

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: Dr. Douglas Stiernberg

Interviewer: Vivi Hoang

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[00:01]

Vivi Hoang: This is Vivi Hoang. I'm here with Dr. Douglas Stiernberg. We're in the meeting room at Moore Memorial Public Library in Texas City, Texas. This interview is for an oral history project about Texas City during World War II. (Sound of adjustments to video camera.) Today is May 24, 2012.

Dr. Stiernberg, could you tell me when your birthday is and how old you are?

Douglas Stiernberg: Sure. I was born Oct. 14, 1927, which makes me eighty-four years old.

VH: And where were you born?

DS: Actually, I was born in Houston because my grandmother lived there. And I have two, had—they're both dead—had two siblings. They were also born there. We were actually born in a little hospital close to where my grandmother lived.

VH: What part of Houston was that?

DS: Well, my grandmother lived on Anita Street and I don't remember the address right now.

VH: Oh no, that's all right, I was just wondering if it was the—

DS: I think it was the Baptist hospital, but I'm not sure. Then of course, I guess after we were a few days old, my mother took us back to Huntsville.

VH: So your family was living in Huntsville.

DS: Oh yes.

VH: Oh, okay. So, we were talking earlier about, you said, you remember when you were in high school during the war.

DS: Second World War.

VH: During the Second World War.

DS: Right.

VH: And you were talking about how a lot of people would come to Texas City other places to work.

DS: To work.

VH: Can you tell me more about that?

DS: I don't really know any more about it than that. I couldn't tell you the names of any of them now. I just remember my folks talking about it.

VH: What kinds of things would they say? What were these people doing when they—?

DS: Oh, they were probably working at the petrochemical plants here in Texas City. And the same thing in Beaumont and Port Arthur.

[2:18]

VH: And they would commute, is that right?

DS: Yeah, but not commute every day, I don't—that wouldn't be practical, take too long.

VH: Okay.

DS: But I'm guessing that they just got a place to stay during the week and would go home on weekends.

VH: Okay, and there was a fair number of people doing that.

DS: Yes. Right.

VH: Did you happen to know anyone doing that?

DS: No.

VH: Okay.

DS: Heck, I was just a dumb kid then.

VH: You were in high school, weren't you? That's true, that's true. So tell me about after you finished high school, where did you go to school?

DS: Okay. I think we graduated in—we graduated in 1944 from high school, I think on a Saturday night, and Monday morning, I started at Sam Houston. Well, now it's called a university but anyway, Monday morning, started that Monday morning. And so I didn't get much vacation there.

But anyway at that time, anytime if you were halfway physically able, when you're 18, you're immediately taken, drafted into the Army. So I took as many courses as they would let me take at Sam Houston. Pre-medical courses. And as it turned out, the Second World War was over before I was eighteen years old. And so I got into medical school pretty young. 'Course, that was four years, and I got out of medical school in 1949.

If you're at all interested in this, I interned, twelve month internship at Jefferson Davis hospital in Houston. And then I worked, I did a general practice for a short while before I went in the Army, which was in, let's see, I think I went in the Army in 1952. And I was in for about twenty-six months, all of it over in Asia, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan.

[4:48]

And then when I finished up—well, let me tell you this, when I was first checked in at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, there was an orthopedic doctor there that had been in the Second World War as a doctor. He had twenty-two months of active duty and they had called him back in. He was quite angry about it. (Laughs.) So I decided that twenty-four months was a good cut-off period and I was going to get twenty-four months and one day in the Army in case they wanted to get after me.

However, after I got out—I guess I was in the Reserves for five years—and then I was completely turned loose.

VH: Oh, I see. And after you finished, where did you go?

DS: After I finished being in the Army? I took residency over at UTMB [University of Texas Medical Branch] in ophthalmology and some ear, nose and throat. You can't do that now, it's either one or the other, but I was able to get some in both.

[6:04]

VH: If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to go back and ask a couple of questions about—

DS: No.

VH: — some of the things you talked about. So you said you graduated from high school and pretty much the next day you started college. Is that right?

DS: Right.

VH: How did that work? Was it a special circumstance, or did school actually start, did college actually start right after?

