This is November, the month of Veterans Day. And the experience of being a surgeon during war is one of the highlights of the SVS History Project Work Group’s new video, an interview with Dr. Milton Weinberg, a member since the mid-1960s.

Most of the previous interviews for the work group’s project have been with SVS past presidents. However, said Dr. James Yao, former chair of the history team, group members thought SVS members would find Dr. Weinberg’s recollections interesting. “He’s been a member for so long and has experienced a great many changes,” said Dr. Yao. “We wanted to see what he had to say about the SVS.”

In addition to Dr. Weinberg’s work as a doctor and mentor, “respected by everybody,” said Dr. Yao, Dr. Weinberg also was an Army surgeon who served in Korea.

Because he had three years of surgical experience, Dr. Weinberg served for approximately six months of his time in Korea in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital – or MASH – unit, made famous in the 1970 black comedy movie, “MASH,” and the long-running television series of the same name.

In his interview, Dr. Weinberg noted that during World War II, Dr. Michael DeBakey had been a driving force for the concept of a unit that moved as the troops did and took care of the casualties somewhat close to the action.

MASH unit locations varied from seven or so miles to approximately 15 miles from the fighting. “It was a distance an ambulance could get to in a reasonable amount of time,” said Dr. Weinberg, with helicopters used to bring in the most seriously injured.

He noted that 97 percent of all wounded soldiers brought to a MASH unit survived. Never before had survival rates been so high.

As someone who served in Korea, what does Dr. Weinberg think of the fictionalized versions?

“I liked the movie, because it was funny,” he said. “I didn’t like the TV series (known as “M*A*S*H”), because they belittled the Regular Army.” And it is the so-called Regular Army, he said, “that takes the brunt of the real fighting when a war first starts.”

It is thought that the character Hawkeye Pierce was modeled at least partially after the late Dr. Keith Reemtsma, of
Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, and an SVS member, Dr. Yao added in the interview.

Dr. Weinberg said he – and probably all soldiers – left Korea, “A little bit older than when we came in, a little more serious.”

To watch just his interview, visit vsweb.org/Weinberg.

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