

***Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War***

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Ernest Higgins

(World War II - U.S. Army - Infantry Officer)

[Attu, Kwajalein, Leyte, Okinawa]

Date of Interview: October 19, 2002

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This is Larry Rabalais. I'm a volunteer in the Oral History Program at the National Museum of the Pacific War. Today is October 19, 2002, and I'm interviewing Mr. Ernest Higgins. This interview is taking place at the Bush Gallery of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas. The interview is in support of the Center for the 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. Rabalais:

I would like for you to state your name, where you were born, when you were born, and basically tell about your life from that point on.

Mr. Higgins:

My name is Ernest F. Higgins. I was born on June 21, 1913 in Vancouver, Washington. I lived there until I was about ten years old. My Dad was a plumber for the Civil Service and he was transferred to Fort George Wright in Spokane, Washington. We moved there and I lived on the post with my parents as he was with the Army. It was the 4th Infantry Regiment at that time. Through my school years during my summer vacations I spent four years of military training at Fort George Wright.

Mr. Rabalais:

Did you go to school on the post?

Wright. That was then called the Citizens Military Training. I had

No, I was in the ROTC training during the summer at Fort George

Were you doing some type of ROTC type of training?

I was going to school in Spokane, Washington.

before you were commissioned, you were going to school there?

Let me back up a little bit and get some details. On your training

rotation plan of the point system.

through 1945 when I left Okinawa to come back home under the

something was going to happen. I remained with the 32nd Infantry

the expansion of the Army. I think that people probably knew that

Infantry Regiment at Fort Ord, California. That was the beginning of

I was recalled to active duty with the 7th Infantry Division in the 32nd

over to the civilians, so I went back to civilian life. In August of 1940

administration of the CCC out of the Army Command and turned it

Washington. That didn't last too long because they took the

an Exec Officer of the Civilian Conservation Corps at Gto,

commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in January of 1936. In 1939 I was

I had three brothers. I am the only that was in the service. I was

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

headquarters for the 4th Infantry Regiment.

one battalion deal to begin with. It was the 2nd Battalion, and the

No, not on the post, I went to civilian schools. The post was just a

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

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Mr. Higgins:

Our training was basically to Fort Ord, then transferred to San Luis Obispo as an Armored Division. We trained out in the Mojave Desert. On the way back from that training, our vehicles were fading away and we were transferred to Fort Ord and underwent amphibious training on different types of vehicles. We were equipped then with tractor and AT trailers. We didn't know what was going on but we

Mr. Higgins:

Where did you ship out to first?

Mr. Rabalais:

Company

When I was called back into the service I went to Fort Ord. I reported in down there and they asked me if I knew anything about vehicles. I said that I was a pretty good old Model T Ford mechanic. I was automatically made Transportation Officer with the Service

Mr. Higgins:

Yes, this was in the Army. Basically I was trained as an Infantryman. Did you train for a particular specialty, or ... This was in the Army?

Mr. Rabalais:

on top of their bunks in the barracks.

No, Dad was civil service so he didn't get transferred around any, but I did know a lot of soldiers at Fort George Wright because I delivered the papers there when I was a young fellow. I would put them right

Mr. Higgins:

a bit to where it was sort of hard to latch on to one guy?

Was there a particular buddy or friend, or real friendship, that you made in your early years in the service, or did you move around quite

Mr. Rabalais:

over four years in that.

boarded ship. We headed for the Aleutian Islands. We took off and we captured the island of Attu.

Mr. Rabalais:

How did you land? Did you use regular landing craft?

Mr. Higgins:

Landing craft is what we landed in.

Mr. Rabalais:

That bow/ramp type...

Mr. Higgins:

We jumped over the side.

Mr. Rabalais:

That was a pretty chilly area wasn't it?

Mr. Higgins:

Actually, the Aleutian Islands is on the Japanese current, and the island itself doesn't get hardly below freezing, but you do get snow and fog. Those are among the worst things.

Mr. Rabalais:

The storms.

Mr. Higgins:

The division made a landing at Massacre Bay and our regiment went around the north part of the island and came in to what they called Holz Bay. We were supposed to complete the operation in a week or two, but it took us over 30 days.