DS: Well, I don't remember the date we graduated but that would have been in the summertime when I started college, it would have had to be. I remember I started on a Monday morning. As a result of taking extra courses, which I was doing thinking it would help me when I went into the Army, and as I said, war was over before I was eighteen years old, so I did not go in the Army, I just continued with my pre-med courses and I got into medical school pretty young and I think I was either twenty-one or twenty-two when I got out of medical school.

Then, as I told you, I interned twelve months, rotating internship in Houston at Jeff Davis Hospital.

VH: Okay, I see.

DS: You probably never heard of it but it's no longer there. It was the city/county hospital at the time and it turned out to be a very good internship.

VH: Did you always know that you wanted to be a doctor?

DS: Well, when you say, "always knew."

VH: Well, when did you start?

DS: I don't know, I guess when I was back in high school I decided I wanted to be. I had an older brother that was a doctor. My father was a dentist and if you're interested to hear the story how we ended up in Huntsville, I'll tell you that.

He went to dental school at University of Illinois in Chicago. He said at the time there was no decent dental school in the state of Texas. And we're talking about probably 1900 to 1905. Pretty far back. 'Course now, there are several good dental schools in Texas. When he got out of dental school, he used the term, "didn't have a pot or a window," but that means he didn't have much money.

He took a half-time job with the Texas prison system in Huntsville and opened an office downtown half-time. And that's how we ended up growing up in Huntsville, which I think was a fine place to grow up.

VH: I actually just happened to be in Huntsville about a month ago.

DS: You what?

VH: I was in Huntsville a month ago.

DS: Huntsville? Yeah.

[8:55]

VH: It is a very lovely town.

DS: Well, since—now, Huntsville is very, very different from what it was when I was growing up. I would not have recognized it hardly at all. I was up there for business reason here, about, let's see, about six weeks ago. It's totally different from what I knew, when I was growing up.

VH: You said your father—did he have his practice like on the square in Huntsville?

DS: Yes, he did, as a matter of fact, upstairs over a drugstore initially. And then he built a building himself and had his offices still upstairs, second floor in that building, which was just about a block off the square.

VH: How quickly did you finish college? How many years did it take you to finish college for you to be able to go so quickly into medical school?

DS: I had three years' equivalent. Actually I wasn't there three years because I was taking extra courses. The standard load then was fifteen semester hours and that's what most people, I guess, if they weren't in a hurry, is what they did. Well I was taking as many as twenty-six hours and some of those were laboratory courses, which, of course, take more time.

VH: Was that exhausting?

DS: Pardon?

VH: Was that exhausting? How did you get through so many courses in so short a time?

DS: Oh, it wasn't that tough.

[10:33]

VH: Okay. And how did you choose UTMB as your medical school?

DS: Well, my older brother had gone there. He was a medical doctor. He's dead now.

But he had gone. Back—now they apply, pre-medical students apply to many medical schools. UTMB's the only one that I applied to. Went down, the dean interviewed me and took me in.

VH: Had you been to Galveston before?

DS: Yes, uh-huh.

VH: Oh, okay. What was your impression of Galveston back then?

DS: I thought it was pretty. I was unused to seeing that, what's now called Broadway, that big street that goes into Galveston from the Causeway. And of course there are a lot of trees on it in between the two—well, East and West Streets, really.

But I had been to Galveston. The high school had a tour down there when I was a senior, I believe. I remember we went swimming in the Gulf but I can't remember where we stayed. (Laughs.)

VH: Was that your first time to go to Galveston, with your school?

[12:06]

DS: Probably. I think that's probably so.

VH: When you started medical school, did you know what you would be specializing in?

DS: Did I know then? No, I did not.

VH: Oh, okay.

DS: I decided later.

VH: What made you decide to later on pursue ear, nose and throat and ophthalmology?

DS: Well, primarily mine was ophthalmology, which I became what they call board-certified in. My brother, older brother, certified in ear, nose and throat. And we kind of—but we practiced together, which in, if I had an ear, nose and throat problem that puzzled me he could help me and vice-versa.

VH: And after you graduated from UTMB, that's when you went into the Army.

DS: No.

