

The Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology
Museum of Vision & Ophthalmic Heritage

EXCERPT: Dr. Forrest Hull

Interviewed by Robert W. Enzenauer, MD, March 2002

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DR. ENZENAUER: This is Dr. Robert Enzenauer. I'm interviewing Retired Colonel Forrest Hull for the Archives Committee and the Foundation Museum of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Colonel Hull, thank you so much for taking the afternoon. Could you tell me, sir, how you started out in medicine? Where you went to med school?

COLONEL HULL: Well, I went to school at the University of Southern California, during the Depression. I went through the Liberal Arts course, got my B.A. degree there. Then I took a pre-med course, and they had a new rule then that the fourth year of arts will be combined with the first year of medicine. So my senior year in arts was really the same as the first year of medicine, and then after three years we went to an internship. The internship was at the San Diego County General Hospital in San Diego. And the school at that time did not confer the M.D. degree until you completed your internship. That's not true now, but it was then.

My father was a physician and he advised me that because Hitler was rattling the saber over there, and since he was a medical officer in the Army in World War I, that maybe I'd better consider military service. So I took the examinations for the Army and the Navy. And the Navy gave me a promise for a commission in several months, whereas the Army said I could join right now. Well, not being too familiar with Army protocol, I accepted and was immediately given orders to proceed to Fort McArthur, California. Unfortunately, the superintendent at the San Diego General Hospital wasn't too sympathetic. He said no I had signed up and I had to stay and complete my internship, which I did. I was a little bit unusual because I didn't have my MD degree, therefore, I didn't really qualify to take the darn examination [for the Army], and that kind of threw them into a bit of a tailspin. And so they put me on detached service at San Diego County Hospital until I finished, and then I proceeded to Fort McArthur. That was 1938.

When I arrived at Fort McArthur, I signed in and everything. And then they said, 'Now, how would you like your pay?' And I hadn't realized that I'd get any pay. Our pay at the San Diego General Hospital was \$10 a month. Then the San Diego County Board of Supervisors decided on a 10% cut for all county employees. Therefore, instead of \$10, I got \$9 and that was a dollar that I resented losing the most in my life.

So, anyway, when I went to the finance officer at Fort McArthur, he said, 'Do you want your pay in check or cash?' Well, I didn't know what to do so I said, 'Well, I'll take it in cash.' So he kept counting out those \$20 bills and I just about fainted. That was the most money that I'd seen for a long time. And so then he says, 'You have another allowance of \$150 for forage for your mount.' And I said, 'What?' He said, 'All officers are supposed to have a horse, and that's for the horse.' And I says, 'Well, I don't have a horse. Can I use it to buy gasoline with?' And he said, 'Yeah, that's okay. I don't care what you do with it. Anyway, here's \$150 for that.' So that was my introduction to the Army at Fort McArthur.

DR. ENZENAUER: And, sir, you were commissioned in what branch then?

COLONEL HULL: Medical Corps. I was a First Lieutenant in the Medical Corps. I served in Fort McArthur for about six or eight months, then I was transferred to Washington.

DR. ENZENAUER: Let me ask, where was it? Because Fort McArthur doesn't exist anymore.

COLONEL HULL: Fort McArthur was at San Pedro, California, just about 20 miles south of Los Angeles.

It was a coast artillery post. You could hear the cannons booming when they were practicing. They never shot anybody in anger, but they always had their exercises and so forth.

When I got back there, I went to the Army medical school and got a pretty good portion of tropical diseases and that sort of stuff, it was very good. And then after that I went to the Medical Field Service Group in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where the Army tried to make a soldier out of me. It was sort of a West Point for medical officers. I learned how to march. I learned how to carry the saber properly, all that sort of stuff.

So then after that I was classified as general military in medicine, which really was the equivalent of emergency room services today. In that capacity, I served in the Army for many years until I became an ophthalmologist.

DR. ENZENAUER: I'm very interested in your World War II service. So when did you go overseas? With what unit did you go?

COLONEL HULL: I was on maneuvers and so forth in the south part of the country, and then I was ordered to Camp Custer, Michigan. Well, first I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky and joined the Fifth Infantry Division. And was a company commander of a collecting company. There I was promoted from First Lieutenant to Captain, which is a big deal. And then when I was there, our whole unit was sent to Camp Custer, Michigan. And when I was at Camp Custer, Michigan, why I was placed on a group that was being transferred to the Philippines. Now, remember, we weren't at war yet, and the Philippines was considered a very, very desirable duty. It's a nice quiet place, and I would have had lots of servants and all that sort of stuff. My wife was very interested in going, too, because dependants could go at that time. And then I suddenly developed a leg infection, so I was put in the hospital. Under those conditions, why, I was stricken from the list and I was very disappointed because I couldn't go. So they sent me to Iceland instead, which is the opposite end of the world. It's very interesting to know that, if I had been part of that group that was transferred, that I would have been involved in the Bataan Death March.

DR. ENZENAUER: So if you had not gotten that leg infection, you would have been in...

