

**Harris Gibault
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke
Interviewer**

**June 27th, 2017
New York State Military Museum
Saratoga Springs, NY**

Q: Today is June 27th, 2017. We are at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. My name is Wayne Clarke. Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and your date and place of birth?

HG: My name is Harris Gibault. I was born in Winchester, Ontario, Canada, on January 16th, 1918.

Q: Did you go to school there?

HG: Yes, I did—until about third grade or so. It was a regular English-speaking school, just like they have here.

Q: And then you moved to the States?

HG: Yes, we moved to Vermont.

Q: Where in Vermont did you and your family relocate to?

HG: Just outside of Middlebury where the college is. It was in the town of Whiting and there were all farmers.

Q: Did you grow up on a farm?

HG: Yes, I did.

Q: When did you enter the service?

HG: It was March 7th, 1941.

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

HG: I couldn't be drafted. The only thing was I wasn't a citizen.

Q: You're a Canadian citizen.

HG: Yes. The only way I could get in was to volunteer, and that's exactly what I did—I volunteered my services.

Q: Why did you choose the Air Corps?

HG: It wasn't really my choice. They automatically assigned me to the Air Corps. We have to get it straight. It was the Army Air Corps. We still had planes and all that.

Q: Right. The Army Air Corps didn't become the Air Force until 1947.

HG: I believe so. Yes, right.

Q: Where did you go for your training? You mentioned earlier that you left Saratoga?

HG: Yes, I left Saratoga. From there, we all went to Long Island. I forgot the name of the place now, but—

Q: Was it Camp Upton?

HG: Yes. I went to Camp Upton. From there, we were sent to different places. We had a choice, and I chose—I wanted to get out as far as I could. I wanted to go to California, but I only got as far as Maryland. From that point on, I've been all over the world.

Q: Was that your first time away from home?

HG: No. My folks lived in Vermont. I was working down here, outside of Saratoga.

Q: Once you left Camp Upton, where did they send you for your basic training?

HG: It was in Maryland, but I can't remember the name.

Q: After your basic training, did they send you to any kind of aviation school?

HG: No, not really. I wasn't a flyer or anything. I was in the Air Force, but never a flyer. The main thing we were trained for was chemical warfare. That was the main focus. And it didn't take long. I was an eager beaver, probably still am. But it wasn't long before those of us who were willing to step up started getting promoted so we could train other troops.

For the longest time, that's what I did—I trained troops. I became a staff sergeant in not too long a time, maybe a year and a half after I joined. Training troops was something I couldn't stand, but I endured it. Eventually, I went to my commanding officer and said that both of my brothers had been killed by that time, and that's why I wanted to go overseas—to retaliate. But he wouldn't hear of it. He asked, "Does your mother know you're planning to go overseas?" I said, "No, she doesn't." He said, "She's already been through enough. Why would you want to go out to a fighting unit overseas?" But I insisted, pleaded, and eventually I did go overseas. I was with the Army. Our mission over there.

Q: When did you end up going overseas? Do you recall?

HG: I think it was 1943 and in the fall of the year.

Q: How did you go overseas? Did you go by ship?

HG: By ship. Yes.

Q: Do you recall the name of the ship?

HG: It slipped my mind.

Q: Did you get seasick at all?

HG: No, I never got seasick. But I'd like to tell you about that trip. We were in the thick of battle with the Japanese. We left Los Angeles, and it felt like forever before we got to where we were going. The ship stayed far south of the Hawaiian Islands to avoid Japanese submarines—they were very active. We made a stop in Melbourne, Australia, for supplies and such. Then we sailed across the Indian Ocean and landed in Bombay, India. From Bombay, we traveled by train across India to Calcutta. From there, we went up the Brahmaputra River. We ended up in Dhaka.

Q: What Air Force was that? Were you part of the 14th Air Force?