VH: You did the—

DS: —rotating internship in Houston.

VH: I'm sorry. Okay. What was—can you talk a little bit about what your internship in Houston was like?

DS: It was exhausting. This city/county hospital, Jefferson Davis Hospital, was a five-hundred bed hospital. They usually ran at least 525 or 550 patients. They put beds down the halls, it was so busy all the time. But they kept us working almost around the clock. It was exhausting or fatiguing or however you want to call it.

VH: What were your feelings when you finished that internship?

DS: Oh, that I had had a very good internship. UTMB, the medical school in Galveston, had an arrangement with the University of Indiana and I could have gone up there with no problem and interned in their hospital but I chose to do it in Houston and I'm glad I ended up doing it that way.

[14:26]

VH: What made you choose to stay in Houston rather than go up there?

DS: Probably one of the reasons that—I figured I would enjoy interning in a Southern city rather than a Northern one. I grew up in Texas.

VH: I can understand that. And so after your internship, that's when—

DS: Okay, I worked for a short while. I did a general practice. And then I—actually, I started the ophthalmology residency and then I went into the Army.

VH: Were you drafted or did you—

DS: No, I had been in the Reserves and they called me to active duty as I mentioned a while ago over at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. And that's where I ran into the orthopedic doctor that had been called back in and he was unhappy about it.

VH: Okay, do you remember what year that was, when you started your military service?

DS: When I—?

VH: When you started your military service, what year that was?

DS: Let's see just a minute, I can figure it out. I started in 1951, I believe. Yes, that's correct.

VH: Okay. And you were in there for twenty-six months.

DS: Yes. I was determined to get twenty-four months plus one day. It turned out to be twenty-six months.

VH: Can you talk about what your military experience was like and where you were?

DS: Well, as I mentioned a while ago, when I went in at San Antonio, they told me I could have a choice of three places where I could be, wanted to be stationed, which I thought was pretty decent of them.

I chose the Continental United States first; Europe, second—we still had a bunch of troops from World War II over there—and Alaska, third. They looked at that list, I don't why they even asked me; they sent me to North Korea during the winter time.

[16:52]

VH: What's that like?

DS: It's like minus twenty and minus thirty degrees below zero.

VH: Had you ever experienced temperatures like that?

DS: Before? No, sure had not.

VH: What was that like for you, to be in such a different environment than before?

DS: Well, when I was in North Korea, one other doctor from Oklahoma and myself ran what they called a battalion aid station. We caught all of the injuries from the war and illnesses before anybody else. We saw, the two of us probably saw about at least 125 patients every day. The bad ones that had bad injuries, we couldn't do anything other

than maybe sew up little cuts. But we sent them to what they called a MASH hospital, if you've ever heard of that: Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. Well, there were two of them available to us when we were in North Korea.

[18:05]

We worked seven days a week because we were out in the middle of nowhere and there wasn't anything to do if you weren't working.

VH: How big an adjustment was it for you to go from your internship and general practice and starting your ophthalmology residency to the medicine you were practicing there?

DS: Oh, I don't really know how to answer that question. I guess it was quite different in that we started work very early, right after dawn. I'm talking about when we were in North Korea. And we worked until it was dark. Which—but of course, at that latitude, I guess, there weren't that many daylight hours. I don't know how many hours there was.

One thing that happened to us: One morning at dawn—now, this is in North Korea—bombs started going off all around the place. And then the airplanes came back and machine-gunned the whole area so that the four people in my tent were most lucky; none of us got hurt. But a lot of other people did.

VH: Did your responsibilities change as you moved—you said you were also in South Korea and Japan?

DS: Yeah, well, they transferred me to South Korea when the winter was over. (Laughs.) Which was the tough time, that winter.

Incidentally, when that first bomb went off—I'd never heard one before in my life, but I knew what it was—and I rolled off of my cot onto the ground. We didn't have any floors in the tents. We had, we slept in, heavily lined sleeping bags that you could zip up from the outside or inside. But anyhow, I rolled off to the ground and tried to get as small as possible. (Laughs.) And nobody in my tent was hurt.

