

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
PHILIP GAFFNEY
Medical Clerk, Army, World War II
1999

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Gaffney, Philip. (1916-2003). Oral History Interview, 1999.

Approximate length: 40 min.

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Philip Gaffney, a Madison, Wisconsin native, recounts his US Army service during World War II as a clerk—reprising his civilian occupation—stationed overseas in the European theatre. Gaffney entered service at Fort Sheridan, Illinois on December 2, 1941, and had his basic training at Camp Lee, Virginia. After a stint working as an admissions clerk at Tilton General Hospital, Fort Dix, New Jersey, his ship sailed from New York’s harbor in late June 1942, bound for Scotland. Gaffney remembers that his posting at Ben Hall Farm in Cheltenham, England was home to a signals, quartermaster, and aerography division. Technician Third Class Gaffney worked in the medical supply division of the chief surgeon’s office, Medical Department, European Theater of Operations for the next two and a half years. He states that his job involved requisitioning and keeping track of needed medical items from the United States, a process complicated by scarcity and by sinkings at sea. Gaffney and his Department only set forth for the continent when G2—Army intelligence—assessed it as sufficiently staffed to support the invasion. Gaffney was promoted to the chief clerk of his division. After D-Day, Gaffney was sent to France, first to Sainte-Mère-Église, and then on to Paris when “they were still shooting from the house tops.” He recalls the colorful assemblage in Paris on VE Day impeding movement around the city. As part of the Army of Occupation, divisional office was set up in Frankfurt am Main, Germany for one year, and then in Bad Nauheim, Germany. Gaffney and his wife, who he had met at Ben Hall Farm when she was sent there from the English War Department to be his assistant, returned to the US in April 1947. Using the GI Bill, he attended the UW as an undergraduate and as a law student. Amongst other decorations, Gaffney was a recipient of the Order of the British Empire, and the French Croix de Guerre.

Biographical Sketch:

Gaffney (1916-2003) served the US Army in the medical supply division of the chief surgeon’s office, Medical Department, European Theater of Operations during the Second World War. Before his repatriation in April 1947 he was part of the Army of Occupation in Germany. After the war, he went to the University of Wisconsin Law School on the GI Bill.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999.

Transcribed by John Maerzke, 2012.

Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2016.

Interview transcript:

McIntosh: Okay, we are now talking to Philip Gaffney, and the date is August 6th. Tell me where you were born.

Gaffney: Madison, Wisconsin.

McIntosh: And that was when?

Gaffney: December 10th, 1916.

McIntosh: And when did you enter the service?

Gaffney: December 2nd, 1941.

McIntosh: Where were you sent from Madison?

Gaffney: To Great Lakes Naval Training Station down near Chicago.

McIntosh: From there, where?

Gaffney: From there I was sent to Camp Lee Virginia for basic training. I believe I was in 5th Battalion, but I am not positive.

McIntosh: What did they train you for there?

Gaffney: Well, I got basic training there.

McIntosh: In what?

Gaffney: In basic military things such as marching, cleaning up the area, and making a bed, etc. And then they also sent me to clerks school, probably being aware that when I was in civilian service I had a job as a clerk.

McIntosh: So after you accomplished that they gave you a stripe and moved you on.

Gaffney: I'm not sure if they gave me a stripe, but they sent me from there to Tilton General Hospital which was on the outskirts of Fort Dix, New Jersey. And there I was assigned to the detachment.

McIntosh: What detachment?

Gaffney: The detachment was the Tilton General Hospital part of the whole setup, and they assigned me to work in the admissions office of the hospital under a Major Hogan. I was under a sergeant whose name I can't remember and also worked with a corporal by the name of Conant, I

believe, C-O-N-A-N-T. We received veterans who were medical cases. We handled the proper records for them and took the patient to the ward involved.

McIntosh: Then what?

