

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
**VIRGIL HOUFF**  
Ship service, U.S. Navy, World War II

2011

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**Houff, Virgil.,** (b.1925). Oral History Interview, 2011.

Approximate length: 1 hour 12 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

Virgil Houff discusses his service with the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor during World War II, growing up during the Great Depression, and life after the war. Houff describes his childhood in Austin, Minnesota during the Great Depression and his family history of military service. He outlines his time in the Navy beginning with his enlistment in 1943, his basic training at Great Lakes Navy Station [Illinois], his service at Ottumwa Naval Air Station [Iowa] and Pearl Harbor, Base Eight Hospital [Hawaii] as well as returning home in 1946. Houff gives anecdotes about his life after the service, including use of the G.I. Bill. He describes his involvement with the VFW, the American Legion and other civic men's groups including the Shriners. Lastly, he reflects on his youth and compares the United States, then and now.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Virgil Houff (b.1925) enlisted in the Navy in 1943, and was stationed at Ottumwa Naval Air Station [Iowa], and then at Pearl Harbor, Base Eight Hospital [Hawaii] as ship service until he was discharged in August of 1946.

Interviewed by Molly Graham, 2011.

Transcribed by Lexie Jordee, 2014.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

## Interview Transcript:

Graham: What do you have there?

Houff: It's a picture of me.

Graham: Oh my gosh, so handsome.

Houff: Yep, that's 68 years ago.

Graham: [Laughs]

Houff: Now here's the four brothers, that's living, my younger brother was killed on Saipan you know.

Graham: So tell me about who's in this picture?

Houff: Well there--that's I am. There's Ronald. This Chester was in thirteen battle stars. This one got three battle stars and Malaria. So when he came back in '44, they sent him to Minneapolis, the air station, he couldn't go back in it anymore. These are my sisters and my mother. But it was kinda interesting, you know, I was brought up--I showed you this didn't I?

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: During the depression, we only had one pair of shoes. You know, I loved what I did cause I was livin' in the golden days. Listen if you ever lived in that period in life, you appreciated life. Cause I was, during the depression, you know when I was a baby, my sisters took me to the Eagle theater and I got first prize as a baby. And funny thing about that thing, they said Virginia Houff won first place. And they said it ain't Virginia, it's Virgil, he's a boy. [laughs] I had long curly hair, oh I was so cute.

Graham: Oh man.

Houff: Anyway, during the depression, boy that was rough for us. I mean we starved. I lived in cockroaches, bed bugs, you name it, we did. And of course we never had electricity, we had lamps. Then for fuel, what we did, when the trains came by, you know, these trains with coal in?

Graham: Mhm

Houff: When they stopped, we steal coal off them, we throw the coal down. You know, and do that see. We during the depression-- I remember one time, it was back, oh god, in the '30s. The chinese restaurant were called the Canton Buffet, and they came from Canton, China before the war broke out.

Graham: Mhm

Houff: But everyday at 8:30 I went there and they gave me what soup was left, you know, soup and if they had a few buns. And that was our supper. And years later I got a job there for 25 cents an hour and I was too young, but the waitress always took me home 'cause I was a young boy. And that was kinda nice, at least I had some money and I could buy somethin' to eat. But during the depression, boy if you ever lived during the depression, we starved. I mean starvation. I didn't know what the hell milk was until we got in the service. It was just unbelievable. And my brother Clayton, he was a cute little boy. But you know we walked to the woods one time, you know just kids venturing, and someone shot him in the back, you know. And the boy looked at the wound and I was just young too, so we walked home. We never--we walked all the time you know. And we went home, showed it to my mother, and said you take him to the doctor. Doctor took one look, called the sheriff's office. He said, "where'd this happen?" I said, "Over that park there and there." And I think the guy was named Radco[sp?] They caught him, he said it was an accident, he was shootin' at some trees. So but anyway, Clayton went to the hospital for a week. But poor Clayton always had accidents. I remember he hit his head one time and cut it open really bad when he was a boy. And then, you know, I graduating at Great Lakes, 1943. And Clayton, I didn't know Clayton joined the service. My dad signed for him, he was only 17. But he found my company, he came up and says, "Now Virgil, take care of Mother." He said, "I just joined the Navy Corpsman with the fleet marines." Six months later, he was dead. Yeah, just a young boy. Never lived his life, and it stopped there.

Graham: Is he in--in this picture--.

Houff: Well this is a group picture, taken--I don't know who took it but it was after the war naturally. I'm just guessing, I'm gonna say about '65, maybe '70. But see Jimmy, my brother, he was in before Pearl Harbor. And my two brothers here, Ronald and Chester, went in together, '42 they were sent to San Diego. They was placed on the same ship, they took 'em all because--remember the Sullivan brothers? Five Sullivan brothers died on the ship. They said oh no, no more, we're splitting 'em up. So Chester was transferred to the cruiser Chicago. But the ship was overloaded so they transferred him on the ship USS Phillips. That's the time the Midway Battle started. Chester's ship went up to Attu Island see and Ronald went to the Pacific. And the Chicago submarine was sunk and he's picking up survivors, couldn't find his brother, didn't know he was transferred, see, but that was kinda interesting. But things worked out and what my--now get back to me in the service, I went in in '43. I graduated at Great Lakes and the first place they sent me was the Ottumwa, Iowa Navy Air Station. And then what I did, I sat on a map where the planes were assigned, and I'd write down the numbers of the cadets, see, and I thought I was gonna get an aircraft carrier. Then 1944, everybody--well I was only a seaman first class. My third class petty officer did

come too late, so most of 'em went to Florida for aircraft carriers. And [cough] I'm gonna get a cough drop.

Graham: Okay I've got some water here too if you'd like some.

Houff: Oh yeah, let's see if I got a cough drop. I got cancer in my throat.

Graham: Oh no.

Houff: Yeah.

Graham: Yep I got it for you. Here you go. Virgil before we keep going, I just have to do a little introduction for the tape, for the recording.

Houff: Okay

Graham: And so that's just me saying--.

Houff: Now where was I?

Graham: What's that?

Houff: Where was I talking about?

Graham: You were about to talk about your service.

Houff: Oh yeah, my service. And I told you about Clayton, we met for the first time. Oh yeah, I was telling about Ottuma Naval Air Station.

