

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD A. BERGBOWER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II \* KOREAN WAR \* VIETNAM WAR \* COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Hanna Witherspoon: I am Hanna Witherspoon and today is April, the 16th, 2007 and I am here interviewing Harold A. Bergbower. Mr. Bergbower, will you just tell us where you were born and when?

Harold Bergbower: Okay. I was born in Newton, Illinois, Jasper County, in May 11, 1920.

HW: Okay, and did you join the army or were you drafted?

HB: No, joined the Army Air Corps on the twelfth of May, 1939.

HW: And what happened from there?

HB: I went through school at Chanute Field and became an air mechanic, and, in January of 1940, I volunteered to go to the Philippine Islands. I went to the Philippine Islands by the way of New York City, the Panama Canal, up to San Francisco on the ... *USS Republic*. But anyway, we took the *US Grant* from San Francisco to the Philippine Islands, arriving in the Philippine Islands on the 20th of July, 1940. So I had a year and a half, I guess, of pleasure in the "jewel of the Orient," they called the Philippines. Then on December, the 8th, 1941, we had word that ... Pearl Harbor was bombed, and that was about three o'clock on the 8th of December, and everybody got ready for that. But, at breakfast time on December the 8th the news report said that Hawaii had been bombed and Nichols Field in Manila had been bombed and Clark Field had been destroyed, and being at Clark Field, we thought, I guess, "Not bombed here, so this must be a joke." But then, at ten minutes to one on the 8th of December, the Japanese bombers come over Clark Field and dropped their bombs. I was on my way to my duty station and I stopped to look up at the bombs and the bombers and I saw the first bombs land on Clark Field, and then nothing for a while. Then I was hit with a bomb and when I come to, I was in the morgue at Fort Stotsenburg. There were several people in the morgue. I crawled out and went back to my squadron and had my corpsmen clean me up and went back to duty. Now, I got to go back just a little bit. Before the war, I was a detached service in the emergency landing field in the northern part of Luzon, and I went to Clark Field on the 1st of December 1941, to get paid. The squadron commander said I better stay there because we were going to be at war within a week, and we were. But, anyway, after the ... [battle] I got permission finally to go back up to the landing field to get my possessions. When I was up there I took a ride on that army truck and he said, "I'll pick you up on the way back." He was going to Bagio and I said, "Okay," and I guess about five days passed and he didn't come. Troop B of the 26th Cavalry unit had come by and the Lieutenant saw me and he asked me what I was doing there and I told him I was waiting for transportation back to Clark Field. He said, "Well, I have an extra horse, you better join us because the Japanese are about thirty minutes behind us." [laughter] So I fought with the Filipino Scouts on horseback until the middle of March, about two and a half months. ... By that time, the food was so scarce that they used their horses and the mules from the 26th Cavalry Unit as food. ... The Scouts, asked me what I was going to do and I said, "Well, I don't know. My squadron is already on Mindanao." He said, "Well, we're going by outrigger to Mindanao. You are welcome to join us." So, five or six days in an outrigger, in the open waters, boy, [that's] scary. But we made it to Mindanao, a place called Cagayan. I went down to where my squadron was, they were at the Pulangi River, the second line of defense from the city of Davao, and there I fought in the infantry until the surrender went through. When the surrender went through, I

was on patrol duty and I didn't know that the surrender had went through and the path that I was on we run into a Japanese patrol. We fought for a while and, finally, we were captured. The guy, I can't remember the major's name, but we called him, "Handlebar Hank," because he had a big, black mustache, but he asked me why I was still fighting and I said, "Well, we were at war," and he said, "Yeah, but you have surrendered." I said, "Well, that's the first I've heard of it." Which was true. I stayed with him for almost two weeks until he took me back to a prison camp called Malaybalay, which was in the northern part of Mindanao. We were at Malaybalay for two or three months and then we were transferred to Davao Penal Colony, which was, the city of Davao is on the southern part of Mindanao, and the penal colony was about twenty-six miles from there, in the jungles, and during our time there we farmed. We raised rice, learned how to use a caribou to plow in the fields and the paddies. They would flood the patties, they were probably what, thirty meters square, and you'd get it all mushy and then they'd plant rice. They plant rice going backwards through the rice fields. I was there until June, I think, either May or June. They took us to Davao and put us on a "hell ship." They were going to take us to Japan to work as slave laborers at different factories.

