

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
LAWRENCE E. GRIFFIN
Gunner, Air Force, World War II.

2000

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Griffin, Lawrence E., Jr., (1924-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound disc (ca. 50 min.), digital, 4 ¾ in.

Security Copy: 1 sound disc (ca. 50 min.), digital, 4 ¾ in.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 50 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Lawrence E. Griffin, a South Beloit, Illinois native, discusses his World War II service with the Air Corps as a gunner aboard a B-25. Griffin touches on volunteering for the Air Corps, staying in hotels during part of his training, washing out of airway communications school in Chicago and radio school in Madison (Wisconsin), and gunnery training at Fort Myers (Florida). He describes training on B-25s and B-17s at Greenville (South Carolina) and flying overseas with his crew via Brazil and Tunis to Corsica, where they joined the 489th Bomb Squadron. He comments on frequently flying with different crews, his co-pilot's getting killed, and frequent theft of silk parachutes. Griffin discusses his first missions over Italy, a long, cold mission to Yugoslavia, and several missions against Italian bridges. He reports on some German tricks, such as directing anti-aircraft fire from a captured B-25 and making bridges look like they had been bombed. Griffin details the mission when his plane was shot down: getting blown out of the plane, being wounded by shrapnel, landing in a tree, and being picked up by the Italian Home Guard and taken to a German military hospital by sledge. He comments on being transported with German soldiers, his medical treatment, and almost getting killed by an angry guard, whose parents had been killed in the bombing of Berlin. Griffin talks about being a pallbearer for a prisoner of war who died in the hospital. Griffin describes the food at the German hospital, some of the other Allied POWs, and their injuries. After the war ended, he tells of being liberated by the Red Cross, working with the partisans to accept surrendering troops, and being taken by an American ambulance through Pisa to Naples, where he was flown back to the States. He describes leave in New York City, turning 21 on the ride home, a ninety-day convalescence furlough, and getting discharged. Griffin touches on joining a POW group in Janesville (Wisconsin), getting a POW license plate, receiving a disability pension, and having continuing medical problems from his injuries.

Biographical Sketch:

Griffin (b.1924) served in the 12th Air Force, 340th Bomb Group, 489th Bomber Squadron. On his forty-ninth mission, his plane was shot down and he was held as a German prisoner of war. He worked for forty years at Freeman Shoe Company and settled in Beloit (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000
Transcription by John P Danish, 2009
Checked and corrected by WVM staff, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

Griffin: Ah, now I go to the VA up here and there's another Lawrence Griffin, so, I put junior on this so they can make the difference between the two of them.

James: Okay. We're, ah, speaking to Lawrence Griffith, Griffin on 9 June the year 2000. Where were you born?

Griffin: In Beloit.

James: 1924?

Griffin: Yup.

James: And when did you enter military service?

Griffin: When I was eighteen, the year after Pearl Harbor.

James: December '42.

Griffin: Right.

James: You volunteered for the U.S. Army.

Griffin: Air Force.

James: Air Force. Okay.

Griffin: That's why I did because I didn't want to get into the U.S. Army.

James: That's what I wanted you to say; I didn't know how to ask you directly, [chuckles] now. Okay. Where'd you go?

Griffin: Oh, we took our basic down at St. Petersburg [Florida].

James: Twelve weeks?

Griffin: Ah, whatever, they'd taken.

James: Okay.

Griffin: We stayed in hotel down there, the Serena Hotel. We got done with our basic; then went back to Chicago and, ah, at the Stevens Hotel, which is a Conrad Hilton now right on Michigan Boulevard. There

we took airway communications or some type there, and we had to take Morse code through here; put it on typewriter.

James: Was that hard to learn?

Griffin: Couldn't do it, ah, I washed out there and went to Madison.

James: Went to Radio School here in Madison?

Griffin: Yeah, Truax.

James: Yeah.

Griffin: Beautiful, except the tar-paper shacks and we went to school at night and you can imagine how hot it was in the summer time.

James: Yeah, it's been this way all summer.

Griffin: So, ah, everybody came in and got eye shades. I went from there to Denver.

James: By this time you were a radioman.

Griffin: No, no, I--.

James: That didn't work either.

Griffin: Couldn't get it; couldn't coordinate the two.

James: I see. Okay.

Griffin: So, anyhow, we went out to Denver and I took armament out there for gunner. And, went from there to; where did we go? Ah, Denver? [I] can't remember.

James: Okay. [unintelligible]

Griffin: Oh, anyhow, we went to Fort Myers [Florida].

James: Yeah.

Griffin: Took gunnery training down there.

James: Okay.

Griffin: Then we got delayed en route and I went back to, ah, Columbia [South Carolina] where the repo/depo [was]. Then we united with our crew and went to, ah, Savannah [Georgia] and picked up our plane.

James: Did you know what kind of an aircraft you were going to get?

Griffin: Oh, yeah, B-25.

James: You knew that, ah.

Griffin: We trained on them down in Greenville [South Carolina].

James: Okay, that's all I, ah--

Griffin: All our overseas training down there.

James: How did they train you to shoot that gun?

Griffin: Ah, tow-targets, supplies [unintelligible].

James: You got them on a railcar and, ah.

