Warren C. Hickok
Veteran

Wayne Clarke
Interviewer

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Q: Today is the 13th of January, 2012. We are at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. My name is Wayne Clark. Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and your date and place of birth, please?
WH: Warren Charles Hickok. H-I-C-K-O-K. I was born in the Town of Milton, and I have lived in the Town of Milton all my life.

Q: When were you born?
WH: April 23rd, 1923.

Q: Did you attend school in Milton?
WH: It's the Village of Ballston Spa.

Q: Did you attend high school there also?
WH: Right. The Village of Ballston Spa is in the Town of Milton and the Town of Ballston. So students from both towns, and also from the Town of Malta, all attended school in Ballston Spa.

Q: Did you graduate from high school?
WH: Yes.

Q: What year did you graduate?
WH: 1941.

Q: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?
WH: Yes, I was roller skating in Schenectady, on Erie Boulevard.

Q: Did somebody come over and tell you what happened or did you hear it on the radio?
WH: They announced it over the speaker.

Q: They announced it over the speaker?
WH: Yes.

Q: Did your life change much from that moment on?
WH: I think one of the things that probably changed for everybody was that you couldn't get tires, you couldn't get gas, you couldn't get anything. Most of the people living around the Ballston Spa area, we went to Saratoga or Schenectady for work and school. Some went to school in Albany.

Q: When did you go into the service?
WH: 1943.

Q: From the time you graduated from high school in 1941 to 1943, what did you do?
WH: I went to school at Albany Business College and worked part-time for a Slade tractor company. He sold Caterpillar tractors and similar equipment—big ones, I mean, the kind they use on the Northway. In fact, I really let them draft me, because he had offered me a job in Alaska. He had some equipment up there and wanted someone to keep track of it.

Q: Were you drafted into the Army?
WH: Yes.

Q: And you went in in 1943?
WH: Yes.

Q: Do you know approximately when in 1943?
WH: I don't know. I just remember when I got my discharge. It was about early spring.

Q: Where did you go for your basic training?
WH: I had a peculiar situation. I went from Saratoga to Albany. Stayed overnight and had my first Army meal—beans. If you've been listening to the radio lately, they're rebuilding the Larkin Tavern. It's up next to something like a museum on Central Avenue—it was sold to a man who used to be mayor of Albany. That tavern on the corner, Larkin Tavern. From there, we went straight down to Camp Upton on Long Island. I spent very few days there. I ran into one of the Duel brothers—around here, the Duels are pretty involved in car racing. Then they packed us on a train and we went down to Camp Lee, Virginia. That was quartermaster training.

Q: Did you get through basic quartermaster training there?
WH: Not quite completely. I went through about four or five weeks, and that was it. Then some of us were shipped to Omaha, Nebraska—Fort Crook. That was an ordnance

depot, and we were placed in ordnance school. We were located on the road between Omaha and the capital of Nebraska—Lincoln. They had the Martin bomber plant. They built B-26s there. On the east side, the planes were built. On the south side, the government tested them. On the west side, the Army took them over and tested them. We were right in the middle of all that. It was an old, old camp.

Q: Were you going through an ordnance school there?
WH: Well, the funny part —it was an ordnance school for automotive. I was there for about four or five weeks, and then one day they called a couple of us out and sent us to school in Lincoln, Nebraska—the capital. They were starting a program to send young people to college. We were up there for about four or five weeks, doing basic training again, marine drill and all that stuff. Then we went back and finished up the ordnance training. They pulled a couple of us out again and sent me down to Louisiana. Down there, I joined the Army Engineers.

Q: Were you in school down there?
WH: Yes. First, I went through training for about three months. Then I attended school for pipe laying, station operator work, and also bridge building. We had to build our own roads—there were no roads. We built Bailey bridges. We installed them. Then we finished that phase. We went out and built a pipeline connected to the Red River and pumped water throughout the area—we learned how to pump. Later, I was selected as one of the few to go to what's called station operator training. We were to operate pump stations for the pipelines. One funny thing happened—I was using one of those Army field phones and lightning struck. It hit the line and knocked me flat. Surprised the heck out of me. After we finished that, I went to the station operator school to learn how to install valves and similar systems. Once that was done, I got a short leave and went home for a few days. Then we returned to Virginia and boarded what was supposed to be the 13th-largest ship in the world. It was originally called the Empress of Japan, but when we boarded, it had been renamed Empress of Scotland. We shipped out—we didn't know where we were going. We had both winter and summer clothes. We kept sailing and sailing, and finally someone said, "There's Africa!" That's when we realized we were near Africa. Then we sailed down around the Cape and stopped in Cape Town, South Africa. We spent about a week there.