Gaffney: And then there came a time when Don Conant was to be shipped overseas. As I learned later, a little bit later, he didn't go because he ran under the major's skirts, quote unquote. That was the way that my detachment commander put it when later on he told me he that he was putting me on a list to go overseas, and "Damn it, don't run under Major Hogan's skirts like Conant did." So I got shipped. It was a case of, and the song was in existence at that time, "I like New York in June." Because it was the end of June that I was shipped out of New York Harbor, and it was July when I was on the ocean to Europe, to England, "Jolly Olde England," and we landed either at Gourock or Greenock, Scotland and came straight south on a train down to Cheltenham, England. At Cheltenham was a camouflage war office, at Benhall, B-E-N-H-A-L-L, Farms. It was kind of a crooked entryway with camouflage buildings on each side, and each building, generally speaking, represented a service. Signal was there, Quartermaster was there, AG [aerography, the production of weather charts] was there, what else, I don't know. But we each had our building.

McIntosh: What was your duty there?

Gaffney: I started out—oh, now I remember. I was made a—I believe it was called T3 at that time, technician third class which was three stripes over and one stripe under. I was put to work in the supply division of the chief surgeon's office, the theater chief surgeon. We had miscellaneous duties for a while, and I can remember there came a point where the decision had to be made by me as to whether I was going to take orders from a line sergeant, three stripes above, and I don't believe there was anything under. Just about that time, and this is something that was very interesting to me, Doctor Middleton; Doctor William S. Middleton, who was the Chief of the University of Wisconsin Medical School, who was in the medical practices division of the chief surgeon's office. He came to my part of the building to see Sergeant Gaffney. He asked to see Sergeant Gaffney of Captain Schliffert, who was the guy who was friendly with the staff sergeant I was having a problem with. I wish I would have been there when Captain Schliffert saw the colonel come down and wanted to see a sergeant. At any rate, to make a long story short, I had no more trouble with the sergeant, with the buck sergeant.

McIntosh: What kind of trouble was he giving you?

Gaffney: Well, the question was, who ranks the higher? Who gives the orders? My friendly Captain Schliffert had gone to the same university that Sergeant Homa had gone to, and they were a little friendly, but I had three stripes up and one under, and he only had three stripes. And the question was who ranks?

McIntosh: Now, I'm confused about one thing, you ended up in the Army, but you entered the service at the Great Lakes?

Gaffney: Correct.

McIntosh: How did that work out? I didn't know that the Army put people in service through the Navy base. How was that?

Gaffney: I can't explain it or justify it, but that was the way it was. There's another name for that, do you remember what that is, where it is? It's near Chicago.

McIntosh: Another name for what?

Gaffney: For Fort Sheridan.

McIntosh: Oh, yeah.

Gaffney: That was it, Fort Sheridan. Why did I say Great Lakes Naval Training Center? I don't know.

McIntosh: Oh, okay. All right, that confused me. All right, here we go. We're off and running again.

Gaffney: All right.

McIntosh: Yes, and now we're back to [inaudible].

Gaffney: There's a very interesting story there. You want me to take off on that subject?

McIntosh: I don't know, what is the story? Just tell me briefly what it is about. Then I'll answer your question.

Gaffney: How come Colonel Middleton came to see Sergeant Gaffney, whom he had never met?

McIntosh: How come?

Gaffney: Well, Colonel Middleton's wife's name was Maud. As I understand it, she had served in the military services as a nurse during World War I. My dear Aunt Stella, my father's sister was a nurse. She did not serve in military services, but somewhere along there, about the time of World War I, she was the head nurse at St. Mary's Hospital [Madison, WI]. My Aunt Stella and Maud were friends, and my dad and Doctor Middleton were friends because my dad was the Superintendent of the University Post Office on Randall Avenue. At times he had removed from the mail service at Doctor Middleton's request exotic plants or medicines that came from somewhere. But the doctor was interested in 'em, and my dad cooperated. Middleton was a very nice guy. So that condition existed, here's my dad still working on Randall Avenue.

McIntosh: And talking to Middleton and saying, "By the way my son is in England." Right?

Gaffney: Yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: I can see how it happened.

Gaffney: so [laughs]—

McIntosh: Well, good. Okay, let's get back to the war.

Gaffney: All right. Where are we?

McIntosh: How long were you at this place in England?

Gaffney: In England?

McIntosh: Roughly.

