cold weather.

Yes. So did you have any trouble readjusting to civilian life? I would imagine you did?

No.
No. You were just young and resilient.

See, my job was, my job, in those days, if you returned to your-- your job was guaranteed when you returned.

And you got it.

And I had worked for Kraft, as I said, and I got my job back until I went to school. And I went on, and on, and on. I got my doctorate degree, my PhD, in 1953.

Was that on the GI Bill?

Yes.

What was your field of study, medicine?

Nutrition. I had my own business. I’ve had my own business for sixty years. This is one of my calling cards. I don’t have the business anymore. Beckart Laboratories right here in Morton Grove. My middle name is Becker, as you know, and I had a partner by the name of Art, Arthur, so we put the two together and made it Beckart. And I’ve had clients from India, China, Berlin, Australia, Greece, France, all over the world, really. So, I’ve been very fortunate.

You received your PhD from which school, from--?

Well, it was back east, back on Long Island years ago. It’s a university now, I guess. I really don’t know.

So you used the GI bill then?

Oh, yes. I couldn’t have done without it.

Yes.

I took night courses. I took, remember, in those days, they had, I don’t know if you remember or not, but they had correspondence courses.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

You would send for things.

Yes.

I was determined. My education was disrupted because of the war. And I was going to somehow get it back. And the GI bill was beautiful.
So I brought a house. I used a GI loan to get a house when I got married.

*Did you-- you had-- you met your wife after the war?*

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

*She didn't see you in a uniform?*


*And you did stay in contact with your wartime buddies after the Service?*

Oh, yes. For a number of years with Dick, especially. And I lost contact with him. As I said, I was best man at his wedding. He came to my house in Baltimore for his honeymoon. And I took him around, he and his wife. His wife was in the WAVES in the military, she was in the WAVES. And I went to his home, met his parents in New Bedford, and we corresponded for a number of years, and I would visit him when I could, in that area. We would get together.

I guess maybe, Neil, I'm guessing, this is '08, maybe 15 years ago, he must have died. And a friend of mine in Morton Grove was from New Bedford. And he was going home on vacation one year, and I asked him to look my friend up, which was a coincidence, and I gave him the address, everything, his mother, his telephone, and everything. And he came back, and he said, "There was no family there. There is nobody there by that name. I couldn't find anybody."

*You had mentioned he was of a particular nationality?*

Portuguese.

*Portuguese, in New Bedford, Massachusetts.*

Oh, yes. His father was a fisherman, yes, but we were very, very close, very close.

*So, not to go over a difficult subject, you and Dick were the only two that survived the imprisonment?*

Yes. Yes.

*He also was a medic, was he?*

Yes. Well, yes, but he--

*They thought he was.*
What did I say, MOS – Military Occupational Specialty, you know what you were classified as.

He was a cook. No, he wasn’t trained as a medic per se. He helped me save my life, and I helped him save his. We were just that close.

Why did you need the operation on your hand? --

Oh, I only, see, from here, all the way around, all away around to here, I wanted to raise--my thumb was way back here when I was in a slit trench and somehow-- it got back there. I don’t know how it was. I’ve got a stainless steel knuckle in here.

Yes.

Stainless steel, and they said, you’ll never touch your little finger. Don’t tell me never to do something! I’ll do it.

You’re determined.

And I did it.

Yes, so you--

And it’s always been red all those years.

You were sunk in the Atlantic Ocean.

Yes, that was awful.

And you came down with malaria.

Yes, malaria, still bothers me to this day. I never got a pension for any of these things.

You contracted malaria in India. And then you go to China, and then you were, toward the end of the war, then you were captured.

See, I was mostly in, a little bit in India, enough to get sick, so to speak, a little bit in Burma, driving the road, but most of the time in China, so it was the CBI, China-Burma-India Theater.

So we have-- there are a couple of questions that we always ask the veterans at the end of the interview.

Sure.

How do you think your military service and experiences affected your life?
Well, good question. I’ve never been a quitter in my life, ever. I’ve always been my own boss. I’ve needed no motivation all my life. That’s the way I’m born. But I knew what I was doing in the Service although I didn’t know what I was doing in the Service. And I did it to the best of my ability. And I think it made me a better person somehow.

And I don’t mean to wave the flag. I’m not saying that. But I deplore some of the things that are going on today with our country. And, again, it’s none of my business. And I’m not a politician. But I don’t like to see what’s going on. And I’m glad I’m phasing out. At my age, I won’t see a lot of this. I’ll be eighty-six in December if I live that long I feel like a hundred and six!