HW: Which "hell ship" were you on?

HB: I don't know. I don't know. But the next part of my story is that when I got on the ship, they packed us in there from shoulder to shoulder, front to back, where you couldn't even sit down. But I remember that part, but then I don't remember anything until we landed in Moiji, in Japan, and we were in the warehouse being hosed off, washed off, when I really started remembering again. From there, we went to a place called Toyama, and there was a steel mill. We scooped ore into an open hearth-type furnace. We were there until the war ended. The way we found out the war had ended is that the Red Cross people came into our camp and said, "The war is over, we have entered the atomic age. The atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that caused the Japanese to surrender." The guards all left the camp. Our captain, a Japanese that was in charge of the camp, stayed with us until we got back into American control, which I thought was pretty nice of him. But, then, we went to Tokyo, on the hospital ship *The Rescue*, and that's where we got our treatment, hot meals, and new clothes, Navy clothes, but that was all right. We got to send a telegram home. This telegram went by Marconi telegraph service in Canada and delivered to my folks' house by regular mail. But to back-track a little bit, my mother had received a letter and a telegram from the president [about] the death of her son December the 8th, 1941. Here it is August, September of 1945, and she gets this telegram. Of course she went into shock and the doctor took care of her. But anyway, I got back to the States in October of 1945. I went by train from San Francisco to Galesburg, Illinois to Letterman General Hospital there. I got to call my folks to tell them.

HW: Oh, my goodness, what a wonderful phone call.

HB: Yeah, it sure was, and they came up to visit. I got released from the hospital and went to my folks' home in Decatur, Illinois; got there on Halloween night. [laughter] But there are a couple of stories I would like to tell. When I served with the 26th Calvary I was going into General King's headquarters during a raid and, of course, you always dismount a horse from on the left side, and a bomb, went on the right side of the horse, and it killed the horse, and I had a piece of shrapnel went through my finger and into the saddle and I couldn't get it out, off. So ...

HW: You couldn't get your finger off the saddle?

HB: Couldn't get my finger off the saddle, and so I finally got my knife and I cut the strap and got the saddle off the horse and I carried that into the headquarters and the General says, "You didn't need to bring the saddle with you," and I said, "Well, if you can get it off, my finger off of that saddle, I would appreciate it." [laughter] They finally sent me down to the woodwork shop and they chiseled it out.

HW: Oh, my. So you went in to see General King with a saddle on your finger. [laughter] You also, well, you said that the horse saved your life.

HB: Yeah. It took all the shock pretty well, except for my hand was still on the saddle, until I reached the ground. Then I couldn't get it off.

HW: There was another story that you wanted to tell me that I heard.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HW: Okay, would you like to give us the prison camps and kind of your journey through the war?

HB: Okay. My first prison camp was in a place called Malaybalay. We were only there for a few months, because there was no farming there in that area. There was no, the only thing we could do to get wood for fires, for cooking, but then our supplies were running low and there was no way to get anymore supplies, so we moved to Davao. It was Davao Penal Colony, which is a prison camp for Filipinos, you know, in peace time. There, our main project was farming. We raised rice and a lot of different vegetables, cabbage, okra, and ...

HW: Now were these vegetables used to feed the prisoners or did the Japanese take the vegetables?

HB: The Japanese took most of them, ninety to ninety-five percent of them, and most of the rice [that] was good rice they shipped off to the Japanese troops and we got the rice that had the weevils and the worms, and everything else in it. All and all, Davao was a well-run camp and we didn't have too many difficulties, except when the prisoners escaped from Davao. Their policy was to shoot ten people for every one that escaped. So I was put in a restricted area, wasn't allowed to go back to the main camp until they decided to either shoot or release us. As you know, well, I was released, along with a bunch of others. At the next camp we got on a "hell ship" that went, I don't know if it was bombed or torpedoed, but it, I found this out later in life because I didn't know anything about this till I went back to the Philippines in 2002, I found that out. The ship was bombed and it went into Leyte for a couple of days for repairs and then went on to Manila. I was in Bilibid Prison for a couple of weeks and was sent to Cabanatuan. I was at Cabanatuan, two, three, maybe a month, but then back to Bilibid and then another "hell ship." [It] was the *Noto Maru* that went on to Japan. We landed in Moiji, Japan and then we went by train, they were slowing and stopping and taking a lot of troops off the train, and we were in the

last group to get off. We were in a place called Toyama, and Toyama is where I stayed until the war ended.