COLONEL HULL: I may not have been here today, because they had quite a few casualties in Japan at that time. So I managed to go to Iceland. And there I was... a very interesting thing. When I hit Fort Slocum—that's the embarkation for going to Iceland, why, the commanding general called me in, and he said, 'Hull,' he says, 'you are the highest ranking officer of the infantry people that are on board, therefore you're commander of troops.' Well, I was that much of a soldier I could do that. But then I found out, lo and behold, why they had a general hospital that was on that ship, and they had a full colonel and more lieutenant colonels, and I was outranked by practically every medical officer on the ship. I was only a captain at that time. So I was able to get along pretty well, but it was a funny. I told the general, I said, 'I didn't think that a medical officer was supposed to come in and line troops.' And he says, 'Listen,' he says, 'I'm the general here and you do as I say.' I said, 'Yes, sir,' and saluted him twice.

DR. ENZENAUER: I was curious, one thing, before we go on to World War II, were you in the Louisiana maneuvers? You mentioned that you were in the south. And were you in the maneuvers in like '40, '41?

COLONEL HULL: Oh, well, while I was in the maneuvers, I was with the First Infantry Division at Fort Benning, Georgia. And there I was more or less involved in the infantry school there, where I learned infantry tactics and all that sort of stuff.

DR. ENZENAUER: Well, it sounds like you were qualified to be the troop commander.

COLONEL HULL: Yeah. Then later on, I was transferred over to the Fifth Division, down around the Louisiana/Texas borders and Sabine River, that area. We did a lot of maneuvering down there, and particularly in the winter time it gets pretty cold. We lived out in pup tents and just did the same things that any other soldier did. Went through infiltration courses, people shot bullets over your head while you're traveling under a fence and all that sort of thing. The motion pictures today, depict some of those infiltration courses, and they give most of the credit to the Marines. Well, hell, they've got more people in the Army doing that than the Marines had in the whole Corps.

DR. ENZENAUER: So, sir, you said you were in Iceland. Were you in Iceland when the war started?

COLONEL HULL: I was in Iceland when Pearl Harbor... yeah. We heard about it and listened to the President's speech.

DR. ENZENAUER: So, again, sir, what was your assignment there in Iceland?

COLONEL HULL: I was in the Fifth Infantry Division, and I was with the 10th United States Infantry.

DR. ENZENAUER: Were you a unit surgeon then?

COLONEL HULL: I was a surgeon. When we got to Iceland we relieved the British, because the British had been kicked out of Dunkirk and a lot of those British soldiers were all sent to Iceland. We had them there, mostly British and Scots plus our own full division.

I landed in Iceland in September of 1941. Iceland was small-Reykjavik is a small town. Fishing and sheep grazing was the main thing there. And, see, Iceland is a very interesting country because it touches the Arctic Circle, but the Gulf Stream comes up north and circumnavigates Iceland and then dissipates in the Arctic Ocean. So the peripheral Iceland is reasonable, it doesn't get colder than 10 degrees below zero. But the interior is purely arctic stuff and it gets awfully cold. We had winter warfare maneuvers there.

DR. ENZENAUER: How long were you in Iceland?

COLONEL HULL: I was two years in Iceland.

DR. ENZENAUER: And then did you go to Europe?

COLONEL HULL: No, they sent me back to America from Iceland. But what I want to tell you is, see, the Norwegian officers there were training us for a possible attack on Norway. Now, the philosophy for doing that was that Hitler was building his troops up in France. Now, if we should hit him from Iceland in Norway, which wasn't very heavily defended, then the Germans would have to put most of the German army up to Norway, and then it would have dissipated the German army in France. And then the invasion into France would have been much easier. That was the philosophy, but Field Marshal Montgomery scotched the idea and that made Eisenhower pretty mad. But that's why Eisenhower was raised to five stars instead of four, so he could outrank the field marshal, you know.

Now, I was sent back from Iceland to form a cadre for the 75th Infantry Division at Fort Leonardwood in Missouri. But when I got there, they found out that another cadre had been sent. The adjutant general had, in a typical way, why, they goofed up and sent two cadres there. So I was supposed to command the Medical Battalion, be division surgeon, but I was outranked by somebody that got there before I did. We got along fine. I acted as his unofficial second-in-command, kind of advice commander, and so forth, and we got along fine in training, basic training.

Then all of a sudden I got a call from headquarters that said 'General Frickett wants to see you.' I hadn't been there very long. I figured I must have done something wrong, but I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what I was going on the red carpet for. So I reported in with the General. 'Hull,' he says 'sit down.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' He says, 'Did you go to medical school?' I said, 'Well, yes, I did.' 'Did you do well?' 'Well, I... yeah, I was in the top of the class.' I

couldn't figure what the hell he was getting after. And then he finally said, 'Look at this.' 'Sure.' It's a letter. And it was a letter excoriating him for inability to select proper officers to the Commander General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. It seems that two of them in a row had flunked out. Now, I realized that the division was ready to go into combat, and, two of their candidates had flunked out. And the General says, 'You're going to the Commander General Staff School, and you're going to make good grades. You're going to pass.' Well, I could see the other side of the coin. He was a Brigadier General bucking for Major General and he didn't want anything to happen. So I went off to the Commander General Staff College, and I figured, boy, if I didn't come through there, why I'd better go over the hill and not even come back.

DR. ENZENAUER: I didn't think that many doctors went to the College back then. Were you the only doctor?

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