VH: What happened right after that? Did you immediately fall into action in terms of looking after your fellow soldiers? You said a lot of people were hurt.

DS: Hurt. Yeah, well, we treated the ones that were hurt.

VH: Mm-hm. We were talking about what you did when you went to South Korea. You were saying—were your responsibilities the same?

DS: Yes. However, I don't believe we worked as many hours. (Unintelligible), the place in South Korea, was a tent hospital and I have in my mind it had four hundred beds, which is a pretty good number.

[21:11]

One man that was sent to me had, if you're interested in this, had not been able to swallow for a couple of days. And it hurt him when he swallowed. He had been in what's called a firefight. You probably aren't familiar with that, where you're getting shot at and you're shooting back, you know. And I went, well, I would imagine if I was—which I've never been in, fortunately—but if I was in one, it would excite the devil, the dickens out of me.

Anyway, he had swallowed—we had an x-ray in South, it's a hospital in South Korea. When I checked him over, you know, he said he couldn't swallow for a couple of days. Had an x-ray, which solved the problem. He had swallowed a partial dental plate. It was stuck in his esophagus. It wasn't going to come up and it sure wasn't going to go down.

I called my boss, Colonel Johnson, and he had to cut his chest open and get it out. And he got along fine.

VH: Oh my goodness. What—

DS: The guy was a sergeant, if I remember right. He knew that the partial dental plate was gone, but he didn't know it was in his esophagus.

VH: Yeah, he didn't realize it was down there. What was your reaction when you saw that x-ray?

DS: (Laughs.) My reaction was: I thought he was lucky; it could have been worse!

VH: When you went to Japan, were things different when you went there, in terms of what the country was like, what you were doing?

DS: I thought Japan was a beautiful country. I was kind of surprised to see so many pine trees over there like we had around Huntsville. And I was stationed at a small hospital. There were just seven of us doctors, plus the commanding officer, who did not see patients, at a place called Sendai, Japan, which is on the east coast up about two hundred, two hundred fifty miles north of Tokyo.

That was pleasant duty; it was in a nice building. That beat—far better than North Korea, and better than South Korea, too.

VH: Sounds like it. Do you have any favorite memories during your tour?

DS: I beg your pardon?

VH: Do you have any favorite memories or favorite stories you like to tell from your time?

DS: War stories?

VH: If there's any you'd like to share.

[24:09]

DS: Well, when I was in North Korea, this kid, probably nineteen years old, came in. He had his steel helmet on. There was a bullet hole through the steel helmet right over his forehead. I pulled up the helmet and looked at him and there was a bullet hole in his head right in the forehead.

And he walked in, now remember, and I got—this steel helmet, of course, saved his life—but I got to feeling around and I could feel the bullet in the back of his head. It went around, did not penetrate the skull, went around under his scalp and I could feel it in the back of his head.

VH: That's wild!

DS: Needless to say, I sent him to the MASH hospital, where they have all kinds of facilities at MASH hospital.

One other one that was up there that I remember: Again, a kid, probably the same age, nineteen, came in, said he'd been hit in his neck by some shrapnel. Do you know what shrapnel is? Okay. And I could see a little cut on his neck. While I was standing there, talking to him, he started coughing and he coughed up the shrapnel.

VH: Oh my goodness! What—how big was the shrapnel?

DS: Oh, it wasn't very big, probably, maybe, two or three centimeters, something like that.

VH: So that had been in his—

DS: Yeah. It had to have been above his vocal chords or he wouldn't have been able to cough it up. He did not know it was there until he started coughing. (Laughs.)

[26:01]

I would liked to have saved the shrapnel as a souvenir but he wanted it. He deserved it since it was his. Hit him. (Laughs.)

VH: That's pretty good. Let's see, so after you finished your tour of duty, you came to UTMB, came back to UTMB for your residency.

DS: Correct.

VH: Okay, what, um—

DS: I finished up the ophthalmology residency and took the board, what they took what they call the American Board Examinations, which were in, at the University of California in San Francisco.

VH: Do you have to go out there?

DS: Go out there? Well, we first took a written examination. I took that in Houston. But yes, I had to fly out to San Francisco to take what they call the oral examinations.

