Edwin B. Heyes, Jr.
Veteran

Michelle Heyes
Interviewer

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Rome Free Academy High School
Rome, New York

Q: Today is April 29, 2005. My name is Michelle Heyes and this interview is being conducted at Rome Free Academy. Today I'll be interviewing my Grandfather, Edwin Berhans Heyes, Jr. who served in the Pacific Theater during World War II as a Navy Seabee.

Q: Your date of birth?
EH: My date of birth was June 20th, 1916.

Q: Where were you born?
EH: I was born in New York City on 77th Street and West End Way [Ave].

Q: Where did you live?
EH: We lived at 706 West End Ave, New York City.

Q: What was life like during that time?
EH: It was very relaxed and peaceful. And not as expensive as it is today.

Q: Where did you go to school?
EH: I went to school at [unclear] Collegiate School which was on 77th Street and West End Ave in New York City. Right across the street from the hospital in which I was born.

Q: Where did you go to college?
EH: Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Q: What was your major?
EH: Political Science.

Q: Where did you go after college?
EH: I went to work for The Chase National Bank.

Q: Where did you end up working for The Chase National Bank?
EH: [Unclear] My first job was in the Check Department where we processed millions of checks [unclear] and we got them from the New York clearing house. [Unclear] It was there I learned to run a check adding machine. My friend is running up and down the numbers so I can [unclear] type them and I also learned how to subtract on the adding machine.

Q: What cities did you work in?
EH: My first job was in New York City. And now I was offered a job in Shanghai, China and I turned that down. And I finally got an overseas assignment in Panama City, Panama.

Q: Is that where you met your future wife Mary Dunning/Downing?
EH: I met her on the ship going down there.

Q: Why was she in Panama?
EH: She was going down to be a nurse at the Gorgas G. Ho RGS [?] Hospital in the canals–which were separate from the city of Panama.

Q: And that's where you got married?
EH: That's where we got married.

Q: How long did you live there?
EH: We were there for almost three years.

Q: So when the War started in 1939, what did you think of it?
EH: I didn't quite understand why it happened.

Q: Did you think that the U.S. would get involved in it right away?
EH: No, I didn't.

Q: What happened when Pearl Harbor happened? What did you think of that?
EH: I think that was terrible.

Q: Was it after that that you decided to enlist or were you almost drafted?

EH: When we lived in Panama in the Canal Zone, we were exempt from the draft–which was going on in the United States at that time. But when my wife and I came back to the United States, the Draft Warden thought I had been dodging the draft because I was out of the country. In order to avoid the draft, I applied for [the] Naval Commission in the U.S. Navy.

Since my previous background had been in banking, I was granted a commission in the Navy Supply Store…Supply Co-op, which I immediately took over to the Draft Warden and shoved in the face of the old man who thought I was dodging the draft [Both Laugh].

Q: When did you enter the service?
EH: In 1943.

Q: And what did your wife think about this?
EH: Well, she didn't have much to say.

Q: But she was pregnant at the time.
EH: She was pregnant [Pause] at the time.

Q: What did your parents think?
EH: They couldn't say much either.

Q: What Unit were you assigned to?
EH: The 25th Special Seabee Battalion.

Q: What is a Seabee?
EH: A Seabee is a Construction Battalion. Prior to their establishment in the Navy, the government hired contractors to go overseas and build airfields and bridges and material–tactical material such as that. But the Navy then thought their engineering group could take it over and be more effective [unclear] than the government itself, rather than using the contractors.

Q: Where were you stationed with the Seabees?
EH: We finally wound up in a place called Milne Bay in New Guinea. Our favorite nickname for it was "Gamma Do Do" [Chuckles].

Q: Why did you call in "Gamma Do Do"?
EH: Just a silly name that one of the sailors thought up [Laughs].

Q: Is that where you trained or did you train somewhere else?
EH: No, we trained in Williamsburg, Virginia. The Battalion was formed in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Q: How were your instructors during training?
EH: Very good. They were Naval Officers who had mostly been through Annapolis [unclear]. Three were known as Reservists, even though we had a Naval Commissions.