Graham: Right

Houff: Now I'm on track again, you know I'm 86 going on 87. But anyway, in '44, most of the crew went to Florida on aircraft carrier. Me, one man draft, I was sent to San Francisco, market street, OGU, out-going unit. They didn't know what to do with me, they sent me to Treasure Island. OGU, that's out going unit, they didn't know what to do with me, they sent me to Sacramento, California, out going unit. Said I'd be just one man draft. Then they sent me back to San Francisco and finally I got a ship. The worst ship in the Navy you ever could get. It was an LSM-178. It was flat bottom, flat bottom ship. And I'll never forget on the convoy, we left the convoy San Francisco and we had tile shackled down for Guam. We were going to Guam. And they put me in the bowel of the ship, you know, and boy did I get chronicle sea sickness, and boy I mean I was sick. The ship goes, see, up and down, and it goes "doom doom doom" and me, 18 years old, course I almost died. Boy I don't know how I got back to my sack, boy I sat there. And then, oh, we went back to San Francisco cause the tiles broke loose. And so they put on seven 50-caliber machine guns, on the thing. We started out

again, course chronicle sea sickness. And I'll never forget, we got to Pearl Harbor, they had general quarters and I was a machine-gunner. I never shot a machine-gunner, how the hell do I shoot a machine gun? And then I had a loader, and then they had a airplane coming by, see, with these big balloons for a target, I don't know what I did but I shot at it. I don't know what I did. But they transferred me off the ship because I couldn't do the duty on that flat bottom. And that was fine with me, I didn't mind that. I went to base eight hospital, I remember that. And then a week later, they sent me to OGU again, that's out-going unit. And I sat in that place there. And then I got a beautiful ship, I loved it. It was the Greeneville, USS Greeneville. And it was going to Iwo Jima and we went on maneuvers and everything. That was beautiful. I liked the ship and everything good. We got back to Pearl Harbor, they're loading up for Iwo Jima, they throw me off the ship.

Graham: How come?

Houff: They said it was overloaded. Said no, we got too many people. So base eight hospital liked me, they called me back and I ran a ship service there. The ship services took care of the base there. And I was--funny thing about it, I was just a young kid, but I was control of all the beer. And so, you know--

Graham: That you need to have.

Houff: Yeah and I remember the officer come in, I said, "would you sign this slip?" "What am I signing Virgil?" "Uh, two cases of beer for the cooks." He signed it. Cause you know we couldn't have liquor, only the officers got treated right, you know. So anyway then I missed tree-stripes, I was a seamen first class and they didn't wanna give me stripes. They said Virgil we can't do it, if we give you stripes, we're gonna lose you, and you're going to Pearl Harbor, to the laundry room. So I stayed there then. And it was beautiful and I enjoyed myself. But that's all I--tried to get in one battle, that's all I wanted. I didn't ask for much. And I didn't get anything. But I guess that's, hey oh I got a discharge then.

Graham: Okay

Houff: Cause I was young, came home. But that was a very poor service for me, wasn't it?

Graham: [laughs] well it sounds like you enjoyed yourself.

Houff: Well, well, I wanted just one battle, I wanted that ship, I loved that ship. And I couldn't figure out why they transferred me off. I was a little mad, you know, and stuff. But the duty was good, I can't complain about the duty.

Graham: Yeah

Houff: You know, I enjoyed it, you know. And I controlled everything there. And I had my own quarters. And if I want something--I had a little room by myself in this ship service, you know. And I go to the cooks, I need some butter, bread, they gave it to me 'cause I furnished them you know, with beer, with the officer. Officers were good, that's good. And but it was serving good duty and then I got transferred out. But I just get very disappointed I didn't get, do more. But, you know, they take care of you, they put you where they want you to put you. You don't have any control over that. But then I was discharged.

Graham: What did you end up doing with those two cases of beer?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: What did you end up doing with those two cases of beer?

Houff: Well I just, what I did, I just signed 'em, you know, they took it and they had a party. But the officers knew that, see, you know, I just, but I couldn't give it out unless I have an officer signature. But I told, I said it was for the cooks, they were gonna have a party or something. They signed it. You gotta have an officers signature on that, you don't hand out that stuff, there you get yourself in trouble. But I had a lot of fun there. I did one thing I didn't like too well. Chinese Navy came in, they were national, and I had 2,000 pins. And I sold 'em for twenty cents a piece. I wanted--they told me to get rid of 'em any way I could, and I sold all those damn pins to the Chinese and damnit five officers were dismissed from the Chinese Navy. They took the pins that I sold 'em and went to Hong Kong, they sold 'em on the black market. I didn't know that but I found out about it. Yeah but that's--but I was good though, I met a lot of people and stuff and enjoyed myself, yeah. And I had a good service, more so than the rest of my family. They were really put out, you know.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: But I liked to put out but I couldn't. I didn't have no control over it. They have control of it. But what I wanted so bad, was just an aircraft carrier. Darn it! An aircraft carrier would have been just beautiful. And that's good duty. Aircraft, you got ice cream on there.

Graham: [laughs]

Houff: Yeah. See, you know, I remember when we went out-going unit in Pearl Harbor, that's what's going out. If we went, we went to--you'd drink beer and we had huge lines and we'd run like hell, we'd get two cans of beer, then we run right back to the line, get in line again, we drank the beer, but that's all they--no beer allowed on the ship. No enlisted men could have any, any stuff that was restricted. That's the only way you get to drink your beer. [laughs]

Graham: Did it remind you of stealing coal from trains when you were a kid?

Houff: Oh the train, oh god almighty. I--we suffered during the depression, I mean we suffered. I remember one time my mother bought us a bicycle, I don't know how she did it, it was a goodrich for \$5. And they repossessed it one month later. Yeah, they couldn't make the second payment. We lived in dirt floors. I remember this Strand[sp?] building, boy you turn on the lights, the cockroaches used to fly to the holes. Bed bugs, holy crying out loud. I remember when I was in Kindergarten, I was sent home because I had lice in my hair. You know, just a kid I didn't know. And boy that's, I mean rough duty, boy I mean, during the depression, boy we--it was dog eat dog, you know. [cough] I stole from gardens, carrots. And oh once sold newspapers for a nickel. And I'd never forget that, we get 2 and a half cents, if i sell newspapers I get a nickel. And there's a hamburger place, I can get a hamburger for a nickel. And I bought that hamburger, see. Now that's something. But you gotta be careful on the street, kids try to beat you up for money. I remember I hit one guy so hard, he hit his back on the fire hydrant and he screamed for Daddy but he tried to rob me.

Graham: Yeah, you gotta do what you gotta do it sounds like.

Houff: Oh yeah, jeez, save my pennies. Yeah but, oh we did a lotta things that we shouldn't-a done. I remember one time, me and Jimmy, and we went to these rural houses, and we went in the cornfield. And the cornfield, the bootleggers had booze and they put it in that. We stole their booze, just young kids. Holy shit. Then we go to another bootlegger and sell it for 50 cents. But boy, if we ever got caught we woulda been dead! Yeah.

Graham: Did any of that sort of, resourcefulness, carry on later in your life?

Houff: Oh god I, boy I save everything. I save everything, I don't throw anything away. And it's stuff, I give to church--oh it's just unbelievable what we did. One time me and my brother Jimmy--see Madison was my second home. One time we got on a, you know passenger plane-- uh train. We got on the engine, where the coal is, and we sat on the back of that engine and we drove all the way to Madison. And I remember when we got to Madison, the firemen--our suitcase, we had a little suitcase with a few things in it, slipped down there and firemen picked the suitcase up and handed it to us, but we was arrested two blocks from the station. And then the cop--we said we're going out to visit our cousin, they let us go in Cottage Grove. Say, that's one thing happened there. But oh, things were rough during the depression, I'll never forget that. But oh, but that's good experience for life. I enjoy life now. And I do things--and after that I went to college. I went to McPhil College after my service. And then I took an engineering course and I got vocational, took me five years, and I got a chief engineers license. Oh I had, I was married but I got a divorce in--when in the hell did I get a divorce? Oh '66. And I had a wife that was very unfaithful.

