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Hugh Ambrose: The Art of History

*Good history informs us as a people, as voters and as parents,
what we're going to do, who we're going to elect, and how to
exercise our constitutional right to decide the fate of this country.*

Interview by Brian Schott

Hugh Ambrose is the author of *The Pacific*, a non-fiction account of WWII, published March 2010. He also served as the Historical Consultant for the HBO miniseries produced by Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, and Gary Goetzman which debuted on HBO March 14.

Before joining *The Pacific* team, Hugh was the Vice President of The National WWII Museum. He continues to work for the museum part time and has been hired by HBO to aide in the development of another miniseries. His career began when, after earning a Master of Arts degree in history, he went to work with his father, the late historian Stephen E. Ambrose, author of many best selling volumes of popular American history. Over a decade, Hugh helped his father produce a number of acclaimed documentaries and films, including HBO's *Band of Brothers*, as well as a number of books, including the New York Times bestsellers *Citizen Soldiers*, *Nothing Like it in the World*, and *Undaunted Courage*.

He is a trustee of the Lewis and Clark County Library, in Helena, Montana, and a former trustee of the National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council, as well as of the National *D-Day* Museum. The interview was conducted by telephone on November 10, 2010, a week after Mr. Schott met Mr. Ambrose at the Festival of the Book in Missoula, Montana. The transcript has been edited for clarity, but has been kept as conversational as possible. The length of the audio transcript was 34:57.

INTERVIEW BY BRIAN SCHOTT

BS: Can you hear me okay, Hugh?

HA: Yes I can.

BS: Alright. How's your day going so far?

HA: So far so good.

BS: So is it just a whirlwind for you right now?

HA: Yeah, I mean it's been a busy year. That's for sure. You get done with a project and that project does well and then other opportunities come up. It feels good. I feel lucky, but certainly busy.

BS: Well let's first go back a little ways and talk about the work that you did with your dad. You did a lot of research with your dad and worked very closely with him on a lot of projects. Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

HA: Sure. It began with a phonecall when I was in graduate school. He called to say that he did not have a teaching assistant that year. He was working on a book. He needed someone to go get stuff for him, make copies of this and that — and he said, "You're in the library every day, maybe you could do it?" And then he said the magic words: "I'll pay you." So I said great and he would just call up and say what he needed and I would go down and make copies every day and send them to him. He was an extremely focused, hardworking, and driven sort of person and so working for that sort of person — particularly when it's your father — you have to work out a relationship with a high level of trust. That happened without a whole lot of forethought over a year.

And then that book, *D-Day*, did extremely well. Then for *Undaunted Courage* he had more success. It began with the same sort of thing — providing information and research on things that just pop up as you work your way through a topic. You suddenly realize you need to know more about a certain thing. I began to give him documents as less of a compilation and more of a report, which he really appreciated. The big thing for me on *Undaunted* was he would send me the draft chapters and I would read them to review certain footnotes. But I couldn't read the chapters without a pen in my hand, so I just

started making editorial comments for him. I was right out of graduate school and nervous about whether he would like the notes on his book. I thought, “What a knucklehead I am. The guy’s a master historian and here I am with my notes on his book.” But he called me a few days later and said the notes were great. Now my father was a very generous guy and some of them he used and some he ignored. But that was great to be a part of that.



And then that book became such a phenomenon. By that point, I got a couple of different job offers and he said, “Well that’s great. Hugh, I’m very proud of you. The next book I’m going to do I need somebody to go for a few months interviewing German World War II veterans in Germany.” He wanted to follow up on the success of his *D-Day* book that would eventually be called *Citizen Soldiers* — it follows the men across Northwest Europe and then into Germany. I had done a year of postgraduate work at the University of Salzburg, Austria. And I had learned to speak German well. So when he was telling me this, he knew that he was offering me something that I would love to do. So I dropped those other opportunities and went over to Germany and spent a few months interviewing German World War II veterans and it was an amazing experience for me in translating those and getting those in the book. It was all such an experience — of learning from him about how a book is put together, what he was trying to achieve, from

INTERVIEW BY BRIAN SCHOTT

conception to final draft.

With each book, you understand that process better. After that we did a couple books like *Nothing Like It in the World* — about the construction of the Pacific Railroad. I would do a lot of the original research. Again, he was an amazingly focused and hardworking guy. My job was to go through the endnotes to find out all the archives and the diaries and the letters and photographs and so forth. As he began to decide what stories he was going to tell, I would grab what we needed and separate the wheat from the chaff and put together boxes of research that fit with what he was trying to do. It was a demanding task, but a lot of fun to do. It involved a fair amount of travel. We worked really hard. I felt very lucky to be a small part of his success.