Q: Did they prepare you for your duties specifically or did you train with the group and then you went off?
EH: No, the Supply Corps had two primary responsibilities: to supply everything needed both to the ships and to the Construction Battalions themselves and to feed them. That was the primary responsibility of the Supply Co-op.

Q: When did you finally leave for the Pacific?
EH: [Pause] I guess it was in August of '43. No, September of '43. We had finished training…our training was up at the Harvard Law School in the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration.

Q: Why was it up there?
EH: That's where the Navy decided that there were facilities available to be used for the purpose.

Q: When you left in September of '43, where did you have to go specifically?
EH: We took a troop train through the southern section of the United States and many of us thought we'd never get through Texas [Laughs].

Q: You wouldn't survive through Texas?
EH: [Laughs] It was such an expanse, we thought we'd never get out, but we wound up in Fort [?] in California–where there's now an established Construction Battalion Seabee Base there permanently.
Q: You were assigned as a Supply Officer in your Battalion in the Pacific?
EH: Yes, there were two of us.

Q: Two of you?
EH: Yes.

Q: Who was the other one?
EH: His name was Jack Hepplewhite.

Q: Hepplewhite?
EH: H-E-P-P-L-E-W-H-I-T-E.

Q: What did you do as Supply Officers?
EH: My responsibility was to handle the payrolls and food. And Jack's responsibility was to [unclear] other supplies as needed.

Q: So you dealt with the payrolls and the food?
EH: Yes.

Q: What kind of food did you serve?
EH: Food was really not too bad. Some of it was brought over from Australia because Milne Bay was not far from Australia.

Q: Were you assigned any other duties as well?
EH: No.

Q: No? So did you mostly deal on a ship or were you in port on a base?
EH: On a base.

Q: You mentioned in your earlier transcript that the Navy Seabees had equipment that the Japanese could not match. What was the difference between the equipment?
EH: Did I say that?
Q: Yes, you did.
EH: [Laughs] We were supplied amazing volume [unclear] and variety because when the Seabee Battalion was assigned to an area, it was not known whether they would help build an airfield or build a bridge or whatever. It turned out our primary responsibility was a Stevedore Battalion–to load and unload ships. And the supply depot at Milne Bay was one of the largest supply depots in the South Pacific.

Q: So it was basically superior because they had the largest congregation of equipment and supplies?
EH: Absolutely.

Q: And you also had the fastest mobility in order to get it done?
EH: Yes.
Q: Okay.

Q: Were the Japanese [unclear] in there?
EH: They were just forced out. Milne Bay had two prongs that separated them. That means a spick of land surround the Bay. The Navy was on one side and the Army was on the other side. The side that the Army was on was what the Japanese had been using as an airfield and our Airforce had taken that strip over. But by the time we had gotten there, most of the activity had ceased and moved further up towards Japan and the other islands.

Q: How were your Officers on the base?
EH: Great.
Q: Great?
EH: Officers, you said?
Q: Yes, Officers.
EH: Why was there any single one that wasn't quite up to par?
Q: Not really. We had really only two real Navy Officers who had made their career [unclear] and had been assigned to us. All of us [unclear] were primarily Reserve Officers, just like myself. And they had been drawn from the construction area of the civilian population.

The Commander had been involved in some way or another in shipping and he was a Lieutenant Commander. The [unclear] Officer, so far as we knew, had been an insurance salesman and was a full Lieutenant.

They [unclear] both–Jack Hepplewhite and I–were Ensigns at the time, we went along and we got promoted finally to be Two Stripers and it was Full Lieutenants. It's the equivalent of a Captain in the Army. The other men–Commanders of the Company's Unit–were older men and mainly in their fifties. We had two Doctors: a Senior Doctor and a Junior Doctor and a Dentist. And we, as Supply Officers and the Medical Officers, shared the same tent.