Graham: Oh.

Houff: Yeah, yeah. I think they [inaudible]. But [inaudible] always liked Madison because when I was a little boy, I was seventeen years old, I always hitch-hiked to Madison. I had two sisters there, see.

Graham: Which ones?

Houff: But by the way I lived in Austin, Minnesota, where all this took place.

Graham: You were born there?

Houff: Yeah, born in Austin, Minnesota.

Graham: In what year?

Houff: '25. 1925. But anyway, I used to hitch-hike to Madison and I gotta--I love swimming, I got my--what the hell do you call it? My lifesaving certificate, you know?

Graham: Being a lifeguard?

Houff: Yeah. And then at seventeen I got my senior badge I get. Then on my birthday, eighteen, I went to Madison and became a lifeguard here. Yeah, before I went in the service. At B.B. Clarke's Beach. And that was fun for me. And I was just a kid, eighteen. And I used to go down to the damn Madison Union, you get a nickel beer. Oh boy I was a big shot, you know. You know this stuff, oh I can drink beer now, I'm going in the service. And I did go in the service then. But that's where when I got my dors[?] I came to Madison. Because I had, you know, my sisters lived here and cousins and stuff, you know, and stuff there. So but that's--I always liked Madison. But I still have--I had six kids, six grandchildren. And they're very close to me and I always told my kids, "Remember one thing kids, you only got one mother, so you have respect for her." You know, just because we didn't get along, she did a lot of things that the kids do resent, you know. And I gotta blow my nose, I gotta thing--

Graham: Let me get you a tissue Virgil.

Houff: I thought I had a handkerchief, yeah I got one.

Graham: Okay

Houff: A big blue one.

Graham: Well you can't lose that.

Houff: Yeah. And anyway, those kids, you know, kind of resented her. She married a alcoholic drunk and he blew his head off. Put a gun and went and just blew his brains right off the head. But truly, every girl I went with here, they said, "How the hell did your wife let you go?" You know, how, she musta been nuts. And her sister said that too, "you had a good husband one time." And she was unfaithful to me, see, very un--and I'm so dumb, I didn't know it.

Graham: How did you discover it?

Houff: Well I tell ya. My kids--I went to a football game, I came home, I had four kids, and she deserted my kids and left a note. And the guy that she was havin' an affair with, I didn't know that at the time, took her to Saint Cloud, Minnesota. I came home, I read the letter, I went out of my head. I called her sister, lived next door. I said, "Clea, what's going on here? I got this letter, she's gone. She left the kids upstairs in the bedroom by theirselves." I said, "If we had a fire they'd been killed." And oh, she called me that she got scared, she got scared up there and she called me and said, "I wanna come." And I didn't know what the hell cause I was still in the dark. But boy did I find out. I went to up Saint Cloud and brought her back. And then I found all the stuff she did is unbelievable! Boy! But I still have respect for her, you know. I mean when I go down--I went down Easter, I got kids living in Austin. And I went over there for Thanksgiving, I hafta. And if I take my kids out, I take her out too. She's old now, she's 82. No teeth in her head. She's a beautiful girl though, boy when she was young she was a beautiful girl, very attractive. She's five feet two and a hundred pounds, black curly hair, and oh brown eyes. Somethin' like you, yeah. [laughs] But anyway I still have respect for her, you know, I mean although she did a lot of dirt to my kids but my kids got good memories.

Graham: And did you have two more kids with her later on?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: You had two more kids?

Houff: Oh yeah, yeah. Well there's not much more I can say.

Graham: Well let's back up a little bit, i've got some more questions.

Houff: Oh yeah.

Graham: But we can also take our time.

Houff: Yeah sure, I ain't goin' nowhere.

Graham: [Laughs] You talk about, you moved to madison or hitchhiked to madison, you were working here as a lifeguard.

Houff: Yeah.

Graham: And then walk me through enlisting or signing up for the service?

Houff: Well I signed up in Madison I think. Yeah cause I went to the service August 18th--no October 18th.

Graham: What year?

Houff: 45--43. And then I was sent to Great Lakes, yeah '43 I went in. And then I met my brother, you know, Clayton, he was only seventeen, I didn't know he joined the service. I said, "What are you doing here Clayton?" "Well I joined" I said, "How'd you join?" "Oh dad signed for me." And I says--and he said I joined the Navy Corpsman of the Fleet Marines. Well, that's a death warrant you know. And he said, "Take care of mother." And I did take care of mother. I took out an allotment for her. I was the only one that took allotment out for her.

Graham: Can you describe your parents? What were they like growing up and what did they do?

Houff: Who?

Graham: Your parents?

Houff: My what?

Graham: Your parents. Your mom and dad.

Houff: Oh my ma and dad. My mother, god bless her heart, she was brought up in a sod house. I never seen my grandfather. He fought in the civil war. And right downstairs there, there's where he joined. Camp Randolph, there's where. And he joined the Civil War in '63. Know where they sent him? Out west to fight Indians. Well then after the war, the government gave him 160 acres of land in Minnesota, southern Minnesota, between Austin, Minnesota and Albert Lea. It's called Freeborn County. And in 1877 they gave seven acres of land to the Midland-Oakland Church. A hundred years later they celebrated the anniversary, thank god my mother was still living, and we all went there to celebrate the hundred anniversary of this church. My mother lived in the sod home, she was a good Norwegian, she could speak it and everything. My father, he was from Virginia I think, West Virginia my father was from. And he was, Christ I think they had slaves I can't remember or not but anyway he was a railroad man and stuff there. And that's--they separated about 1929 or '30, that's why we only got--he gave her \$35 a month to live on, see but that wasn't much money to live on. Course we always had a cheap place, I remember this Strand[sp?] building cost \$5 a month. But you gotta have food and stuff like that.

Graham: And there were nine of you?

Houff: Well my oldest sisters were grown up. Two of 'em came over here in Madison and stuff like--Ronald went to Rice Lake, Wisconsin, Ronald did. To stay with my mother's brother. Louis Rice was his name. And so they lived there. And but let's see, my mother took care of the four boys, the other girls were pretty well on their own, I guess, you know.

Graham: Were you the second youngest?

Houff: Yeah of the, yeah, that's right. He's the youngest, I was the second. God I love that picture. A guy gave that to me, I treasure this picture.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: And that was a blanket, see, I remember the blanket. They put it over that dirty house we had. And I don't know, I suppose my mother musta had a dollar to take this picture, you know. But boy can you imagine, living through the life like that?

Graham: Yeah. For the recording, you know, people are just going to be listening to this. Can you describe what's going on in this picture?

