

National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Howard M. Heisler
First Cavalry Division; Pacific War
Date of Interview: May 28, 2004

National Museum of the Pacific War
Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with Howard M. Heisler
First Cavalry Division; Pacific War

This is Eddie Graham. Today is May 28, 2004. I'm interviewing Mr. Heisler. This interview is taking place in the Nimitz Hotel in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Graham: Okay, Mr. Heisler, tell me when and where were you born?

Mr. Heisler: I was born the fifteenth of August, 1926, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Mr. Graham: Did you go to school there?

Mr. Heisler: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Tell us, how did you end up getting into the U.S. Army?

Mr. Heisler: In the spring of 1942, I ran away from home. I was fifteen years old. I ran away to Chicago and I started living under another name in Chicago. In the summer of 1942, they lowered the registration of draft from twenty-one to nineteen. So, I went to the draft board and told them I was three years older and registered for the draft. Along about September or October, I'm not sure, I received a 1-A. So, I went down and joined the Army in 1942.

Mr. Graham: What were the names of your parents?

Mr. Heisler: Anthony and Mary.

Mr. Graham: Where did you do your basic training after you got into the Army?

Mr. Heisler: Actually, I volunteered to go to the cavalry. There was only just about a half-dozen of us and we were sent directly to Ft. Bliss, Texas. We were assigned to the reconnaissance squadron there. We took a little basic training there. Never really had basic training as such.

We had a 1st sergeant who was a very big man, 6'6" at least and big. If you fouled up, he would take you out behind the orderly room and straighten you out. We had a captain who we called "the cat" because he would sneak up on

you while we were training. Months later while overseas, the captain got shot and as they were bringing him out of the jungle, the 1st sergeant kept saying, "The cat is getting cold." The sergeant cracked and they took him away. Which just proves you can't tell. None of us poor putz cracked.

Mr. Graham: After you finished your basic, where did you go?

Mr. Heisler: We stayed there in the 1st Cavalry Division and then we went overseas in the spring of 1943. We went to Australia.

Mr. Graham: What did you do in Australia?

Mr. Heisler: We trained and we built a camp right outside of Brisbane, the whole division. And we trained.

Mr. Graham: What kind of training were you doing there?

Mr. Heisler: Combat training. Like going out in the field and things like that, you know, because we knew we were going to be in combat before long.

Mr. Graham: Okay.

Mr. Heisler: I think it was December or January, I'm not sure, December of '43 or January of '44, we went to New Guinea. We moved up to New Guinea.

Mr. Graham: What took place there?

Mr. Heisler: We built another camp because New Guinea, at that period of time, was no combat there. So we built a camp there in Buna. And then, I don't remember exactly when, but our first combat was in the Admiralty Islands. I would say sometime maybe in the spring of 1944.

Mr. Graham: Did you all invade them, or how was this—

Mr. Heisler: Yes, we invaded. I don't know if people will remember, but there were pictures over there at Momote, I think was the name of the airstrip, where the Japs kept coming and they'd crawl over their dead. They were stacked up and just crawling over.

Mr. Graham: Still coming.

Mr. Heisler: Still coming, yes.

Mr. Graham: How long did that battle last?

Mr. Heisler: Well, it must have last about 3-4 months, I guess. There were a couple different islands there within the Admiralty Islands.

Mr. Graham: So you had different invasions each time.

Mr. Heisler: It wasn't really invasion, I don't guess, just further battles.

Mr. Graham: I see, okay. You didn't have to go back out to sea on ships.

Mr. Heisler: Oh, no. No.

Mr. Graham: Okay, so you just moved along land.

Mr. Heisler: Right, right. Or in small Navy boats they took us different places, too. Because we were in the reconnaissance outfit. So in reconnaissance we were out looking, always ahead, looking. We'd go in these Navy LCIs—

Mr. Graham: Landing crafts.

Mr. Heisler: Small Navy craft, yes. Then along about September, we landed on D-Day on Leyte in the Philippines. Our outfit was in the second wave to land on the beach at Leyte in 1944. We moved inland and that's where they had the big Naval battle. That night you could just see all, oh man, it was really something to see from the land. We didn't know what was happening, you know? During that time, a typhoon hit the island one night. Everything got all screwed up. The only way you could survive was you hung onto the roots of these trees that were above the ground. You'd lay down and hang onto them. The next day the Japs were behind the Americans and it was all screwed up.