HG: No. It wasn't much of a fighting outfit—it was a supply unit. We were near the Himalayan Mountains. We were supplying the Flying Tigers with their needs. We had planes that could fly over the Hump. They called it the Hump because 10,000 feet is the lowest point in the Himalayas. Flying supplies over it—that's what we were doing there.

Q: You must have been attached to the 14th Air Force, because the Flying Tigers were part of the 14th. And that theater was called the CBI theater: China-Burma-India.

AB: Yes, CBI. That's right.

Q: What was it like over there? Were there a lot of mosquitoes, malaria, dengue fever, and so on?

HG: I wouldn't want to live there if they gave me the whole city of Dhaka. It's probably the poorest city in the world. Still is. We were only about six miles from Dhaka. We had several hangars there—it was a big outfit. The main thing was delivering tools and supplies over the Hump into China for the Flying Tigers. There must have been other places we supplied, but I know that was one of them.

Q: What was your actual job there? Were you still training people?

HG: More or less, yes. Want to know the truth? There was hardly anything to do.

Q: It must have been pretty hot during the summer, and rainy during the monsoon season, right?

HG: Yes. I had a very good friend—he was with the Ordnance. He was like me. He had ordnance supplies stacked up, waiting to be used in actual battle—which, of course, never happened.

Q: Were you ever bombed or attacked by the Japanese at all?

HG: No, that was out of their range. The reason the Flying Tigers were stationed on the China coast was because the Japanese used to come in and attack there. But those guys—the Flying Tigers—were terrific. They were always ready to receive the enemy and shoot them down. The Japanese kept coming, but the Flying Tigers were right there to meet them and fire at them. That was our mission—flying aviation gasoline over there. Planes are completely different today, you know.

Q: Did you ever go up in any of the airplanes?

HG: I did once.

Q: Once?

HG: Over the Hump—one trip, as far as into Kunming China.

Q: How was it?

HG: Honestly, I'd call myself a stowaway or something—I had no business flying. But we did a lot of things over there that we had no business doing. You had to have a little fun once in a while.

Q: What were your living quarters like? Were you in tents or huts?

HG: We had what we called “bashas.” They were buildings made out of bamboo. They definitely weren't airtight. But they were snake-proof.

Q: Did you ever encounter any snakes over there?

AB: Well, there's a long story there. We used to get quite a few vacations—it wasn't 365 days a year of work. One time, a buddy and I were on leave in Calcutta. They had these snake charmers there, and they'd come around with a basket containing a cobra. We were standing there watching, and they let the snake out. The charmers would kind of steer it where they wanted it to go. Well, one snake headed right toward us! We jumped up onto a platform—I said I wasn't coming back down again. But somehow they managed to catch the snake, put it back in the basket, and moved on. They were just looking for a handout. Over there, “beggar” might as well have been everyone's first name.

Q: What was your food like over there?

HG: We only ate our own food—we wouldn't touch anything local. Period.

Q: Did you have fresh food, or were you eating C rations or K rations?

HG: It was actually a mixture. I remember one time we had chickens—freshly killed from over there. But we stuck with chicken. We were well fed. We had a mess hall. Sure we did.

Q: Did you get to see any USO shows, like Bob Hope or anyone like that out there?

HG: We had movies. We used a big sheet stretched between poles as a screen. I forget exactly how we set it up, but that was our screen. The projector—well, it wasn't great, but it was better than nothing. One night, this happened: the runway wasn't far from where we were, and we were watching a movie just as it was getting dark. Suddenly, my God, the biggest explosion you could imagine—we thought we were being bombed. All the lights went out, and everyone ran back to their quarters. What had happened was this: we had some four-engine C-54s on the runway, loaded with high-octane gasoline. One never took off. The pilots were new, inexperienced. The damn thing exploded, all that fuel on board—believe me, it was a real explosion. We thought it was an air raid and everybody ran from their quarters. We found out later that all four crew members were killed instantly. That was just one episode. But flying the Hump—there were a lot of accidents. I mean, the guys just crashed. That was it. We called it “the Hump” because it was the lowest pass in the Himalayan Mountains. Now I've got to tell you about Hiroshima.