Mr. Rabalais:

Did you actually meet any resistance at all?

Mr. Higgins:

On a beach landing there is hardly any resistance at all, but to take the island of Attu, which is mountainous, we had to climb up the mountains. The fog would come in and you couldn't see in the fog, but the enemy was behind it and they would sit down and pick us off.

Mr. Rabalais:

Were they dropping mortars?

Mr. Higgins:

Yes they were using mortars.

We came out of Attu with our woos and landed at Scofield Barracks on September 15, 1943. We had basically the northeast area of Scofield Barracks. We did military training, equipment, etc. Then they came out with the Army DUKW Amphibious Trucks. I took

Mr. Higgins:

That is a change in climate.

Mr. Rabalais:

We went from Attu to the Hawaiian Islands.

Mr. Higgins:

After the Attu operation, where did you move to next?

Mr. Rabalais:

That kind of smoothed it out.

Mr. Higgins:

That's interesting.

Mr. Rabalais:

coal and spread it on the roads.

that came in were probably ballast with a lot of coal. We took the

The roads that we built were down to the dock, and all of the ships

Mr. Higgins:

Tundra – spongy like.

Mr. Rabalais:

Yes, down on the base – this part is the tundra.

Mr. Higgins:

Wasn't that pretty boggy terrain, spongy like.

Mr. Rabalais:

as far as we could and drop the ammunition and supplies off.

The caterpillar tractors, put a trailer on behind them and go right up

Mr. Higgins:

Those were permanently used to haul supplies and equipment in?

Mr. Rabalais:

from Massacre Bay in.

the transportation, and that included the tractors and the AT trailers

I was a company commander at that time and I was in charge of all of

Mr. Higgins:

Were you a battalion level officer, or company?

Mr. Rabalais:

command of an Army DUKW unit and trained them on the north side of the island of Oahu on beach landings. Then we boarded an LST out of Pearl Harbor and sailed to the island of Kwajalein. On Kwajalein we made a landing. On the big island of Kwajalein is where I went on. My job was to see that the supplies were delivered on the beach and it was within the hour of the beach landing. We had the supplies on the beach for them.

Once the supplies are piled up on the beach, at some of the beach landings that was a real problem in that the supplies were piling up and they couldn't seem to get them off of the beach and out of the way. Were you involved in any way with that, or did they have a Beach master, or...

There was a beach master there. Actually we took of the stuff right straight up there to out units.

We have a nice deck here in our out area in our combat zone that you might be interested in. It my refresh your memory. I don't know if you've seen it or not.

No, I haven't seen yours, but I've seen several of them. They are still used in some areas for tour boats.

Yes, they are used for tour boats. I have a picture with my own command vehicle that I used going on the island off of Kwajalein. There were having problems with a big boat. They couldn't get any

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

of the enemy out of their bunkers, so the engineers called for a vehicle that could bring in a load of TNT and cone charges. I was the person that brought in the TNT and cone charges. They took care of that and put it on top of the bunkers. I still have my original picture by the signal corps that was in combat readiness, with all of the machine guns and the bumpers, or woven fenders.

Mr. Rabalais:

That was at Kwajalein?

Mr. Higgins:

Yes, that was at Kwajalein.

Mr. Rabalais:

I guess they used those cone charges to try to penetrate concrete bunkers. I guess it is basically a shape charge. Now this was an Army infantry unit – most people think that all the island invasions were done by Marines, but in fact the Army was involved in...

Mr. Higgins:

The Army was involved in the initial landings on all the islands that I'm talking about. We were the first Army units. Perhaps there would be Marines to your right or left.

Mr. Rabalais:

Most Americans don't realize that.

Mr. Higgins:

I know that. They always figures that the Marines had taken to the islands to begin with, but that is not true. The Marines were not on the island of Attu. We landed on the northern part, the beachhead of Kwajalein. The Marines took the northwest islands of Roy, and I don't remember the name of the other little island, but our unit was the one that took the big, main island of Kwajalein and the lower part

Mr. Rabalais: Now, you had received landing training at Hawaii? Is that true?

Mr. Higgins: That was at Hawaii, on the north shore.