Griffin: Well, they had—

James: [unintelligible]

Griffin: Yeah, they had them going around a track.

James: Right.

Griffin: And then down in a lot of skeet, or you know.

James: Twelve-gauge shotguns.

Griffin: Twelve-gauge and they had the [unintelligible] shotguns mounted on turrets; we used them. And we also had hand held that we started a few fires down there; we put a few incendiaries in, or.

James: But now, tell me about that training. Was that hard to learn?

Griffin: No.

James: Just had to learn how to properly lead things and--

Griffin: Exactly, we had to bore sight our own guns and we also had to be blindfolded with gloves on and pick out three broken parts, which was tricky. It was hard to do. But we--

James: Without broken parts?

Griffin: Yeah

James: You'd find a part that was broken

Griffin: Well, the thing is, yeah, if you were off and your gun malfunctioned; well, really it was kind of dumb 'cause we didn't have any spare parts to put in there anyhow.

James: Oh.

Griffin: You know what I mean.

James: No, I do now.

Griffin: Yeah, oh, anyhow, we finished our overseas training at Greenville [South Carolina] and went down to West Palm Beach.

James: Yeah.

Griffin: Or went to Savannah [Georgia] first.

James: Were you in a squadron then, or--

Griffin: I was with my crew.

James: Yeah, your plane crew.

Griffin: Right.

James: Was the plane in a squadron, or, ah, just going individually?

Griffin: Ah, we didn't know where we were going to be until we got over there, you know.

James: Okay.

Griffin: So, anyhow, we picked up our plane at Savannah and, ah, went to West Palm Beach. Well, we couldn't get off the base, so we had one of the permanent party guys get us a bottle of booze. Well, six people [and] a bottle of booze isn't much. We were in the PX

drinking and I lost my wallet. [unintelligible] Went back the next day; nobody found it. Oh, anyhow, that's on the way. So, we picked up our plane and we flew to Puerto Rico first stop.

James: B-25?

Griffin: '25, yeah.

James: Puerto Rico, okay.

Griffin: Yeah. That was our first stop.

James: Right.

Griffin: And, god I can't--it's all in the diary there--where we went, but I knew we landed in Brazil; we landed in Belem and Natal in Brazil, and then we landed in Tunis. We left our plane there and they took us by C-47 to Corsica, which was a 340th, ah, I don't even remember anymore. Oh, 340th Bomb Group, 489th Bomb Squadron. Then we started--well, we had a jungle pack when we went over with a .45. We were issued .45s with a shoulder holster. And we had fish hooks, Atabrine tablets, water purifying tablets, and a big chocolate bar, and a machete.

James: Ready for the jungle.

Griffin: Right and I checked it in--checked in at--wherever--we that were checking in and the guys at ten asked me, "Where'd you leave your survival gear [?]" I said, "Down there." "You better go get it;" he said, "that's got a big chocolate bar in it and candy's very scarce over here." Man, I beat it down there and got it. And then we flew--

James: Is that the first time you started flying as a squadron?

Griffin: Yeah, right.

James: And how big was your squadron, roughly how many planes?

Griffin: God, I couldn't even tell you.

James: Well, rough--in the neighborhood, twenty, thirty?

Griffin: Closer to forty, [or] fifty.

James: Is that what you generally operated, as a squadron?

Griffin: Out of Corsica, yeah, but all our bombing was done over in Italy.

James: Yeah, I understand that. And your--12th Air Force that was?

Griffin: Right.

James: And they told you right from the beginning that you had to finish fifty missions?

Griffin: Right.

James: Then you could be rotated home.

Griffin: Right. We had one fella; he--another mission--not only had been overseas three months, not rotated back to the States.

James: How come?

Griffin: My missions were [unintelligible]; they made an instructor out of me somewhere. When you're done, you're done, you rotate back, see.

James: I understand.

Griffin: And well, anyhow, this guy had one more mission to go and his wife had just had a baby and he wanted to get home so he traded with another guy; he got shot down, got killed.

James: Oh, okay.

Griffin: So, out of our original crew I lost my co-pilot. See, we didn't fly as a crew; we'd go down every night and check the bulletin board to see if we were flying the next day. And then, you flew with different--

James: Oh, so you never flew with the same crew all the.

Griffin: Oh, no, no, no.

James: How many flew in the B-25s?

Griffin: Six.

James: Six.

Griffin: Yeah. You had your--

James: Pilot and co-pilot.

Griffin: Bombardier, pilot, co-pilot, engineer, radio operator, tail gunner or [unintelligible]

James: Was there two gunners on it?

Griffin: Yeah, oh, no, your bombardier had a nose gun; a gun in the nose. We had two waist guns.

James: Who fired those?

Griffin: The radio operator.

James: He fired one of them?

Griffin: Right, and the engineer would get up in the upper turret, take care of that; and then I would go back to the tail guns.

James: Who was the other waist gunner?

Griffin: Well, he took both sides there wasn't--

James: Oh, he did both jobs.

Griffin: Right, right.

James: Okay, all right.

Griffin: But we trained on B-17s.

James: Oh, I see.

Griffin: And we were up 55,000 feet, the instructor told me. We were up in the nose; he says, "Go back to the tail." Well, you familiar with them?

