

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT LIBESCH
Medic, Army, World War II

2016

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2098

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Libesch, Robert (b.1925). Oral History Interview, 2016.

Approximate length: 28 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Robert Libesch, who grew up in West Allis, Wisconsin, discusses his service in the US Army during World War II. A graduate of West Allis High School, Libesch enlisted in the Army in 1943 at eighteen years of age, patriotism making that “the right thing to do in those days.” He wanted to be a pilot in the Army Air Force, but an abundance of pilots, and aptitude scores directed him to pursue engineering, and, finally, medical training. Libesch matriculated as a medic in time for the invasion at Normandy, France, in June 1944, and was attached to an infantry division. He states that his chief role was administering a wound treatment drug to the wounded and taking them to a field hospital tent. Accompanying the troops through France, Belgium, and into Germany he bore witness to the horror of the concentration camps. Libesch deems himself “lucky” at many points in his life story, relating that his invasion training once back in Marseilles, France, was aborted by Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb over Japan. Discharged from the Army in 1946 and desiring to become a doctor, yet unable to secure a loan in order to attend medical school, Libesch decided instead to pursue a business career in Wisconsin, resuming further education at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He credits his wartime experience with giving him the “initiative” to accept new ventures—whether working his way up through a department store or an insurance agency. From a term with New York Life, Libesch started his own agency. He states that he left the images of war behind him fifty years before this interview.

Biographical Sketch:

Libesch (b.1925) served in the World War II-era US Army from 1943-1946 as a medic. His service took him from the beaches of Normandy, through France and Belgium, and into Germany. Spared the invasion of Japan, for which he was training, by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he returned to the US and pursued a business career. He was a member of the American Legion.

Interviewed by Bob Bach, 2016.

Transcribed by Brian Pass, 2017.

Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

Bach: Okay, now I think we are--now I think we're ready to roll. I'm going to read this uh, introduction that I have and then we'll start with the questions. Today is Sunday, December 4th. This is an interview with Robert Libesch.

Libesch: Libesch.

Bach: Libesch. Let me try that again. Today is Sunday, December 4th. This is an interview with Robert Libesch, who served with the United States Army from 1943 to 1946 during World War II. This interview is being conducted at Regency Senior Housing in New Berlin, Wisconsin where Robert lives, the interviewer is Bob Bach and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Mu- uh, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program, also in the room today with us is Robert's son-in-law John, who is videotaping this uh,

Libesch: Yeah

Bach: Interview.

Libesch: John is my son-in-law.

Bach: For future, uh, for family use as a matter of fact, so well, Bob, thank you for taking the time to chat with us this morning, I appreciate that.

Libesch: It's my pleasure.

Bach: Pleasure to meet you too, sir. Tell me a little bit about where you were born, a little bit about your background, if you don't mind.

Libesch: Are we gonna go that far back?

Bach: Yeah, we're just gonna skip through a few things about where you uh, grew up and what you did and then get into your service.

Libesch: Well, I grew up in West Allis.

Bach: Okay.

Libesch: And, uh, graduated from West Allis high school. And, uh, I, my father was a molder, and he worked at Allis-Chalmers.

Libesch: In West Allis, right.

Libesch: Yeah, and that was big. At one time they employed 18,000 people. Of course, they're not in existence anymore. Uh, but he always wanted me to go to school. He didn't want me to be a molder, or work in a foundry and that's where my dad worked. He worked very hard. And, uh, if you're acquainted with the type of work, he served his apprenticeship, and then became a molder, and he was a good one I hear.

Libesch: So, then when I graduated from high school, I started to--I wanted to go to school so I went I enrolled at Marquette University.

Bach: Really?

Libesch: I should've stayed. But I then enlisted in the Army. That was a mistake.

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: Because I would've gone- gone into the Navy, and probably been an officer type thing.

Bach: What prompted you to enlist in the Army?

Libesch: That was the right thing to do in those days. Everybody was patriotic, this was not Vietnam, this is World War II, so anybody at my age--I was 18 years old at the time--and that's what I did. Went in the Army, took all the aptitude tests, and then I ch--I moved over to the Air Force.