*And the next question follows on that one: did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?*

No. Well, yes. I’ll take that back. It did, because I learned a lot about the so-called expression “political.” I saw where people were bumped off of planes for high-ranking officers and their dogs, where the poor guy that should have been on the plane never got on the plane to go home, things like that. I’ve seen and I know that goes on, of course. But, well, like I told you, my commanding officer, for an example, that wasn’t right. I could refuse. They could court-martial me, because he ordered me to do it. It was an order. And, believe me, I was scared to death that I would bumble it, number one. You know, you’re a young kid. You’re doing the best you can. But the military has made me cognizant, yes, of “political-izing”, if there is such a word.

*Yes. Is there anything, at this point, that you would like to add to the interview that perhaps we haven’t covered?*

I’m very appreciative of your time and your effort to do something like this. I never expected it, number one, never. And I hope-- I don’t know if anybody would be ever interested in reading it, or looking at it, or anything else. If they are, I hope they can get something from it. I don’t know what, but it’s so personal with me, so personal. And between you and I and the telephone pole, who cares? I care, that’s all I can say.

I’m very active in the military. I’ve put in many, many hours of volunteering up at Great Lakes. And, as I said, I’m a people person.

And there’s another whole subject, and I don’t know whether this is the time or the place for it, but I’ve developed no use for the military. They almost killed me. I almost died.

*After the war or during the war?*

About five months ago.

*Oh.*
I almost died. I know they didn’t mean to do it, but another story, Neil, another story.

Yes. But, anyway, if you don’t mind my saying it, you look and sound wonderful.

Well, thank you.

That’s a very rigorous interview that you’ve given. And people are going to read it, and I think it is one of, this is, as far as trying to afford people, you know, a generation or two later what it was like, I mean, I think your powers of recall and description--

Well, they haven’t taken my memory away from me.

No. it’s remarkable, and anyone who reads your transcript is going to know a little bit more about the Greatest Generation and World War II. So thank you for calling me.

To me, that is the great war, naturally. And I appreciate World War I, I appreciate Korea, I appreciate Vietnam. I can not see what we’re doing now.

Yes.

I just can’t see that. That’s a political thing, of course.

Yes.

And I don’t want to bother you. I don’t want to bore you with that. That’s not my right to do that.

Okay.

Thanks, Gus. Thank you.

Reader’s Note

The following 15 pages of photographs, records, clippings, and maps illustrate and complement Mr. Habighurst’s memoir of service.

In addition, the web site http://cbi-theater.home.comcast.net/~cbi-theater/menu/cbi_home.html is devoted to the “China-Burma-India Theater, often referred as “the Forgotten Theater.”
Mr. Habighurst is pictured below with best friend Dick Silviera. They were the only two of their unit’s 28 men who survived their Japanese captivity after being captured near Chengtu.

Mr. Habighurst in uniform is pictured outside his Baltimore home.
These three were taken in Oran, North Africa, Feb. 1943.

Taken while passing thru the Suez Canal, Mar. 1943.

Going thru the Red Sea, Mar. 1943.

Taken off of Port Said, Egypt, Mar. 1943.

Scanned loose page from Mr. Habighurst’s album of World War II experiences. These photos were taken on his way across North Africa through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea on the way to India.
The Ledo Road, (from Ledo, Assam, India to Kunming, China) was built during World War II so that the Western Allies could supply the Chinese as an alternative to the Burma Road which had been cut by the Japanese in 1942.

After the initial section to Shingbwiyang, more sections followed: Warazup, Myitkyina and Bhamo, 372 miles (600 km) from Ledo. At that point the road joined a spur of the old Burma road and, although improvements to further sections followed the road, was passable. The spur passed through Namkham 439 miles (558 km) from Ledo and finally at the Mong-Yu road junction, 465 miles (748 km) from Ledo, the Ledo Road met the Burma Road.
The Stillwell Road (named for General Joseph Stilwell and also known as the Ledo Road) Sign shown below is a scanned copy of a photograph provided by Mr. Habighurst who drove the road twice at night. It was built as an alternate route for the section of the Burma Road, controlled by the Japanese after their invasion of Burma. Its length was 1079 miles. Mr. Habighurst then flew by plane from Kunming to Chengtu where an air base served American bombers striking Japanese targets. On the back of the photo, Mr. Habighurst noted that “each of the 10 cities named was stop for us to rest.”
Various "ENLISTED MAN'S PASS" (es) issued to Mr. Habighurst in North Africa, India and China.

ENLISTED MAN'S TEMPORARY PASS


Habighurst, August, B. Sg.t. (Name) (Army serial No)


is authorized to be absent

1200 29 Jan'45 To 2359 29 Jan'45

Khargpur

To visit

Charles C. McVeagh

Major MC, Commanding

W.D., A.G.O., Form No. 7 (OVER)

This form replaces W.D., A.G.O., Form No. 7, 8 September 1944, which may be used until existing stocks are exhausted.