James: What the B-25 or--

Griffin: '17.

James: Yes.

Griffin: You know the walk-around bottles.

James: Um hum.

Griffin: You unplug it and you got fifteen minutes of air, so I didn't want to pass out, you know, so I almost ran back to the tail gun so I could plug into the main supply. And then we went on splash missions; we'd fly about 500 feet above the water and fire a burst from the waist gun and then try to hit it. Well, a lot of these guys, you know, what they were doing, shooting these big green sea turtles and buoys; boy, they really got rapped for that. And then we went to, well, I gotta say, we picked up our plane and flew that over.

James: So, you didn't keep track of any of these guys that you flew with?

Griffin: They're all in my diary but I--

James: Presently, you don't have any contact with any of them.

Griffin: No, huh, huh.

James: And you didn't see any of them right after the war?

Griffin: No, they'd all rotated back to the States already.

James: So--

Griffin: Cause see, we moved from Corsica to Rimini, which is on the coast of the Adriatic there. And my original crew all were gone back to the United States already.

James: Oh.

Griffin: Because, see--

James: They had more time than you did.

Griffin: Right. Up in the hospital there the--what am I trying to say; senior moment. But they were, ah, the Germans were good. They took care of me and I can't understand--I got hit in the leg.

James: Now, don't get into that yet.

Griffin: Oh--

James: We get ahead of--we have to this all in order.

Griffin: Okay.

James: Tell me about your first couple of missions, what it was like for you?

Griffin: Like playing cops and robbers when you're a kid.

James: Yeah, but nobody was shooting at you then.

Griffin: No anti-aircraft.

James: Yeah, but you didn't shoot at those.

Griffin: We tested our guns. Like I say, their fighter planes were done, but what happened--see, the Germans had Corsica. They had an air base there and we didn't know this. And one of the boys landed a B-25 there; the Germans took her captive. Well, what they did; they sprayed it black and when we would go on a mission, he'd be over here a couple of miles radioing down to the anti-aircraft how fast we were going, how high we were, pick you out of the sky like that. So, we sent a couple of P-47s up after that and got rid of him. They shot him down.

James: So was it difficult? Was your first mission a long one?

Griffin: No, the longest one we had was in Yugoslavia. We went from across Italy up the Adriatic to Yugoslavia. And what they were doing is they were stealing the silk out of our chest packs.

James: Who was?

Griffin: The French people on the island. And we had to have a guard in the parachute tent every night. Oh, I found a heated suit, like they use on the heavy--ah, well, I'll wear that; so, all I had was a gabardine coveralls and a leather jacket. Got in; I was flying in the upper turret that day, plugged it in, ah nice and toasty, you know. All of a sudden "shpit" she burned out in the elbow; it was--we'd fly at twelve, thirteen thousand feet and it was cold up there, you know.

James: Sure.

Griffin: So, I called the pilot up and I said I'm going to crawl up into the wing section where there have some kind of motors. Look, we had

no heaters on the plane and, boy, it took me three days to warm up when we got back.

James: Generally, what kind of bombs did you carry?

Griffin: Five hundred pounders, they used to call us a little B-17.

James: Right. How many of those did you carry?

Griffin: It's all in my diary and I just don't remember, probably, ah, eight or ten--

James: Oh, I see [unintelligible]. And generally, what would a mission to be to bomb what?

Griffin: Railroad bridges.

James: As the usual?

Griffin: Yeah.

James: The usual target?

Griffin: Yeah, right. Railroad bridges and just regular bridges and we would send out ship, three planes in a ship, throw pamphlets out telling the people to stay out from under the bridges. Those were our main targets. Hear an air-raid siren and right under the bridge. We don't know how many people were killed. And then, the Germans were very tricky; here's a bridge we bombed out, okay. So it was like this during the day time; well, what the Germans had done; see the Brenner Pass into Italy was the only way they had to get any supplies into Italy and that was one of our main targets. Well, during the night they would put this track back up [unintelligible] and then put it off set again. Well, our intelligence came back, told us what they were doing; so we bombed it completely this time. But, any other things?

James: Well, we're getting there. Tell me about getting shot down.

Griffin: Well, this one mission, it was, ah--

James: This was just before your fiftieth, you said.

Griffin: This was my forty-ninth.

James: Right.

Griffin: Right.

James: Okay.

Griffin: And we had a flak vest, but put a flak vest on [and] you couldn't put your chest pack on your parachute. So I used to take a bang on the side of me. We had our flak helmet and I had half-inch armor plating underneath me and half-inch in front of me where the guns were.

James: Where were you flying to?

Griffin: I think it was Bologna [unintelligible] on there. And, ah, getting hoarse. We started getting anti-aircraft and I looked out, I see a big hole like this in one of our tails. I said to myself, "There's no place for me." I crawled in my flak helmet, almost like a turtle. And the next thing I knew, I was out in the air.

James: Jesus!

Griffin: Got blown out of the tail.

James: But you didn't--

Griffin: We got a direct hit.

James: You said you didn't have your parachute on.

Griffin: Hum?

James: You said you didn't have your parachute on.

Griffin: I did that day.