Q: What was that like?
EH: That was good fun.
Q: Good fun?
EH: Yes.

Q: What did you guys do?
EH: Well, we slept a lot [Both Laugh]. But the rest of the time we were doing assigned duties. The other Officers in charge of the various Companies–there were five Companies: A, B, C, D, and Headquarters. Headquarters Group included all of us in the Medical and Supply fields.

The other groups had to take their turns down on the docks supplying and resupplying the various ships that came in. They were quite surprised to learn that the Russian ships coming into the Bay had women on board.

Q: Why was that?
EH: Well we…at that point there were no women in our section of the [unclear] anyway and we didn't know that there were any women on board the ships, our own ships at that time. The waves I think had been started, but I'm not sure a lot of them were in the combat zones at that time.

Q: You also said in your interview that you "found the spirit of your entire group most inspiring"–in your experience in the Service. But I always understood that the Seabees were typically in dangerous situations because they had to build bridges and airfields in high-risk zones.
EH: That's quite true. We just didn't happen to be in that dangerous of a zone.

Q: So I take it morale was quite high in that group then?
EH: It wasn't bad.

Q: What do you remember best about your group?
EH: It was amazing that whatever kind of a job had to be done, we had the people who had the experience to take the job and get it done in very good fashion.

Q: Did that have to do with the variety of people you had in the Reserves?
EH: Yes.
Q: 'Cause you said you had an insurance agent and you were a banker.
EH: Right.

Q: What other jobs did they have?
EH: All walks of life. A lot of the men there knew how to handle heavy equipment and it was there that I learned what a sheep's foot was. A sheep's foot was a big, rolling tumbler with spikes on it that looked like the ties on the railroad…and that

was used to break up hard ground when they [unclear]. That was something I knew absolutely nothing…in the construction industry before I got into the Seabees.

Q: Tell me about your Company Commander. What was he like?
EH: He was not a very strong leader. As a matter of fact, when several of us were granted leave to Australia, the Executive Officer got drunk and threatened to kill him. And we heard that by the grapevine when we were in Australia [Laughs]. They had to get the ship's police–the Shore Police–up to take the gun away from our Executive Officer. When I got back from Australia, the Executive Officer was in a straightjacket [Laughs].

Q: What did you do in Australia during that time…when all that fun was happening?
EH: We landed in Brisbane. The dentist and I were the only two that were given leave. And at the time we landed in Brisbane and took the train overnight down to Sydney. There was a young blonde girl in the second compartment who later showed us her home which had tennis courts, but no bathroom. They used outhouses…at that time in Sydney.

Q: And when you returned from Sydney, you found out that your Executive Officer kind of went crazy and threatened to kill your Officer?
EH: Yes. The reason he got crazy was if he got drunk, he got a hold of the medical alcohol.

Q: Ooh. They used that type of equipment in the medical field then still?
EH: Sure.
Q: Don't they normally lock up that type of supply?
EH: Well, yes. They should have.
Q: Well they do now, don't they?
EH: He and the Senior Medical Officer were friends I guess.

Q: Where was the most interesting place to serve when you were in the Pacific?
EH: We only had the one place. We were there all of the three years.
Q: Oh really?
EH: Yes.
Q: Oh.

Q: You remained a supply officer through your entire service there?

EH: I did.

Q: How did you earn your ribbons because you said you earned the American Theater Ribbon, the Asiatic-Pacific Ribbon, and the Victory Ribbon. Is that simply because you stayed in the same place…kept at the same duration?
EH: That's right.

Q: And the Victory Ribbon was after the War ended [Pause] or later?
EH: No, I guess it was after the War ended.

Q: Why were you discharged?
EH: Well, almost all of us wanted to get home and since the Navy at the end of the War had no need for us, many of us were granted honorable discharges and went back to our families.

Q: What did you do after the Service?
EH: I rejoined The Chase National Bank and I stayed there for forty-two years.

Q: What was it like going home after three years in the Pacific?
EH: Wonderful.