My father at this point had been 30 years into the business and that's just a great career. For all his great success, remember that he began being a military historian back in the 1970s when nobody would have thought that the path to career advancement was to be a military historian. In the wake of Vietnam he made this choice — and he made it because he believed in it and chased it down through all those decades. I come in at the tail end when all this work began to really communicate with the country in an astonishing sort of way.

BS: Talk about going to Germany and interviewing veterans over there. What's your approach to interviewing people?

HA: For the veterans, obviously the chance to leave their legacy is important. Once they knew I could speak German, that was a big hurdle. Ultimately, what I found was my promise to them: first of all I'm just interested in your service on the frontline. And the subtext of that of course is, "I'm not looking for Nazis." I'm not looking for people who have done things — you know, crimes against humanity — that they would rather not speak about it. And certainly no one who had those types of experiences would want to talk to me. People self-select. But the men that I spoke to were men who at 16 were taken into national service, or at 17 put into the German military. And spent most of their teens and early twenties at war, without ever really having a choice. They felt that they had been honorable soldiers and were willing to talk to me because of that.

War is a terrible business. But at the end of the day they had not done the atrocities and crimes against humanity that all of us under-

stand were committed by German military people during World War II. My questions were mostly about widening their story while seeing if there is more here or there and placing them properly within the context of what was going on during the war at that point. When I did this in the late '80s, nobody was talking to German World War II veterans. None of their families really wanted to know what they had experienced — down to their children, down to the wife, down to the grandchildren. Nobody. But when I arrived at those homes, I was treated as an honored guest. They'd often serve me a beer, even if it was nine in the morning, which took a little getting used to, but they were so very, very gracious as hosts.

As soon as we started to talk, everybody left us alone. So my promise to them was that one day there will be a generation of Germans who will want to hear directly from you and you will have the chance to speak to them. Because this tape is going into the archives in the National War Museum in New Orleans and young Germans are going to find that one day. And you can say anything you want to them. You have my word. And it worked.

BS: That's incredible. Whether you're speaking with a German veteran, an American veteran, does anything strike you as a common thread when you're speaking with veterans of war?

HA: Speaking to the veterans from both America and Germany, the common threads I found was that for all of its importance to their lives and to the history of the world, they were very glad that it turned out the way it did. They're very proud that they had helped rebuild the country —because Germany was completely devastated, but like America, rebounded and has become, once again, one of the most important countries in the world. They are very proud of their achievements of creating a world which is safe and prosperous. The Germans I spoke to were glad that they lost. They did all what they were expected to do and were honorable soldiers, but certainly glad that things turned out the way they have.

The one thing that struck me the most is that I've had tours over there with German veterans and American veterans meeting — and how much they enjoy speaking to one another and how much you can stand in a particular battlefield with veterans and have them say, "Oh,

INTERVIEW BY BRIAN SCHOTT

I was over here and we were shooting here. And I was over here shooting at you.” And they’re talking about it and it’s a very bizarre moment in the sense that you know that both of these are guys that lost men that they cared about in this battle, maybe even were wounded there themselves.

And so in another time, if they were telling you the story they might get emotional about all the pain and suffering of that moment — and yet here with the Germans and the Americans there’s a sense of mutual respect and curiosity and interest in what was going on so that those of us like me — more than a generation away from that moment — were just astonished. Really it was a wonderful thing because ultimately we have to get over our hatreds in this world. The Germans and the Americans found a way after this horrible war to get over it and become great allies. And when you become great allies, you have moments like this. Those kind of things are not something a historian would ever dare to say — but it’s the veterans who have a right to say them.

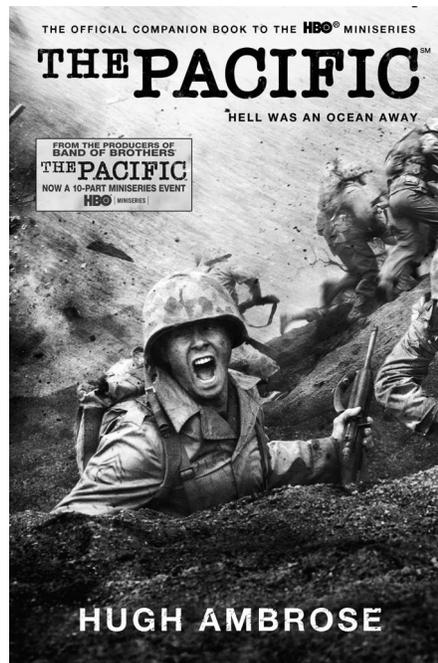
BS: Certainly war and violence get glorified in the media and movies. It seems like with *The Pacific* you made a conscious choice to take a more realistic look at it?