James: Oh.

Griffin: I used to keep it laying here and they said this was going to be tough, so, I thought, "Well, I'll put it on." Cause it interfered with your controls, you know. No fighter planes and we didn't really have to worry too much; we never did any strafing. And, ah, next thing I knew, I was blown out of the plane. Got a direct hit in the bomb bay. Well, I could see the rest of the plane gone, you know, Well was I mad, cause we had incidents where we had anti-aircraft under the tail section that blew the gunner out—concussion. Ah first thing I did was pull this thing, and you always check to see if

you had any silk in there or stuffed with rags. They used to take the silk out and stuff it with rags; that's the first thing you check. Well, the chute opened; I almost broke my back and I undid my helmet strap and let that go. Well, I see this cabin on the side of the mountain. I thought, "Well, I'll try to steer over there."
[unintelligible] You could control your parachute. I started going like this and air started spilling out of it; that's enough for me.

James: Started to come down too fast.

Griffin: Yeah, so, I landed in a tree and when you land in a tree, you cross your legs; so instead of getting [unintelligible]

James: Right, ah, five-alpha.

Griffin: Like this, so I had, ah, one heck of a time 'cause our chute harnesses were here and one on each leg. But [with] the English harness, everything went into one main thing here and all they had to do was give it a half turn, and hit it, and it would come off. Well, we had to unbuckle ours. Well, I got hit in my leg and I got shrapnel in my back yet.

James: Okay, that was from the original explosion of the airplane?

Griffin: No, that was from the anti-aircraft.

James: That's what I meant.

Griffin: Yeah, no, I got hit by anti-aircraft not by airplane; the bomb.

James: No, the explosion from the anti-aircraft that [unintelligible]

Griffin: Oh, yeah, right, right.

James: That's when you got wounded.

Griffin: Right, right.

James: And where were you wounded, in the knee and, and in the--

Griffin: Leg, under the thigh here and in my back. Well, I still got a piece of shrapnel that big in my back. They never monkied with it, so I'm getting 15 % [disability].

James: In your leg.

- Griffin: In the leg and the Germans, when they took me to the German hospital, they put a splint from my hip all the way down to my ankle. Why, I never knew.
- James: When you were coming down you ended up in a tree. How'd you get down from the tree?
- Griffin: I finally got my harness off and I was coming down the side of the mountain. The home-guard picked me up, took me up to their home. I was bleeding all over their beautiful white wood floors. So I told them I couldn't speak German or, I tell you, I thought I was in Austria. Get me a belt or piece of rope to put a tourniquet on, you know. So, then, the next day they took me down to a German hospital.
- James: [unintelligible] The Italians picked you up then?
- Griffin: Yeah.
- James: Took you to the German hospital.
- Griffin: Right, on a sledge.
- James: Right.
- Griffin: Two-hundred foot drop off here. I was more scared going down there than bailing, or getting blown out, you know.
- James: Strapped into that.
- Griffin: Yeah. And they took my flying helmet, gave me a stocking cap, and then when they took me to the hospital, they took the hat back. Well, the first thing they did was get me a tetanus shot, or whatever, and they checked my leg out. And I could hear the German soldiers in the barracks there singing *Lily Marlene*. So, there's about two or three trips in different trucks; and then, one time they had a big truck with the Germans on both sides of the truck, full battle gear. And here, I'm on a stretcher--they put me right in the middle of them. And I laid there like this; I never moved. I was really scared to death. Well, then we got to Murano and they put me in with the Germans. There was a young fella here and myself and--"Oigen", his name is Irving. And then, there was a guy here, here, and here.
- James: This is in the hospital.

Griffin: Yeah, and--

James: Did they put your leg in a cast?

Griffin: No, they put a splint.

James: Okay.

Griffin: From the hip on down and I asked my brother-in-law, I says--

James: You mean a plaster splint

Griffin: Nope, a wood splint.

James: [unintelligible]

Griffin: A wood splint some tape, strapped it on.

James: Strapped it on.

Griffin: Yeah.

James: Okay.

Griffin: And, ah--

James: How'd they stop the bleeding?

Griffin: Oh, they bandaged it or wrapped it, you know.

James: They didn't take you to the operating room or anything.

Griffin: Oh, no, no, no. I never hit any operating room at all, lucky I didn't, but they were pretty good surgeons; they did a lot of good.

James: Yeah.

Griffin: And the food was very scarce kinda, close to the end of the war. And this young guy here, Oigen, he come back from town one night drunk and he was going to kill me, cause they knew I was in the Air Force, and his parents lived in Berlin, and they bombed Berlin that day, and both of them were killed, or the day before, or whenever. And this young guy here could speak English. He told Oigen, he says, "I'm here I wasn't there, you know, I was—" And then when the Germans interrogated me. I did like they said, name, rank, and serial number; L. A. Griffin, 16156381. That was

it. He says, "Oh, you're from Corsica, aren't you?" I said, "You ought to know that." "You were on a B-25 weren't you?" I said, "You know that too." I didn't argue with him, I agreed with him, I agreed with everything he said, but that was about the extent of the interrogation. So and then we had one young fella that was strafing what he thought was a troop train and it was an ammunition train and it blew up on him and the plane got on fire, but he got out and there wasn't a part of his body that wasn't burned. Well, they had him in one room downstairs and, in mosquito netting. Every day they'd come in and take all them scabs off. Well, he finally died. Well, there was about fifteen of us upstairs; they'd put us all together finally and so when that guy died--

James: Someone from your plane?