HW: After the war ended, how did the United States inform you that the war was over? Did they drop leaflets into your camp, or did you hear on the radio?

HB: No leaflets, we got it from a Red Cross worker that come in and said that the war was over, that they had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that ended the war. The Emperor decided that that was enough.

HW: Did you ever have food dropped?

HB: Yes. After that, food was dropped, and it was even dropped before the Red Cross people came. The Navy sent over food, hot food in fifty-gallon drums. They dropped them by parachute into our camp, which was probably the best food we had for years and years and years. [laughter]

HW: I'm sure.

HB: Then they dropped parcels of K-rations so that we used [them] on the train going across Japan to the port where the hospital ship, called *The Rescue*, was what we got on.

HW: When you were in Japan were you in a cold area?

HB: Yes, snow in the winter time was maybe four to five feet deep. When we first got there, it was cold and, boy, we worked these furnaces and we'd get sweaty, and then they'd march us back to our camp and our clothes would freeze. At first, we had no heat in the building, no windows and no doors, and we'd wake up in the morning and our clothes would still be frozen. It's a wonder we all lived, because, we'd get back to working and you'd get thawed out.

HW: How did you get to work from your sleeping quarters?

HB: We walked. It was probably a half to three quarters of a mile.

HW: So without food, without much food, little clothing, you walked through the cold to the factory, to the mill, the steel mill, and worked until you couldn't, and then you walked back home.

HB: That's right.

HW: Do you know how long you were there?

HB: From, until, the first part of September of '44, to the 28th, I think, of August of '45. I was in Tokyo Harbor when they signed the surrender on the USS *Missouri*.

HW: That must have been a wonderful day.

HB: [I was] probably about, oh, a hundred yards, maybe a football field away from the battleship.

HW: Oh, my goodness.

HB: But it was a fantastic day. Then, we went from there back to the Philippines and the 29th Replacement Depot to wait for transportation to go back to the States.

HW: How did you get back to the States?

HB: By boat, by ship.

HW: Oh, so that was another long journey.

HB: Yeah, a delightful journey.

HW: Yes, I'm sure. Were there people from your prison camp who were on your ship going back to the United States?

HB: Well, I got separated. You know, in our camp in Toyama, in Japan, there was a lot of people from Scotland and from England, English troops, and I got mixed up with some troops from 200th Coast Artillery from New Mexico.

HW: Well, I'm sure there were thousands of people transported back and they got you back as well as they could. How did you survive this internment? I know there was almost no food, almost no clothing.

HB: One day at a time, I guess, is all you can do. At Davao, I got malaria and dysentery and got down to seventy-eight pounds. Well, when I was able to stand up, I weighed seventy-eight pounds. When I was liberated I weighed a hundred and seven, and when I got back home, from good meals starting August of '45, so I got home in October of '45, I gained up to one hundred and seventy-seven pounds.

HW: Oh, my goodness.

HB: So, I just bloated.

HW: Yes.

HB: In fact, on the ship from Japan to the Philippines I had my stomach pumped out twice. [laughter] You get to the point where you can [only] eat so much, you know, and then you have to stuff yourself, and then you get bloated and sick and, oh man, it hurts bad.

HW: Was there any one person who kind of kept you going, or did just visions of your family wanting you to come home keep you going?

HB: Well, yeah, I always dreamed of being on the farm and, I think, that you live in another world. You had to create another world in your mind to forget where you're at and what your doing.

HW: To survive it.

HB: The memory of your childhood and the food that you have at home. When I did get home, they had rations, and my mother said, "What do you want?" I told her about her pies, you know. "Well, I don't have any sugar." So I went to the, what do you call it? The place where they ration out the food, and they gave me twenty pounds of sugar.

HW: Oh, my. So you got a pie.

HB: Yeah.

HW: What kind of pie was it?

HB: It was cherry pie and rhubarb pie.

HW: You needed the sugar for the rhubarb for sure.

HB: That's right, that's right.

HW: Where do you live now?

HB: I live in Peoria, Arizona which is just a suburb of Phoenix.

HW: Do you have children?

HB: I have three children. My oldest boy is a Lutheran minister in Long Island.

HW: New York?