Mr. Rabalais: Most people don't realize—they see pictures of the Marines practicing

these, but the Army is also doing that too. That is a very interesting

piece of information.

Mr. Higgins: We were trying to keep our vehicles at the right angle of waves that

were running from four to twelve feet high coming in to make a

landing. The waves would come in, and after they would start

breaking then we could come on through.

Mr. Rabalais: So the deck itself, once it got a grip on the shore, the rubber tired

wheels began...

Mr. Higgins: Yes, the DUKW would take hold first, then the rubber tired wheels

would begin to work.

Mr. Rabalais: The dock that we have here at our display—the metal is not real thick.

Mr. Higgins: It is not thick.

Mr. Rabalais: I don't think it would resist even a solid nose 30 caliber. OK, now

after Kwajalein, you stayed there for a while on the island?

Mr. Higgins: No, we made that landing and our operation was probably about ten

days long at Kwajalein, and then we reboarded the transport ships and

went back to Hawaii.

Mr. Rabalais: OK, you went back to Hawaii.

of the Atoll.

I didn't really have too much at Kwajalein because the Navy had just bombed it. Also the Air Force was bombarding an awful lot of it. Leyte, yes - we had some kamikazes come in, but they were more or

Mr. Higgins:

accidents, enemy action, or shell-fire, or anything that? toward the front occasionally, did you have any close brushes with any close calls, even being in back of the front a little bit, but going back During these island landings, or especially on Leyte, did you have any

Mr. Rabalais:

By-By. the west side of the island of Leyte, and forward on up to the town of relieved from that we went back south to BU49 and crossed over to went on into San Pablo and secured the beachhead. When we were in the Philippines. We made the landing there east of San Pablo. We days later and found out that we were headed for the island of Leyte out to sea. We didn't know where we were going until two or three were there for about ten days, and then we left out of there and got from Eniwetok to the Admiralty Islands south of the equator. We weren't able to get off. Then the orders came that we were to go Kwajalein. When we got to Eniwetok we were onboard ship and were to go to Eniwetok. That is a ten-day trip. It is north of we were out of Pearl Harbor, our orders were taken away and we for the island of Palau in September of 1944. Twenty-four hours after Then, I can't give you the exact time, but we left Hawaii to be heading

Mr. Higgins:

less looking for supply depots. That was part of my job too. We

didn't have too much enemy action there, but on Okinawa we did.

There we had a lot of mortar fire coming into the supply depots.

Did you also participate in Saipan?

No, we did nothing on Saipan or Iwo Jima.

Okinawa is a pretty good sized island, and that certainly got...

At Okinawa we landed on the right side and the first day we got in as

far as Kadena airstrip. The next day we were across the island at

Buckner Bay, and then we turned south.

What were the beach conditions on Okinawa? Was that a volcanic

sand like Iwo, or was more like a sandy...?

More like a sandy beach even on the west side of the island. We

didn't have any trouble there.

Was that pretty much a jungle, or a dry, desert type terrain?

It was just a regular beach landing. We didn't get too much enemy

fire to begin with. Going across the island the Marines were on our

left and we were on the south. From Kadena air strip we went over

to Buckner Bay and turned south and went down through Yonabaru

down to the southern end of the island.

That is getting close to Japan.

They figured we were about 350 miles from Japan when we were on

Okinawa. There were a lot of kamikazes. They were going after the

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

Mr. Higgins:

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Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

When the war ended I was on my way home. At the time I was coming home they had a point system that if you had 85 points you were automatically relieved and got to return home. Well, I had 135 points. I was on Okinawa and was in charge of the unit that was going to go to Fort Lewis. Another buddy of mine and I got lucky when we started reading the roster to ship home because my name

Mr. Higgins:

When the war ended where were you at that time?

Mr. Rabalais:

I dodged a lot. I almost got it in the Philippines.

Mr. Higgins:

is pretty remarkable.

You weren't injured in any way during any of these operations? That

Mr. Rabalais:

I think they had to lift them off of the ship.

Mr. Higgins:

the ship?

Did you carry your own landing barges onboard and side-slip them off

Mr. Rabalais:

Well, you have the landing barges that bring it in onto the beach.