Q: Were you there?

HG: I was still in India. That's as far as I ever went—India. We were in our tent that night—it was probably around 9:00. Some guys were playing cards, others were just talking. Then someone came running into our quarters—he was from another tent—and started talking excitedly. He said something like, “A bomb... Hiroshima...” He couldn't pronounce it clearly.

We looked at him and thought, “Jesus, this guy needs to be checked out—he's not right.” It was just so unexpected. We had homemade radios over there—I forget exactly how we built them. The pilots had those radios, and somehow we got one. Anyway, that was the first we heard of the bombing. At first, we didn't believe it. But the next morning, we found out he had been telling the truth. The date was August 6th, 1945. I sometimes mix it up, but that's what it was.

Q: Hard to believe that one bomb could take out an entire city.

HG: Yes. The next morning, that's when we found out what had happened. But before Hiroshima, we figured we'd be there another two years—at least. We really thought we'd be stuck there much longer.

Q: This goes back a couple of months, do you recall hearing the news about President Roosevelt passing away?

HG: Yes, I do remember. I certainly do.

Q: That must have been a shock to everybody.

HG: It was. Roosevelt did a lot for this country. He pulled us out of the worst depression we ever had. My folks were farmers—they managed to survive. But the people living in the cities, working in factories—like the Ford Motor Company—it just shut down at the time. All those men were out of work. Some were committing suicide. It was unbelievable. There was a lot of starvation. Roosevelt was a good man. He really was. He did a hell of a lot for this country.

Q: Then it was Truman who took over. What did you think of Truman?

HG: Truman was all right. But I'm a Republican—I vote Republican. These days, there's no gain either way.

Q: Truman made the decision to drop the bombs on Japan.

HG: Yes, Truman—he was the one. And the Japanese surrendered to him, too.

Q: Once they bombed Japan and Japan surrendered, did you go home right away, or did you stay over there for a while?

HG: No, we didn't go home right away. Not at all.

HG: Was that 1944—the bombing of Hiroshima?

Q: No, it was August of '45.

HG: All right. So it was August 6, 1945—Hiroshima. And Nagasaki was shortly after that.

Q: Once that happened, you stayed over there for a couple more months, it sounds like.

HG: Yes. We had barracks—or more like big buildings—that were fully stocked in case of chemical warfare. They were loaded with shirts, pants, socks, hats, gas masks—everything—just in case of a chemical attack. When the war ended, the commanding officer had me start crating everything up, sealing the boxes to make them waterproof. It was crazy. We were well along in the process when he came to me and said, "Get one of those long trailers from the base, bring it over, load everything onto it, and then come to my office." So I did. I had the engineers do the heavy work. We brought everything over to his office, and I asked, "Sir, what do we do with it now?" He said, "Take it out into the field, pile it up as high as you can, and we're going to burn it." That was fine with me—those clothes were chemically treated and couldn't be worn anywhere except in war. He sent me to get the gasoline. He told me, "Spread it around and light it up." The engineers helped, and when the whole pile went up in smoke, they couldn't believe what they were seeing. But honestly, no one could wear that stuff—it was like wearing rubber clothing. After that, there was nothing to do but wait to go home. You had to wait until you had enough points. I even ran a little store at the port—selling cigarettes and such. The sales weren't great, but eventually, I got out.

Q: You got free cigarettes anyway, didn't you?

HG: Oh no, they were all American—nothing was free. It wasn't long before I went home. I probably stayed about two more months running that little store before I left.

Q: Do you recall if they destroyed any of the vehicles over there—like the jeeps and trucks? I've heard stories that they didn't want them ending up on the black market.

HG: That mostly happened with the ground troops. As for us, we didn't have much of that up in India anyway. Actually, the British troops were the ones guarding our base. Yes, they were—it was the English troops guarding us.

