

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
LAURENCE GILES
Medic, Army, World War II

1999

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Giles, Laurence (1924-2001). Oral History Interview, 1999.
User: 1 audio cassette (ca. 70 min); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master: 1 video recording (ca. 70 min); ½ inch, color.

Abstract:

Laurence Giles, a resident of Madison, native of Massachusetts, discusses his World War II service as a medical technician in the US Army with the 320th Medical Battalion of the 95th Infantry Division as it fought through northern France, at Bastogne (Belgium) and through the Rhineland, his return to the United States and assignment as a medic for seven months, his use of the GI Bill to return to university, his commission as a medical officer in the Inactive Reserve, and his career as a doctor and poet. Giles entered Army service in February 1944; his basic training equipped him to carry arms, but a maternal intervention led to a lifelong pursuit to heal others. He reflects on the role of the medic in World War II. In August 1944 Giles arrived in France, seeing action in Troyes, Orléans, and Metz. He shares his views on Generals George Patton and Anthony McAuliffe; and witnessed the impact of the 106th Division's travail at the Battle of the Bulge (December-January 1945). From Bastogne (Belgium), Giles' outfit joined the First and Ninth Armies for the push into Germany. He addresses, as a translator for the occupation, the perceptions and attitudes of German soldiers and citizens that he encountered. He covers his medical treatment of Americans, Germans, and Russian prisoners of war; and observed the living conditions in Germany, and the vagaries of Allied occupation policy. Arriving back in the States in the summer of 1945, Giles was assigned a brief stint of medic duty in New York state before heading back to Madison and taking advantage of the "greatest piece of social legislation ever," the GI Bill. Giles eschewed joining veterans' organizations out of a desire to avoid overwhelming memories of the war. The interview ends with Giles, a retired physician, musing on the role of the individual in history and reciting his poem about the soldier in the aftermath of war.

Biographical Sketch:

Giles (1924-2001) served in the US Army during World War II with the 320th Medical Battalion of the 95th Infantry Division during operations after the invasion of France. He returned to the United States in June 1945 and earned a medical degree. He was commissioned a medical officer and spent twelve years in the Inactive Reserve.

Interviewer: James McIntosh
Transcribed by WDVA staff & Leah Schultz, 2012
Transcription checked and corrected by Channing Welch, 2014
Abstract written by Jeffrey Javid, 2015

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: We're now talking to Larry Giles, World War II veteran, European Theater. It's July 3, 1999. You were born in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Giles: Born in Holyoke, Massachusetts—

McIntosh: But raised in Madison, Wisconsin, I know that.

Giles: That's right [laughs].

McIntosh: Old West High, classmate. You're not a classmate, but—you finished West in '42?

Giles: I finished in '42—

McIntosh: Yeah, a year behind me.

Giles: And went into the service in '44, in January.

McIntosh: '44.

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: Where did they send you to, initially?

Giles: Uh, they sent me to Pennsylvania initially, and I might give you a little background on that. Um, as I say, this is something I've put the war out of my heart and mind for fifty-five years, and talked with you through the experience of memory, which is fallible, and involves a distortion of time and language. I'm elderly now, and under treatment for a rather rare disease called systemic amyloid, for which I say, take chemotherapy. Well, this has saved me at least so far, and it did cause a severe peripheral neuropathy, which makes walking very difficult, and I presented with congestive heart failure.

It's hard to remember ancient detail, but I'm Laurence T. Giles, PFC, 36841756, Company D, 320th Medical Battalion, 95th Infantry Division. Now, I kind of refer to my rank as evidence that I had the ability to get ahead but did not prostitute myself by going further. Much of the wartime correspondence is gone, but as I sit here with maps of France and Germany to verify dates and troop movements, I served in the ETO [European Theater of Operations] for a year, and I had two years of Army experience, as a medical technician. So, it was in January of 1944 that I

was notified that the draft was “now,” and I was sent to Milwaukee for a physical prior to induction into military service, with active entry into the service in February of ’44, and onto the Great Lakes dispensary, and then, to answer your first question, [Fort] Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, as an infantry replacement for the 95th Infantry Division. I thought, mistakenly, I would be returning to school. But um, A-12 [Infantry Tank Program] and ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] volunteers were no longer being taken, and were sent to infantry units.

McIntosh: Now, is that where you got medical training?

Giles: Uh, yes.

McIntosh: And that was in Pennsylvania?

Giles: Yes, but—

McIntosh: How long did that last?