Houff: Well Clayton, you see, poor Clayton he's always sad. You see the holes in his pants? Barefooted, we always went barefooted. We never had shoes, you know. And oh we--who the hell is that. That's Jim, Jim had tennis shoes. But you know. Oh we did get shoes in the fall, it cost us 49 cents for a pair of shoes. We had to work during the winter, and stuff there. Our pants, you see, were filled with-- we didn't know what underwear was. We just had a pair of damn pants, you know. Oh hell we were lucky if we had any food. But that was terrible.

Graham: Do you remember--.

Houff: Oh didn't you want to take a xerox copy of this?

Graham: Yeah I think we can do that maybe after the interview.

Houff: Yeah, yeah.

Graham: I just thought for people who might listen to this, would be curious.

Houff: Yeah, yeah curious how we looked. We starved, yeah, we starved. We did everything; we always stole carrots and any garden things. I'll never forget, a guy had a case of chili. I just loved to steal one can. And he knew I was stealing it, and it was there always for me. I went back there, picked one can up, just one can. [laughs] That's fun though.

Graham: What have you told your grandkids about the depression?

Houff: Oh god they--my son is pretty good off. Now my son Larry works for the state of Minnesota. He's in charge of the mental hospital. He had three daughters. Two daughters graduated from the University of Minnesota. My oldest granddaughter graduated from Macalester College, yeah, private school. But she got a scholarship for that. They all got good jobs. And my son's wife was a top--after the kids got grown up she went and become a nurse--a x-ray, person that takes x-rays and stuff. And she was the top student in the state of Minnesota. And the hospital at the University of Minnesota wanted her. But she stayed at the hospital where she took her training and stuff. And that was kinda interesting.

Graham: What do you remember about kind of emerging from the depression?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: What do you remember about, kind of, recovering from the depression or the--?

Houff: Well I'll tell you one thing, I think the best thing that ever happened to me--we always sold newspapers. And I'll never forget, we made little trips, if you sold a subscription for five newspapers, you got a trip to Minneapolis. And that was a big treat for us. And we get free food. And I never forget, we went to, oh they got a park up there, Excelsior Park I think, in those days, God that goes back about seventy years. And we got a nice hotel, we got a good meal. Boy that was great for us. And just five subscriptions so I did that couple times and stuff there but that was kinda interesting. But you know survival was just, just to survive you know. It was hard, tough. And I never--we never knew it. We always had lamps, you know, with kerosene. I remember one time we lived in a house. And my brother Chester--and I don't know, we had pork cutlets. And the ceiling fell right down on the table. Everybody got the hell outta there but Chester stayed there where all that shit and dirt and ate his pork cutlets. He wasn't gonna leave, dirt, shit, i'm eatin'.

Graham: Where were you for Pearl Harbor? The attack on Pearl Harbor?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: The attack on Pearl Harbor, what do you remember about that?

Houff: Oh god I was sellin' newspapers, I remember that. I remember that and oh but when Post--when Roy--no when was it? Woody Post died and who's that famous, God, now that star that died up north, that was big news. And I got that. And Pearl Harbor was big news. I was selling newspapers. I was--shit I was fourteen then. Oh that was a great year for me cause I joined the first wrestling team. On the wrestling team--see now what the hell was it? I gotta stop and think this out now.

Oh '43, '43 I was on the first wrestling team, organized. And we had alumni day and all the wrestlers showed up, and I signed my name "1943" and I sat back and a mother had another child that was running, come here honey, I wanna show you somethin' come here, look here's a guy, 1943. And I overhead 'em. I said, "I'm still living." She said, "That's you sir?" I said, "Yeah." Yeah, that was a big plus of me. You know, I liked that, they had alumni day and I went there. And I played football and I did everything. That's, you know, we didn't have no recreation during the depression. I think we--oh come Christmas we always got a Christmas tree on the 26th of December when they throw the Christmas trees on the curb, we ran and got a tree, put it in the house. [laughs] But we had a tree! [laughs]

Graham: It's a new tradition now.

Houff: Yeah, we picked it up from the--oh god we picked that tree up, oh God. Oh that's true we used to, funny I'm still living. Yeah, doing that, yeah.

Graham: You get to extend Christmas that way.

Houff: Oh and we did. We had games--we played games in the neighborhood. Hide go seek and all that stuff. We didn't have all that damn recreation. And stuff, we didn't know what that was. And I think someone bought a radio for us for \$5 and we got to watch some of those programs like Jack the Armstrong Boy and all, yeah that was kinda fun. And oh, I remember one time I worked for the Tasty Bread Company. I worked all day, I got 50 cents and two loaves of bread, oh God. And I traveled with the guy and I had to stack the bread up, you know, in the stores. When I got done I got two loaves of bread and 50 cents. Shit I was rich. [both laugh]

Graham: What year was that?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: What year was that?

Houff: Oh god I was about twelve years old. Just yeah but, no one answered you, you get to work. Oh we always try to go out and shovel the sidewalks during the winter, anything for a buck. I remember one time--never had a Christmas by the way, I didn't know what Christmas was. I remember I used to go to Montgomery Board Store. I used to look in the window, I seen double holsters, said boy would I like to get that, cost \$5. And never got it, you know, but--oh one Christmas my father always went to the Canton Cafe, you know, and that's probably how I got my job. And he gave me \$1. That's the first God damn money I ever got from my dad for Christmas. He says "Where's Clayton? I got a dollar for him." And Clayton was selling papers, I go find him, "Clayton look dad gave me a buck. You get a buck too." Jeez that's the first time that son of a bitch ever did anything for us. [laughs]

Graham: So what do you remember about Pearl Harbor?

Houff: Well not much of Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor came up and course, like everybody else, I was just a young kid, "Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?" I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was and I didn't two years later I was gonna be there.

Graham: Yeah, how did you find out about the attack?

Houff: Radio, I guess it was radio and newspapers. And that's--I sold newspapers. I remember it was the Minneapolis Journal, it doesn't exist anymore. They sold the place but jeez I sure had fun with that paper company. Boy saved a lot of meals for me, make a nickel, hamburger. Boy if you grow up during the depression you enjoy life. And you gotta, boy. But you know now-a-days people don't realize what they're going through, they think they're having a hard time? Hey, that's a hard time, you know.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: People got hard times, these people, black people, mexican, they all got beautiful clothes, and they're shaved, they're nice and clean, they get food. Shit, we didn't know what food was. Oh, we ate oatmeal, that's what we had. No sugar, no milk but we had oatmeal. And remember one time, there was bugs in that oatmeal, and I said "Mother", I was just a little one 'bout eight years old, "there's bugs in the oats." "Shut up and eat the oatmeal Virgil!" I said, "There's bugs in it." And sure as shit she said, "Take that back." And then, in those days, farmer stores, everything was in a barrel, big barrel. I went down there with bugs in our oatmeal and they open up the barrel and they take big scoops at that time. And they filled the bag up and gave it back to me, see. We didn't have that fancy shit now it was always in big barrels and stuff. And I remember kids--when we was hungry, I used to go to the butcher stores, ask for bones, back bones, anything, make soup, you know. One time I was skipping to school and I stole an apple they had, and the God damn guy caught me, took me to the store. Sat me down with that apple, you know, and took the apple away and sent me but he sent me back to school. He just knew it, yeah, I'll never forget that. Little things like that you gotta remember, yeah.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: Yeah kinda cute, yeah.