Bach: Really? They were combined in those years, weren't they? The Army and the Air Force?

Libesch: We- they were called the Air Force, and now it's- and- at that point, uh, that's what I wanted to be was a pilot. Well, I'm getting ahead of myself but later on, we discovered they had more pilots than they knew what to do with them. But they knew my interest was in medicine. And as a result, um, uh, they sent me to school. I went to University of Arkansas.

Bach: Really?

Libesch: For almost two quarters. And, paid for by the government, and uh--

Bach: And what were you studying there?

Libesch: Uh, well, in the beginning it was to be a pilot, but then when they- they learned that um, they had more than they needed, then it was engineering and I didn't think I had the aptitude for engineering, but I was told that- that I did. So that's what I was studying.

Bach: Where were you--do you remember where you were, uh, stationed in those years? Was there a military base there or anything?

Libesch: No, that was just Fayetteville, Arkansas; University of Arkansas--is the university. So that was, ah, quite an experience.

Bach: Certainly for an 18-year-old, right?

Libesch: Yep.

Bach: Wow. After those two semesters of study there, what happened next?

Libesch: Well, now we're approaching June, 1944. That was the invasion of France.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

[00:05:08]

Libesch: And when they learned that I had this interest in medicine, they sent me to another school.

Bach: Wow.

Libesch: The military was very good about that. For me, anyhow. So--

Bach: Where was that?

Libesch: Atlanta, Georgia. And I learned to be a surgical technician and all the--and I learned that I was going to be a medic. And now they were talking about the war, and the invasion of France, Normandy. And that's where I really began my career, then, in the military.

Bach: Did you have special training--prior to the invasion--and uh, and where was that?

Libesch: That was in Atlanta, Georgia.

Bach: Okay. And were you part of the invasion?

Libesch: I was, well I was a medic.

Bach: Right.

Libesch: So I wasn't forward, I was attached to an infantry unit, as a medic.

Bach: And were you with the infantry forces as they moved forward, or were you in a rear area where there might have been a, a surgical hospital, or something like that?

Libesch: Well, we set up a surgical tent, Dr.--now I remember his name--Wallerson. This goes back many, many years.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: And he said, "Bob", he said, "I think you should go to medical school", and he said, "If you need any help," he said, "I'll be in St. Louis, that's where I graduated from." And he said, "If you decide that's what you want to do." So, to make a long story short, after I was discharged from the military--incidentally my job as a medic was to pick up the wounded, that's all we did then, John, was apply Sulfanil-nilamide. [Sulfanilamide]

Bach: And what was that, exactly?

Libesch: Uh, a medication--for open wounds. And so we treated them--

Bach: Was that a disinfectant or something, or--

Libesch: Yes.

Bach: Okay.

Libesch: Part of the Sulfa drugs.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: So that was my job, and then, then bring in the wounded to the surgical tent, and we would treat them there, and if they were very seriously wounded, we would send them, either back to England or to America for surgery--uh, special surgery.

Bach: You were a very young man at the time you were having these experiences, Bob. How did you cope with that?

Libesch: Well, I just did. [chuckles] I never gave it a thought, except that, um, I was, I did what they told me to do. Which a good military man does. And so um, when the war ended, and that was my job to pick up the wounded, bring them in to- and then treat them, and uh- I was shot at, but I was, I never had a weapon, because I was a medic. So I was lucky. Lucky.

Bach: Did you make some friendships, with people back then, that you recall, and did you stay in contact with some of the people that you might've met during those service years?

Libesch: No, no, not really. I did in the beginning, but we're talking about sixty, seventy years ago. So, by that time I met John.

Bach: [chuckles]

John: [chuckles]

Bach: The uh, the people that you worked with, the doctors and the other medics-

Libesch: Nurses.

Bach: Was that like a close-knit team?