Q: Did you have much contact with the civilian population?

HG: Yes. We were allowed to, but we mostly didn't want to—because it really wasn't a fit place to live anyway.

Q: What about things like malaria? Did anyone come down with malaria or what they call dengue fever?

HG: Not that I recall. No.

Q: Did you have to take those malaria pills?

HG: Yes.

Q: Did they turn your skin orange?

HG: Oh, we got back to—can't think of the name... New Jersey! That's where we ended up being discharged from. Guys were coming in from Europe, and we didn't look like brothers at all. With that damn tan and everything, we looked sick compared to them. It's kind of funny when you think back on it.

Q: You obviously went back by ship again?

HG: I went around the world, actually. I enjoyed that. I left from Los Angeles, went around Australia, and ended up in Bombay, India. From there, we traveled across India by train, eventually reaching Dhaka—which is now in Pakistan, though it was part of India at the time.

That's where the base was, and I stayed there until the war ended.

Q: Each unit had a numerical designation. Do you recall what yours was? Or did it just have a name or title?

HG: I don't really remember. It mostly depended on how many points you had. I came home not too long after the war anyway.

Q: When you came back, did you run into any typhoons at all?

HG: Yes, we did. We all thought the damn ship was going to break in half. That was in the North Atlantic. I don't know why, but they have sea lanes—just like we have roads here. In case someone gets in trouble, there's always someone not too far away to help.

Q: Did you come back in a convoy, or just on a single ship?

HG: No, it wasn't a convoy. Just Individual ship. We were in Dhaka, Pakistan—Dhaka is probably about 1,200 miles from the nearest seaport in Pakistan. I can't recall the name now. We flew there, and the ship was waiting for us. But it had broken down, and they had to send to the States for parts so it could be made seaworthy again.

Q: Did you get seasick at all?

AB: Never.

[Interviewer prompts interviewee to hold up a photo]

Q: Do you recall when that photo was taken?

HG: It had to be around 1943.

Q: Taken in the States then?

HG: Yes, that's right.

Q: How did you correspond with your family over there? Did you get mail regularly? Were you able to write letters regularly?

HG: Yes, sure—we got mail, definitely. I used to write to them, and they wrote to me. It was all what they called V-mail.

Q: Did you receive any packages from home?

HG: No.

Q: I've heard that when people got food sent to them, it was often moldy by the time it arrived.

HG: No. I would never have sent anything like that from home.

Q: When you got back to the States and were discharged, how long had it been since you'd seen your family?

HG: About a year and a half.

Q: Were discharged from New Jersey, right?

HG: Yes.

Q: Was it Fort Dix, New Jersey?

HG: Fort Dix—that's right.

Q: I'm assuming you came home by train?

HG: I did—came home by train, that's right. As far as Albany. Then I called, and someone came to get me.

Q: I'm sure they were happy to see you.

HG: Well, I guess so—but I was even happier to see them.

Q: Once you got back home, did you take advantage of what they called the 5220 Club? It was like unemployment—you could sign up and get \$20 a week for 52 weeks if you wanted to.

HG: No, I never had that.

Q: Did you go to work right away?

HG: Yes. That's right.

Q: Where did you work when you got back?

HG: I went to work right away in Greenwich. They had a little iron foundry there—it's long gone now. At the time, they were making supplies for the war in Europe. They were also making plows—you know, for plowing land. I can't remember the name of the plant, but when things quieted down and there was no longer demand for that kind of equipment overseas, I left the plant. After that, I kind of wandered around—I was a wanderer. I ended up in Pueblo, Colorado, where I went to mechanic school for a year.

Q: Did you attend school under the provisions of the GI Bill?

HG: Yes, I did. After one year, I thought I knew it all—and I actually did know quite a bit. I went back to Greenwich and started working in a garage in Mechanicville—the Ford Garage.

Q: Did you eventually purchase the business?