Giles: Well, let me tell you about what happened to me en route because some of these experiences are unique in themselves. And en route we had our hair buzzed, we sat at rough tables and chairs, and a giant sliver impaled itself in my right calf; I still remember it very vividly, although I hadn’t thought about it for fifty-five years. And the dispensary doctor which—I still remember what he looked like, he had a very kind face, and he was balding, he had a small mustache and rimless glasses—he called a nurse for procaine [a local anesthetic] and a scalpel, and I can remember him saying, “Give me some help here! Can’t you see this man is dying?” He pulled the foreign body out of my gastrocnemius muscle, and I pulled guard duty that night with a temperature of 103 degrees, after typhoid shots.

So, um, I was en route to basic training, which includes potato peeling, garbage detail, latrine cleaning. And I had missed my marksmanship, so an M1 rifle was thrust into my hands, and I was told by the sergeant that, “This is your rifle. It is not a gun; it is your piece. You must learn to sleep with her. And if you do so, she will save your life.” Now, targets popped up, “Ready on the right, ready on the left, ready on the firing line, commence firing,” and I blasted seven out of eight bulls there, a lot more kick than my .22 on the farm [laughs]. Now, the sergeant was wide-eyed. He said, “Son, you’ve been shootin’ before, but not on humans.” We learned to fire BARs [Browning Automatic Rifles], .30 caliber machine guns, basic training, and use of a bayonet and grenade throwing. No longer was I a pacifist as I had been in high school. When your door is broken down and the world is on fire, you do something about it.

Now, at this point, to answer your question of where I was trained as a medical technician. I received a summons to see General [Harry L.] Twaddle—he was the general in charge of the 95th Infantry. Now, kind of imagine my confusion to hear that my mother had written him, and that I had three semesters at the University of Wisconsin with an A average. So, the general said, “How would you like a transfer—as a medic?”, instead of the infantry. And I said, “I would rather heal than kill; so be it.” This probably saved my life. I vowed to study for medical school if I survived. And I went through a three months training program in taking care of first aid problems.

Um, let me comment on that, because I think this is extremely important to think about what happened with our medics and what they were responsible for. The experience of this war—“the last good war,” as it’s been called—was that if a medic could make it to the wounded man, he had a fair chance for survival, maybe in the range of 90%. So, first aid included: stopping the bleeding, open the airway, use compression bandages, mark with morphine for pain, start plasma for shock, and then evacuating to a clearing station in a field hospital. What I saw there is something I haven’t thought about for fifty-five years. Wounds could be absolutely horrific, with ripped chests, arms and legs gone, torsos without anything else to identify them, faces blown off, multiple shell fragment wounds, guts spilling out, “pancake men” who’ve been run over by tanks, “crispy critters” from burning tanks, and yet, on the part of wounded veterans, a terrible madness to live. There were no flak jackets back in those times. Helmets provided questionable protection, which is interesting, ‘cause most people don’t know that. And I was struck after the battle for Bastogne [Belgium], seeing a young German—he must have been about sixteen years old—with a bullet hole right in front of his helmet, and his brain was oozing out. And there were many such, on both sides. I used to have flashbacks of black German tanks running over me, and I think it was estimated that there were at least 200,000 casualties from northern France alone.

Um, anyway, this led to involvement in northern France and in the Rhineland in central Europe.

McIntosh: Right. Before we get into that, let’s proceed in order here. From Pennsylvania, where did they ship you?

Giles: From Pennsylvania, they shipped me to, uh, Boston, and our departure—

McIntosh: The date’s not important. Which kind of a ship did you take over?

Giles: Okay, it was a large ship called the SS *Mariposa*—it was a merchant ship.

McIntosh: And where in England did you—

Giles: And um, in England we docked at Liverpool a week later. And it's very interesting because we found out later that we were being shadowed by a German sub. Now, why they did not attack us is hard to know; we gathered that they'd had no more torpedoes.

McIntosh: Then you spent some time in England forming up into your battalion?

Giles: Yes, that's right; I should say a word about that, and what happened in Liverpool—we found a city that was under siege. The trains that we got on were diverted to London, and then from London to Winchester, which is where our headquarters was. Um, it was midnight, and suddenly the train stopped en route to London, and there was a little old man dressed in black as the conductor and he walked down the aisle, saying, "Cover your windows—the doodle bugs are coming, the doodle bugs are coming." Now, there were fires all over Liverpool and London, and I just thought, "What a gutsy guy this is—he never even raised his voice." These were V-1 or "buzz bombs"; Hitler's terror weapon. And as a matter of fact, a month after our arrival in England they started using V-2s which travelled 3,000 miles an hour and then exploded before you even heard the explosion. Um, so I wrote a poem for that incident on Waterloo bridge, once we got to London, and we can look at that later. And then we left for France.