Gaffney: I'd have to refer to my records to tell you. I was roughly there for two and a half years. I think I've got me in the Supply Division of the Office of the Theater Chief Surgeon. I believe that was General Hawley at the time, Paul Hawley. At any rate our function was to requisition from the United States the medical items, supply items, for the troops in the field as requested and approved by the surgeon, chief surgeon, or the chief of my section. We would draw up cables in code and send them back to the US to have shipped to the European Theater, in care of the Chief Surgeon, any medical item in the medical catalogue or any item that was purchased from the British that was on reverse Lend-Lease. And we had to keep a record of those and follow up on them, and it got to be rather complicated, because sometimes items that had been requisitioned and were on route to England or Europe were sunk overseas, and sometimes items that we requisitioned were in short supply or the requisition couldn't be filled, and

that was backordered. So we had medical items in the theater in England or Europe, items on ship at sea, and items being manufactured in the US to fill the requisition. Somebody had to keep track of all these things. We had people in the Supply Division who did that. We had a number of officers working in different sections of the Supply Division, a few people from Eli Lilly Company, and one warrant officer. I think we had twenty or thirty people until, as I understand it, G2 [intelligence] investigated whether or not the Medical Department in Europe was sufficiently— [exchange regarding a bird at the window]. At any rate, G2 investigated whether or not the Medical Department in the European Theater was ready to take on the invasion of the continent. As I understand it but didn't know because they didn't want anybody to know anything over there, other than what they had to know; as I understand it the Medical Department was not considered ready. I can't date this, but it must have been before the invasion of Europe. At any rate, we went from in personnel from about thirty GIs plus officers to one hundred and some GIs and officers. Then the war came along in Europe, it was the invasion, etc. Prior to that incident, we set up the North African invasion which had a code name that I've forgotten.

McIntosh: Operation Torch?

Gaffney: Yeah, that sounds familiar. Do you want me to tell you about Europe?

McIntosh: About what happened to you?

Gaffney: Well, I can tell you that—

McIntosh: Where did you go?

Gaffney: My work was first of all, as I have mentioned, as a file clerk. Can you shut things off till I get some water? Would you like a drink of— to going to Europe, I'll tell you what I did in the Supply Division and for which I got a couple of medals that I never thought were deserved because I only did my job. But at any rate, as of the time I was assigned to the duty of a file clerk, the files, which had previously been maintained by an English War Department civilian, and consisted of an in file and an out file, I had to change all of that and refile everything because I found out there was such a thing in the Army as the Dewey Decimal System. I didn't know anything about it, but I found out from AG or somewhere that that was the system that was used in the military. So I got a hold of a book, and I still know—I don't remember where I got the book, but it itemized the way to set up a file in the military style, which I did. We got lots of files, file folders, and file cabinets, and they were all set up by decimal. If there was any question as to whether to file anything here or there, you had to look in that book and make up your own decision. I was assigned an English War

Department civilian by the name of Joyce Wormleighton to help me with the job, and she became the permanent file clerk, and later I married her and brought her to the United States. At any rate, I stayed in the file section, and I was made chief clerk of the division, although my principle duties were the files, and to see that the correspondents got answered, and so on. Then came the invasion of Europe, of France and Germany. I was shipped overseas to the Carentan Peninsula [in Normandy, France] with our office. That occurred after the invasion and before the fighting troops had gotten to Paris. We were in the area of Sainte-Mère-Église. Incidentally we had a major by the name of Major Parks who was a technical nut. His job was, if I remember correctly, largely as that of a statistician of some sort. At any rate, he had IBM machines running out in the field, in the Carentan Peninsula at Sainte-Mère-Église before the Germans were kicked out of Paris. I thought that was pretty good. At any rate, our office was assigned duty in Paris. That was at about the time that they were still shooting from the house tops, but before—Paris was substantially secure. We always had to follow up the armies; they didn't want the headquarters people to get shot at. So we had assigned an office on, I think it was on 9th Avenue and Kléber, K-L-É-B-E-R, which was near the Majestic Hotel, about two short blocks from the Arc de Triomphe. That was our office, and we started performing appropriate functions for the Medical Department there. I don't remember where we were—where the GIs were first billeted. But later on we were billeted at the Université de Paris dormitories, and for that we were hauled from those dormitories to downtown Paris where our office was. Hauled down there in the morning, hauled back at night, on 6x6s, 4x6s, 6 bys. We were not far from the Arc de Triomphe, or the Louvre, or all the other wonderful buildings downtown. We worked there until victory was declared. One thing that was of interest I thought, and rather comical, was that when peace was declared—I think they call that VE Day; the French, since they had many outlying possessions, were visited by parades of people from North Africa or wherever the French had colonies. We had elephants going around the the Arc de Triomphe and down the Champs-Élysées; interfering with our getting to lunch at noon. We had to walk all the way around the Arc de Triomphe; we couldn't go through it anymore to get to the chow line. That was pretty serious matter. Then after war was ended and I was mustered out at Étampes on the outlying area of Paris. I became a War Department civilian. The authorities, whatever they were in the US, were at that time happy to enlist the services of any warm body and give them high ranks and good pay. So that's the way I was for a year and a half roughly, maybe two and a half years.