Q: Did you go ashore?
WH: Yes, I went ashore every day. What they were doing was setting up a false front so that we could return and board the ship again. We never knew where we'd wake up—there or somewhere else. In fact, the day we left, I slept on board. We sailed all the way up along the east coast of Africa, between there and Sumatra. If you've been following the news, there are a lot of pirates in the Sumatra area now. We went up that way, still

not knowing our destination. Then one day, I realized we were pulling into port—you could smell it from miles away. It was Bombay.

Q: Do you recall when that was? AB: I don't know.
WH: It was in ’44. In Bombay. We went right from the boat to trains, and went all the way across India by train. That was an experience in itself. We were told not to buy any food, but some of the guys bought coconuts. Apparently, what the natives were doing was buying coconuts, drilling a hole, drinking the milk, and then selling the coconuts again. The guys got them and got sick.
I don't know how many guys lost their watches. They were in the train, and someone would take the watch right off their arm. It was a different atmosphere over there. We went from there all the way to Calcutta. Then we went up the Hooghly River on what you might call a river barge. They got us on trucks and hauled us into Jorhat—J-O-R-H-A-T. That was our headquarters. If you picture the Bay of Bengal, we went up around right where Bengal meets Burma. We were just about north of that. In fact, you’d come out of your tent and you could see Mount Everest in the morning.

Q: At that time, were you in Burma or still in India?
WH: We were about 10 miles from Burma. We moved in and out of it, depending on where we were. I was working on the Burma Road. In fact, that's where I got hurt. They sent me to two field hospitals. Then they flew me out—by then, the C-46s and C-47s were coming into regular use. They were being used for transport. When the Japanese came in, we lost most of Burma, including the Burma Road. That whole area was gone, we couldn't use it anymore.

Q: Let’s go back a little bit. When you first got to the unit, were you a replacement or did you go with an entire contingent that ended up in the same place?
WH: Most of us were oil field officers. The captain of our company owned his own oil company. We had four platoons, each usually led by a first or second lieutenant. When we laid pipe, we worked in teams of eight or nine men, going out into the field and laying pipe all day.

Q: The unit you were with—were any of the guys people you went through school with? Or were they all new to you?
WH: Very few of them were people I knew.

Q: What were your living conditions like? Did you live in tents?
WH: Yes, we lived in what they called British desert tents—thick canvas tents. When we moved, we packed the tents with us. We could lay about a mile of pipe per day. As I later found out, what we were doing was preparation for the invasion—building up for the war effort. After that, I ended up in the hospital—I went through two field hospitals.

Q: How did you end up in the hospital? What happened?
WH: The roads were terrible. I was in a road accident—we were riding in the back of a truck, and that's when it happened.

Q: Did the truck roll over?
WH: No. We had laid the pipe, but hadn't buried it yet. The truck went over the pipe, which caused it to rock back and forth. These were large pipes. We were constantly on the move—every day or so. We worked in squads of about eight to ten men. But our biggest enemy over there wasn't the enemy—it was malaria and dengue. Everyone got it. I wore leggings 24 hours a day. That's how I got the break I got.

Q: Did you end up with dengue fever or malaria?
WH: I was lucky—really lucky. I used to make sure mosquitoes couldn't get to me. I'd button up my sleeves, button my collar… but some of the guys did get malaria.

Q: Were you taking Atabrine? The tablets to protect you?
WH: I never got that until I was coming home. Then they thought a lot of people had what turned out to be yellow jaundice. At the time, they didn't really know if it was jaundice or something else. But I didn't get that either. Then I went to the hospital—if you can picture it, almost to the eastern edge of Burma. There's the peninsula, and Burma is to the right of that. We had to go above Burma, over the mountains. They were flying gas pipeline segments by plane into China—getting ready for that. And the pipeline we laid was all on the surface—nothing underground. That's what caused so many road problems.

Q: Now, how long were you in the hospital for?
WH: Six and a half months. Most of that time was in Calcutta.