McIntosh: And you arrived in France roughly when, in which month then?

Giles: We arrived in France in August of '44, and there's an interesting [laughs] occurrence that I maybe should mention, because I was in a hospital on a last furlough before going overseas, and this was at Truax Military Hospital [At Truax Field, next to Dane County Regional Airport, Wisconsin]. Now, how did I get there? I was full of pain, especially my chest, and I had six broken ribs on the right side, and two broken bones on the left wrist. What was happening was, I was at the farm, and I was waiting to water my pet bull—who was then two years old—and I made a huge mistake in not getting behind him, instead of in front, as I took him, ya know, for a watering. I heard a sudden snorting behind me, and turned, and received the full force of the charge hitting me right in the chest. The bull was trying to kill me. I was thrown into a fence, and the hired man and my mother saw this, came running to grab the nose chain. Incidentally, that bull was shipped off to Oscar Mayer's that same day, and I was admitted to the hospital. Then I got back to base, and the guys back there thought it was pretty funny, but I told them I really had no further interest in bullfights. I was returned to duty the next three weeks and took the trip that I've described to you. And then we left for France in August—August of '44. And at that point, we traced the American and

British routes and forces to Normandy, especially Omaha and Utah Beach. It's kind of interesting because we were in hedgerow country, and I have another poem in that regard. And um, the hedgerows were 2,000 years old, and wonderful apple trees. The hedgerows made for very great difficulty in fighting because they were so thick and so tall; even tanks could not smash through 'em.

McIntosh: What was your specific duty at this moment?

Giles: Um, my specific duty at this moment was that I was with a clearing company, and I was responsible for picking up wounded and carrying them inside and doing the first aid that we talked about.

McIntosh: Right. You weren't attached to any—

Giles: Yes.

McIntosh: Hospital?

Giles: Yes; well, we were a clearing station.

McIntosh: Clearing station. And how many men were involved in your unit then, the clearing station? How many docs and how many corpsmen?

Giles: Oh, I have to think about that.

McIntosh: Roughly.

Giles: Yeah. The whole platoon and then the company—about twenty-two of us.

McIntosh: I see. And nurses?

Giles: And uh, we didn't have nurses that far front; but the next pick-up on the evacuation hospital, they did. And by the way, those nurses did a wonderful job. I can't say enough good things.

McIntosh: Did you have good docs at this—

Giles: We had very good doctors; they were all young, of course, and they were recently out of medical school. But uh, I got to appreciate them.

McIntosh: Mm-hm. Did they have two operating rooms?

Giles: We had two operating rooms.

McIntosh: I imagine a group that size would have two.

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: Okay. So you're moving along behind the infantry at that point.

Giles: That's correct. The German armies were in slow retreat at that point, but they were fighting desperately all the way.

McIntosh: Did you go from here towards Paris?

Giles: Yes, yes, and the liberation of Paris was at the end of August; we had come in in the first part of August. And um, Paris at that point was 160 kilometers away, which is 100 miles, and there were four of us. This was a weekend, we decided we'd take a weekend pass, but not exactly tell our CO where we were going, except to indicate that we were interested in seeing Cherbourg. We decided to flag down one of our trucks and go to Paris and see what was there.

McIntosh: The opposite direction [laughs].

Giles: [Laughs] Well, Paris—this was not really a cool thing to do because German guns were going off in the background. But, you know, the people nonetheless—especially the young girls—were just wonderful, I mean they just smothered us with affection and hugs and kisses. And we learned to use a unisex pissoir [outdoor urinal] for the men and the women. So this opened the eyes of the other lads from farms.

McIntosh: You hadn't seen those before.

Giles: [Laughs] That's right. So, uh, on return, we struck our tents and joined forces with the French, and General Patton of the Third Army was then attached to us, or rather, the other way around, and we then followed the infantry and railroad cars. And all the railroad cars were called "Forty and Eight"; in fact, it was painted right on there. "Forty hommes" [forty men] and "eight chevaux" [eight horses], so "quatorze" [sic] [*quarante* is actually "forty" in French] and "huit", so "men" and "horses", and/or. And the population at every stop we would make would have food for us, particularly a very interesting one called "White Lightning", which was Calvados [apple brandy]; and this particular concoction was made from the apples which were turning ripe at that time. So then, from that area, the [Vernoil-le-] Fourrier_area, we went to Orléans, the home of the maid, Joan of Arc, and our destination fortress was Metz, in Alsace-Lorraine. We tried to beat the censor on this in sending letters to home, and one of the things I did is saying that, "Well, we have a very popular song here called 'Sweet Lorraine,'" to indicate where we were going. And we did get by the censor that way, actually—my mother heard from me. Metz was

tough. This is now dragging into November, and we had terrible casualties.