Mr. Higgins:

That has to be pretty tricky if you have any kind of a sea.

Do they do that with the ship booms because those are pretty heavy.

Mr. Rabalais:

ships.

caterpillars and things that we have to lift out of the hole of these

the trip to Attu we were on a troop transport along with our

I was based on a troop transport from Hawaii to the Philippines. On

Mr. Higgins:

You are normally based on a troop transport?

Mr. Rabalais:

ships.

wasn't on it and his name wasn't on it, so we went to the headquarters and wanted to know what was going on. We were informed that the "high pointers" were going to fly home, but they said we would have to wait until a plane was available. That was about another five days away from when the ship sailed. We flew from Okinawa to Guam, Guam to Kwajalein. We landed at Kwajalein and the fellow came out of operations and said that we had dropped an "A" bomb on Japan. We said, "What the hell is an 'A' Bomb?"

Mr. Rabalais:

You had no inking.

Mr. Higgins:

We had no inking of what it is. We were there 2-3 hours and they refueled the plane. Then we were able to get off, wash our faces, do a little shaving, had something to eat, got back onboard the plane and the pilot says after we were in the sky that he has orders to fly directly to Hickam Field.

Mr. Rabalais:

Was that on a C-47?

Mr. Higgins:

It was a four engine plane. Normally they would land at Johnston Island to refuel, but we went non-stop to Hawaii.

Mr. Rabalais:

Then you were discharged on the west coast?

Mr. Higgins:

Yes. I went back in to get a regular examination for the service, but they didn't have a vacancy in the grade.

Mr. Rabalais:

Was that a Captain?

Mr. Higgins:

I was transferred out. To begin with, in Hawaii there was 10th Army

Mr. Higgins: Yes, and I will say this, that every landing you do you are scared

there any things that was particularly a scary situation to you? insights with us is what we are looking for. Just out of curiosity was you had a lot more in your career than that, but sharing these bits and career is what the museum is specifically interested in. I know that

Mr. Rabalais: That was quite a stretch in there. The World War II portion of your

came through for my retirement I had 39 years, 11 months and 7 days.

Mr. Higgins: I stayed in. My military career began back in 1934. When my papers

Mr. Rabalais: So you stayed in?

Staff School for a while at Fort Wright, Washington.

the Reserve staff. I was infantry instructor in the Command General

put me on standby and after a year I said that I would revert back to

home." So when I signed up for regulars I put in for ordnance. They

was ready to come to work for them, and I said "No, I'm on my way

back into a rest area, I went to the ordnance deal and they asked if I

got pretty teed off at it. So when we got to Okinawa and we went

I was not now performing the duties for ordnance. General Arnold

hand for 10th Army. The ones for ordnance disqualified me because

wanted me, so I had the orders in my hand, no I had the orders in my

canceled that. Then when I landed in the Philippines, 24th Ordinance

were rescinded because we were going on another operation. They

Headquarters, was 10th Army Transportation Officer, but those orders

shitless. You don't know what you are going to run into. I'm sorry about the wording.
That is OK
It is a job that was put to us and we did our beset to carry out what we could do.
None of this John Wayne stuff? I'm sure that everybody felt the same too.
When you are responsible for a lot of fellows – being a Company Commander you have the responsibility of notifying the parents of your men that are lost. That had to be one of the hardest things I had to do.
That has to be pretty tough.
Then you would get letters from some of the wives of your men in the outfit and they would want to know why they hadn't heard from them, so then you had to go to your men and tell them to sit down and write a letter to their wife.
Try to encourage them to do that. The museum thanks you. We appreciate you donating your time and sharing these thoughts and feelings with us. The way the system works is we will do a preliminary draft from the tape. It will be sent to you for you to look at and edit. If you want to make changes, please do so, and then send it back. They will then do a final copy, bind it and you will receive

Mr. Rabalais:

Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

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Mr. Higgins:

Mr. Rabalais:

two copies. The tape will remain in the archives of the museum for use by historians who are doing research.

Mr. Higgins:

On the island of Okinawa we took the supplies right through the front lines. The terrain was awfully muddy and we even had to get bulldozers so we could move out. The supply places (end of tape)

Tape #677

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