Q: What kind of injury did you get?
WH: It was my right leg. I was wearing leggings. When I got thrown, the leg snapped. Because it was inside the legging, the break didn't go outward—it stayed inside. It broke a bone. I broke the front bone—had fragments like this inside. The back bone overlapped by about an inch and a half. But we were in field hospitals. They didn't have X-rays or anything like that. One of the hospitals was full of Chinese troops. We were right among them—right on the borderline. After that, I didn't know where I was going. They eventually shipped me back to a field hospital, a field equipment plant actually. We had buildings probably 150 feet long, with thatched roofs and mud floors…

Q: Was this still in India?
WH: Yes, still in the Calcutta area.

Q: they didn't ship you to a more civilized place?
WH: No. While I was there, after a couple of days, I got a call to come up front and see a warrant officer. A warrant officer was something I was not familiar with, but he was a very nice man. I met him. He looked at me and said, "I see you know how to type." I looked at him and said, "I haven't touched a typewriter in two years." "Well," he said, "look what I've got." I stood up and looked around at what he had. There were tables, about the width of this thing here, like you'd see at a convention, and probably a hundred guys working, typing with one finger at a time.
He smiled and said, "That's what I've got. You're better than them, I'm sure." He sent me to work with a master sergeant for a couple of days. Then he called me back and said, "Windy Els is going to a rest camp. He hasn't had one since he came over to this country. Why don't you take over his job?" I was given the job. Each morning I had to go up and get the names of the guys who came into the replacement camp the night before. I'd take roll call, tally the numbers, then go over to a full colonel who ran the place. I had to go into his office and put up the numbers—how many left and how many came in—that sort of thing.

Q: What rank were you then?
AB: PFC. That's a smile, isn't it? But I did it. Then I got through that. One day, Windy came back and said to me, "Windy's going into the hospital. He's got something wrong with him. You take his job. I'll take care of you." I thought I'll take it. It couldn't be worse than what I had already been through. Windy went to the hospital, and I kept the job a while longer. Then one day Windy came back and called me in. He asked, "If you had your choice of where to go in India, where would you go?" I said, "Well, there's Bombay, Calcutta—these big cities. There's always something to see around them, even if nothing else." Of course, they all had rickshaws—bicycles in the front, wheels in the back, or the other way around. At night, everything was dark, and riding in one was quite an experience. He said, "You're going to theater headquarters." At that point, I really had nothing to do with ordnance or anything of that nature. It took them about four weeks to get me started, and they issued me a bicycle. I smiled at that.
I was working on the second floor of the capitol. Lord Louis Mountbatten's office was just down the hall. I worked with a bunch of Nisei boys—Japanese born in America. One of them, his father, was part owner of the Dole Pineapple Company in Hawaii. They were all a nice bunch of guys. All of them were Nisei. They would interview people, track what was written, and we'd type it up. We had to fix our own typewriters. They had long carriages—maybe two feet. Cork or rubber wouldn't hold up in the tropics. Rubber didn't work. So I worked there for a while. Then one day, he called me in and said, "You've been over here for a couple of years. Do you like it?" I said, "Yeah." Then he sent me up to...

Q: Were you still a PFC at that point?
WH: Yes. But after that, I started getting promoted about every three months. Within less than a year, I had moved up four ranks. Then they sent us up to Kashmir. You're probably familiar with the area—that's the land between India and China. I lived on a houseboat up there for a week or two. When I got back, they called me in and told me the war was over. Then they said I was going to Singapore. So they flew me down on a British Halifax bomber. We stopped in places like Calcutta, Rangoon, and others on the way. Singapore was very, very nice—right on the equator.

Q: I didn't know we had any troops in Singapore.
WH: We were the first ones there. I wish you could have seen the Japanese officers when they saw the Americans. They bowed, put their heads right down to the floor. I worked down there for about four months, and then they shipped me back.

Q: What were you doing in Singapore?
WH: Same thing—handling reports. They'd bring in maps and write-ups of all kinds. They were translated, and we typed them up. That was top priority.

Q: How many American Army personnel were there? How big was the unit?
WH: Maybe ten.

Q: That's small. Did you work with the British?
WH: They were there, but no, I didn't work directly with them. I was in the British hospital, though, because I got ringworm—just one of the many things you could get over there. We ate in the British mess for a while, and then we came back.

