

INTERVIEW

Robert B Hungate Sr

YEAR

2006

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Robert B Hungate, Sr

DATE: August 25, 2006

PLACE: Ocean Shores, Washington

INTERVIEWER: Sara McFarland

PROJECT SERIES: Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Robert Hungate joined the Navy after receiving a degree in engineering from Fort Hays State University and served Aboard the USS Warren in the Pacific. Their job was to move troops from one place to another. His ship experienced a typhoon while on the ocean. He transferred to a hospital ship that went to Shanghai in preparation for a land invasion of Japan. The war ended before that occurred; and he came back to the States where he was discharged. He was then employed as an engineer for aircraft companies until his retirement. He and his wife now live in Washington State in retirement.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Entering the service and training and life as an officer on a ship that moved troops in the Pacific and his typhoon experience. Service on a hospital ship and his return to civilian life and his work, after the service, were discussed.

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 hour

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 12 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Hungate, Robert B. Sr.
Interview Date: August 25, 2006

Interviewer: Sara McFarland (SM)
Interviewee: Robert Hungate (RH)
Tape 1 of 2
Side A

SM - I am going to start with a little biographical information to tie Robert into Gray County. Robert, where were you born?

RH - In Cimarron, Kansas.

SM - When were you born?

RH - May 3, 1920.

SM - Who were your parents?

RH - William Frank Hungate and Frances Grace Hungate.

SM - When you were growing up, what kind of things did your parents do? What was their business?

RH - My dad had a grocery store in Cimarron with his father, and they ran that until about 1930.

SM - Getting on into your experiences in the war, you graduated when?

RH - 1938.

SM - You were out of high school when the war began?

RH - Yes.

SM - Where were you then?

RH - In 1938, after I graduated, I started to college at Fort Hays Kansas State University. I went to school there and I graduated in June of 1942.

SM - What was your major?

RH - My majors were math and engineering.

SM - You were or are an engineer?

RH - I thought I would be a teacher at the time because I wanted to be a coach, however, going into the war and such, I more or less went into engineering. I had to go to midshipman school in Columbia University before I became an officer in the Navy.

SM - I have a question. Leading up to the war, before the United States got into the war, everything was happening in Europe. How did that affect you? Were you even aware of what was happening over in Europe?

RH - We didn't pay too much attention to it. The only time that it really hit home was when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

SM - Where were you when that happened, do you remember?

RH - I was in college, sitting down and listening to music on the radio and doing some studying. All at once an announcer came on and told about how the Japanese had hit Pearl Harbor and how that was going to be affecting us.

SM - How soon after that did you think about what was going to happen to you?

RH - I was a senior in college. At that time I was due to be drafted very shortly so I looked into the possibility of other services. I found that there was a C-5-C-7 program. I think that was in the Navy. I went to a recruiter in Dodge City to find more out about it and he said, "You are a candidate for either one you want, but I have to send you to Kansas City." That is when I hopped a train in Dodge City and went to Kansas City. I went to the recruiting station there and was examined and found out that I passed. I was a candidate to be called after I graduated from college to go into the officer training program.

SM - You did get to finish college?

RH - Yes.

SM - You went back to Hays?

RH - I went back to Hays from Kansas City and went back to school and graduated in June, 1942.

SM - From Hays, you went to officers' training school?

RH - I went home first and helped through harvest. In September or October, I got my orders to go to New York City to go into the "Prairie State". It was a converted old war vessel. They had put a top on it like a barge, really. It had a place to train the officers. I lived there for about a month and was transferred to Columbia University where I would attend classes.

SM - Where was the "Prairie State"?

RH - As I recall, it was tied up on the Hudson.

SM - That was like basic training?

RH - It was basic officer training camp. We went to classes where they tried to train us. They called us ninety-day wonders. We were trained in communications and various different branches.

SM - You went to officers' training and to Columbia. Where did you go from there?

RH - I graduated out of midshipman school there and became an officer. After I graduated, I went back to Cimarron for a short visit before I was assigned to Norfolk, Virginia, to Amphibious Forces. From there we took small boat training and trained our crews that we were assigned. That was maybe three month. From there we went to Fort Pierce, Florida, to do some more actual surf landings.