Graham: Um let's fast forward a little bit and talk about your training. You talked a little bit about the machine guns and--

Houff: Oh yeah well I--Great Lakes, you know, you didn't do too much at Great Lakes, it's always maneuvers and stuff.

Graham: Where's Great Lakes?

Houff: Great Lakes, Illinois.

Graham: Okay.

Houff: Navy Station. That's still famous.

Graham: That's where your boot camp was?

Houff: Yeah, that's where my boot camp was. And they always say, "Needle bait, needle bait, needle bait." Then you get thirteen shots. And then when they was leaving you say, "shark bait, shark bait, shark bait." You know, so, but anyway after that training you go to OGU. Jesus God they got some beautiful ships, why couldn't I get a ship? And the first thing they said, Ottuma Iowa, fifty-six man draft. I got there, first thing, you're too young, young kid, you wanna go to the war. So I wanna transfer. You ain't gettin no damn transfer so just shut up. But I did like that place, I got milk, milk for the first time. And not only that, for dessert they had lemon pie. I didn't know what lemon pie--woo that was good food. Man I ate like a--oh and they had a swimming pool. And so I kinda enjoyed that. But I worked as a, you know, put the ear phones on, then the tower assigns airplanes to the cadets, that's what I did. And then damn I got transferred out and they lost track of me I guess. Yeah I wanted an aircraft carrier so bad, what they hell, they musta had room for one.

Graham: [Laughs]

Houff: God piss me off, I shouldn't say that.

Graham: It's okay.

Houff: [Laughs]

Graham: So maybe walk me through a typical day, maybe after training.

Houff: You mean at Ottumwa Iowa?

Graham: Sure

Houff: Oh yeah, Ottumwa, Iowa, I swam and did, you know, just normal things. And oh at Ottumwa, Iowa we used to go there and see a movie and stuff there. And I think I was kinda frisky, I think I tried some beer, you know, I was a big shot then, you know, hell I'm eighteen years old, I'm gonna get shot tomorrow so I'm drinkin' today. [laughs]

Graham: And then were there guys from kinda all over the country?

Houff: Oh yeah, oh yeah. You don't have no choice. OGU they--I don't know how they hell they inspect these OGU's, you know, they gotta ship, oh I just, oh I wanted to get on the Wisconsin, if I coulda got on the Wisconsin--any got a damn ship. Not a LSM, stay off an LSM!

Graham: Why's that?

Houff: That's flat bottom! Goes up and boom boom boom boom boom.

Graham: Right.

Houff: Sh. Boy oh boy you croak on that thing.

Graham: Got pretty sea sick?

Houff: Oh god I got sea sick on the LSM, boy. You ever crap your pants and puke at the same time? Boy oh boy, that was rough duty. I was happy to get off that damn ship. But that, God damnit that other ship, what was the name of that ship? Greeneville.

Graham: Yep.

Houff: Yeah, APA, that's a--.

Graham: 171?

Houff: Yeah. That's a transfer ship, I liked that. I'd go, when on maneuvers I could do that, yeah. But sometimes, you know, I didn't like southern sailors. I remember we went on maneuvers on this ship there was a damn guy from Georgia. We was sittin' on gun watch, you know, duty. He says, "You know a bunch of us guys, we raped a black girl in Georgia. We took her under the, you know it was the best pussy and ass I ever had." I looked at that son of a bitch, you know, I'm not used to it being nigger I had one black family in my town and we had respect for 'em. Boy I'll tell you I didn't realize how they treat the blacks, doing the worst, just terrible. And this guy's sittin' here, he told me he raped a black girl. That didn't set to well with me, you know.

Graham: So what'd you do?

Houff: Well I got up out of the way, what else could I do? Got five guys there all on duty, but he's braggin' about it.

Graham: That's awful.

Houff: And they did that! That's common thing, though, during the south. Those damn white trash, you know. I shouldn't say that you know, cause they're good people now. But during the war, you know.

Graham: Yeah. What about the guys you did get along with?

Houff: I got along with everybody, everybody loved me. [both laugh] And the girls loved me too.

Graham: I bet. Did you stay in touch with them?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: Did you stay in touch with anybody after the war?

Houff: No I didn't. And I had a nice book, damn I wish I brought that book with all my photographs in there. I had a list of names there.

Graham: You should bring it back in.

Houff: Well sometime I'll show it to you maybe. There's a lotta pictures of me in my bathing suit. [both laugh] Yeah but that's--oh that's another things I did when I had vacation or time off at Pearl Harbor, I went and swam at Waikiki beach. You know they only had two hotels at Waikiki beach. The Royal Hawaiian and the Alamo Hotel, two hotels. And they both taken over by the government. The Royal Hawaiian, you oughta see the balconies, loaded--there's where they took the submarine personnel. But they needed it, submarine people, and they stayed in that as recreation. They wash their clothes and hang it on the balcony. But boy submarine was rough duty, if they went down, they all went down. And I think they had the air force up there too. But yeah I'll never forget that.

Graham: Did you ever go back to these places after the war?

Houff: Yes I did. My life--I went with the shrine group. And jeez I couldn't recognize it. I went over and sees, fact I tried to look for my base, Base Eight Hospital. Damn I wish I brought some pictures, I got some little photos of that base Eight Hospital. It was a nice, nice duty. And they liked me there. And they didn't wanna give me up either. 'Cause I ran that ship store good, you know, but and the war ended so I couldn't--I had to be some place 'cause I didn't have enough points to get home.

Graham: Well talk about that I guess, being discharged and coming home.

Houff: Well yeah, well I got discharged August, what the hell, August of '46, you know, but--oh I never forget that. I had a wisdom tooth that had to come out. And that was just before I boarded that ship to go home. And it was a navy dentist and he worked for the Mayo Clinic. And he said, "Virgil, this woulda cost you \$50 if I

took it out in the Mayo Clinic." And he had a chief petty officer, and you know, the first time I was deployed my jaw swell up, they took it out, I'm glad they took that wisdom tooth out, boy my jaw swollen up. Then I boarded the damn ship and when I got back to San Francisco. First thing I did in San Francisco, I bought a, sort of a coat, you know, I liked the coat. That's the first thing I bought, yeah, and stuff there.

Graham: Do you still have that coat?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: Do you still have that coat?

Houff: Oh god no, no that's seventy years ago, jeez, Christ, '46, '56, sixty, seventy years ago. Yeah a long time ago.

Graham: How were you receiving news of the war like what was going on sort of?

Houff: How do I what?

Graham: How were you receiving news about the war? What was going on kinda in the rest of the world?