Q: Where did you stay in Singapore?
WH: We stayed in big old houses—beautiful homes. Singapore was probably the most modern city I saw. They had General Motors, Ford, Singer sewing machines—you name it, they had it. The people who lived there had very nice homes. I came back the same route, through New Delhi again. From there, we were taken by train to Calcutta. Then we were loaded onto a British—or maybe one American—Liberty ship. Believe me, you need liberty after riding one of those. Squeaking and squawking, the way they ran… And I was drew [sic] sergeant of the guard. That was something I didn't appreciate—but I got it.

Q: Is that on the boat?
WH: Yes. What they didn't want was any gambling on board. Of course, I suppose I can understand—it could have caused trouble. Then we came through into California…

Q: Did you go through San Francisco?

WH: Yes. Under the Golden Gate Bridge. We yelled and cheered and bang on things. That completed a trip around the world for me—because I had come home over land, and went out across the Pacific.

Q: When did you come back?
WH: I got back about three or four months into 1946. They put us on a train, routed us through Texas, and then up to New Jersey, where we were discharged.

Q: When you were on the Burma Road, were you attacked by the Japanese at all? Any bombing?
WH: Apparently, nobody knew where anybody was—and nobody seemed to care. The hospital was full of Chinese soldiers, and they wouldn't let the nurses touch them. It was considered improper for a nurse to touch a Chinese patient. They would give them something to knock them out, and then they could take care of them. I was within 5 or 10 miles of the front line the whole time I was working up there.

Q: You mentioned fevers and mosquitoes. What about snakes? Any problems with those?
WH: Only one I remember. One guy got a six-footer—he was so proud he chopped it in half and nailed it to something. He wanted to show everybody what he got. We built our own bridges. They were made of ebony—it was the only wood that could hold up in those conditions over there.

Q: When you got back home and were discharged, did you make use of that 5220 Club?
WH: I got back home and immediately started looking for a school—because I wanted to finish up my education. And over the next three or four months, I finished that up. I was living in Ballston Spa, and we went to Albany every day for school.

Q: Did you drive?
WH: Sometimes I rode with someone, and sometimes I took the train. During the war, my sister and her friend went to school together. They both used to brag about where their brothers were stationed—at Uncle Floyd's. In the meantime, the man who would later become my father-in-law was the County Clerk. He would sit out on the porch, and since I came home by train every day, I'd say hello to him regularly. One day, he called me over—and the next thing I knew, I was working for Saratoga County.

Q: What did you do for the county?
WH: I ran the motor vehicle office. Back then, sometimes people would race cars or move them around 10 or 20 times before they even got registered—because it was so hard to get a car at all. But once we got married, money got tight, so I ended up going to work for GE.

Q: Did you know your wife before the war?
WH: No.

Q: How did you meet your wife?
WH: She and my sister were friends—Jan and Shirley.

Q: When did you get married?
WH: That was in 1948.

Q: How many children do you have?
WH: I had four. His mother died in the early 1930s. One of the girls ended up working with the credit union. Back in those days, credit unions were pretty much volunteer-run. About once a month, they gave people involved a dinner and sometimes held a dance. My wife and I—my present wife—were the only two there who weren't married at the time. Jean said the only mother he remembers is the one we had together, since his own mother died when he was just a couple years old.

Q: You said you ended up going to GE?
WH: I went to GE for 10 years. Then all of a sudden, if you didn't have 20 years in, you were out the door. They started laying people off in large numbers. After GE, I sat next to a guy. He asked, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I want to get a job." He asked if I wanted a temporary job. I said, "Maybe." I ended up running the credit union. Credit unions were just starting to grow again after the war. I worked there for 35 years. You know Route 50? We've got one branch down there now. Our credit union does. We have five or six branches in total.

Q: You ended up retiring from there?
WH: Yes.

Q: How old were you when you retired?
WH: I was 62. I took early retirement. After I retired, I spent 10 to 15 years volunteering with the Office for the Aging. For over 10 years, I drove people—anywhere in the county. We picked them up and took them to Schenectady, Albany, Troy—for doctor's appointments, dentists, that sort of thing. I covered the whole county: Schuylerville, South Glens Falls, Waterford, all over. That's actually how I came to meet the lady from the museum. One day she found out how old I was, and the next thing I knew, I was doing the same thing we're doing here—only back then it was about transportation.

Q: Did you ever join any of the veterans organizations?