HB: New York, and my youngest son is retired from the Air Force and lives in Abilene, Texas, and my daughter, who I want to say, is my daughter, my chauffer, my traveling companion, and my best friend; I live next door to her. I lived in Sun City for thirty-five years and she bought some property out on the northern part of Peoria. She had three lots, each an acre and a quarter, and she rented out the one and I said, "Well, when that guy leaves I want to move in there, and I want to bring my two horses." I went back to riding again. It is so nice to live next door to my daughter.

HW: Is she married, and does she have children?

HB: She is married. She has one boy and he's married now and has two children.

HW: Do you tell your family your stories?

HB: No. My wife, I feel so guilty, but I used to wake up at night and she wouldn't be in bed with me, and I would get up and check and she's sleeping on the sofa in the living room. I'd ask her, "Why?" and she would say, "I was restless and I didn't feel too good, and I was restless and I didn't want to disturb you." Years later I found out the reason she was doing this was I kicked her out of bed. Then one day I saw she was bruised and I asked her why, and I had nightmares. After this interview I will probably still have nightmares tonight.

HW: Oh, I hope not.

HB: I always do.

HW: I'm so sorry.

HB: I gave a lecture at Arizona State University. I worked at a golf course, after I retired from the Air Force, and taught golf and played golf and the guy who owned the place, the manager, his son was going to Arizona State University and he asked me if I would give a talk to his class, about eighteen or twenty people. Well, when I got out there, the word got around and the class was all joined, and there must have been three hundred people in this auditorium. I talked for about thirty minutes and asked if there were any questions, and, man, it's amazing that the kids were so interested and had so many questions, and I was there for almost three hours.

HW: Oh, my.

HB: But I certainly enjoyed that, certainly enjoyed that.

HW: You certainly educated those young people too.

HB: I must say also, in 2002 my daughter, she didn't know really too much about what I went through. I got an e-mail about a trip going to the Philippines for the sixtieth anniversary of the fall of Bataan, and I had kind of decided I would go, and then I decided I wouldn't go. But my daughter got a hold of this and she said, "We're going," so, we went.

HW: And was it a good trip?

HB: It was a fantastic trip, fantastic. We stayed at the Manila Hotel when we were in that area. We made the trip up to Camp O'Donnell and Camp O'Donnell was the first POW camp in the Philippines, and they have planted thirty-one thousand trees at Camp O'Donnell, one tree for each guy that died at Camp O'Donnell, and that's American troops and Filipinos.

HW: That's quite a legacy.

HB: They reenacted the Death March, with college students that dressed up like Japanese soldiers and other guys dressed up like the Americans, they fell, and the guy was kicking them and they act like they bayoneted them. It was real nice. Then we went to Cabanatuan, which,

nothing left of Cabanatuan except open fields, and they have a wall with names on it. I have a prize picture at home, the *Stars and Stripes*, you're familiar with them, they were with us on this tour, and they took a picture of me, ... my daughter and I. She saw me looking at these names, and I got a little teary-eyed, and she come up and put her arm around me and the guy took this picture. It was in the *Stars and Stripes*. I have that picture now and I framed it.

HW: Good.

HB: Since then, I have been to the White House twice for breakfast, met General [Richard B.] Myers who was then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and met Admiral Norman Clark, General Michael McGee of the Marine Corps. Met Colin Powell, what a nice guy; we talked for quiet awhile. He was quite interested in my story, and I talked to Mr. [Donald] Rumsfeld, and we had our picture taken with George and Laura, and my daughter was really tickled about that.

HW: I saw your photo album and I saw the pictures with the President and ...

HB: Well, she is a school teacher. Mrs. Bush was a school teacher, a librarian, and they would have liked to talk more, I think, but they rushed us through.

HW: Yeah.

HB: Also, on Veteran's Day, I went back to the White House and took my granddaughter, from New York, and she met the President; Laura, Mrs. Bush wasn't there.

HW: Okay. We have been talking with Harold Bergbower, B-E-R-G-B-O-W-E-R, and this is April 16, 2007 and I'm Hanna Witherspoon. This concludes our interview, unless there is there any thing else you would like to include?

HB: One more item, that my family migrated from Bavaria, came to the States in 1837.

HW: You come from good German stock. [laughter] Thank you so much, Mr. Bergbower, we appreciate you doing this.

HB: My pleasure to be here.

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Reviewed by Elaine Blatt 9/6/2007

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 9/7/2007

Reviewed by Harold A. Bergbower 10/5/2007