ENLISTED MEN'S PASS


DATE

August 6, 1944

TO VISIT

Rank Sg.t. ASH

20 2359, 18 Sept.

Charles C. McVeagh

Major MC, Commanding

ENLISTED MEN'S PASS

A.P.O. 600

MEDITERRANEAN BASE SECTION

LIBERTY PASS

Name

Grade

Org

225 Med. Mag.

Location

Staging Area

Tel.

2075

Effective date

2-5-44

Expiration date 2-5-44

I certify that this soldier was inspected as to proper uniform upon the issue of this pass.

Charles C. McVeagh

Major MC

Unit Commander

CANCELLATION PASS

Name

ASN

Grade

Org.

Location

Tel.

Date of issue

The soldier bearing this stub has been deprived of this pass and ordered to report directly to his unit. If loitering en route he will be taken into custody and turned over to the Military Police.

Charles C. McVeagh

Major MC

Arresting Officer
Chinese paper currency.

Courtesy of http://static.howstuffworks.com/gif/d-day-invasion-/jpg
Italian currency and other notes
Collected by Mr. Habighurst.

Egyptian Ten Piastres Note
INDIA
British One Rupee Money

INDIA
Japanese Invasion Money

PHILIPPINE ISLANDS
Japanese Invasion Money
22 JAPANESE FIRST-LINE SUNK OR DAMAGED OFF PHILIPPINES

American Aircraft Patrols Crippled Enemy Fleet

Twenty-two first-line Japanese warships,包括 several 10,000-tonners, have been sunk or damaged in the group of American raiders in the Philippines. These figures are from reports received from Admiral Nimitz, and other headquarters.

British Troops Cut Road from Hannover to Germany

A small force of British troops has been cut off in the Hannover to Germany road. The German Army has been considerably weakened by the recent fighting, and the British troops have taken advantage of the situation to launch a counter-attack.

Big Anglo-U.S. Air Fleets Bomb Germany

Only Two Aircraft Lost

British and American bombers kept up the constant offensive against Germany yesterday. Lancaster bombers, accompanied by fighters, attacked the port of Hamburg, which had been heavily damaged in previous raids. The British Air Force claims that the attack was successful and that the bombers returned safely.

Russians Capture Arctic Airfields

Making British Supply Route Safe

Red Army forces have captured several key airfields in the Arctic region, providing a safe supply route for the British. These airfields were previously controlled by the Germans and were used to transport military supplies to the Wehrmacht.

Link-Up on Italy

A small group of American and British troops has linked up in the Italian campaign. This is a significant victory for the Allies, and it marks the beginning of the end of the war in Europe.

Battle in Tilburg's Suburbs

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R.A.F. Bomb Japanese Aircraft Dumps

The British Air Force launched a series of raids on Japanese aircraft dumps, causing significant damage to the enemy's war effort.

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Destroying Power Of The Axis

Consistent Strategy During Five Years Of War

(By Brigadier H.S. Sewell)

Through five years of war, Britain has followed one strategy—that of destroying the power of the Axis. Every campaign has been aimed at achieving that purpose.

When the German invasion of 1940, France and England like all other countries at that time, except Germany, Italy, and Japan, were not ready for total war, France and Britain were not ready to face Germany, and Britain, despite her losses at Dunkirk, had not made any effort to prepare the country for war.

This made it necessary for Britain to rush up her Army for home defence, but Britain did not neglect to plan for the future. After the loss of the Allied foothold on the Continent of Europe, the accomplishment of Britain’s strategy—destruction of German power—depended on two things: (1) The defence of the British Isles, and (2) the retention of the strategic position in the Middle East, without which it was impossible to contain or attack German power from the south.

Keeping Vital Link Open

The surrender of the French fleet and French soldiers in North Africa, Madagascar, and which have occurred, has led to a revision of the policy of the Mediterranean, and the British forces in Egypt and Palestine were outnumbered ten to two by the Japanese in Libya.

Plans were made to meet this situation, and when the Italian armistice was signed, it was decided at once that, apart from defensive actions at home, there must be a move to secure the vital link in the British Commonwealth. This communications route through the Suez Canal and the land bridge between Asia and Africa. Resistance of this point was essential for future offensive plans against the Axis. Italy and Malaya could not be considered as a single entity from Britain, and the Antipodes and the Mediterranean, and the Middle East were connected by two or three battle lines. By these means, Germany would be isolated and Britain could not be strengthened by the lack of adequate power.