Then we went over the mountains there and that was really rough because there were leeches and rain and the mud. Leyte was no snap. One of the platoons in my troop landed on Samar and they were ambushed as they were landing. The Japs got them on the water. Used to go in these rubber boats. Make rubber boat landings. On Samar we had almost a whole platoon lost on Samar.

Mr. Graham: On that particular one, did they have any backup troops that could rescue them or anything?

Mr. Heisler: Oh, no. You know, you'd go in these places and you were on your own. (laughs) They'd drop you off in these rubber boats.

Mr. Graham: So we don't know really what happened to the survivors?

Mr. Heisler: I think there were a few survivors, if I remember. I know almost the whole

platoon got wiped out there. I know my platoon sergeant has written a book about the experiences in the war. In that he said that he drew straws because we had three different missions that day and they drew straws. So, we got the right straw. We didn't go on that mission.

Mr. Graham: Let's go back to some of the battle of Leyte and through there. What were some of the things that still stand out in your mind most about the action that took place there?

Mr. Heisler: Going over the mountain range there and the leeches and the mud. It was just really bad. It was quite a mountain range there on Leyte going over. We went all the way over to the harbor over there.

Mr. Graham: Did you have any illness, sicknesses, or disease that happened while you were in that mountainous area?

Mr. Heisler: I ended up with malaria. I had malaria real bad and had many attacks after I got out of the service. You also would get these blisters around your body.

Mr. Graham: What were the blisters from?

Mr. Heisler: Jungle rot, they called it, or something.

Mr. Graham: Oh, I see, okay. So much moisture.

Mr. Heisler: Yes. That was the worst part of the Leyte invasion.

Mr. Graham: After Leyte, where did you go?

Mr. Heisler: We loaded up on boats and we landed in Lingayen Gulf on Luzon. We made the drive to Manila. We were the first troops in Manila.

Mr. Graham: What was that gulf name again?

Mr. Heisler: Lingayen Gulf. It was about seventy, eighty miles north of Manila. We were in these armored cars. We were the reconnaissance for the division so we were ahead of the division. We got to Santo Tomas. I'll never forget that. We stayed there and the division went in and rescued those people. We didn't actually go in but we were there before—

Mr. Graham: You did the reconnaissance.

Mr. Heisler: Right. Before the regular troops got there.

Mr. Graham: Let me ask something about reconnaissance work. Evidently it's pretty

dangerous work because you're going on ahead and trying to spot the enemy. Is that correct?

Mr. Heisler: That's correct.

Mr. Graham: Why don't you just give us an example of how it worked and everything. How you moved through the jungle without being detected.

Mr. Heisler: That's hard to say. I don't remember a lot of it because I was young.

Mr. Graham: But your main job was that you went out and tried to spot the enemy?

Mr. Heisler: Yes. We'd go out ahead of the division and they'd send us on missions. We were always with the division, close to the division, and they always had missions. Go out and see this or go look for that or see what you see.

Mr. Graham: It was intelligence gathering.

Mr. Heisler: Right, right.

Mr. Graham: Getting information on the enemy.

Mr. Heisler: Yes. Then when we got to Luzon, they had armored cars on the boat. When we got off the boat we got off with our armored cars. That's where we started the drive to Manila. Prior to that, we didn't have armored cars. We were just foot soldiers. But then with the armored cars we were able to move faster.

Mr. Graham: Were you fighting all the time that you were moving forward in the armored vehicles?

Mr. Heisler: Oh, no. No. Occasionally a little, you know.

Mr. Graham: So it was just a move forward to Manila.

Mr. Heisler: Yes. Then we were the first troops in Manila. Then of course, the division came in behind us. We were assigned, my platoon was assigned to guard this one bridge that was an exit for the Japanese out of Manila. We weren't actually fighting in the city of Manila because we were reconnaissance and the regular division was fighting in there. But they put us out on this bridge to guard this bridge. One day the Japs wanted it and they came and that's when I got wounded there. I got hit by a mortar shell. I was in pretty bad shape. I spent over five months in the hospital.

Mr. Graham: Did the Japanese take the bridge?

Mr. Heisler: Not that I know of. You know, when that happened—

Mr. Graham: You were moved out.

