

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Master Sergeant Virgil Heidbrink
WWII United States Army
Date of Interview: April 2, 2005

Mr. Graham: This is Eddie Graham. Today is April 2, 2005 and I'm interviewing Mr. Virgil Heidbank (interviewee corrects "Heidbrink") I got it wrong there, okay, Heidbrink and we are in the Plaza, Crown Plaza Hotel in Dallas, Texas and this interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War Center for War Studies and for preservation of historical information related to WWII. Okay, let's start out Mr. Heidbrink. When and where were you born?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, I was born in Ireton, Iowa, on a farm, on December 4, 1925. I was delivered by the local doctor in the home. In those days women didn't go to hospitals to have babies.

Mr. Graham: Okay and where did you go to school?

Mr. Heidbrink: I went to school for eight years in a rural school, about a mile and a half away, in a one room school, although quite comfortable, one room school and then after that four years to high school in the nearby town of Ireton, for four years where I graduated in May of 1943.

Mr. Graham: Okay, let me ask you this then, where were you and what were you doing December 7, 1941?

Mr. Heidbrink: I was on the farm. I think the event happened in Pearl Harbor, earlier in the day, but I remember late afternoon in December, there wasn't much snow on the ground. It was my job to get the cows, to drive the cows from a pasture, some distance away, to the barn some of whom, I guess, would be milked and I remember, I knew about the event about the dropping of the bomb and I wondered just what was going to happen to me and what kind of part I would have to play in that. I can still see that early day, about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Mr. Graham: Okay, then, tell us, how did you end up in the United States Army?

Hr. Heidbrink: I was drafted. I didn't volunteer, I was drafted and I was willing to go, but I waited for the draft for maybe one sly reason. I had an opportunity to get about six months more schooling. I graduated from high school in May of '43 and I was drafted in March of '44 and that gave me the opportunity then in September of '43 to enter into one of these business schools that were founded in cities throughout the country. In cities where you learned typing and bookkeeping and shorthand and the (compcomforter?) machine and other parts of a business office.

Mr. Graham: All right, where did you take your basic training?

Mr. Heidbrink: I took the basic training in Camp Barkly, Texas from oh, March of '44 through August of '44.

Mr. Graham: Okay, and after your basic training where did you go?

Mr. Heidbrink: The assignment to a medical unit, in fact with the 1072 General Hospital, right from the beginning, when the hospital had its (TOO?) compiled they sent us to Brigham City, Utah for training, joint training with Bushnell Army Hospital or General Hospital, a permanent or semi-permanent post. Our people could practice the art, or practice their skills with that unit for six weeks or so.

Mr. Graham: What were, was the basic kind of training that you did, was it medical.

Mr. Heidbrink: In my case I was assigned to the hospital headquarters and I worked under the Sergeant-Major and basically and a couple of other sergeants and that's where the C.O. was and the adjutant and so forth.

Mr. Graham: So you were doing clerk duty at that time?

Mr. Heidbrink: And clerk duty, all the time.

Mr. Graham: Okay, how long did you stay there?

Mr. Heidbrink: We were at Bushnell, I guess up until November, sometime in November of '44, then they shipped some of us, I don't remember, I don't think it was the whole unit, there may have been groups going to Camp Anza, California, where we stayed a few days, we had time to go into Los Angeles for an evening, for a few hours then we boarded the *U.S. General John Polk* at, I think, Long Beach or one of those ports.

Mr. Graham: Where did you go?

Mr. Heidbrink: On thirty days on the *General John Polk* down to the Pacific, with a stop in Melbourne, Australia, but not a stop to get off, and under the southern coast of Australia and into the Indian Ocean. It took about thirty days.

Mr. Graham: Where did you end up stopping and getting off?

Mr. Heidbrink: Nowhere.

Mr. Graham: Where?

Mr. Heidbrink: Nowhere.

Mr. Graham: Oh, you stayed on the ship.

Mr. Heidbrink: We all had to stay on the ship.

Mr. Graham: Okay, so you spent your time there then on the ship.

Mr. Heidbrink: Yes, living like a sardine.

Mr. Graham: Now, this was a hospital ship?

Mr. Heidbrink: No, this was a troop ship.

Mr. Graham: Oh, troop ship. Okay and how long did you stay on there?

Mr. Heidbrink: Thirty days.

Mr. Graham: Thirty days and then when did you get off?

Mr. Heidbrink: About December 11 of '44 or 10th, December 10 or 11, at Bombay, India.

Mr. Graham: Okay and where did you go from there?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, the Red Cross group met us with donuts and coffee and then we boarded a third-class Indian train which took us across India for a period of ten days, more or less, to Ledo, Assam.

Mr. Graham: And when you got there what happened?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, we were assigned quarters which were (Boshabashas?) and everybody knows what a basha is now, as you know what one is and we were assigned a basha and the other usual things and then we had an office, a hospital office so I went with, I took my portable typewriter, the Army's portable typewriter and I was under the jurisdiction of the next in command, some sergeant.