SM - That was training in surf landing?

RH - Training in surf landings in the landing craft boats. We were there three or four months and from there we were sent back to Norfolk where we were assigned to a ship, the USS Warren-APA 53.

SM - APA 53 is the designation of the ship?

RH - Yes.

SM - What type of ship was that?

RH - That was a converted cargo ship that we had about thirty-two different boats on board. Most of them were what they called, LCV-P. They were thirty -two foot boats and we had three that we called fifty-three foot. They landed tanks. The smaller boats landed the Army and Marines or whoever we wanted to land on shore.

SM - So you were actually landing troops on shore.

RH - Yes, we landed troops on various islands like Kwajalein, Leyte and Guam.

SM - What was your particular duty on ship?

RH - Since I had engineering, I was assigned to the boat shop where we had all the motor mechanics that were assigned to each of the boats.

SM - Each of the landing craft?

RH - Each one of the landing craft. They were the ones that kept the boats in running condition and I had to check each landing craft to be sure it was in tiptop condition. Our landing craft were like the main guns of a battle wagon and were how we landed troops on shore.

SM - Were those landing craft inside the big boat?

RH - No, they were hanging on davits on the side of the ship. They usually cradled three onto each davit. They were cleaned up and checked out to be sure that they were in good condition.

SM - How many men were in each landing craft? How many men were on a ship overall?

RH - We started off using four: a motor machinist, two regular seamen to catch the lines. We trimmed it down to two on some and had three on others.

SM - To take care of the boat, right?

RH -Yes, and the big boats had four on them.

SM - How many men would be in the boat to land on beaches?

RH - It varied by how much the boat was carrying and how many they wanted to put on the shore where they were going to go in.

SM - How long were you on the ship?

RH - I guess from 1944 until 1945 when I came back and was reassigned to a hospital ship, USS *Repose*.

SM - What kind of action did you see in the war?

RH - We did landings of Marines that we picked up from a Marine Base in Southern California, and we landed them at Kwajalein. After Kwajalein, our home base was Caledonia and we picked up Army and moved them. We went back to Guadalcanal and picked up Marines and ended up in Leyte or Guam next. We had troops on Leyte and also at Guam. After Guam, we got troops at Leyte. That is when we almost got caught by the Japanese fleet. Our battleships caught the Japs and got them in a "T" and sank a few of them. Afterward we were headed up on the west side of the Philippines to land troops.

SM - Are there any of those memories that are really clear in your mind?

RH - Yes, I think our beach party went into the wrong area to begin with and they got pretty well shot up before they got out and got away. They had to go in and land most of the troops in different areas so there wasn't so much enemy fire.

SM - You were with a battle group?

RH - I think we used to have several APAs for landing troops. I don't know how many soldiers or Marines we ended up carrying. It was a large number and then after we landed the troops on Guam, they were pretty well shot up. Our boats brought the wounded back to our ship. We had like a hospital ship to where we could transfer them.

SM - What was the battle where the Japanese almost got you?

RH - That was the one on Leyte. It was after we landed the troops there. We had a lot of ships in there at the time. Merchant Marine was sort of slow unloading cargo and some kamikazes started hitting some of the ships.

SM - They didn't get yours?

RH - No, they didn't get us, but we had one real close coming in at us, and our five-inch gun hit him with a direct hit. We knocked him out of the sky, fortunately.

SM - You had some good shooting?

RH - Real good shooting, we had some boomers, five-inch, fifty-calibers and thirty-caliber guns going all at the same time.

SM - How was the food on your ship?

RH - I ate in the wardroom all the time. It was good. I couldn't complain. Our stewards and mess boys were real good. Before I would go on watch, I would come up and sit and have a cup of coffee and maybe a couple of pieces of toast which they would furnish for you. It tasted real good before you would go on a midnight watch. All in all, we had real good food. We had quite a bit of lamb that came out of New Zealand and Australia that we ate. Sometimes we thought we were sheep, almost.

SM - I hadn't thought about you eating lamb. What did you do for entertainment?

RH - You could read a book or sleep. When we were in a harbor where we could drop the hook and tie up, we could get movies. We would run them on a main deck. We'd have to put the three big tank lighters down off the deck area. We would have plenty of deck there for movies.