Houff: You mean before I went in or in the service?

Graham: In the service.

Houff: Oh the service, well we got all that because Pearl Harbor was the headquarters for the USS[??], where everybody ship out of, so we got all the news. And I left a lotta hawaiian newspapers there, I gave 'em to--did you guys see 'em?

Graham: I didn't see them.

Houff: Well it was the Honolulu, boat and children, when the war ended the parades and stuff you know and stuff there. And I'll never forget [inaudible] the war ended, jeez, everybody was happy. Just a matter of going home I'd say. Yeah.

Graham: So talk about coming home and what that was like.

Houff: Oh I was on a nice ship coming home, didn't get sea sick. Only time I got sea sick was that LSM, Landing--that's the worst thing they coulda done to me, put me on that damn ship. Boy oh boy, it just the roughest duty ever seen. But it was beautiful, nice ride going home and stuff there. And I got to San Francisco. Then I transferred--what the hell--oh train transferred, we always traveled by train you know, they didn't have fly, so I was on a train to Great Lakes. I was discharged in Great Lakes. And I came to Madison, see my sister, went back to Austin, yeah.

Graham: And then what was life like? What happened next?

Houff: Well then I went to Junior College first.

Graham: GI bill?

Houff: Yeah oh yeah and I didn't do too good there. So I cancel--I went to McPhil College, salesman school, graduated in '48. And then I--'48 oh after I got outta college, my first job out of the service was at J.C. Penny's and I was charge of the boy's department. And I got \$130 a month. And when I left they go to give me a \$10 raise and I, you know, what the hell did I do? Oh I worked on a railroad, fueling boxes, I did that. Eventually, oh I got, got in the school system, and I went to vocational school, five years I got a chief engineers, that's what helped me in Madison. When I came to Madison my credentials were good and I ended up being a first line supervisor for the Department of Administration and housekeeping. So I mean, I didn't make big money. Highest money I made is \$13 an hour. But I retired--when the hell did I retired, I gotta think this out. Oh '93. I made \$13, it ain't much money and people make big money. I didn't make big money. But I'm very comfortable right now with my state tax and state pension and my social security. I make \$3200, I can live on that.

Graham: Yeah well you're probably doing better than you were in that picture.

Houff: [Laughs] This picture, we, shit we'd eat shit if they gave it to us. Anything, we'd steal anything. We did steal coal, we did everything.

Graham: What year did you meet your wife?

Houff: Oh god, that would say, get away. You know, I'm a ballroom dancer.

Graham: Oh.

Houff: And our Terp[??] ballroom--we had a beautiful ballroom, it was the same ballroom owned by the guy at Aragon in Chicago. And I was there and she was sittin' with a person, and this person always liked me. And she always said, "See doesn't Virgil look nice?" And I just happened to be walkin' by the booth, my god damn wife just grabbed me in, I was just walkin' by, and boom I hit my head. And she said, "I'd like to meet you." And I went, holy crap. And I was shocked and she was good, I told you a good lookin' girl. Black curly hair, brown eyes, I said, "Jesus Christ this ain't bad." It might be a free one tonight. [laughs] Shouldn't say that. Anyway, that's how we got acquainted with her. You know she tried--woo. Oh boy, but anyway, that's how I met her. It was the worst damn thing I ever had. Oh boy.

Graham: What do you think the year like woulda been like if you hadn't enlisted for some reason?

Houff: Oh god, I don't know. I'd probably end up back in Madison, I always liked Madison, you know.

Graham: Yeah

Houff: But I gotta, you know, eventually I had a great job in Austin, custodial engineer and running the boilers and stuff. And I, gee, I had a good stuff there but you know, we just gotta damn divorce and I made it as best I got a divorce, I'd probably shot her.

Graham: Did you ever remarry or meet someone else?

Houff: No, I never remarried. And I went with some beautiful girls. I went with attorneys in town, I went with entertainers, beautiful people playing piano and singing in night clubs. I went with a lotta girls. And oh I forgot to tell you, I have two mental retarded sons. One's fifty-nine and one's fifty-eight and they live in group homes. That's the reason I go to Austin. And anyways those two kids, they're, you know, just very very close to me. And that's, that's why I never remarried. And I have group--they're in beautiful group homes. And they taken care of. And the one lady that's the social worker, I says--they ask me why I never married, I said, "I had my choice, I had my two retarded sons or I could get married." Should I get married and forget about my two retarded kids? Or should I get married--I said I decided I'll take care of my two kids, and I take care of 'em, you know. I just--to hell with the marriage. But I did go with a lotta girls and I did a lot of dancing, and they lined up to dance with me

Graham: [laughs]

Houff: Yeah. Especially a place i liked to dance was on Monona Drive, it used to be called Lesky's[s?]. It was years ago. And they had ballroom dancing. That's where I met this one entertainer; she played the piano in Oregon and sang, yeah. And I was going with another girl and the girl went to the restroom, I said, "Would you like to go out with me?" She said, "I sure would." I had a date there, yeah, so oh God, I--.

Graham: [laughs] What about veteran's groups? Are you involved in any?

Houff: Oh god yes. I'm a life member of the Veteran's of Foreign War, and American Legion. Yeah I'll show you my cards. Here's my veterans of foreign war. Yeah that blue one there. And there's my American Legion.

Graham: Virgil how do you say your last name?

Houff: Houff [pronounced Huff] . H-O-U-F-F. And then I belong to the Blue Lodge Scottish Rite, Doric Lodge, I belong to the Scottish Rite, 32nd degree Mason, uptown. I'm a shriner. I'm the only person in the Zor Shrine to ever been elected to the imperial. I was imperial president of all the Scottish pipe bands, 2003. I was imperial president. And then I won eight world titles as a tenor drummer. Tenor drummers that fancy wooing the stick in the air, you know, and stuff like that. And the last time I won--the last gold medal I won was at the Alamo in El Paso Texas. And all the dive band's wives followed me around. When their husbands had a meeting, they go and--I should bring that one article in that they wrote. The girl says, "We follow Virgil around." And, you know, I'm always good to 'em. They said, "Virgil, would you take a picture with us?" I said, "Certainly." I said, "I'm no star." They thought I was a star. And I'd take a group picture with all these girls, you know, they're guys' wives, they're all married. But they're wives are out--and so they just follow me around for competition and stuff. They liked that. I got some nice articles there. But that's the last one I won, last gold medal. I won gold medals in Las Vegas, Nevada, Vancouver, Canada. There's where I was elected president. In 1902--03, I was in Minneapolis and I got another gold medal and I was the president. Why the hell did I go there? Oh I went to Baltimore Maryland, I had a open heart surgery.

Graham: Hm. When was that?

Houff: Yeah I was with the band, pipe band. And I worked so hard that day and that night--oh the next day I was stiff and I was aching in pain. And I says to the hotel, I said, "Well where's the nearest hospital?" Five miles. I drove down, I walked in the emergency room, I said, "I think I'm having a heart attack." He said, "We know you are." Boy they put me in there.