Mr. Graham: Okay, for the sake of the tape why don't you define a "Basha."

Mr. Heidbrink: A basha is an Indian name for a hut. It's a hut made of bamboo. The poles that hold the hut aloft, the roof, in place are maybe four or five inches in diameter, very light wood and then other parts of the bamboo are become strips of leaf, bamboo leaf or some of the substance from the bark and that's woven like a rug and that becomes the wall, the walls, and then there's a thatched roof and I really don't know what they used for roofing.

Mr. Graham: Okay, all right you got assigned a hut, a basha, what happened to you then?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, I think I reported to Tobuli(??) and of course an unwieldy desk of some kind, not a polished desk, it was constructed, I don't really remember and I followed orders, typed and maybe had to take a letter from the coronel, I don't know, I don't remember and then visited with the Indian peddlers who came through, the strangest thing is we were not in any kind of a camp with a fence. We seemed to be among the general population. It was a mixture of some farmland and some forestry, jungle as a matter of fact, with some animals that weren't too friendly, but we weren't, it was not a problem. I can just see the Indian landscape, we had a border of forest and then there were some farms and peddlers would come by, just walked through our camp, trying to sell us something and nobody seemed to mind, they really weren't a pest at all.

Mr. Graham: They were just part of the atmosphere (Laughter).

Mr. Heidbrink: Very informal.

Mr. Graham: Okay, so you stayed there clerking and for how long did you do that?

Mr. Heidbrink: Oh, until about April of '45 when there were efforts to get us into China because our destiny was to set up a hospital in China, Kunming, and eventually in Shanghai which was our final place and some of us went over the road with convoys and I happened to

be chosen for Convoy Number Fifty. I was with the medical officer, Captain Pickens from Little Rock, Arkansas and then another guy, a friend of mine, Jim Wallace, we three then occupied or made up the medical section of that convoy. It was a convoy of quite a number of vehicles with Chinese; I think we had some blacks, black quartermaster people. I don't know how many vehicles, but we had, we three medics, the doctor and Jim I had a six-by-six truck and a jeep and we brought up the rear so that, if there happened to be an emergency of medicine of some kind why the doctor could go to the front.

Mr. Graham: Okay and where did you go to from there, traveling in this convoy?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, we wound our way through Burma to Mission (unintelligible) which is famous. We didn't go into Mission(?), all we were mainly out in the wilds. It was gravel road. The Burma Road was not gravel. The Burma Road was blacktop. We were on a very well-constructed American-made gravel road. From Ledo to, I think it was, Bhamo and we went through forest, no signs of civilization. Bhamo, however was a bombed-out city. We could see some of the Buddha statues in the temples without walls.

Mr. Graham: Let me stop you for just a moment. As you were moving on through these roads and everything, were you treating people on the way or just moving?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, there were really weren't many people to treat. The doctor himself, of course, performed his duties and Jim was a medical technician and I was a clerk, so I had to do the dirty work. I had to check the oil and all that. So I was a load of grease at the end of the day, but that was my job.

Mr. Graham: A grease monkey too.

Mr. Heidbrink: Now I was not a medical technician, now my buddy, Jim, was a medical technician.

Mr. Graham: Okay, after you got to your stopping point, where were you?

Mr. Heidbrink: Kunming, you mean after the trip? Kunming, China.

Mr. Graham: What did you do there?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, I was on detached service for a while with the hospital already there called the 95th Station Hospital that had been there for quite some time, in permanent quarters and I was assigned to various not, the 122nd didn't operate. In India we had out nucleus of people and all of the other people in our group were assigned to other units. The 18th General Hospital the 20th General Hospital and some station hospitals, I don't know what. And when we got to China we started, we took over the 96th Station Hospital.

Mr. Graham: Were most of your patients American, Chinese?

Mr. Heidbrink: I guess we treated some Chinese, I never really got much into the wards. I was in the admitting section for a while.

Mr. Graham: Was it pretty hectic there. Did they come in groups or did you 'all pretty well handle the situation.

Mr. Heidbrink: I think we handled it pretty well.

Mr. Graham: It was in control. Okay. And you were in China.

Mr. Heidbrink: Oh, yes.

Mr. Graham: Okay and how long now did you stay there?

Mr. Heidbrink: I stayed there until May of, I don't know the day, about the middle of May of '46. Not in Kunming, in Shanghai.

Mr. Graham: Okay, now the war was over then.

Mr. Heidbrink: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Okay, what were you still doing the same thing?

Mr. Heidbrink: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Okay, then what happened that you left in '46.

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, I had accumulated enough points to go home (laughter).

Mr. Graham: Tell us about your wayward back home.

Mr. Heidbrink: The trip back home?

Mr. Graham: Yeah, how did you get back home? Did you fly?