SM - Did you ever go ashore?

RH - Oh yes, we went ashore quite often. We took one trip on one of the boats when we were at Guadalcanal. We drove through one of the islands that had a river that ran through it. It was called Florida Island. It was right across from Guadalcanal. There in Bottom Bay you could see a lot of oil coming up from where the ships were sunk.

SM - After you were with the USS Warren, you went to a different ship?

RH - This was a hospital ship. I was reassigned to it and sent to New York where the ship was being outfitted and rigged and set for the possibility of an invasion for Japan. They were fixing it up so they could do almost any kind of an emergency. At the same time I was on the deck and assigned to communication and navigation where I did a lot of navigating after our ship got underway. We put it in commission there in New York City. We took our first cruise down to Norfolk where we took several shakedown cruises. Mostly, wives followed their husbands down and stayed at the hotel, called SS Chamberlain. It was a very nice place to stay. We enjoyed nice meals at good prices, and they had a nice swimming pool so we could swim. We didn't stay there long. We went out to Hawaii. We went down through the canal and up on the west coast of Mexico, and over to the great state of Hawaii, now.

SM - Through the Panama Canal?

RH - Yes.

SM - That brought something else up. We will get back to the ship in a minute. Did you get married during the war?

RH - Yes, I came back from the Warren and I had a thirty-day leave so I went to Springfield, Massachusetts, where I was married to Lorena Siebert in April.

SM - Had you met her during the war?

RH - Yes, I met her when I was a midshipman in New York City. We had a whirlwind courtship. We met at a tea dance in 1942 on Park Avenue.

SM - One of those wartime romances that lasted forever?

RH - Yes.

SM - Were you able to get mail back and forth?

RH - Yes, we got mail back and forth. When I was in Florida, I planned on getting engaged, but didn't have enough time to get out and get a ring. I got a ring and mailed it to her from Florida. From then on it was official.

SM - How did the mail work on the ship?

RH - You were assigned, of course, to a ship and the mail would be sent to various post offices at places where they thought the ship was going to be. They would accumulate that mail there. If the ship came, they would send it to us. If they knew the ship was going somewhere else, they would send to where the ship was going. We got fairly good mail; not as much as we wanted. That was the way it was during the war.

SM - Did they microfilm it or something?

RH - You could just write a letter and it would be censored and be mailed.

SM - You got back and you got married. When did you have time to get married?

RH - Oh, I had a three-day leave. I landed on the West Coast and I flew into Dodge City and picked up my mother. My dad was going to go, but he couldn't get away. We took the train to Springfield, Massachusetts, where we were married. From there, I reported to my next assignment on the USS Repose, the AH-16. It was a beautiful ship. It was air conditioned throughout and I had a beautiful big stateroom. I was very much a senior officer at that point because I had sea duty and had a lot of different watches. I had to perform various duties.

SM - What was your rank at that point?

RH - Lieutenant JG, in time of the service, I outranked some that were even higher.

SM - You said it was a hospital ship in the Pacific?

RH - Yes, we first went into San Francisco. We picked up a bunch of nurses somewhere along the line. I can't remember if they were to be taken out to Okinawa for them to be there when the big push was made into Japan. That never came about, thank goodness. It would have been a real bloody affair. The nurses we took to Okinawa, and in the meantime we went through the Ira Typhoon. We had a scary affair. The ship was well built and it went through a lot of maneuvers required to get out of a typhoon. We landed the nurses off at Okinawa and left them there. We were ordered to go in with the hospital ship into Shanghai, China. We went up through the Yangtze into the Wang Po where we went into a harbor there. We tied up at the dock and stayed there. That is where I left the ship in December of 1945.

Interviewer: Sara McFarland (SM)
Interviewee: Robert Hungate (RH)
Tape 1 of 2
Side B

SM - I want to know how you got through the typhoon.

RH - The typhoon was real scary. We went up and down and the barometer dropped below twenty-five inches and winds were up to 150 or 160 miles an hour. We headed into a sea that was about seventy-five foot high. As the ship went through those, you know you have expansion joints in the ship. We could hear the old ship stretching out to the fullest of the expansion joints. It seemed like it just stood there and shook for a minute and then relaxed. We would keep doing that every time we went through a big wave or a big crest.