Mr. Heisler: No, I don't know because next thing I knew after I got hit, I didn't know anything. I remember getting rolled down the road there from the concussion and stuff. Next thing I remember I was in a hospital. In a field hospital there in Manila. That's when I woke up. They tell me it was a couple of days later but I don't really know.

Mr. Graham: Okay.

Mr. Heisler: Then they evacuated me by a small airplane. They had these small airplanes where they put the litters under the cabin like and out to the hospital ship. That's where I got on the hospital ship and that's where they operated on me. I'm very lucky to be alive because the shell hit me in the side here and that piece of shrapnel was mainly stopped by my right shoulder blade. It ended up lodged to my spine. I have scars today to prove. So, I'm very lucky.
(laughs)

Mr. Graham: Tell us something then, you had your surgery on the ship and you came to, and tell us something about the life aboard ship or what happened then.

Mr. Heisler: Oh boy, I don't remember.

Mr. Graham: You were still pretty much out.

Mr. Heisler: Oh, yeah. I had to lay completely flat on my stomach with my arms out because I had a hole in the back of my right shoulder. The first time a nurse showed it to me it looked like you could stick your head in there. It looked like it was that big. It wasn't once they sewed it up and operated and everything. So, I had to lay for a long time just straight like that. And even if you moved your little finger it would hurt because when they sewed you up, you know, it would hurt.

Mr. Graham: Do you know how long you were on board this ship?

Mr. Heisler: No, I don't. All I know is I got on it in Leyte. Wait a minute. I can't remember now how I got down to Leyte. I was in a field hospital in Luzon and I must have got on the hospital ship from there, from Luzon. I suppose three or four days, or whatever, five days down in New Guinea. Then I ended up in a general hospital there. I stayed until the end of July. I got wounded on the seventh of February and I was in the hospital until about the end of July.

Mr. Graham: You were staying in this one particular hospital the whole time?

Mr. Heisler: Yes, the whole time.

Mr. Graham: And how was that hospital? Did they give you good treatment?

Mr. Heisler: It was good considering. Everybody in there—you look around and you realize you're lucky because there's a guy with his leg off and arms off. There was one guy in that ward I was in that had been run over by a tank. He was in such bad shape they couldn't move him. The morphine quit working on him and he just lay there and cry and holler. So I'll never forget that part.

Mr. Graham: I can't imagine.

Mr. Heisler: Anyway, in 19—, let me get this straight—in July of 1945, they assigned me to a replacement depot in Leyte. Back in the Philippines. But I didn't go there. I went back to my unit which was up in Luzon training. They were in training to be one of the landing troops in Japan and the invasion of Japan which was scheduled something like for October of '45. I got back to my unit and reported in and they picked me up on the morning report and so I was okay. No problem. But that just shows you the spirit that people had in them days because war was over as far as I was concerned, or it could have been. But I wanted to go back to my unit because I had pride in my unit and the other men that were in there and things like that.

Mr. Graham: You were dedicated.

Mr. Heisler: Yeah, well.

Mr. Graham: That's great.

Mr. Heisler: And probably just too young to realize the dangers, you know. (laughs)

Mr. Graham: But it was that spirit that won that war for us.

Mr. Heisler: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Okay, tell us then what happened. You went back to the unit and—

Mr. Heisler: I got back the day after they dropped the bomb. I got back to my unit and in them days you had to hitch a ride on an airplane or thumb a ride in a vehicle or whatever way you could get—

Mr. Graham: Back to the unit.

Mr. Heisler: —back to the unit. They were down in the southern tip of Luzon. They were training, like I said, for an invasion of Japan. They dropped the bomb on the

sixth of August. I got to my unit on the seventh of August and that's when I found out about the bomb. Then they dropped another one I think three days later or something. So they loaded the whole outfit up on boats and we went up to Japan. We landed in Japan, oh I'd say several days before the surrender of Japan. We were on the streets of Tokyo before they signed the thing on the *Missouri*.

Mr. Graham: Was there much action when you went into Japan?

Mr. Heisler: There was no action. The unit I was in, we were assigned just to drive around Tokyo and see what we could. I remember they had these big, most everything was level in Tokyo.

Mr. Graham: Bombed.

Mr. Heisler: It was really bad. They had these places that were still—they had all the Japanese bring their weapons in and you could see great big buildings full of nothing but weapons. The Japanese surrendered completely. I don't there was ever a casualty in Japan at the end of the war. That was in September. First part of October everyone that went overseas with the division was sent back to the States.