Griffin: No, no.

James: You never saw anybody else in that plane that you were on.

Griffin: They all got killed.

James: Oh, you know this?

Griffin: They crashed into the side of the mountain.

James: Oh, I thought maybe somebody else got out.

Griffin: No, they told me that the plane had crashed into the side of the mountain and all the guys on board were killed. So, anyhow, where was I?

James: Um--

Griffin: Pay attention now.

James: Yeah, well, I was just trying to think where I'm gonna pick that up. You're right after you got--

Griffin: Oh, yeah, this guy, well, anyhow, he died.

James: Yeah.

Griffin: And I was pallbearer for him and I think of all the guys up there, there were only two of us that were ambulatory, and we acted as pallbearers for him. Well, I reported the grave site when I was liberated so that they--if they wanted to, you know, take him back

to the States. But it was a German cemetery, naturally, Italian cemetery, being hilly they'd bury them six and three. Well the day we buried him, they had another German soldier that died, and our backs were to them, and they fired them guns off. I jumped that high; I'm scared too death.

James: Tell me, did they-- how long were you in that hospital?

Griffin: From February 25th. Well it was a couple three days later, about the 28th of February, 'til the war was over.

James: So, you never left the hospital?

Griffin: Oh, no, no, uh, uh. And then the 5th Army come through, and this other guy and I could walk, and we heard these big Sherman tanks coming through that day. We run down the stairs and past the guard and everything else. We were out there hollering, "Hey! We're Americans!"

James: Oh, yeah, right.

Griffin: Yeah. And--

James: The Germans didn't bother you? The Germans didn't bother you?

Griffin: No. **[End of Tape 1, Side 1]** No, no, hell, the war was over.

James: It was over or--

Griffin: Oh, yeah, it was over then.

James: Oh.

Griffin: But they were still coming through [unintelligible]

James: The Germans, I thought they had just left.

Griffin: No, uh, uh. Oh, I worked with the partisans, too, when we were liberated. The International Red Cross liberated us. Our people didn't.

James: I'm surprised that the German doctors and so forth and their hospital would stay.

Griffin: Well, they were all there.

- James: They were?
- Griffin: Yeah. Well, I imagine we had five-thousand troops out in the hills that wanted to surrender. So, I worked with the partisans. When they'd come in, they'd put their guns in a pile. Well, they come by and threw a bunch of sausage and bread out. Young German fella, he could speak good English, he says, "You don't want any of that. You come with me." I said, "I ain't got no money or I don't have any money." Don't worry about it, and he went up to this farm house and got a big old bowl of soup and a glass of beer. That's about the best meal I had. Although on Sunday we used to have 'tatoes, and a little meat, they called it flesh, and pudding that looked like wallpaper [chuckles], but it was sweet; ah, better than nothing.
- James: That was their usual fare?
- Griffin: Yeah. Then when I was in with the Germans, I had a sign on the back of my bed, "kriegsgefangener," "prisoner of war." So when the Red Cross would come, they'd tell me to turn it. I'd get maybe cigarettes or toothbrush or something like that, but being at the end of the war they were just about out of potatoes and I think they made their bread out of sawdust, very coarse. We didn't get a lot of food, but as much as the Germans had gotten and we used to get our--when they moved us all upstairs, or on top of the hotel, they had one guard out there to help--nobody ambulatory, guy with a leg shot off, one little New Zealander; he was on a BAR, you know what they are? Browning Automatic and he was in a stone building in the window with a BAR; well, that's a pretty deadly weapon. And the Germans used a--what is it? A tank rocket or something, tank destroyer, whatever, went through the brick building and blew his leg off.
- James: [unintelligible]
- Griffin: Yeah, yeah, that was the bird, you know, it was one of those very versatile guns; they could use it as an anti-aircraft gun or a field gun.
- James: You were ambulatory by this time; you were in good shape, healed up?
- Griffin: Ah, the first month I was in bed all the time and then they finally took that thing off and then they put us all upstairs.
- James: Then you were loose?

- Griffin: Yeah, right.
- James: Right. And did they ask you to help them, help with the other patients?
- Griffin: No, no. No, no. We were all separate; we were all POW; we had English—
- James: Then you were just an ordinary POW away from the hospital?
- Griffin: No, we were in the hospital yet; they had us all upstairs and--
- James: [unintelligible] But you had no duty?
- Griffin: Nobody could do anything. We had Gurkha Indians. We had English. We had Italian. We had Scottish--fact is he got shot, shot in the leg and they had a tube running through him and gangrene starting to rot out, so, they had to cut. And he was a carpenter; he said, "For what pension I'll get," he says, "I'll never be able to make it." And he couldn't do any carpentry work anymore with a leg like that.
- James: So, tell me when you found out the war was over. Tell me about that day.
- Griffin: I got a mosquito bite. Well, that day we got a pack of cigarettes to split amongst all of us, but that was about it. Then they come up, the Americans sent ambulances for us and they took us down to Pisa, Italy and our ambulance driver stopped at the Leaning Tower so we could see it. And we went to the 12th General Hospital; and we recouped there. And I had a complete German uniform on because I didn't have any clothes; they'd taken them all. And I turned it in, and the guy says, "What did you do with your uniform, hobnailed boots and all?" I said, "Turned it in and got new supplies." "You could have gotten \$150 for that!" Well, that's great, now you tell me. [chuckles] But, anyhow, we went from Pisa, Italy to Naples; we were there for, ah, god, I don't even remember, a week or two, maybe three.
- James: You had no duty?
- Griffin: No, no.
- James: What was your rank at that time?