McIntosh: This is the first really intensive action that you were involved in?

Giles: Well, we were involved in actions at Troyes and then Orléans and then Metz. And we respected Patton, but what's not generally appreciated nowadays is we really hated his guts. 'Cause he took Metz with a frontal assault, and there were over 3,000 casualties dead. 'Course, there were twice that many on the German side, but he did win that battle, so I have admit that, with a frontal assault. And so then we were on the way to Zweibrücken in Germany and Kaiserslautern, and I can well remember a sign that our guys put in called, "Welcome to Germany, with the courtesy of the 95th Infantry Division."

McIntosh: Tell me about a day. They'd started out, and you'd—and casualties, and how it proceeded.

Giles: Well, but, the—

McIntosh: A typical day.

Giles: A typical day was not typical because we had no [laughs] night or day in terms of when we brought casualties in for first aid.

McIntosh: That would happen at night, too?

Giles: Yeah, it happened at night, too, and we went—

McIntosh: Did you go get them?

Giles: Of course, but I wasn't on the immediate firing line; I was on the pick-up, and trying to figure out where the people screaming "medic" were, and dragging them in. Ah, I would say to you there were at least a hundred people a day, wounded, that we took care of.

McIntosh: Who made the decision—

Giles: The docs.

McIntosh: Whether to keep 'em or send 'em back.

Giles: The docs made that decision. But we also marked on the helmet or the forehead the amount of morphine that was given—

McIntosh: Certainly. You had the little pledgets [compresses]?

Giles: But we had pledgets, yeah.

McIntosh: And that gave 'em a quarter [perhaps a quarter of a milligram of morphine].

Giles: Yeah. And we did plasma, too.

McIntosh: Right. So you had that going, and then you marked the men, someone decided whether they could deal with it there, or they had to move further back—is that correct?

Giles: That is the way it was, right. I might say something at this point about Patton, 'cause [laughs] he believed in reincarnation.

McIntosh: Yeah. We don't want any of that.

Giles: He thought he was Hannibal.

McIntosh: I know that.

Giles: Did you know that?

McIntosh: Oh, yes. I know.

Giles: Did you know that when he reached the Rhine River he skipped his breakfast coffee, so he could pee in the river?

McIntosh: Yeah, we all know about that.

Giles: You heard that.

McIntosh: I'm not interested in Patton; I'm interested in you.

Giles: Yeah, well, but I mean there's an interaction here between who's on the ground and seeing this thing from a worm's view, and, you know, getting a view not only from the worm, but from the diggers of the worm.

McIntosh: Right. If you had too many people, then what would do? If they started bringing 'em back faster than you could manage?

Giles: Oh, then we'd ask for help. They would go to an evac—

McIntosh: Right. Did you get some of the GIs to help you?

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: That's what I was getting around to.

Giles: Yeah. Listen, our guys were great.

McIntosh: The ones that you talked into helping, did willingly, and so forth?

Giles: Surely.

McIntosh: Yeah. I just wondered whether the sight of some of these wounds would scare some of the average GI who wasn't prepared for it.

Giles: Um, they were in shock. We were all hypo-desensitized to what was happening. It got to the point where the sheer fatigue and seeing these awful sights that I was telling you about—I mean, I can weep now—

McIntosh: Sure. You didn't have for it.

Giles: But I never cried then.

McIntosh: You know, I think you're too busy, don't you think, Giles?

Giles: I think that's part of it.

McIntosh: Yeah. You didn't have time for that.

Giles: And you may have seen that in Korea.

McIntosh: Yes. I saw some of that.

Giles: Yeah. And then, of course, comes December and the Battle of the Bulge, and the Germans struck with a ferocity that was just unbelievable.

McIntosh: By the time the wounded got back to you, the ones who were going to die generally had died before they arrived, or did you lose some after they got into your hands?

Giles: Uh, we lost a few after they got into our hands, but not many. Once you made it back there you would probably survive.