Just to tell you a little more about what happened. When I joined the Army, I was under another name. But you have insurance. So I put my mother down as my aunt. When I was wounded she got this message. In the meantime, they'd been looking for me for years. They got that message and they went down to Ft. Snelling which was the active fort in Minneapolis at that time. It's no longer active. They started tracing me. They traced me and about two days or three days before we were due to leave Japan, my CO called me in and he said, "Is this you?" And I said, "Yes." (laughs) He said, "Well, what do you plan on doing?" I plan on going home and getting out of the service and going home." "Okay," he said, "if you promise me you'll do that, we'll let this go. Because," he said, "if I do anything, you'll be in the service for a year or more." So I did. I got out and went back and went home. Then I started the process of changing my name. I ended up in, I think in July of '46, appearing in front of the judge advocate down in Kansas City. They gave me a discharge in my right name. And gave me credit for all my time in the service.

Mr. Graham: Let me go back to Japan when you were in there and you said you all were just driving around. How was the reaction of most of the Japanese people that you did see there? How did they react to you?

Mr. Heisler: They were meek. They were just—you know. There was never any—and of course, most of the city by that time had evacuated. There wasn't a lot of

people in Tokyo.

Mr. Graham: So they went to the hills?

Mr. Heisler: I don't know where they went. I remember we built our camp in Meiji Park which was very close to the emperor's palace and that was never bombed. All you would see in Tokyo was once in a while a building standing but almost everything was level.

Mr. Graham: When you all set your camp up there and you ate and had your chow halls?

Mr. Heisler: Right, right. Set up regular camp there in the park.

Mr. Graham: How long, once again now, did you stay there before you transferred back to the United States?

Mr. Heisler: Like I said, I'm not sure exactly when we landed but it was days before they signed the armistice on the *Missouri* which was what, second of September?

Mr. Graham: Second of September.

Mr. Heisler: I think the first part of October I left. Everybody in the division that originally went over with the division had to be sent back to the States. All the replacements, they stayed. They transferred us to another division, 41st Infantry Division. We came back and they deactivated that division.

Mr. Graham: Let me ask you, of all the different people you served with, are there any particular ones you still remember and if so, what?

Mr. Heisler: Oh, yeah. I still see my old platoon sergeant up in Beaver, Utah. You know, I should show you this book he wrote. I don't know if you guys would be interested in something like that.

Mr. Graham: Oh, yes.

Mr. Heisler: If you would send me back the book. (laughs)

Mr. Graham: I couldn't guarantee you that so we'll talk about that later.

Mr. Heisler: Okay.

Mr. Graham: Were there any others that you just remember that maybe they weren't a close friend or anything but there was something different about them that you remember?

Mr. Heisler: I remember one of our troop captains. He got shot and there just a mark right down the crease of his hat. My platoon sergeant got wounded. We had quite a few of them that got killed, you know, during that period of time.

Mr. Graham: I was thinking maybe any guys that kind of were characters that were always doing something different or fun. Usually you always have some of those.

Mr. Heisler: Well, let's see. It's been so many years ago it's hard to—

Mr. Graham: I understand.

Mr. Heisler: It's hard to remember. In our unit we did have some Sioux Indians. Each platoon had a Sioux Indian and one in headquarters. We'd go out and they'd use them on the telephone. They'd speak in the Sioux language. So they were helpful. And we had a guy in my platoon, his name was Pumpkinseed. They were all from South Dakota. One night in the Philippines he got drunk on that tuba, that jungle juice, tuba. He was so strong. That guy was about 6'2" or 3" and real slender but he was so strong six or eight guys couldn't hold him down. He just tore through that camp that night. (laughs)

Mr. Graham: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us that maybe we've missed?

Mr. Heisler: No. I should have probably written stuff down. I'll probably think of it when I leave. And you're only interested in what happened in—

Mr. Graham: World War II.

Mr. Heisler: —in World War II.

Mr. Graham: Let me say this then, on behalf of the Nimitz Museum and the Center for Pacific War Studies, that we thank you very much for sharing your experiences. I can assure you that we will be looking forward to putting them into our library.

Mr. Heisler: Okay.

Proof

Bonnie Day Rush
April 23, 2009
Dublin, Texas
Tape 1171