HA: Absolutely. It wasn’t just my choice. From executive producers Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks to Bruce McKenna who was the head screenwriter and the co-executive producer, it was always important to us that the Pacific War be seen as it really was. You have to remember when I was growing up and in college films came out like *Hamburger Hill* and *Full Metal Jacket* and so forth. They’re about a lot of atrocities occurring in Vietnam and what the message to many Americans — and certainly to me was, — that Vietnam was bad because these horrible things happened and because Americans on occasion committed acts which we all find horrific.

And the Pacific War had many such moments in it. This whole idea that there’s such a thing as a good war needs to be really thrown out. This is what happens in warfare. And that the only thing that makes all of that pain and suffering — which don’t always just occur on the battlefield of the day, but to the people who go through it that last a lifetime — the only thing that makes that in any way redeemed

is, “What is the outcome? Why did we do this?” In World War II, why we did it and how we behaved afterwards was to make a better world. This is why we care about World War II and not because that on those islands there were ferocious battles in some way less brutal than the battles that were fought on the peninsula of Vietnam.

I do believe that “Good history informs us as a people, as voters and as parents, what we’re going to do, who we’re going to elect, and how to exercise our constitutional right to decide the fate of this country. I think we absolutely need to understand those things and so I hope that that is a part of what comes out of *The Pacific*. We want to honor those guys for their courage. We want to honor them for their sacrifice — but we also want to recognize that America did a great thing in winning the Pacific War and what it did as victor. And that’s really a proud legacy. And that is something we shouldn’t lose sight of because of course we are still a super power and we are still engaged with an enemy that is every bit as fanatical as the Japanese were way back when. The comparison between Al Qaeda and the Japanese breaks down pretty quickly, but at least at that basic level — fanaticism — they share the willingness, the absolutely unquestionable willingness to die for their cause.



What we had to do for my book and also for the HBO series was figure out how to tell the story in the Pacific so you experienced it in the first person, from the beginning to end in its totality. So you have to decide what parts of the war you’re going to represent and which parts you are not. You simply could not have the Army and all of its contributions be a part of this. And the Army has certainly let me know on

INTERVIEW BY BRIAN SCHOTT

various occasions —veterans of the United States Army — that they thought that was a mistake and I respect their right to believe that. I will say quite honestly that there were two drives toward Japan. One lead by the Navy and its fighting arm, the Marine Corps. And one lead by the United States Army. And the one crucial — if we'd only been able to have one — would have been the Navy going through the Central Pacific. The decision to follow the Navy units that I did is all based on the idea that I don't want to write a comprehensive history. There are already comprehensive histories of this vast and complex war. I wanted to do something that was different and I had to make difficult choices to achieve that — that's what you see in the book and in the film.

BS: What does immersing yourself in all this war research do to you?

HA: Well, the guys, “our guys” as I call them, the veterans that I got to know — it was a joy to get to spend time with them and get to know them — to see them not as some archetype of some old guy, but to really get to know their story and their history and see them as friends. I think that the thing that always comes back to me is that they are surprised at how quickly life goes by. They had a great life. They're proud of their service to their country. They're proud of their family. They're happy to have lived to a ripe old age and enjoy the fruits of their labors. And yet it's still amazing that as they get to this advanced stage and have lost many other friends and so forth that they know that life goes by really fast. Hanging out with them and spending time with them beyond learning about this important conflict is that it's going to go by fast for me too. I will one day will find myself going, ‘Wow. Now I'm 70 years, 75 or 80. I'm in a different part of my time here on planet earth.’”

BS: You travel a lot, but what's it like when you return home to Helena?

HA: In terms of coming back to Montana — I just love Montana. I love being here with my wife and kids. I feel lucky to get to do what I do and also to live here and not in some big city.

BS: I mentioned to my friend Lisa Jones that I met you at the Festival of the Book. I didn't realize that she knew you.

HA: Okay, yeah! My ski buddy.

BS: Lisa mentioned to me that you were a Jammer bus driver in Glacier. *[Note: Jammers are the historic, 1930s-era red tour busses in Glacier National Park, so-called because the drivers had to “jam” the manual transmission gears. Bus drivers give interpretive talks over a loudspeaker as they drive tourists on the Going-to-the Sun Road.]*

HA: [Big laugh] Uh-oh. It’s Montana. All your dirty secrets come out.