McIntosh: Practically all the medics I've talked to said that, "If they didn't die right away, generally, we could save them."

Giles: That is generally true. And people would say, "Well, you have about a ninety percent chance of making it." I'm not sure it was that good.

McIntosh: That's pretty high.

Giles: Ah, maybe eighty.

McIntosh: Sure. You know, in *Vietnam, with the helicopter transportation, they lost one percent.*

Giles: Which is really extraordinary. I didn't know the percentage on the Vietnam War.

McIntosh: One percent. If they got their mitts on 'em, they saved ninety-nine percent. That's just a little aside—I didn't want to _____ [?]

Giles: No, I'm [portion no longer exists in the original recording] glad to hear it.

McIntosh: So, anyway, now we're marching forward here, and did you notice that when the casualties increased when you were on the march—on the attack rather than on the defense, or not?

Giles: I'm not sure what you're saying.

McIntosh: Whether the front was stabilized—

Giles: Oh yes.

McIntosh: Versus being on the aggressive and—

Giles: Well, we thought that the front was going to be stabilized, and then came the Battle of the Bulge—this was Hitler's last desperate attempt to win, and he damn near did it. His objective was to get to the Meuse River, and then aim—

McIntosh: Did they move you?

Giles: To Antwerp.

McIntosh: Did they move you when that occurred?

Giles: Yes, they did. I was—

McIntosh: You sort of moved north, then.

Giles: Yes, we moved north, and um—we were trying to rescue the remnants of the 106th Division, which was a green division. It was ripped to shreds.

McIntosh: Two-thirds surrendered?

Giles: *That is correct. Over two-thirds surrendered.*

McIntosh: _____ [?]

Giles: *That is right. And I was one of them—or I could have been.*

McIntosh: *Yeah, you could have been, yeah. _____ [?] Their treaty wasn't fair; to put them in that situation, then expect them not to surrender, I don't think—I don't see any real recrimination about that, but it's readily understandable that they were suddenly overwhelmed by really professional soldiers.*

Giles: *Well, that's right. [portion no longer exists in the original recording] The initial reaction to this was so severe that our CO called everybody together and said, "We might be pushed all the way back to Paris." And it is said that Patton's response to this was, "Well, let 'em come. I'll cut off their heads, and bottle 'em up, and win the war." And it took until [Brig. Gen. Anthony] McAuliffe had the guts to stand up and say, "Nuts, I do not surrender," to start turning the tide. There were a lot of other factors here, though—environmental factors. I mean, it was snowing, the temperature was cold and freezing in foxholes, there was overcast skies so the bombers couldn't get in.*

McIntosh: Oh, I understand. Tell me about your billet [lodging for troops]. Where would you stay at night?

Giles: I was fortunate because I had a bed. And we all had, uh—

McIntosh: Cots.

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: When you moved then you just tore the tent down, and—

Giles: That's exactly right; threw 'em in the truck, and continued to go north.

McIntosh: Did you have a lot of equipment that you personally had to move?

Giles: Oh, sure.

McIntosh: Men that you were responsible for, is what I'm getting at.

Giles: Oh, yeah, yes, I was responsible for hypodermic needles and equipment.

McIntosh: This is you and how many foremen, would you say?

Giles: There were twenty-two.

McIntosh: Twenty-two. So the twenty-two of you would be responsible for this unit and all this equipment and moved by those trucks.

Giles: It was terribly chaotic as we moved north. I mean, we got fire all the way, but it was worse when we got there.

McIntosh: Where would you go, specifically? Where did the truck stop, when you moved north? Do you recall?

Giles: Well, now, I'm trying to remember that; we were still with the Third Army, and Patton was still commander—

McIntosh: He was outside of that, yeah.

Giles: Yeah, of that—but we were sent to join the First and Ninth Army under [Gen. Courtney] Hodges and [Gen. William Hood] Simpson. And when, uh, the cold was just unbelievable, we had cots, but still there was only so much we could do. The biggest problem was that it was just so bone-breaking freezing that it was unbelievable. And C-Rations were a wonderful gift; Christmas was coming up. I mean, C-Rations were canned goods, like dog food we [laughs] called them—but we were glad to get 'em.

McIntosh: Right. At this time, did you have any trouble with food—getting food to you at this moment?

Giles: Yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: I mean, you weren't depending on the rations?

Giles: Yeah, we were not only on C-Rations, we were on D-Rations, which is a concentrated chocolate bar. But it was bone-breaking.

McIntosh: Now at this time were the casualties lower, because you were on the move tryin' to catch up?