WH: Yes. Scott Brown and I joined the American Legion. But neither of us really got too much out of it. I used to go to their monthly meetings for a long time and have a meal. Then Harold Nix, our neighbor, joined the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), and I went down there. But they seemed to expect me to tend bar six nights out of seven. And to be frankly honest with you, I didn't think that was what I should be doing.

Q: Did you stay in contact with anyone you were in the service with?
WH: I haven't. Well, Chief Decora—he was the chief of police in Ballston Spa—his son I ran into up in Jorhat. He was near death from flying "The Hump." And Donald Yalk West, from Galway—his wife died, and he used to go down to McDonald's. A bunch of guys would go down there. He was the only one. I never really went down with them, maybe just a couple of times. I did attend a couple of CBI (China-Burma-India) meetings, but they seemed to be mostly Air Force guys. We are alumni.

Q:I know there's a national CBI organization. I remember a fellow we interviewed, his last name was Colony. He was in the CBI, and there were several others too. Some were ground personnel, others were aviation. How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

WH: I'm a lot like him.[the previous interviewee] He said it really changed him, and I feel the same way. I can talk to anybody and get along with just about everyone. I got used to being around people from New York, people from all over the country—even the world. I remember Casey from Boston. He was planning to be a priest. I don't know if he ever made it. Most of the guys I went overseas with came from the oil fields—so they were mostly from Texas. They couldn't say three words without swearing. "Mother" was in just about every sentence—my mother and all that. You get used to it after a while; you just stop noticing it. But someone like my wife, when she met them, she didn't think they were all that nice. I tried to explain to her—that's just how life was out there. One time, we took a trip to Branson, Missouri. We had trouble with the motor home, and a guy offered me a ride. He told me his brother worked for GE in Springfield, Missouri. When I got in the truck, he started swearing a bit, had half a can of beer, and offered it to me. I told him no—I was driving on open roads and didn't think it was a good idea. And that kind of language—well, I hadn't heard that much of it since my time in the service. But those guys, they were real Okies.

Q: Did you get a lot of mail when you were over in the CBI, from back home?
WH: Not too much, no.

Q: What was your food like over there?
WH: Well, quality-wise it was probably good, but by the time we got it, it wasn't too good.

Q: Did you have a lot of C rations or K rations too?
WH: When we went out laying pipe for a day, we'd take one. But honestly, the best food I had overseas was when we went down to Singapore. The Nisei boys—they could really cook. They took dried potatoes, and goodness knows what they mixed with them, but when they were done, they came out as round balls and tasted a lot like french fries. They were gamblers, too—all of them were gamblers. I don't know if that means anything.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to touch on that we may have missed? Or anything you'd like to ask, maybe some stories you've heard over the years that we didn't get into?
WH's Son: Other than the fact that actually breaking his leg ended up being almost a benefit for my father while he was overseas. Because of that, he got to see a lot more of the world and got out of the day-to-day work of laying pipe. In a way, it turned out to be fortunate. But the other thing is that even though he broke his leg while in the military, he refused to take any benefits for it. He never accepted any disability compensation, because as he always said—he just couldn't wait to get home. Now, we've tried to get some VA benefits for him, but it's almost impossible.

Q: Have you tried Congressman Gibson's office?
WH's Son: No, we haven't.

Q: I'd recommend contacting them. He's very pro-veteran. He's a veteran himself.
WH's Son: We've found we could get very little satisfaction from the VA at all.

Q: Don't give up—believe me.
WH's Son: Okay.

[Present photos]

Q: You've got some photographs there. Please hold them up in front of you, I can zoom right in on them with the camera. The one in your left hand—that's you in uniform?
WH: Yes. That's me as a PFC. I thought I was going to be a PFC for life, the way things were going. It was in 1944 in the US.

Q: And the other photograph?
WH: This is one of the temples in India.

Q: I see you were a technical sergeant.
WH: That point I had one more strike back to that.

Q: So you would have probably been a staff sergeant ?
WH: Same as staff sergeant but it was a T.

Q: Another photograph, where did you take it?
WH: This was in New Delhi. And New Delhi is something that might be of interest to someone. It was the first place I had ever been in the desert. They had these things—looked like boxes, maybe half again as big as the top of this desk, with big wheels in the back and wheels in the front. Inside, there were women—all covered up so that all you could see were their eyes. The camel would be pulling it, and the top was all covered with animal skins. We'd look at them; they'd look at us. It was something I had never seen before. That was right in the desert and New Delhi is in the north.

Q: Thank you again.