SM - You didn't lose anybody over the side?

RH - No, but once we got turned into it and got the sea on our stern, it cleaned off some of the lifeboats on the rear end when they would be hit by the waves. It just raised them up like they were a cork and smashed them on the deck. It broke some of the cables holding up the lifeboats and they were damaged. We had a certain amount of equipment that wasn't tied down and it floated around. It needed to be lashed down with lines.

SM - Did you get much water in the ship?

RH - No, we didn't get much water. It was only when somebody opened a door and a wave came by and water would come in. The mess cooks had made a great big box of ham sandwiches and the coffee was cold of course. We had ham sandwiches to eat, and I think I was on the deck for about fourteen hours.

SM - What were you doing?

RH - We had a coxswain on the wheel, but you wanted to be sure everything was going right the way you went. Then we were going into the storm and eventually we got into the eye of the typhoon and that is where everything was quiet. The barometer hit its lowest and I had a call from my fellow officer from the engine room. He was wondering what was happening because they were having a hard time keeping a vacuum. I had to tell him that we were in a minus vacuum.

SM - He was trying to keep a vacuum in the engine?

RH - In the condensers was where we were having our trouble and also the boilers.

SM - After you hit the eye of the storm, you hit the storm again.

RH - When we started to go out on the other side that is when we had the ocean hit the lifeboats on the starboard rear quarter. It just picked them up and smashed them like they were so much kindling. The wind, where it hit the ship, was like wire blowing against the side of the ship and it looked like it was sand blasted. From there, we went on into Shanghai and tied up at a dock.

SM - You were there for how long?

RH - Oh, for about a month, I guess it was.

SM - What were you doing while you were there?

RH - I was just waiting for enough time to come around so I could get discharged. I had enough time in so I could have been discharged, but the captain wanted me to stay on until I got my relief. The hospital quarters were the finest they had to offer. I don't know how big my stateroom was, but I had a double bunk in there. I was the only one using the stateroom. I had a desk and a place I could wash and shave. It was right around the corner from where the showers were.

SM - How was the food on this ship?

RH - The food on this ship was excellent.

SM - This was a hospital ship. What kind of medical services were there?

RH - I think they could have performed any kind of medical service because they had a group of doctors on. At least twenty doctors were on that were just going along for a ride, mostly. They could do almost any kind of operation and they could make eye glasses. There was a dentist that could treat teeth.

SM - You had surgical, lab and galleries and others?

RH - We had all kinds of orthopedic surgeons and neurologists. A lot of the officers had chosen to go aboard ship because they had been sitting in some post somewhere doing nothing but examining people for this and that. They were getting bored in their jobs there and wanted a change. They applied to the Navy to be transferred onto a ship.

SM - Describe a fellow soldier or officer who was significant in your experience.

RH - The first ship I was on, our captain was a Naval Reserve and he had been to sea all his life, practically. I think he was a kleptomaniac. Anything he could get hold he liked to grab it. He liked to do metal work, making rings and turning rings on a lathe, something like that. We always had our boat shop to do little

things. I had a chief that would keep him out of there. He was sort of an enjoyable fellow. He was quite a bit older. We had an officer killed up at Bengal and Goff. He had been a star football player at LSU. One of my good friends, Bob Fisher, from St. Louis; he and I went aboard the USS Warren together and we are good friends.

SM - You have kept in touch?

RH - Well, yes and no, we have lost touch in later years.

SM - What did you think about the Japanese that you were fighting?

RH - Well, I didn't know much about the Japanese going into it, other than they had bombed Pearl Harbor. They were out to take over everything they could, United States and whatever. We got to thinking that the only good Jap was a dead Jap.

SM - When did you come home?

RH - I left the ship in Shanghai in 1945, right after Thanksgiving. I rode a ship back called the Sea Fiddler. That was an old cargo ship and that was a rough one. We rode it into Pearl Harbor and from Pearl Harbor rode it the rest of the way into San Francisco. From San Francisco, I caught a train out of there to Chicago where I was discharged. In the meantime, my wife Lorena had flown back to Kansas. I left Chicago and went back to Cimarron and landed there a day or so after Christmas. I had bought a lot of things over in China and I had a big box built and had it mailed back to Cimarron. I had brass things and a mandarin coat for my wife. They did a lot of beautiful carved work and I brought back some boxes that were carved. I distributed them to different places. I brought back a junk, which was a boat that they would sail on the rivers. We stayed there for a month or so and then went back to Massachusetts where I had to start to look for a job.