Giles: That's right. And, not until we got within about ten or fifteen kilometers of the action did we—

McIntosh: In the ring around Bastogne [Belgium].

Giles: That's correct, yeah. But McAuliffe was an inspiration to every one of us.

McIntosh: I'm sure he was.

Giles: Yeah. Ooh! You're making me sweat.

McIntosh: I just interviewed a guy in that 101st [Airborne Division].

Giles: Really? Oh, they were—boy, those were—

McIntosh: They were starving, is what they were.

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: Okay. So then, Patton saved the day and stormed into Bastogne as soon as the weather cleared.

Giles: That's right.

McIntosh: So what did your outfit do then?

Giles: Well, at that point, once the fighting was lifted—which took until New Year's Day really, and Christmas—then we joined with the Ninth and the First Armies to attempt a Rhine crossing.

McIntosh: Went to the back to turning right [laughs].

Giles: So, that's right, we turned right, yeah.

McIntosh: Right, before we leave this now—did you get some packages, some Red Cross packages, at this moment? **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

Giles: Uh, yes—but not 'til then. As I say, things were so chaotic that we didn't have a delivery system. It took Eisenhower awhile to figure out what was going on; he didn't take it too seriously at first.

McIntosh: How about mail?

Giles: Mail, same thing there. But we did get mail.

McIntosh: It was delayed.

Giles: It did come through; it was delayed.

McIntosh: Okay, so now we're off to the Rhine.

Giles: We're off to the Rhine and the Ruhr Valley, and the fighting was still very

savage. And what was happening is that Hitler was sending out, desperately, his last remnants; he had boy scouts, the Hitler unit. And he had the most fanatic remnants of the SS [Schutzstaffel] against us.

McIntosh: Did you encounter any of them?

Giles: Yeah, we did encounter several of them, and, uh—

McIntosh: You mean as prisoners?

Giles: You know, they were so fanatical. I can remember a kid who was a second lieutenant in the Germany army. We brought him in on stretcher ‘cause he had multiple gunshot wounds to his abdomen. But in spite of all of that pain—he was about seventeen years old—in spite of all of that pain, he said, “This is a righteous war. We need *Lebensraum*, [German term for] “living space”, and what you should do is join up with us against the Russians.” I could not believe my ears.

McIntosh: They still believed that.

Giles: I mean, he—and, uh, the next veteran, it was an old grizzled guy in the German army that we were taking care of—he also had a lot of gunshot wounds; his shoulders, face. And I can remember exactly what he said: he said he’s been “*fünfmal verwundet*”, and “*nicht mehr*”; [translated to English] he said, “I’ve been wounded for five times, and no more.” And he said, “to *Hölle* with Hitler”—

McIntosh: He’d had enough.

Giles: [translated to English] “To hell with him.”

McIntosh: Exactly. How many of these German prisoners, did you treat? A lot? A few?

Giles: A fair number, a fair number—because by this time, by the middle of January, the fighting was still very fierce, and there were casualties that were very high still, on both sides. But now the Germans were taking it; it was a war of attrition.

McIntosh: Did you feel that your treatment of them was fair?

Giles: Well, for the most part; we didn’t find out about the massacre at Malmedy [Belgium]

McIntosh: That’s what I was gonna—

Giles: Yeah, until after New Year's Day.

McIntosh: That changed some attitudes?

Giles: That changed attitudes a lot—let me tell you. I talked to a GI who had been on the front, and he told me what he personally had done: they had found a sniper who was a woman and they took her, and they tied her to a door frame, backed up a tank, and blew the hell out of her. That's what our moralistic GIs did. And not one of us was critical. I mean, war—Jim, war is horrible, it's terrible. It's a terrible way of settling things. But as I say, if your house is on fire, you've got to throw water on it.

McIntosh: Right. When you're in the middle of it, alternatives are forgotten.

Giles: And, so then, well there's a whole series of German cities, which they were just, just shoot, like sour grapes for plucking in the springtime. And we were in Cologne, and Jülich, and Munster, and Dusseldorf, and Krefeld, and Essen, and Dortmund, and Recklinghausen, where we were then once the war swept through the area and it was apparent that the Germans were going to lose, um, we could start to relax. We were pulled back as occupation troops.

McIntosh: Did you have some meetings with the German civilians during this time?

Giles: Yes, yes, now this is a very—
..

McIntosh: Tell me about that.