Griffin: Staff sergeant.

James: And you had nothing to do; no chores to do at all then?

Griffin: Didn't have nothing to do.

James: Just waiting for a ship to come home?

Griffin: Right, no, we flew home.

James: Oh, okay.

Griffin: We flew our plane over and when we come back we come back [in a] C-54. We went from Naples, Italy to Iran, North Africa, Casablanca to the Azores to Newfoundland down to LaGuardia [New York]. We stayed every--never did get a full night's sleep; we were up in [unintelligible] Newfoundland. Two o'clock in the morning, sun's still out, but we didn't have our stripes on so we couldn't get into the NCO bar there, or club, or whatever.

James: But you were just there overnight?

Griffin: Hum?

James: You were just there overnight?

Griffin: Right, right.

James: So, when you got to the United States at LaGuardia; they put you on a train and sent you home?

Griffin: We were there for three days. I don't even know what the name of the camp was, but we went up the Empire State Building and I spit off of it. Oh and Central Park, Radio City, and Coney Island, and the Subway; took it out. And we met a couple of gals out there and we were gonna go out for dinner and they said, "We don't want to go there; it's too expensive," so we went to another place—seafood. And so we asked them where they were from and they were from Brooklyn [New York], so we got on the El, or whatever it was, and took them to Brooklyn. And one of the girl's dads owned a drugstore. Well, I had a splitting headache, not from drinking, cause I didn't drink that much. And so she opened the drugstore and fixed me a Bromo-Selzer. Then we went back to camp. We went on from there to Fort Sheridan and I took a train from Fort Sheridan. And I'd just turned twenty-one, so we had a stop over there--no, it was in Chicago. I went to a bar across the

street; I was legal, man! And I had bought one rum drink and I told the guy it was my birthday, and I never bought another one after that; probably had three or four. But rum is rough, and I got back to the train, and I told the conductor, I says, "I've just turned twenty-one." And I says, "I've had a few drinks across the street." And I says, "Wake me up when we get to Janesville." I didn't have a bus or a train that went to Beloit; it went to Janesville. And then we had to take a bus home. So, that was about the extent of it. Then I had a ninety-day convalescence furlough. And then we went from there, I went to Chicago, City of Miami, down in Miami Beach for discharge. Well, the Air Force'd taken all the [unintelligible] hotels over; that's where we stayed, but we were down there about a month, and they had so many to process, they couldn't handle them all, so they flew us down to San Antone. We were the only bunch to go out by plane; the rest of them all had to go by train. But I got out on points; I had enough points.

James: So what did you do after you got out of the Service? Did you use your GI Bill?

Griffin: No, I didn't. I should have but I didn't.

James: Okay, did you join any veterans groups?

Griffin: No, right now, I belong to POW.

James: That's the only group you've joined?

Griffin: Yeah.

James: Do they meet on a regular basis?

Griffin: Once a month up in Janesville.

James: How many POWs are there in your group here in Janesville?

Griffin: They're getting less and less. I don't know. Did you ever hear of Ralph Pope from Edgerton?

James: I'm from Edgerton.

Griffin: Oh, you knew Ralph then?

James: I knew who he was. I didn't stay there.

Griffin: Oh.

James: I lived in Madison most of my life.

Griffin: Okay, well he was four years [a] prisoner over in Japan; I've got--

James: He's dead now, though.

Griffin: Yeah. Paul, er, ah, Ralph died. Mary is still with the group or she's still [unintelligible]

James: So, anyway, how many do we have here in your Group here in Janesville?

Griffin: Not more than ten or twelve any more.

James: That's about it?

Griffin: Yeah; a lot of women.

James: You mean wives of POWs?

Griffin: Yeah. We just lost a guy from Beloit. But the only one I ever got in contact with--one of our pilots was from Monroe, and I went over there one time to see him, and that's the only contact I've had with anybody from our outfit.

James: I see.

Griffin: I don't even know where my pilot is; my co-pilot got killed.

James: Oh.

Griffin: Of our original crew, that we trained with--and my radio operator's from Ohio; my engineer was from Ada, Oklahoma. They were from all of--my pilot was from Texas and the guys--The co-pilot [who] got killed was from Kentucky, Louisville; he worked in a mattress factory, nice fella.

James: This guy from Monroe, is he still alive?

Griffin: Ah, I couldn't tell you; we were--oh, this has been--oh, we been married, what? Fifty-four years?

James: Well, so when is the last time you were in contact with him?