Mr. Heidbrink: On a ship. I was not that lucky to be able to fly. I took another troop ship and I don't remember the number of days and landed in San Francisco. It's a funny thing I was thinking recently about the old Army phrase that RHIP, rank has its privileges. I was a technician fifth grade when I went to India on the ship; I didn't get any KP duty because my rank was too high. I (laughter) and coming back I was lucky, I was a master sergeant and my rank definitely was too high so I never had to do any KP.

Mr. Graham: That made you so unhappy (laughter). Well how was the food and such coming back on the ship.

Mr. Heidbrink: I don't remember that wasn't so bad, it wasn't good going; it was (unintelligible) since I was enlisted, why, and we didn't have many special privileges, we just. . .

Mr. Graham: Was the ship very crowded on the way back?

Mr. Heidbrink: Coming back, I don't think so. I don't remember much about the return journey. Apparently it wasn't difficult.

Mr. Graham: And so you landed in big San Fran.

Mr. Heidbrink: In San Francisco.

Mr. Graham: Tell us about your processing out.

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, I don't know very much about that other than the fact that I was there only

for a very short, I don't remember how long, and then I was sent by train to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and discharged there I think it was on June 1946. And then took the train back to Iowa to my family.

Mr. Graham: All right, let's go, something to think about this whole experience of yours. Today, what experiences do you still think about more than the others. I mean talking good and bad. Are there any particular ones you seem to think about more than others that come to mind?

Mr. Heidbrink: Oh yes I think about the trip across India. I saw the terrible situation of the poor Indians. We stopped at train stations. These trains would always stop about four o'clock so the engineers could have tea. It was tea time, it was a British custom I guess and we stopped in railroad stations and we saw some awfully sick people on the platform. We saw barbers giving haircuts and shaves and we exercised by walking through some of the villages occasionally, dusty streets and I remember seeing some kids with their reading books and I remember one reading book on the legend of the story of Black Beauty, uh, Sleeping Beauty. And the little girl and the boy, I don't remember what, showed me the book and they were learning English. This was in some little town.

Mr. Graham: That's great. What are some of the, this is interesting. Tell us about some of the other things you observed there.

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, I observed an ancient Chinese lady; she seemed very, very old. When we camped at night, we cooked our own food, we used these C-rations, I believe or D-rations, whatever it was, but once in a while some old Chinese woman would show up somewhere, out of the bush with eggs for sale, so then we were able to fry eggs with our mess kit and in one case this poor old lady had the bound feet which we heard was a custom of ancient China and until recently also. Her feet were really pathetic, she hobbled.

Mr. Graham: Now when you say bound, not tied together.

Mr. Heidbrink: No.

Mr. Graham: It was wrapped in . . .

Mr. Heidbrink: It was a Chinese custom that the Chinese considered the women should have tiny feet. And so when they were born they just wrapped them so they wouldn't grow normally.

Mr. Graham: Stunted the growth. Well, every country has its customs unfortunately, for the woman that was their custom there.

Mr. Heidbrink: And that was an indication of superior status in society, for only the rich could afford to do that.

Mr. Graham: When you were making your traveling on the truck, before you went into China, what kind of things did you see on the way there?

Mr. Heidbrink: Well, mostly just trees, some rivers, some mountains.

Mr. Graham: Was it pretty country?

Mr. Heidbrink: Yes.

Mr. Graham: A high amount of foliage?

Mr. Heidbrink: Oh, very much. Very tropical foliage because Burma's tropical and we stopped, we didn't get very many baths of course and one day we stopped, I think in was the Salween River early and we, everybody went into the river to take a bath and down the stream there were some Chinese, I think it was, this was in China, some women washing clothes. So all the guys just stripped down and went in and took a bath and down the stream the ladies were washing their clothes. At that time it seemed a little unusual maybe today it isn't.

Mr. Graham: I understand there were cobra snakes in that area. You all ever have that much trouble with those?

Mr. Heidbrink: No not cobra. We did have in a stand in India there was some very deadly insects which I didn't see. Although, once in a while some Indian kid who happened to walk through our camp or somebody would point out some insect that was apparently very, very deadly. But nobody that I know of ever got bitten.

Mr. Graham: You didn't have any; probably any medicine to treat it either, I guess, did you? Well, Mr. Heidbrink, I don't know anything else to ask you, do you have anything else you want to add?

Mr. Heidbrink: Oh, not really we had some, it was really rather comfortable. It was an adventure. It was an adventure. I had always wanted as a kid I saw these movies by Charlie, not Charlie Chan, but Dr. Fu Man Chu, always in the Far East, scenes of the (unintelligible) and where people were stabbed with Peter Lorrie. When I was in Bombay, when we arrived on the ship late one afternoon, we could see the skyline of the city and there were rich Indians in small boats being rowed around, I guess, just for recreation and I remember, I almost cried when I saw, "here I'm finally seeing India," I was really overjoyed.

Mr. Graham: Well, it sounded like you did have a very exciting adventure, as you say and on behalf of the Nimitz Museum I want to thank you for sharing it with us.

Mr. Heidbrink: You're welcome.

Mr. Graham: Well thank you again. Okay.

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Herbert R. Summers
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