Giles: Okay. Um, well, we were pushing to an army of occupation. Hitler blew his brains out at the end of April, and it was apparent that the war was coming to a dreadful end. And we were called together by our officers to explain a new policy with the German people. And most of the Germans that I talked to were so glad to see the war coming to an end and the bombing stopping. But, it was apparent that the reason that they felt that way was because they were so shell-shocked—but they wanted Germany to win. And, um, that was almost universal.

McIntosh: You mean, their feeling of disillusionment?

Giles: Their feeling of, "We accept the end, and that peace is coming, but we wish we had won"—if you pinned them down on that.

McIntosh: So they were disillusioned to the max.

Giles: Yeah, very disillusioned. Ah, we had a policy that was expressed as "no fraternization" except in line of duty with the civilians. Now, this policy

came down from Eisenhower himself, and it was to make the German people aware of how terrible their actions were in the war, while we were supposedly morally superior. And so, most of us felt, “Why should we act like supermen to this downtrodden people now who are in smoking ruins?”

McIntosh: Did you encounter any of the concentration camps?

Giles: Uh, right towards the end of the war, *Yank* [*The Army Weekly*] Magazine printed pictures from the Holocaust. And it’s interesting that we put these pictures up in the barracks, and Germans who came for treatment, um, all of them said, “It was the Nazis,” or, “It was the SS”

McIntosh: For a long time, I used to believe that; now, in the last five years I’ve realized that’s not true at all. They knew exactly what was going on.

Giles: They knew exactly what was happening. That was my feeling, too, after talking to them. And I did get a small commendation for acting as a translator.

McIntosh: Oh, did you?

Giles: Yeah, in German.

McIntosh: What did they want you to do specifically—when they were questioning—the security forces were questioning or—

Giles: Yes, yes, that, or just as liaison with our armies and their armies, who were turning in all of their weapons.

McIntosh: You were dealing with the soldiers, or the civilians?

Giles: No, I was dealing with civilians—to help out with the military government.

McIntosh: But there was no concentration camp in your area.

Giles: Not in our area.

McIntosh: I see, okay.

Giles: We were halfway between [Belsen-Bergen] and Buchenwald [concentration camps]. Yeah. I remember standing in the wreckage and shards of a church where this steel helmet was ‘cause the Germans had used it as a command post.

McIntosh: This is where, in what town?

Giles: This was in Recklinghausen.

McIntosh: That's why the helmet, the fire [??]

Giles: Yeah, yeah. And um, a nun came running out. She started berating me and trying to hit me, saying "*Amerikaner barbaren!*" [translated into English:] "You Americans are barbarians!" And I just lost it at that point. I just said, "And who do you think destroyed Rotterdam? And who do you think destroyed Warsaw? And who do you think started this war? You did." I just blasted the hell out of her. And all of this is coming back to me now, and I'm sweating and nervous.

McIntosh: It's made you mad all over again.

Giles: [Laughs]. But um, it's an awful experience. But you know, the non-fraternization policy was being bent. Now, the policy was supposed to be policed by the MPs [Military Police]. Now, what happened is that the MPs—[laughs]—would look over the area, find the most interesting *Fräuleins* ["young ladies"] to talk to, and then make them their guest as night fell. You know what's coming back to me, is a popular song that was being circulated by those of us who were occupation troops in the Rhineland: "I lost my cherry, in Dortmund city, I didn't wanna do it, I didn't wanna do it; but I was young, and she was pretty, so she said, [inaudible]." [Laughs] One of the lighter things that happened to us.

McIntosh: Were the Germans starving?

Giles: Uh, some of them were. It wasn't starvation, though, like had been inflicted on the Russian prisoners of war, or the Jews, or the Holocaust. But they, uh—

McIntosh: They were definitely short on food.

Giles: They were short on food. I can—

McIntosh: Did your group feed them?

Giles: Yeah. Well, somewhat, yes; we would help out.

McIntosh: Now you said you treated some—treated civilians.

Giles: Yes.

McIntosh: Tell me about that. How did that come about?

Giles: Well, okay. There were the general medical problems, we had set up an aid station, which was—

McIntosh: For anybody?

Giles: For anybody who needed it, and they all needed it. And—

McIntosh: Like—could you excuse me—like what, Giles?

Giles: Well, we were responsible for wound dressing, for trying to take care of the chronic anxiety that was being shown both by the German population and our own soldiers at this point.

McIntosh: Oh, really.

Giles: Yeah. And—

McIntosh: How could you treat that?

Giles: You can't.

McIntosh: The stuff they use today didn't exist then.