Libesch: Yeah, yes it was because we set up a tent--

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: And there we did minor surgery and took care of the wounded as they came in, and I was an assistant, after all I was only a kid, and um, well that's where I, I decided then that I would--that's what I wanted to be, was a doctor. But it turned out, that um, after I completed my pre-medicine at St. Louis University, uh, in nineteen forty--let's see--'44- '44, '45, um, my wife's parents owned a flat in West Allis, and they had a vacancy, so, I decided to move back to Wisconsin from St. Louis, and um, my wife and I, by that time we had one child. Susan was born in St. Louis--

[00:10:27]

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: My oldest daughter, so--

Bach: How many children did you and your wife have?

Libesch: I had five girls and two boys.

Bach: No kidding!

Libesch: Mm-hmm.

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: I have a wonderful family.

Bach: Did you pursue medicine or did you do something else for a career?

Libesch: No. You want all that information?

Bach: Yeah!

Libesch: Okay. All right, so I was in, I couldn't get a loan for medical school. Loans were not easy to get in those days. It's a little easier to get a loan today. But nevertheless, I switched to um, business, which is all right. I made a- I made a good decision. And I, but I thought when I graduated, then I went back to Marquette, and eventually I graduated from Marquette, even sooner, because all my credits that I earned in Arkansas were acceptable.

Bach: Wow.

Libesch: So I was graduated earlier, and then I decided, well, at that point, that I was going to be--get involved with the--with the stores--that, I'm looking for the word--that I thought I would be involved in--in the uh, word would be uh--

Bach: Like a franchise or something?

Libesch: No, no--this would be with, with Schuster's--

Bach: Okay.

Libesch: Department store.

Bach: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Libesch: So I'd would be a, eventually a buyer--

Bach: Oh, all right.

Libesch: In their operation.

Bach: Mm-hm.

Libesch: So I started- do you know this story?

John: No, I've never heard it.

Libesch: So I, started with Schuster's, and they promised me, um, of course, department stores are noted for their hiring, but they don't pay very well, and by that time I had two children. And, um, one day the manager of the store came to me and he said, "Bob, you know, there's a vacancy in the men's clothing department. We need somebody, would you be willing to work there for a while, temporarily?" And he said, "At that point, uh, then we would continue your career with- with the department store." I said, "Well, all right, I'll try it." So, I went to the clothing department, and there I met the manager of the clothing department, took a liking to me, he taught me how to be a salesman, he taught me how to wait on two and three customers at a time.

Bach: Wow.

Libesch: And I became the leader in that department, and I made some good money because they paid a commission--

Bach: Wow.

Libesch: As well as a salary. So one day, one of my good customers came to me and he said, "Bob", he said, "What are you doing here?"

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: Well I said, "Well, I'm earning a living." He said, "Well," he said, "I'd like to have you meet my manager." I said, "Really?" I said, "I won't inquire about what he- what he does, but fine, I'll meet him." So one day he comes in there, to make another purchase; he always asked for me--

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: Whether it was a sport coat, or uh, slacks, or whatever, a suit. So, lo and behold, he took me to meet the manager, and it was with New York Life.

Bach: Oh, really.

Libesch: New York Life, and uh, the guy said, "Well, it takes quite a bit to develop a young man like you to be a salesman, to sell life insurance." And I said, "Tell me about it," so, he did, and I was educated, you, because you have to be licensed.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: So I had to learn how to, not only write the business, but I had to learn the business--which I did. And I enjoyed it, and I never regretted it, because I made a very good living. And eventually I developed my own agency. That's another story, but that- that's all good.

[00:15:13]

Bach: Do you think the training that you had in the Army and your willingness to learn and to carry out the things that you were taught, do you think that had some bearing on the learning that you did as your career moved forward, first, and --

Libesch: I think it did.

Bach: Did you? Mm-hmm.

Libesch: Mmm.

Bach: In- in what way do you think that worked?

Libesch: Well, just to develop initiative. I was always a worker, always willing to pay a price, and um, when I learned the business, and I got my license, I became one of their top agents- with the New York Life. So one day, then I had to take additional courses in insurance, and the guy who gave the speech, said, "Bob," he said, "How would you like to develop your own agency some day?" He said, "I think you've got the makings to be the leader." And I said, "Well, I'll try anything." And I remember my father saying, "You mean you might have to leave New York Life?" Because you know in those days, as John knows, once you were with a company you never left. You stayed with them forever. And my father couldn't believe that I was ma- ready ma-, I was ready was making more money than he was. So,

Bach: And it wasn't in a foundry.