Strategic Plan

June 1940 to June 1941 was a year of success and revenge, but Britain was able to followher strategic plan up to some extent. Advance in Egypt, Britain’s fighting in Germany and Italy alone, except for the gallant stand by Greece, and the assistance of the British for a short time. During this period, the following were among Britain’s most notable accomplishments: The Italian fleet was damaged and its home port lost, the British Army in Egypt was defeated, the Middle East was lost to the Axis, and the Suez Canal was saved. The British and the Axis forces in the Middle East were at a disadvantage.

Advance On Forti

Twelfth Army Group

Since the entry of Italy into the war, the British army has been pressing forward to secure the south. They have fought their way forward and have now reached the mountain road, which they have named the "Siege Road." This road is the main supply route for the British forces in the Middle East.

Tiddin Gives

Control Of Vital

Mountain Road

The British capture of Tiddin has brought some more supplies to the British forces in the Middle East and has made it possible to establish a supply route to the British forces in the Middle East.

Freed Greece

Guerrilla Liberate

Toungoo Of Laos

A report from Allied Military Headquarters in Southeast Asia has revealed that the main supply route through the Suez Canal is still open, and that the British are using it to supply the forces in the Middle East.

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Obliteration

Princess Beatrice And

Archbishop Of

Oblivion

We regret to announce the death in London of Her Royal Highness Princess Beatrice and Archbishop of Croydon. Princess Beatrice was the last surviving child of Queen Victoria and was 57 years old. She was the aunt of Admiral Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander in Southeast Asia.

Dr. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, was 60. He died at midnight yesterday of a heart attack. The son of a Presbyterian clergyman, he was the Archdeacon of Canterbury in April and is known for his work as a leader of the Church.

Tunisi, Sicily, Italy. Now the main attack from the west is being successfully moved to the American British forces in France and the Middle East. The British are fighting in France, and the way to the south will be opened.
Mr. Habighurst’s very good friend, Jimmy Young, a captain in the Chinese Army, is pictured below on the left. He would die later during the war fighting the invading Japanese Army.

The Chinese writing which appears on the back of the photo can be seen below. Betty Zhan and Joel Hahn of the Technical Services Staff at the Niles Library translate the inscription as

“He Wen-jun humbly gives this present, during August of Year 33 [1944], in China, to Sergeant Bai Ke; please keep it.”
Mr. Habighurst’s “souvenir duck,” made of the actual stones from the Yangtze River. He brought them back from his time as a POW working under Japanese orders on clearing the river after his capture in Chengtu. Mr. Habighurst used Elmer’s glue to fashion the duck.

Photograph taken in Bethany Nursing Home at time of interview on April 30, 2008. Mr. Habighurst’s hands, war album and duck are visible.
Scan of page from Mr. Habighurst's war album. The U. S. Army, due to a fire, has no records for his decorations. Note the actual silver threaded China Theater patch—"the big one." The Flying Tiger Unit, whose patch appears below, is now extinct.
Honorable Discharge Certificate

Army of the United States

Honorable Discharge

This is to certify that

AUGUST B. HABIGHURST, S, SERGEANT,

225TH MEDICAL DISPENSARY AVIATION,

Army of the United States

is hereby Honorably Discharged from the military service of the United States of America.

This certificate is awarded as a testimonial of Honest and Faithful Service to this country.

Given at SEPARATION CENTER, FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, MARYLAND.

Date FEBRUARY 1946.

RECORDED AUG 27 1946

CHESTER E. HANOVER
MAJ INF
ENLISTED RECORD AND REPORT OF SEPARATION
HONORABLE DISCHARGE

HARLAN HURST AUGUST B
25TH MD DISPENSARY AVN

24 DEC 22
BALTIMORE MD

BROWN BROWN
Baltimore MD

CHEMIST ASSISTANT

MEDICAL HISTORY

APR 43
BALTIMORE MD

22
Baltimore Co MD

MEDICAL TECHNICIAN

ASIA PACIFIC THEATER RIBBON
GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL EUROPEAN AFRICAN MIDDLE EASTERN THEATER RIBBON
WORLD WAR II VICTORY RIBBON

NONE

PAY DATA

INSURANCE NOTICE

IMPORTANT
IF PREMIUM IS NOT PAID WHEN DUE OR WITHIN THIRTY DAYS THEREAFTER, INSURANCE WILL LAPSE, MADE CHECKS OR MONEY ORDERS PAYABLE TO THE TREASURER OF THE U.S. AND FORWARD TO COLLECTING SUBSIDIARIES, VETERANS ADMINISTRATION, WASHINGTON D.C.

LAPEL BUTTON ISSUED NO DAYS LOST UNDER AW 107
(35) YWLFVR DEC 43 TYP SEP 45 CHOL SEP 45

ASR SCORE 49