SM - Where were you when the war ended in Europe? You must have been on the Repose.

RH - We were in New York City. New York City really blossomed out.

SM - How did you feel when you heard about that?

RH - We still had the war in the Pacific and I was still pretty well committed to where I was going to be and where I was going to spend the rest of the war.

SM - Where were you when you heard about V-J Day? Do you remember that?

RH - I think we were in San Francisco. We had just pulled in there. It wasn't too long after V-E Day. When the whistles blew, we were just about ready to tie up. The longshoremen dropped the lines and walked away to celebrate so we had to put a couple boats down and send sailors to take our lines in to tie up at the dock. It was scary for a few minutes because here we were floating and headed in to the dock. The Skipper put everything on reverse and held us just sort of standing in the water until we could get some more lines on the dock.

SM - Did you realize why they had dropped their lines? I'll bet you were mad.

RH - Yeah, they were lucky they were gone when we got to the dock, I can tell you. There were quite a few people that were real unhappy. I didn't have much use for longshoremen from then on. There we were, this big ship; the only thing we could do was to wrap our line around a capstan and try to winch it in with our winches. That's what we tried to do. Also, some of the small boats were almost useless trying to push the ship along.

SM - Let's jump back. You got home and got to Massachusetts. How did your experience change you? You were going to be a coach.

RH - The war experience changed my whole life completely because I figured if I was going into teaching, I would have to go back to school for awhile. I had already had quite a bit of schooling in there, in engineering and college. We ended up in Boston. I met a fellow named Rod (D...) who was a person that helped people that had been discharged. He advised me to go out on what was called, "Hurricane Pay", and make a resume. He asked me what I wanted to be. I told him probably an aircraft engineer. We talked a bit and he decided I should probably go to an accessory aviation company or engine company and end up in an airplane company. I sent out all these resumes and ended up getting a good offer from Hamilton Standard, which was a division of United Aircraft. They manufactured propellers and accessory controls for aircraft. I had been advised that five years in a company is good. You can learn a lot of things. I stayed almost right at five years at Hamilton Standard. In the meantime I had brought my resume up to date and resubmitted it to some engine companies. Pratt and Whitney wouldn't touch me because I was working for Hamilton Standard. Ham Standard, Pratt-Whitney and Commander are all part of United Aircraft. I sent a resume to Ray Aeronautical down at Woodridge, New Jersey. I had a good offer from Woodridge in their engine division. I went down there and helped design and learn about reciprocating engines in aircraft. I, also, went into turbojet when they were designing a lean engine. We got into a military program where we were designing and testing ramjet engines. The ramjet was supposed to be on the Navajo Missile made by North American. Curtis-Ray had made a big facility for testing ramjet. I had gone out to Wright-Patterson for testing out there, too and Tullahoma, Tennessee, and different places for testing. When five years was up and everything at Ray Aeronautical didn't seem exactly right for me. What was going on was that manufacturing started taking over the company and

cutting way back on engineering development work. I thought this might be the time to change again, so I sent resumes out to Boeing, North American, and Douglas. I went into New York and was interviewed by a fellow from Boeing and he said he couldn't give me an offer till they flew me out to Seattle for an interview. We went through that and next thing I knew I was on the road out to Boeing and we ended up there the rest of our life. We first rented a house overlooking the sound and then we bought a house out in Bellevue and lived there until we retired. We moved down to Ocean Shores where we are still retired.

SM - Is there anything you would like to add?

RH - I have to thank the Navy for what I obtained from them in the line of education. I didn't keep up my Naval Reserve, but I probably should have. I have often times regretted this that I didn't, but I would have had almost five years in and it would have given me another point for retirement. That is about it.

SM - Thank you for talking with me.

RH - You are welcome.

Interviewer: Sara McFarland (SM)
Interviewee: Robert Hungate (RH)
End