McIntosh: All right. What then? [??]

Gaffney: I was a CA9, if I remember correctly. I'd have to refer to my records to tell that. That meant clerical and administrations, is what the CA stood for.

So I was mustered out, and not too long after that, if I can even remember when that was, our office moved to Frankfurt, as part of the Army of Occupation. I worked in Frankfurt am Main until the War Department, or whatever the authorities were, decided that some people were getting paid too much, and my rating and salary were reduced. By which time my wife was ready to return to the United States with me. So we worked it out, and we went home together in 1947, I think it was roughly in April.

McIntosh: When did you get married? Before you came here or [inaudible]?

Gaffney: We were married November 25, probably of 1944. It was while the war was still going on.

McIntosh: While you were still in [inaudible]..

Gaffney: No, I was in Paris, and she was in Paris. She worked in the personnel department of the Medical Corps.

McIntosh: She went to Europe the same time you did? Is that what you're saying?

Gaffney: Not exactly at the same time. There was some delay, but substantially—

McIntosh: So was she in the same office with you?

Gaffney: She was in, not in my office which was still Supply Division; she was in the personnel office of the Medics which was in a building down the street closer to the Majestic Hotel which building, if I remember correctly, was called the Hotel Columbia, Columbia Hotel. That was on Avenue Kléber also. This was the brownstone area of Paris. She was in a separate building, and she worked under different people in the personnel department.

McIntosh: So you were married [inaudible].

Gaffney: I had to fly to England to get married in London. As I refresh my memory with my wife recently, I was four hours late because the Paris airfield was socked in, and I couldn't take off until [laughs] later, so I was about four hours late for my own wedding, and after that we had a honeymoon,. We went to, I think it was Torquay, T-O-R-Q-U-A-Y, England. Which was on the ocean in the south-west part of England. very beautiful area, and after our honeymoon we went back to work.

McIntosh: So and you were you in Frankfurt for long? Were you there for a year before you came home or what?

Gaffney: All of a year.

McIntosh: And then you decided to come back home?

Gaffney: Well, I went from Frankfurt to a little spa village called Bad Nauheim, in Germany. That was a part of the Army of Occupation, and it was from there—[End of Tape 1, Side A.] I was a War Department civilian then, and it was from there that I got together with my wife. We took a boat to the US. Anything else you want me to touch on? Okay that's my wife. I'll introduce you. This is "Dr. Apple." Joyce?

Joyce: Yeah.

Gaffney: I'd like you to meet Dr. McIntosh.

Joyce: All right.

McIntosh: Hi, how are you.

Joyce: How do you do? Nice to meet you.

McIntosh: Nice to see you.

Gaffney: That's the English souvenir I brought home.

McIntosh: [inaudible] pretty nice. You did better than most. [Philip and Joyce laugh] [exchange regarding the Gaffney's cat]

Gaffney: Where was I?

McIntosh: Just came home [inaudible]. Okay, now we need to get to the other things here, I'll be asking specific questions, okay?

Gaffney: I'd like that 'cause there's a lot I can't remember.

McIntosh: The training you had was very specific for your job and you had no problems with that? You felt the Army taught you well?

Gaffney: Yes.

McIntosh: What you did was exactly what they trained you for? Roughly.

Gaffney: Roughly, yes.

McIntosh: Did you keep in contact with any of your fellow members of the group?