Griffin: It was, oh, a good forty-years ago.

James: Oh, I thought he was--

Griffin: Or more.

James: A member of the POW Group.

Griffin: Oh, no, no, no, there was nobody--

James: From Monroe [unintelligible]

Griffin: One of our pilots was from Monroe, overseas.

James: Oh, ah okay.

Griffin: And he had a real close call, too. He had joined the Air National Guard and he was up in a Piper Cub, and it iced up on him, and he had to bail out. He'd gone through all his missions and then he comes home and has to bail out of a Piper.

James: He doesn't live around here?

Griffin: No.

James: Is there any of these POWs still alive that live around here?

Griffin: I, gee, I lost track of everybody.

James: Oh.

Griffin: In the hospital, if I'd have to take--oh, I do have--ah, one of the, um, Ghurka Indians' address--they can be--

James: But nobody that still lives around here though?

Griffin: Oh, no, no.

James: At this moment.

Griffin: No, no.

James: None of these POWs live right [unintelligible]

Griffin: Um mm [no].

James: Oh.

Griffin: Not I've had any contact down in Janesville. We have a couple of them in Beloit, but we just lost another one. In fact, as I went up to Janesville, looking for a different car, a guy comes in and says, "Whose POW plates out there?" I says, "Mine." There were three POWs in the used car lot there, ah, working. Of course, Janesville had the--

James: They had a lot of them.

Griffin: Yeah.

James: Cause they're on, on Bataan.

Griffin: Right.

James: I don't know how many of those are left around here now.

Griffin: Well, look at Louisiana. That new museum they opened there from the Pacific.

James: Yeah.

Griffin: The guy says--Did you see the news where they had it? The guy looks around, ten-thousand people. He says, "That's more than we had in our outfit!" [laughs]

James: Well, anyway, so to start, you don't know any of these guys in Janesville are still alive?

Griffin: No, I have no idea.

James: But they don't meet with your group?

Griffin: Yeah, they do, but a lot of them don't belong to the club, see. We're Southern Wisconsin. Milwaukee has the Barbwire, what they call a Barbwire Club, but they're kind of--they think they're very exclusive or something, I don't know.

James: Well, maybe I'll speak to the Veterans Service Officer in Rock County and see if I can probably get some information from him.

Griffin: Yeah. I have, ah, if I can find it, a thing about all the ex-POWs in the United States at home, ah, someplace. But, like I say, I never made contact. When I got out, I got married, naturally, had two

kids, bang bang, and just never made any contact with them, which I should have.

James: What did you do after the war?

Griffin: Well, my buddy and I we had a butter and egg route in Chicago; cheese, til I got married, and then--but, that was about it.

James: Well, then what did you do?

Griffin: Went to work.

James: Where?

Griffin: Freeman's.

James: Oh, the shoe company?

Griffin: Yeah. I had forty years in there.

James: Bill Schmitz.

Griffin: Oh, yeah.

James: Do you remember that name?

Griffin: Oh, yeah.

James: A wild kid.

Griffin: Yeah, he's dead, too.

James: Yes, I know.

Griffin: Yeah, a long time.

James: I ate lunch with his brother every Tuesday.

Griffin: Yeah.

James: His older brother.

Griffin: Oh, yeah, did you know Leon Hildebrandt?

James: No.

- Griffin: Well, he was in the Marines and, ah, hit--he was a salesman for Freeman. He worked out of Michigan there and he had a heart attack on the, ah, golf course.
- James: Yeah.
- Griffin: I don't know if this pertains to anything like you want on there, but, ah--
- James: Bout a heart attack? No.
- Griffin: No, no, he had a bypass in--and he did good for about fifteen, eighteen years. And I met him over at the Plaza one time and we went into Mr. Gee's there and had a hot dog and a Coke, or something, and I said, "Don't you feel good?" He said, "No." "I was doing a little raking this morning," I says. He says, "I'm all plugged up again." "Well, you gonna have anything done?" [He] said, "No." He said, "I'll never have another bypass." But back when he had it, it was probably more primitive than it is now. The wife just had one two years ago out here at the University. And, ah, six-weeks later he was gone. In fact, the fact is, he got me my POW license plate. I never even knew about it, you know. He says, "This one guy there he's—" He says, "He's driving around with them." He says, "Why don't you get yours?" I said, "I never knew I could--was entitled to them, you know."
- James: Sure.
- Griffin: They were kind of kept that on a QT or something, I don't know. We were never informed, but, ah, I finally got them.
- James: You're on disability, you said for fifteen percent?
- Griffin: Thirty.
- James: Thirty percent disability.
- Griffin: Yeah, hearing I lost, when I got blown out of there. The concussion knocked me in the head.
- James: You been deaf in that ear since that episode?
- Griffin: [unintelligible]
- James: Because, I was going to say, that leg wouldn't give you thirty percent, but the ear probably did.

Griffin: No, the shrapnel in my back. I think I got twenty percent for that.

James: Yeah.

Griffin: A chunk about like that; they can't--they won't take it out, so--

James: I'm surprised that's so high for a piece of shrapnel that causes no disability.

Griffin: It causes a lot of colds.

James: Pardon?