Graham: How'd they know?

Houff: Yeah well because the way I looked I guess. And the chief surgeon at the Baltimore Hospital operated on me. The whole damn dive band was at that hospital that night. And a girl hold my hand, say Virgil, can we drive your car back? Me and your husband. I said, "Jeez that was a big--I said yes, you can do it." My son flew in from Minneapolis to help me. And I got out of the hospital five days. I says, "You get me an ambulance to the hospital?" He said, "No we ordered you a taxi." Can you imagine? Two-bypass, five days. And I rolled the hospital, he said, "Taxi!" Guy that couldn't understand english took me to the airport. My son was pissed--mad. He was really pissed off and he let people know. And anyway he got me back to Madison and I couldn't stay by myself so I went to my sister's house. She's 94. And I stayed there for a couple days. Then shit, I'm okay. Well I had two open heart surgeries.

Graham: Oh my gosh.

Houff: And the stents put in. I had a severe back operation. I had cancer in my voice box. Shit they patched me up and throw me out.

Graham: You're a survivor.

Houff: Yeah I'm a survivor.

Graham: You have more action than in World War II.

Houff: Oh Jesus Christ, you better believe it. Yeah but i'm tough, I can take it, see.

Graham: I can tell.

Houff: Yeah, yeah. I work at it though. I go to my health club and stuff. And I gave up smoking, drinking and sex. And that helped me. [Both laugh] That's joke, that's what I tell my doctor and nurse, they laugh like hell. [Both laughing] They get a kick out of that.

Graham: Um why did you want to participate in this oral history interview? Why do you think this is important to remember?

Houff: What?

Graham: Your experience.

Houff: Oh god I think that was--the war was a must war, we had to win that war. That was a must war. We had to win it and the Korean war. The wars afterward are a bunch of shit. It's a business man's war. We're selling guns. Our young kids are getting crippled over nothing. I don't like that bull shit. Our war we had to win. This guy was nuts, Hitler was.

Graham: Yeah. What did you--A lot about World War II was kind of revealed after the war ended. So what did you learn about World War II once we had kind of gotten our head around it?

Houff: Oh god almighty I tell you, it's just--it was just a great damn victory, now I tell you. Can you imagine killing six and a half million Jews? How the hell could anybody do that? I--Jesus, the guy's gotta be nuts. The people that shot 'ems gotta be nuts. I can't believe they'd do that. Yeah I didn't know that but I learned a lot after the war. Just like this goofy Japanese general on the death march. They blow his god damn brains off after the war. They had a trial in the Philippine Islands and they put a firing squad for him. Boy a lotta nutty people in this country. I hope we wiped most of 'em out. Yeah. But that was cruel. You know you study the war and it's just unbelievable. It's just very interesting. I lived a very interesting life, you know during the depression and in the war and stuff. And it's

just--I just loved what I went through because I can survive anything now. Shit I can survive anything.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: In fact I got band practice tonight.

Graham: [laughs]

Houff: I think we're going to the dells for the March of Glory, that's where we give the monies to the Shriners Hospital. Our pipe band's giving \$15,000.

Graham: So how have you seen things changed, you know, from 1925 to--?

Houff: Oh God change. One thing I can't figure out, free sex. People dont get married, shit they just shack up. Maybe that's a good idea but we didn't do that during my life. Boy you didn't do anything wrong, you go to hell, yeah. Oh no this free, free style. Dope, I didn't know what the hell dope is. It's free now. People dope up, shit, their minds screwed up. This is a shitty world we're living in. I lived in the good world. The world I live in now, I wouldn't give two cents for. But i'm a loner, I live by myself, I don't associate with any--but can you imagine? Can you imagine all the dope. And look at the gangs they've got? Now they've got gangs kill each other and stuff. Murders, Jesus I can't believe that crap. We didn't have that crap. We survived, we starved, we was happy. I think we was happy, most of the time. But this modern world is a world of sick people. I don't know how you survive. How old are you? But 25?

Graham: Twenty-seven.

Houff: Twenty-seven. Jeez, you're right in the middle of it. Are you married?

Graham: Um no but I'm engaged.

Houff: Oh good for you. I hope you've got a good guy.

Graham: He's good.

Houff: I hope he leaves the pipe alone. [both laugh]

Graham: He does. Well what would you want people who listen to this interview to know? That only you could tell them about your life, the things that you--

Houff: Well I lived in a beautiful life. I lived in a good life. I lived during the depression. You appreciate life now. I went through World War II which is very important. That war is very important and stuff there, the Korean War. And then from then on it was a struggle, you know. After the war, get jobs, working and just like the

normal people do now, see, and stuff. And married the wrong person. But she was a good wife when I first married her, you know. No she went downhill, I don't know when, but I didn't realize it. I was really a dumb bell. But everybody else did. [laughs]

Graham: What do you tell your grandkids about World War II?

Houff: Well not much. They don't say much to me about that. And I--they--I don't know, they're not too much interested in it I don't think. My two retarded boys, bless their sweet hearts, they don't know what's going on themselves. But boy I love my two kids. I just got back from Thanksgiving. And I got their Christmas gifts bought and everything. So that was very nice. I always take care of them first, the rest come last, you know. But I tell you, the world we live in now, I don't know, its survival I guess, you know. You gotta have a good job, I don't know what's going on here. Yeah and now all this dope and drinkin. I gave up drinking. Well I'll have a cocktail. I'm a very--I love milk again, that's into my health, but milk. Boy you wanna see a guy drink milk, look at me, I love it. I drink that milk and I--but with the pipe band I'll have a cocktail or a beer with 'em. And I always got a nice young boy, maybe you know him, Ken Cleary, he has the popcorn on State Street.

Graham: Oh yeah.

Houff: Yeah Ken is. Ken's my buddy. I adopted him as my son. If I have scotch and water, if I can't drink it, I pass it over to him. He will drink it. If I get a beer, and I'm a very poor drinker, yeah but that's good. In my day I think I could hold my own.

Graham: Yeah it sounds like it.

Houff: But you know I watch myself too. I don't like to get drunk. Drunk is not good. [both laugh]

Graham: Well am I missing anything?

Houff: I can't think of anything. I know we live in a world we--now it's, I don't know about this world we live in. You know, I'm 86, I'm from the old school. The new school is, I guess it's called survival, I guess, I don't know. But how the people--how they--you see like Mexico. Look at all the damn dope they bring in. Where does that dope go? Someone's taking it. We must have a lotta people dopey in this country. Madison too. I think Madison's a nice place but I live in a rough neighborhood. I live off Park Street where all the murders are. But I got a two bedroom condominium, not a fancy one. But I bought it at a good price and so I enjoy it. I got two bedrooms, two baths. Nice underground parking. My kids visit me, I take care of them. And but I don't go down Park Street after 6:00, you know. I like Walgreens, I like Walgreens.

Graham: Mhm.