Gaffney: Yes, I kept in contact with a number of fellas from Supply Division that worked with me in England and maybe in Frankfurt. There was Bill Murn from Brooklyn.

McIntosh: New York or Wisconsin?

Gaffney: New York. There was Henry Lathe from somewhere on the Eastern states out there. I can't quite remember the name at the moment of what city it was. They're both deceased now. And I stayed in contact with a Major Bohn, B-O-H-N, from Wisconsin. Before the war he lived somewhere in the upper—in the northern part of Wisconsin. He was my commanding officer when I was working in Bad Nauheim, and he was a wonderful officer. He was the kind of guy who would make an appointment for us to have the use of the swimming pool in Bad Nauheim, and then he would tell all the guys that he had made this appointment, and then he would tell the guys in the class who couldn't swim to be out there, and, "That was an order!", he said. So we had little guys like Anderson from Iowa, who couldn't swim, coming out there. I don't remember whether or not they went in the tank, but we played ball and went swimming. He was hell of a good officer. He gave a damn about his people. He took care of his people. I think he's dead now. I'm sorry I never did—I have a letter from him after the war, but I think he died, and I haven't been able to meet any of his relatives since.

McIntosh: Did you join any veterans organizations?

Gaffney: No, none.

McIntosh: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill when you got out?

Gaffney: I did. I figured you had an easy way out of finances by borrowing a lot of money which would be hard to repay, or you could face the music and go to school and earn more money so I went back to the University of Wisconsin and graduated with a degree of BBA or BBS, whatever it was, and then I went to law school and graduated, got my degree there. Then I went to work for the State of Wisconsin.

McIntosh: Now you mentioned before that you received a decoration. What were those [??]

Gaffney: One was—if I remember right it was the Order of the British Empire. That was from England, and from France I received an award of the Croix de Guerre with one star, one bronze star. And of course, the ever present Good Conduct ribbon, and there's another ribbon that I have that I don't know what it's from.

McIntosh: You got a theater ribbon too?

Gaffney: Yeah, maybe that's what the other ribbon was.

McIntosh: Tell me about your contact with the French civilians. Was it to any extent or what?

Gaffney: They were approximately nil. At that time we had British War Department civilians in our employ, and I don't remember whether we had any French civilians or not. I rather doubt it.

McIntosh: Any in Germany?

Gaffney: I can't remember whether we had any Germans working for us.

McIntosh: You never visited with any?

Gaffney: Yes, my wife knew some people through her contacts through school. Joyce and I both visited with them.

McIntosh: While you were in the occupation?

Gaffney: While we were in the occupation, yes.

McIntosh: What was their attitude then? Do you recall?

Gaffney: These people were nice people. Their attitude was appropriate. Although I took German in University of Wisconsin I was not sufficiently fluent in the language to do a good job of talking with any German civilians. But I can remember one German civilian who hunted red fox with his fox terriers. He hunted with the fox terriers because the German civilians were not allowed to have guns. So I learned something. I learned that fox terriers actually go in a hole after a fox, and they come out with the fox. We did enough swapping of cigarettes for fox furs that we were able to have a short fur jacket made for my wife.

McIntosh: Were they starving when you were there?

Gaffney: I don't have any particular knowledge of how good their diet was at the time. This was down in Bad Nauheim.

McIntosh: Did you visit or see anything in conservation camps [inaudible]?

Gaffney: I saw nothing of them. They were generally farther east from where my office was, northeast.

McIntosh: The cities there were pretty well untouched by the war?

Gaffney: I don't remember Bad Nauheim having any damage, but Frankfurt was sure as hell damaged. The opera house in particular was ruined, the downtown area. While I was in Frankfurt we were located in the IG Farben Building which was a modern office building, and the—what is the word I want to use? The compound was the area generally around the IG Farben Building, and that constituted a part of Frankfurt that the Army had commandeered, and you had to be military personnel to get in there. I understand that the military was told not to blow that building up [laughs], and they didn't, and so we had a decent office building.

McIntosh: Maybe they were forming a friendship [??].

Gaffney: They were planning, they were planning well.

McIntosh: Okay, that should do it. Thank you so much.\

Gaffney: Okay.

[End of Interview]