HG: I was there for a long, long time. Eventually, I had my own business. While I was there, they kind of knew—don't mean to brag—but I was an eager beaver. I wanted to learn everything.

I went to school to learn about automatic transmissions and became a specialist. Later, when alternators came out on cars, I went back to school for that too. Eventually, I was qualified to do just about anything on a car—thanks to that schooling. It was well worth my time. I worked as a mechanic for a long time, and eventually, I had my own place. I retired from that.

Q: When did you end up getting married?

HG: I was lucky. I got married in 1942.

Q: I didn't realize you got married during the war.

HG: Well, things happened that probably shouldn't have—but they did. I mean, I shouldn't have gotten married at that time. I should have waited. But what's done is done, right? Eventually, long after I came home from the war, my oldest daughter was born. And this is my second daughter.

Q: How many children do you have?

HG: Two—two girls.

Q: How many grandchildren?

HG: There's just four. Daniel, Tony, Shelly, and Johnny. Four grandchildren.

Q: Before we started filming, you told me a story about becoming an American citizen. Would you mind sharing that again?

HG: Sure. When my twin brother and I were 18 years old. Actually, it began even earlier—when we were 16. Back then, there were these things called CC camps—the Civilian Conservation Corps. We weren't American citizens, but we weren't really sure what our status was. Boys our age were joining the CCC and making a bit of money. Everyone seemed happy. So we went to Judge Crosby—he was a wonderful man—and asked if we could join. He said, "I'm sorry boys, but you can't get in. You're not citizens." That was a real slap in the face—not from him, because he was very kind—but from the reality of the situation. We couldn't join, and we also couldn't find work. It was the heart of the Great Depression. Joining the CCC would've helped us support our family. Later, when we were 18, we went to another judge—Judge Russell. He and his wife were wonderful people. They helped us fill out all the paperwork to get our first naturalization documents. The sad part was, you had to wait five years before you could apply for full citizenship. We were just young kids—we didn't really understand the process. At one point, my brother and I even talked about going back to Canada. We felt like there was nothing here for us—we couldn't do anything. Anyway, we left it at that. We both joined the military—he went one way, I went another. And for a while, I thought I might never become a citizen. But then, in 1943, I was at Westover Field. One day, my commanding officer called me into the office and said, "You need to report to the courthouse—with two witnesses. You're becoming a citizen." I couldn't believe it. I thought everything we'd done before had been lost or forgotten. But somehow, the process had followed me all that time. I don't know how it happened, but they knew who I was and made it happen. So I went to court—and from that day on, I was an American citizen.

Q: And you were the first one to be sworn in at the courthouse, among the group?

AB: There must have been a hundred people there—it was a big place. But when we walked in wearing our uniforms, they escorted us like we were all generals. We weren't at the courthouse more than ten minutes—and just like that, I was an American citizen.

Q: Let me ask you a little bit about your brother, if you don't mind. Did he go into the service at the same time you did?

HG: No. At the time, I was working in the town of Saratoga, and he was still home on the farm with my parents. So, we didn't go into the service together. I went in first, but within a few days, both he—my twin brother—and my younger brother volunteered too. They ended up in the Solomon Islands. And on July 4th, 1943, my twin brother was killed in action. Funny how things go in this world. We spelled our last name without an "E." My younger brother, Edgar, was also over there, but his name was spelled Gibeault with an "E"—so the Army didn't realize they were brothers. So when my twin brother was killed, my younger brother didn't find out for about a week. Some of the guys who knew both of them finally told him. Edgar had also been wounded—shot straight through the knee. He swore he wouldn't lose that leg no matter what. I was still in the States at the time, in Louisiana, so I took a train about 300 miles to Texas to visit him. I told him, "Ed, that wound is big enough to put a broom handle through. You probably should have that leg amputated." He got furious—if he could've moved, he would've hit me. He was dead set on keeping that leg. But months passed, and gangrene set in. In the end, they had to take the leg off. He was just a kid—only 19 years old.