Griffin: Pneumonia. I've had, ah, bronchial pneumonia and--

James: That piece of shrapnel is inside your lung?

Griffin: Yeah.

James: Oh, it's not just under the skin?

Griffin: Oh, no, no, no. If it was under the skin, they'd take it out.

James: Right.

Griffin: But it's--I've had a x-ray.

James: I'm surprised it hasn't moved.

Griffin: No, its stationary, I guess, been there for--

James: Fifty years.

Griffin: Fifty years, rusty, but--

James: Your leg doesn't bother you?

Griffin: Oh, yeah. I've got a blockage in my left leg. They want to take it--or do a bypass on it up here at the University or the VA. This is four years ago. And, ah, I said, "Naw, I think I'll walk it off, or work on it cause it will develop new capillaries." Well, you know. You're familiar with that. And, ah, I finally asked the doctor, I said, "Well, I've had an aneurysm." I got bypass here and one in both legs.

James: You had that repaired?

Griffin: Yeah, and I asked him how long these shunts or, whatever they do, last.

James: Sure.

Griffin: He says, "About five years." I said, "And then what?" "And then we cut the leg off," that's what he told me.

James: [Laughs] Trying to fool with you.

Griffin: Well [laughs], I don't know. I hope he was.

James: [unintelligible] he's kidding you [laughs].

Griffin: But they tried to get down through there. I had a angiogram up here, ah, with the angioplasty.

James: Um hum.

Griffin: They couldn't get through there; that vein in the leg is--

James: It's the artery; they don't worry about the veins.

Griffin: Oh, the artery. So, evidently, they couldn't get through it for some reason or other.

James: Well, they put a graft around it [unintelligible]

Griffin: A stint?

James: A graft.

Griffin: Oh, a graft. Yeah, well what's a stint?

James: Well, a stint is anything that temporarily holds things open, I mean, but--

Griffin: Okay, the wife's got two of those.

James: Well, that's a graft anyway.

Griffin: Yeah. And they take that out of my right leg. Right?

James: Well, not necessarily; there's plastic materials, you see.

Griffin: Well, that's what I got here, Dacron.

James: Dacron, yeah.

Griffin: Yeah.

James: Yeah, that works, too.

Griffin: I don't know if you--do you ever--you must have heard of Dr. Katz, vascular surgeon from Beloit.

James: I know of him. I don't know him.

Griffin: Oh, you know of him. Well, he did mine. He thought, when he got in there, he'd have to take a quarter [of] both my legs--like a deer, cut them right off. But he got in there—oh, the eighteen hours on the table. You know, he was one of the best vascular surgeon I ever knew; the only one I ever had. We have one down there now-- I go to the VA, or here at the University, before I'd go to him.

James: You won the Distinguished Flying Cross to go with your--and, ah, Five Oak Leaf Clusters, right?

Griffin: Right, and all the Distinguished Flying Cross, ah--

James: Air Medal.

Griffin: Air Medal with five oak leaves.

James: That's it, okay.

Griffin: Then we got a Presidential Citation. What happened there, the Germans were going to sink a big ship in the mouth of the harbor, [unintelligible] Harbor, and our intelligence come back, told us what they were going to do. So we sent out eighteen planes. I was on one of them. Well, [it was] supposed to have been a milk run; no anti-aircraft. During the night, two flak barges, they move in. We dropped our bombs all the way down. Just sunk them before they could get it into the harbor. We got a Presidential Citation for it.

James: That's good. So, what did you do for a living before you retired?

Griffin: Worked in the shoe factory.

James: Just at the factory only.

Griffin: Right, forty years.

James: Right; and what did you do there?

Griffin: Ah, everything.

James: No machine guns there.

Griffin: Oh, no, no, no, not hardly [chuckles], no. I put the heels on. I head set them. I edge trimmed them, heeled them, finished them. I was utility.

James: [unintelligible] it's a good company.

Griffin: Right.

James: I've worn Freeman shoes, ah, for many years.

Griffin: Yeah, until that outfit from India took over; and, "foo", down the tube.

James: They were just absorbed.

Griffin: Yeah.

James: By the United Shoe Company, what--ah, I forget.

Griffin: Yeah, it was U.S. Shoe.

James: Yeah, U.S. Shoe, right.

Griffin: So, that about wrap it up?

James: That'll about do it unless you can think of something that you didn't tell me.

Griffin: [Sigh, conferring with wife]

James: Only single man.

Griffin: No. [unintelligible] Nobody was married.

James: Oh. Oh, okay.

Griffin: Yeah, you know how old my pilot was when we went overseas?

James: Twenty-one?

Griffin: Twenty.

James: Twenty.

Griffin: And we had a dead reckoning navigator.

James: Oh, really?

Griffin: Dead reckoning, not a celestial.

James: Right.

Griffin: Okay, so, one of our stops is the Ascension Island. So, our ETA is, say, 4:00 o'clock. Four o'clock comes around, no island; 4:30 no island; finally, 5:00 o'clock, we spotted the island and when my pilot--he was from Texas--got out, he knelt down on the ground and kissed the earth.

James: I'll bet.

Griffin: And when you come in, onto the Ascension Island-- [interview ends abruptly].

[End of Interview]