Libesch: Oh, no.

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: No, he was proud of that, but the fact is, uh, New York Life, I was with them for about a year and a half, two years, and I, I did a fine; we had our family, and three children by then. And, uh, the guy who was teaching this extra course I was takin', then introduced me to somebody from Catholic Knights Insurance, and then eventually, I developed my own agency, where I had people working for ME. And of course we worked on straight commission, straight commission.

Bach: Were you a good teacher?

Libesch: I hope so, because I had the best agency--

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: In Wisconsin.

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: So I did very well, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Let's see, what's left?

Bach: I-i-if, if you don't mind, tell me a little bit more about the experiences you had, in the Army. I just uh--

Libesch: In the Army?

Bach: Yeah, yeah-- it seems as if it must have been a-an enormous challenge for someone so young to be in the company of such death, and-and pain, and-and

destruction. How did you cope with all of that, if that's the way it was? Was it that way?

Libesch: It was.

Bach: And, and-

Libesch: I was able to cope with it. Well, when you're eighteen years old, you're able to cope. That right, John?

John: Some people do and some people struggle with it, Bob.

Libesch: Yeah, you're right. But I was able to--

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: I was fortunate. And, uh, the Army was a good experience, but I was glad to get out.

Bach: Do you still today, have images that you can see of those experiences or hear sounds or anything? Does that ever come back?

Libesch: No, well, it used to.

Bach: Mm-hmm. When did that stop coming back?

Libesch: About fifty years ago. [chuckles] So I - I tried not to discuss my experiences. I- I didn't think it was worthy. But-

Bach: But yet you helped many people, Bob.

Libesch: Yeah, I did.

Bach: Do you think about that?

Libesch: I do, occasionally, and I do talk to- I eat my meals with- where I live, about almost all the men are veterans-

Bach: Interesting.

Libesch: From World War II, in some way or another, and all of them have medical issues-

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: All of them. Including me. So, it's been- I've shared some experiences with them.

Bach: Did those experiences leave you with a sense of gratitude?

[00:19:56]

Libesch: Well, in a way it- it did because it, it uh, the Armed Forces, as John can tell you, will force you to do things maybe you don't want to do, but you do-

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: For your benefit. So it never did me any harm.

Bach: Hm.

Libesch: And so I did what I was told, and I was very successful with what I did, so I can't complain.

Bach: Is there anything you'd change? You mentioned maybe enlisting in the Navy instead of the Army? [chuckles]

Libesch: Well, if I had stayed at Marquette, I would've gone with the Navy because they had their Navy program. What did they call that John, the--

John: ROTC?

Bach: ROTC?

Libesch: ROTC.

John: Or OCS? Officer Candidate School?

Libesch: Yeah. And then I was uh, I qualified for OCS, later.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: But if I stayed, at Marquette, I would probably, would've been in the Navy. But that's fine, that's neither here nor there.

Bach: You mentioned, that, the, uh, here where you live you have the company of other veterans, which is, I think, very interesting. Wha- what do you guys talk about?

Libesch: Not very much. We don't talk about very much. One guy in particular doesn't talk at all. But we have, at the Regency we have three meals a day- that comes as part of my rent. And, um, as a result, uh, I don't have that problem. I don't have to depend on John or my family--

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: For my livelihood. Because I've got enough, I saved enough, invested enough, that I'm okay.

Bach: The veterans that you have a chance to, uh, share some time with, is that reassuring?

Libesch: [noise] I think it is.

Bach: How does that make you feel?

Libesch: Good. Good. I'm, I'm, I like it here. I'd like to be home- "home", home- but this is home, to me, and I, I get along pretty well, don't I, John?

John: Yes, you do.

Libesch: And I try to be content, and patient.

Bach: Is that easy or hard?

Libesch: Sometimes it's HARD.