BS: Well this is hilarious because I just learned this an hour ago. So I was like, oh this is perfect. I have at least a little inside scoop on Hugh here, so that made me chuckle. But I’m curious — you were a driver in Glacier 20 years ago. Now you’re an international bestselling author. We were just talking about projecting into the future, but how has Hugh changed since those days driving Jammers over Logan Pass?

HA: [Laughter] Oh, I loved working in Glacier and I met so many wonderful people there and part of the reason I can’t leave the state is I can’t live that far away from Glacier. I have to get up at least once a year, twice a year, go hiking and my wife feels the same way and some of my best friends in the world are still those guys I worked with. I learned a lot. Our bus had 18 people every day and I did learn something about keeping folks engaged and how to tell a story and because if things are going well, they’re listening and if they aren’t, they start talking and tuning out and not tipping you. [Laughter] There is a pretty direct correlation to that and part of it was just recognizing what an audience needs. You should always be thinking about who your audience is and some audiences are ready for more serious, longer presentations and other audiences are just so happy-go-lucky and full of vim and vigor and you should go lighter on some stuff and just have fun.

Beyond work I mostly just did a lot of hiking and a lot of goofing off with some great people up there on our days off and made a little bit of money to keep me in school in the winter time — so that was cool. How have I changed since then? Well, I look back at myself back then and I made plenty of mistakes and there was a fair amount of silliness, but it’s all part of growing up, right? You try to learn from it and — not that I would want to become entirely serious — but I learned how to

INTERVIEW BY BRIAN SCHOTT

avoid at least some of the mistakes that I used to make.

BS: How old were you when you were a Jammer driver?

HA: Twenty-one. You have to be 21. I did it for the first summer and I loved it so much, I went back for another summer because it was just too much fun.

BS: You actually got some early training as a storyteller talking about history on those bus rides.

HA: Well that's right. Even back then I could condense the whole story of Lewis and Clark down to about half an hour. I could do an hour and a half depending on the length of the trip and more than once people get off the bus and they saw their comrades on another bus and would say, "We're halfway through Lewis and Clark," and they're like, "We haven't heard any of Lewis and Clark. This guy is talking about rock." And so you know, we had guys up there who studied geology and guys up there who had different ways of understanding Glacier. But mine was a lot about the Blackfeet and the tribes and the coming of Lewis and Clark and the fur trappers and very much history-based and very little on the geology. I think most of the things I said about geology were probably wrong. [Laughter] And flowers were another one. There were a lot of ladies who were very disappointed I couldn't identify more than three or four flowers. I couldn't help them much.

I enjoyed talking about the things that I had been learning all those years in college and growing up doing Lewis and Clark trips with my family and getting to know that story so well. It wasn't really something that I planned. It was simply that I needed a summer job. My dad's close friend had driven 40 years earlier and said, "Oh, you have to do it. I can't believe you haven't done it already." So I went up there and they needed another driver and so it was happenstance and it worked out really well. But I used to joke back then that I had reached the apex of my career because I was getting paid to talk history. They say when you study History as an undergraduate, the phrase you'll say most often as an employee is, "Would you like fries with that?" [Laughter]

BS: So last question here, what's the best part of telling a story for you? What do you love about story telling?

HA: Well you know, it used to be when I'd get a laugh and I still love that. You tell a story and there's something in there. And laughter doesn't just come from *funny*, it comes from *truth*. Sometime something is just so honest, there's such a little kernel of truth that it tickles them a little bit. Or they lean forward a little bit because they're just genuinely curious and you have their attention. I used to really love that. Part of what I really love now is defining the story — it is an act of discovery that is unique to each story, but each person goes about it differently. So the more times you do it, the more you recognize that what you're looking for and how you're going to put it together are all uniquely part of your makeup — not just training — but your proclivities and inclinations are all there. So when all that comes together in a way that other people see the finished product and it all make sense to them, they enjoy it. There's a great deal of satisfaction that goes with that. I'm sure you feel the same way, Brian, by putting together your Review and the magic of what it should be, what it could be, and making all decisions that go into the finished product. There's just something really cool about that.

BS: Yes there is. It's a great adventure.

HA: Yeah, it is. That's what it is and I don't think people always understand that writing — even nonfiction — is a puzzle that you have to unravel and solve and that is an adventure. It's fraught with difficulty, but also weighted with a great deal of fun — if you like that sort of thing. [Laughter]

BS: Well perfect, Hugh. I really enjoyed chatting with you and I know how busy you are and we're just thankful for your time.

HA: That's nice of you, Brian. Thank you. I appreciate you for allowing me to speak to your readership.