Q: And by then your son was about three years old?
EH: Yes, he was.

Q: What did he feel about having his father back?
EH: He thought I was interfering in the relationship between him and his mother and he told me to go back to New Guinea [Both Laugh].

Q: But he warmed up to you after a while, right?
EH: Yes.
Q: Okay.

Q: Are you still in contact with any of the other members in your Battalion?
EH: The few that are left–there are three or four of us–yes, that keep in contact with each other.

Q: Dad told me stories of some of your Seabee reunions. Why was there a papier-mâché Geisha girl in the corner every time?

EH: "Gamma Do Do" Girl. She was brought to every reunion that we had and she was big, black and the usual in the female type that they had out in the South Pacific which consisted of nothing but a grass skirt.

Q: So she was basically there as kind of a mascot or something?
EH: Yes, yes.
Q: But I thought you had that giant bee as the mascot? The Seabee…with the machine gun.
EH: Well we didn't have a giant bee, no.
Q: You had the "Gamma Do Do" girl–okay.

Q: What else did you do at the Seabee reunions?
EH: We talked about old times. We had dances. Many of us took [unclear] and we listed [unclear].

Q: Did you tell stories?
EH: Absolutely.

Q: What kind of stories did you tell?
EH: One of the stories that came out of one of our reunions solved a problem that we had never solved while we were in New Guinea. And it was known as the "Case of the Hams." [Laughs]

Q: What happened in the "Case of the Hams"?
EH: Well a ship had come in from Australia with food stuff and a lot of the food stuff was hams. They had already been prepared to eat. And somehow or another they disappeared from the ship and wound up at the 25th Seabee Construction Area. When we thought we couldn't solve the mystery of who stole them…while we were on the…But one of the reunions…it turned out, basically, there had been one of the Corp. Men who was instrumental. And as each one of the Inspecting Officers went through the tents to try and find who had the hams, they had been passed on to the next tent by the time the Investigating Officers had arrived at that particular tent and they confessed at this one reunion that I was talking about.

Q: So how many years was that…after that?
EH: Oh, that was almost, God, twenty…twenty-five years after that [Laughs].

Q: Did he feel guilty about it or was he just looking back and laughing at it?

EH: No, we look back on it as a kind of a fun trick that there was to have some fun.

Q: Any other interesting stories that popped out of those reunions?
EH: Not…not…not really. Not out of the reunions, no. [Pause] We were lucky to have time for sports, such as softball and four-wall handball. Being part of a Construction Battalion, we built –over the three years we were there– three four-wall handball courts.

Q: What else could you do for entertainment on the topic of sports? Was there anything else?
EH: Once in a while we'd commandeer a small boat and go up a river that fed into Milne Bay and explore how the natives live. [Pause] And we were also able to take pictures of all kinds…some of which you'll have in your hands later.
Q: Okay.

Q: What was it like having a military base so close to a native inhabitation?
EH: Well, I think it was tougher on the natives than it was on us. [Interruption] The area where we had been stationed formally had been coconut palm farms. There was still one Australian Supervisor that was still there. He had married a native girl –very much like the story in the South Pacific, which you've seen on stage and in the movies. The natives themselves lived in huts that were raised up off the ground. They were basically smaller people…than our height would've been. They were pretty scaly because the skin was very dry. But they could climb these palm trees just like monkeys. That's how we got our coconuts, but they always wanted a cigarette before they'd go up [Laughs].

Q: So little trades like that happened every now and then?
EH: Yes, indeed.

Q: Did you like coconuts?
EH: They weren't bad.
Q: They weren't bad, yeah.

Q: Looking back on your military career, how did it influence your life?
EH: It made me respect the motto that the Seabees had, which was "Can do." It certainly was a very good example of what happened when a group of men are put together not knowing each other before. It wound up really as a band of friends and mates–they used to call each other.

Q: Anything else that you would like to add?
EH: That's about it [Smiles].
Q: That's about it? [Pause] Okay, thank you very much.
EH: Very welcome.