And some of the people taking the exams, they were so scared and tense, they could not eat at all while they were there taking the exams. Now, about two-thirds of the people that took the exams passed them but a third did not. They'd flunk them and have to go back the next year and try again.

VH: How did you do?

DS: Oh, I got it the first time. Lucked out.

VH: Did you—

DS: I can remember one incident that I think still funny. I was sitting out in the hall and one of the applicants, ophthalmology applicants, was sitting on a stool doing what we call refracting, where you're fitting eye glasses. For patients they used secretaries I think around the hospital.

But anyway, he was sitting there and he got so nervous and so forth, he fell off the stool, onto the floor. And apparently—they always had two examiners so there wouldn't be any bias problems—they just drug him out to the hall and left him on the floor there and I was next, I went in. (Laughs.) I did not fall off the stool.

VH: Oh my gosh, that's pretty funny. And you said that during your residency at UTMB, the disaster happened.

DS: No, that was when I was a medical student.

VH: Oh, I'm sorry about that. Let's go back; I'd be interested to hear some of your memories about that day. You had said that your, that you went with a professor.

[28:46]

DS: The pathology professor brought three of us, I think it was, over here to Texas City to try to help identify bodies.

VH: Can you talk a little bit about—

DS: They were laid out in a school, I guess I'd say a gymnasium. I guess it was a gymnasium. Anyway, that's where they were laid out in rows. As I said a while ago, we'd measure them to get their height and estimate their weight. As I mentioned a while ago, a lot of them had lost the top of their heads from, I think, standing behind a fence at the time the ship blew up.

VH: What was that experience like for you, coming down to help out with the disaster recovery efforts?

DS: (Laughs.) I certainly never had seen as many dead people as that in my life before. I don't know how many there were in that gymnasium but there were quite a few. And I think, I believe I'm correct, the ones that were never identified, I think they're buried at that cemetery out on the North Loop. Is that not correct? There's a—

VH: I feel like I've read something before—

DS: You, well, I bet you've driven by it.

VH: Quite possibly.

DS: But I think those were the ones that were not identified, so they were—I could be wrong, but I think that's what's correct.

VH: What do you remember seeing of, about this, when you came, when you drove through town to get to that school, what did you see?

DS: To get to the—?

VH: When you were at the school, what did the city look like?

DS: You're talking about Galveston?

VH: Texas City.

DS: Oh. I can't remember much about it. I didn't do the driving, the pathologist drove us over here and took us to the school and then, as I said, the gymnasium, where we did our best we could do.

[30:59]

VH: Returning to your residency at UTMB, after you finished—oh, what made you choose ophthalmology as your specialty for your residency?

DS: Partly because my brother, older brother, primarily did ear, nose and throat. And the two—eye, ear, nose and throat—fit together very, very well.

VH: Did you end up practicing together, you and your brother?

DS: Yes, I did, we did. For a number of years, I don't remember how many years now but for a number of years.

VH: When you finished your residency, was that the next step, you practicing with your brother?

DS: Yes.

VH: Where did you practice? Was that at—?

DS: Well, actually we were with a third person, a lady doctor. And we had one office here in Texas City and one in Galveston. We worked in both offices.

VH: You had said that you moved to Texas City in, um—.

DS: I think '55, 1955.

VH: Okay. Was that—had you been living in Galveston before then? I'm just trying to get a sense of the timeframe.

DS: Okay.

VH: You finished your residency and then—

DS: Yeah, then I came directly over here in 1955.

VH: And then you moved to Texas City. Okay, what made you decide to move and live in Texas City?

DS: Well, if I was going to practice in Texas City, should live here.

VH: Okay. And where in Texas City did you move to?

[32:44]

DS: Let's see. We—my wife is Sally. Sally and myself first lived in a small house, I think it was 304 21st Avenue and we lived there for about ten years. And then we built a place at that address I gave you a while ago, 1509 19th Avenue, and moved to that. We've been in that house now about forty or forty-one years. We've been married fifty years. Fifty years with the same female. (Laughs.)

VH: Let's see here. I think those are mainly the questions I had.

DS: If you're interested in this at all, we have one daughter and one son, both of whom live with their families in Austin, Texas.