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: I'm ninety-two years old, and uh, I've had a good life. I can't complain. We say here, if you complain it won't do you any good anyhow.

Bach: [laughs]

John: Sounds like the military. [chuckling]

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: Doesn't it?

Bach: Did you join any, uh, or participate with any veteran's organizations when you left the Army, or- or no?

Libesch: I did, I was with the American Legion for awhile. And the Foreign-- but, I was so busy with my own business, that I didn't have time for that. So,

Bach: When you first joined, how was that?

Libesch: It was all right.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: It was okay.

Bach: Certainly kept you in contact with others who maybe had similar experiences?

Libesch: Yep, well, yes. You have to understand that I don't have a car, I have problem with my vision. So I have to put up with stuff that, normally, you do, and I used to do. So, okay.

Bach: So, overall, the experiences that you had and the service that you did, of course to America and, and in World War II- uh, it's- it's just so honorable. Do you get the sense that people respect what you did for this country?

Libesch: I think so.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: I think so. If they find out that I've been in the military, they, they let me know. They congratulate me, tell me how happy they are, that I served. Yeah, the people appreciate it, Bob.

Bach: So how does that make you feel?

Libesch: Good. Yep, yep.

Bach: Well you've shared a lot of things with me Bob, I-I appreciate that. On behalf of the Veterans Museum I appreciate it greatly. Is there anything we didn't talk about that you'd like to add in? Please feel free to do that.

Libesch: I don't think so- I think I've got it all.

[00:24:54]

John: If-if I may, Bob.

Bach: Yes.

Libesch: Sure.

John: You've shared with me about being in France, after the invasion--

Libesch: Oh yeah.

John: And what was happening in Japan.

Libesch: Okay. Uh, when the war-- we, I marched with my unit, to Germany.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: After the invasion, we went from, from, uh, France to Belgium, and then we marched and rode to Berlin, Germany.

Bach: Wow.

Libesch: That's what I did. And I continued my service as a medic. And then uh, what was that John?

John: Well, you said you were-

Libesch: Oh-

John: You were being held in, in Germany waiting to find what was gonna happen in Tokyo, as they were amassing plans for a land invasion in Japan.

Libesch: Oh yeah, so they had plans for me--

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: This- this was, well the war was still going on--

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: Not only in Europe but in- in the, uh, in, uh, Japan area.

Bach: Right.

Libesch: So at that point, they transferred me then to Marseille, France, to train for the invasion of Japan. And then when our good president dropped the atomic bomb, the war ended. And I was lucky again. They didn't know what to do with me, so they sent me home. [laughs]

Bach: [chuckles]

Libesch: That's how lucky I was.

Bach: Now, one other thing when you were in Germany, did you have occasion to see any of the concentration camps at the end of that--

Libesch: Yes I did. I s-

Bach: Did you really?

Libesch: Couple of them.

Bach: What was- tell me about that, if you don't mind, what- what you recall of that.

Libesch: It was awful. It was awful. Yeah, these, many of these people in these camps were skeletons- because they were, mistreated, they didn't have proper nutrition, and then- the German people were very happy to see us--

Bach: Hm.

Libesch: And of course, many of them denied this was going on [coughs]--but it was. Okay.

Bach: That must have been a remarkable experience, for someone your age, particularly.

Libesch: Yeah, then I was approaching twenty years old, but um, with a lot of experience.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: Yeah. But, God was good to me.

Bach: Did you struggle with those memories for a time, after you returned?

Libesch: Not too much.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: I just didn't talk about it-

Bach: Yeah.

Libesch: As I am now.

Bach: Right.

Libesch: Talking about it.

Bach: Well, you have a rich story sir.

Libesch: Well, thank you.

Bach: Mm-hmm.

Libesch: Well thank John.

Bach: By all means.

Libesch: Okay.

Bach: Well then, we're going to stop. I want to uh, thank you again for your time and I'll turn off the recorder.

Libesch: Please do.

Bach: All right.

Libesch: Thank you for your time.

Bach: You're welcome.

Libesch: Bob.

John: So Bob, is this painful to talk about, even now?

Libesch: No.

[00:28:27]