Houff: And they got the grocery store Copps but I buy most of my groceries at Copps in Monona. You gotta watch where you go now see. And people--know I go down once and awhile to this gambling place Penny Nickel. And I play the nickel slot. And I sat down, I was playing and a girl came up to me, a beautiful girl, and I looked at her, she said, "Sir could you give me a couple dollars--borrow me a couple dollars?" I looked at her I said, "I'm broke." Can you imagine that? That little girl. God and she was a beautiful girl. I said, "No I'm broke." I ain't gonna give her any money.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: You know. I took care of one nigger family downstairs. I kinda felt sorry--my apartment. She didn't have any heat and stuff, they took the heat away from her. And I told the black girl, I like this black girl and her husband died. He was in a wheelchair and stuff. And I said, "I'll buy you groceries if you need." I don't know her name, I said, "I'll buy you grocery and stuff but I can't give you any money." And she had a--she musta took someone in to kinda help her and this black girl came up, said, "could you borrow me \$11, I gotta get a hotel for my friend." I said, "I don't borrow money to anybody." But she said, "don't tell the lady down below." See the lady didn't know that she did that. And I didn't got no bother after that. But I told this lady--I gave her a loaf of bread, some peanut butter and butter and stuff, anytime you need food, I'll take care of ya. And you know what she says every time she sees me? She says, "Hello Mr. Houff." I said, "My name is Virgil." I'm no god damn better than you.

Graham: Right.

Houff: Yeah, i feel sorry for her. Yeah but she's doing better. She has two jobs and she gets her heat back on, you know and stuff.

Graham: Good

Houff: Yeah I feel sorry. Sometimes I get a little tear so I gotta stop, yeah, kinda gets you.

Graham: Well I'm gonna turn off the recorder unless there's anything else.

Houff: Well I don't know anything you wanna know. I lived a good life [laughs] I lied there. I lived an interesting life, let's put it that way.

Graham: Yeah it sounds like it.

Houff: And I went to service, I got an honorable discharge. And I wish I coulda done more. All I asked for was one stupid battle. That wasn't much to ask for. I almost got it too.

Graham: When was that?

Houff: Well I wanted to go--my ship was going to Iwo Jima and they threw me off the ship.

Graham: 'Cause it was overcrowded.

Houff: Yeah overcrowded.

Graham: How come they picked you?

Houff: How the ship--that's where I went on maneuvers, that's where I met that guy from Georgia, he said he did that girl but that didn't sit with me. No I just hate that shit.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: Yeah.

Graham: Well let's end on a more positive note. How about one great memory from that time?

Houff: Oh I think during the depression, I think going down back to Canton Cafe, gettin' the soup was kinda nice. We eat that at 8:30 then I got a job for 25 cents an hour and I bought myself a little outfit for \$5. I remember that, that was kinda nice. And stuff, I kinda enjoyed that. I liked sellin' those newspapers cause I bought--I got hamburgers and food that way. Other way it was just survival, survival, you know, it was just, I got through it though.

Graham: You sure did.

Houff: Yeah. These two are dead now. Fact they're all dead.

Graham: All your siblings?

Houff: See this sister here?

Graham: Mhm.

Houff: Her husband invented the first heart valve that went into the heart.

Graham: Oh wow.

Houff: That's--the name was Larry Addison--Laurence Addison. He invented it in Minneapolis. And they bought fifty-six acres of land in Montana and there's where she died. She died about two years ago, 94. My mother died in '94. She died at 87. She had a half a lung, she was a heavy smoker, heavy smoker. My sister died 92, last year, Helen did. This one sister, I visit her every day, have coffee with her. She's 94.

Graham: She's still alive?

Houff: Yeah she lives in Monona. Her son takes care of her. He's a retired deputy sheriff. Now Chester had thirteen battle stars. He had malaria. And Jim was in, in '40 before Pearl Harbor. And there I am. Interesting life.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: Yeah.

Graham: Well thanks for sharing it with me.

Houff: Yeah, yeah. I hope I got something there for ya.

Graham: Yea that was great.

Houff: My name is on for that trip to Washington, you know, so. My son said he would go with me, the one in Minneapolis, if I go.

Graham: When's that?

Houff: I don't know when it is. I didn't get the November one. But my name's in, so I don't know, when they call me.

Graham: What are you gonna do?

Houff: Go to Washington for the World War II Memorial, you know.

Graham: Oh.

Houff: Clayton, isn't that a beautiful boy?

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: And seventeen he died, didn't live his life, bless his heart.

Graham: And so where was he killed?

Houff: Huh?

Graham: Where was he killed?

Houff: In Saipan.

Graham: Okay.

Houff: And that was a very important island, Saipan.

Graham: What happened?

Houff: If we get Saipan, we could build air bases to go to Tokyo. And that's what we did. We build beautiful air bases; we bombed the shit outta Tokyo. Oh I showed you these three pictures didn't I?

Graham: No I haven't seen that one. Is this you?

Houff: Yeah that's me. There's Ronald and there's Jim. God I missed three stripes but I'm glad I stayed at the ship store.

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: Yeah.

Graham: Oh Virgil I've got something for you to fill out. It's this side.

Houff: I better get my glasses on so I see I'm not signing my life away. I could be doing it.

Graham: [laughs]

Houff: I give a lot of donations. Here's two donations I'm giving out, I gotta mail 'em today.

Graham: Okay.

Houff: I give out about ten donations.

Graham: This just says that the interview can become part of our collection. I'll fill out this part up here.

Houff: Yeah.

Graham: You're welcome to read this and then this is for you to fill out right there.

Houff: Just put my name in print? Oh I see, print my name too. Print. What else? Oh my address.

Graham: Yep.

Houff: Where the hell do I live? I gotta remember. Madison, Wisconsin, right?

Graham: Mhm, I think so. And that's asking for your telephone.

Houff: What's the date?

Graham: It's the first of December.

Houff: How's that?

Graham: Very good. And I'm just gonna quickly record the intro which I didn't get to do. And I think we're all set.

Houff: Huh, I did what?

Graham: I'm just gonna quickly record the introduction.

Houff: Oh yeah.

Graham: This is an interview with Virgil Houff, who served with the Navy during World War II. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum at the following address, 30 W. Mifflin Street in Madison Wisconsin, on the following day, December 1st, 2011. The interviewer is Molly Graham. I think we're all set.

Houff: Yeah. Did you record any of this that we did today?

Graham: Yeah, yeah I recorded it all.

Houff: Oh you did. Oh my, you're gonna have an interesting talk then, won't ya?

Graham: Yeah.

Houff: Yeah that's good. I lived a good life and during the depression we starved like everybody else. Everybody was in the same boat. I think I worked the horrible company in Austin Minnesota, it's pretty famous. But the biggest job there was twelve bucks a week.

Graham: Oh yeah.

Houff: Yeah oh and my older brother got married, Chester, he got on the WPA, and that's the Wobbling Piss Ants, that's what we called 'em.

Graham: [laughs]

Houff: And my brother Ronald, he drove the CC Camp. Oh God I shouldn't laugh like that, it's kinda funny.

**[end of interview]**