VH: Oh, okay. What brought them to Austin?

DS: Where about?

VH: What brought them to Austin?

DS: My daughter had gotten an undergraduate degree at Baylor University in accounting and then she got a master's degree at University of Texas at Austin and she met her husband there in Austin, who's a lawyer, and they settled in Austin.

My son had an undergraduate degree at A&M, a master's degree at UT in Austin. He then worked about three years over in Louisiana as a federal bank examiner. Bankers are jittery about banking; they find fault with them if there's any to be found.

I guess he decided he did not want to do that forever so he went to law school and got a law degree as his brother-in-law had. He worked several places but he ended up, let's see, he spent a year out in Midland, Texas, working with some lawyers out there. And they liked him and he liked them personally but he said it's out in the middle of the desert, a long way from any place.

He ended up coming back to the Houston area and worked up here at Clear Lake and that's when he met his wife, or future wife. And then they ended up moving to Austin and he doesn't practice pure law; he works for the state auditing office. I don't know exactly what all they do.

[35:45]

VH: When you and your wife moved to Texas City, what was Texas City like as compared to what it's like today?

DS: Well, it's certainly considerably larger now than it was then. I don't know what else to say, except that Main Street, which is 6th Street, it was very active and everything. You know now, the main street is really Palmer Highway. And 6th Street, the stores, much of them are vacant now. They were not back then we moved here.

VH: What would you do, when you needed to go shopping or get groceries, where would you go to do that back then?

DS: Back then? I have never found out where the groceries stores are so that I don't do the grocery shopping.

VH: (Laughs.) Oh my goodness!

DS: Of course, I do know where they are but Sally, my wife, does all of the grocery shopping.

VH: I see. When you moved to Texas City, where there any well-known people at the time? I'm trying to get a sense of who were kind of the well-known community citizens when you first moved in.

DS: One of them was Emmett Lowry, he was the mayor here I think for twenty-five years. Died of a heart attack. Let's see, Duke Goddard was a judge, state district judge. His brother Jack Goddard was the mayor here for a while in Texas City.

This might be, sound funny to you, when we settled in Texas City, we started going to, went to first one and then another of the different churches. And we went to what was called, what is still called, St. John's Church, Methodist Church.

VH: St. John's?

[38:14]

DS: And the minister there at the time was a man named Don Willis. And he found out what afternoon I had off from work and he would show up at our house every Tuesday afternoon without fail. 'Course he was a very, very nice guy, still is. I told my wife Sally that if he was going to keep this up, then we would join his church. So we joined the church and he quit showing up on Tuesday afternoons. (Laughs.)

VH: Wow, what persistence.

DS: He's retired, lives in Livingston now.

VH: I forgot to ask: Are you retired, or are you—?

DS: Yes, oh yes.

VH: Okay, how long have you been retired?

DS: Just a minute now. I've been retired twelve years.

VH: Oh okay. How have you enjoyed retirement?

DS: Oh, I enjoy it. I'm lazy. I have become lazy, whereas when I was working, I was working very hard. Maybe twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours some, a lot of days. When my kids were little, I would go to work before they got up in the morning and they would be in bed asleep when I got home at night. I didn't even see them all day long.

VH: Oh, goodness. I'm sure you see a lot more of them these days.

DS: Well, except that now they live in Austin, so we don't—but as they got older, their sleeping hours weren't that late.

VH: That's true, that's true. Well, Dr. Stiernberg, I think those are all my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

DS: Well, one thing: I have enjoyed living in Texas City. I've no doubt, unless my health becomes real bad and we have to move up near our two kids at Austin, I intend to live here the rest of my life.

VH: What do you think it is about Texas City that you enjoy so much?

DS: Oh, I think it's a good place to live, really. The only bad thing, as far as I'm concerned, are these hurricanes that hit every once in a while. But the last one we had, since Texas City now has a dike around it, we did not get very much house damage, certainly no water coming in. The wind did some damage.

VH: Nothing too serious.

DS: No.

VH: Well, I'm going to go ahead and close it here, then. I'm going to turn off the video.

DS: Okay.

[40:57]