Q: Is he still living, or has he passed away as well?

HG: No, he died a long time ago. They amputated the leg in Vermont, not Albany like I had been going to. For follow-ups, he had to take the train to Boston. That's where they gave him his artificial leg—well, not eventually, actually he got it right away. It was held on by a belt—very clumsy. So they measured him for a plastic leg. He went home while they made it, and by the time it was ready—weeks or maybe even months later—he had lost a lot of weight. When he got back to Boston to try the new leg, it was too big. They tried stuffing it with socks, but it never fit right. So he went back to using the first leg—the one with the belt strap. He couldn't stand it. He got so damn mad, he took that artificial leg, walked it out to the curb in Brooklyn where he lived, and left it for the garbage man to take. He was the kind of guy who could take a joke—but that leg really got to him. Still, he lived to be 82 years old. But he was only 18 at that time.

Q: Are there any other stories, or anything else you'd like to mention that we haven't touched on? **HG:** Well, I could tell you about Calcutta—but that's just another story. My buddy and I—he was from New Mexico and of Spanish descent—his name was Lazo. We had some time off together and went to Calcutta. We flew in. There was an American hotel arranged for us—that was all taken care of. Anyway, we were out walking the streets and came across a group of snake charmers—that was their business. There were about six of them, and each had snakes in baskets. They'd let them loose and control them like traditional snake charmers. One of the cobras came toward us, and we jumped

right back onto our truck. Those were cobras—maybe not the deadliest snakes, but pretty close. Calcutta was an awfully poor city—really poor. There wasn't much to see, but we did get around a bit. I got lost too. They had trolley cars there. I don't know how we got separated, but somehow my buddy and I lost track of each other. I got on a trolley—it just kept going and going, picking people up. I finally asked someone, "Where is this thing going? I want to get back to Calcutta." And they said, "Oh, we'll get you there. We'll get you back." That was a huge relief. I was so relieved just to get back alive and return to our hotel.

I still don't know how my buddy and I got separated—but we did. That's about all there is to say about Calcutta. Nothing else, really.

Q: After you were discharged, did you stay in touch with anyone you served with?

HG: Yes, I did—there was one guy I kept in touch with. We weren't stationed together overseas, but we had served together in the States. He ended up staying in the service and made it to master sergeant. His home was in [Chi Falls unclear], but I think he was working in Springfield at the time—something related to the military, I believe. He stuck with it and eventually retired from the service. When I knew him, he was a staff sergeant—same as me. We were both staff sergeants at the time. A lot of things have happened since then.

Q: Did you attend any kind of reunions or anything like that?

HG: Well, I belonged to the regional branch of the VFW. But our local VFW post started losing members—one veteran after another passed away. Some died pretty quickly. Eventually, there were only a couple of us left in the community. I said, "We've got to fold up—we can't go on like this." So we sold the VFW post. Now, even though we no longer have a local post, I still belong to the regional VFW. But honestly, I'm kind of in and out. The dues used to be \$20 a year, then it went up to \$30, and now they want \$40. The real reason I'm not that interested anymore is—I don't drink. The main attraction there is the bar. So we'd go in, have a short meeting, and then everyone heads to the bar. But I won't drink—I can't drink. I'm fine with how things are. To hell with it—I don't really care.

Q: You must be doing something right—you're 99 years old.

HG: Yes. 99 and a half!

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

HG: I don't know... We were fighting a war to end it. But since then, it's been this unending thing. I feel sorry for the men who are overseas now—that's how I feel. There were friends and not friends now.

Q: Thank you so much for your interview. I always enjoy speaking with people who served in the CBI Theater—most of the people we interview served in Europe.

HG: Well, I really wanted to go to Europe. I wanted to go there so badly. As old as I am, I still understand French—my people were French. But more than that, Europe just felt like our kind of place, you know? Fighting in Asia... it just felt so far removed, like we didn't really belong there.

Q: Well, thank you again.