Giles: No. You can just say, "Look, be glad the war is over, and be glad you lost." And, uh, well, we treated a lot of problems; respiratory problems were very common. Pneumonia was common.

McIntosh: But you didn't have any penicillin for them.

Giles: Not for them, but it's interesting—oh, I've got a little story for you on this. I was walking on the outskirts of Recklinghausen, and I saw these two good-looking sisters who were planting potatoes. And um, we started talking, and along the way, there was a GI from the adjacent C Company who said to me, "Be careful about that blonde—she's really dy-no-mite. But you may want to think a little bit about what happened to me, because I was with her last week, and they sent me to Paris [McIntosh laughs] for a new drug called penicillin, which took care of my syphilis." So, be advised that we didn't exchange favors that day [laughs].

McIntosh: I'm sure it wasn't syphilis, but it was probably the clap [gonorrhea].

Giles: But uh, in addition to treating wounds we had problems with chronic gastroenteritis, all of the venereal diseases, malnutrition was a problem—oh, sore throats. Now, the sore throats that we saw were not due—

McIntosh: On GIs, you mean?

Giles: Yeah. On GIs, right—and civilians, too. This was diphtheria. Now, most of the GIs had had shots which protected them; the Germans did not. So, what they usually had was tuberculosis or pneumonia. And, oh, there was another problem: we had lice. Not only among the GIs, but among the Russian prisoners of war that we picked up in town. And it was my duty as a medic to go out and treat them with D.D.T., which I sprayed liberally.

McIntosh: I didn't know—you didn't mention a prison camp being there.

Giles: Oh, no, no, these were forced labor people.

McIntosh: Oh, I've been thinkin' [inaudible].

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: Okay.

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: They were building the V-2s [world's first long-range ballistic missile], right?

Giles: That's right.

McIntosh: Or something like that.

Giles: So, um, it's interesting to think about the lice and typhus connection 'cause on a—

McIntosh: You couldn't make a diagnosis of tuberculosis except by—

Giles: Except by thinking about it and wondering about it. We didn't have X-ray equipment.

McIntosh: You didn't have any microscope to—

Giles: Oh, yes, we had microscopes.

McIntosh: You had the stains to do it?

Giles: We had the stains.

McIntosh: You could've stained the stuff but you probably didn't have time for that.

Giles: No, we didn't stain for the "red snappers", but if something that red happened, it was a high incidence of TB following the war.

McIntosh: A lot of the guys that I've interviewed in prison camps became tubercular. That was very common.

Giles: Well, it's something that we are starting to see again, incidentally.

McIntosh: Right. So, what else then? Did you ever see anybody from the Red Cross? See anybody?

Giles: The Red Cross people came in towards the end of the war.

McIntosh: Salvation Army?

Giles: And, uh, I didn't see the Salvation Army until I got back to New York. But they were the good outfit—

McIntosh: Oh, I understand, but I—

Giles: We thought very fondly of them.

McIntosh: So from your occupation, then what—did you stay there 'til the end of the war and then go home?

Giles: We stayed there 'til the end of the war, and then we went home in June.

McIntosh: In Recklinghausen?

Giles: Yeah. And what's very interesting is that the same ship that took us over, the SS Mariposa, was the same ship that took us back from Cherbourg.

McIntosh: How unusual.

Giles: The only difference was is we had left from Boston Harbor, and then we docked in New York Harbor on return.

McIntosh: Was that camp at Cherbourg called "Lucky Strike"?

Giles: You know, it could've been.

McIntosh: 'Cause I had another interview who said he left from Lucky Strike; I said, "Where was that?" He said, "I'm not sure," but I assumed it was Cherbourg—I thought you might know. That was a camp, an embarkation camp.

Giles: Yeah, yeah, well—

McIntosh: It probably was; that's a logical place to leave.

Giles: Yeah, it sounds very familiar; I can't pinpoint it any more than that right now. And, um, [laughs] I spent an overnight at Fort Monmouth [New Jersey] and went out with some pals. We had a few beers—

McIntosh: Back when you got back home?

Giles: Yeah, when we got back home. And then as midnight approached I went back to the lodging they had assigned us to—all the lights were out, and I'd been "short-sheeted", [laughs] with water. And there was all this snickering and laughing going on [laughs]. But, I was back in the U.S.A., which was a great feeling. And from there—

McIntosh: Did your health suffer?

Giles: No, as I say, we were fortunate, we—

McIntosh: Other than normal things.

Giles: The guys who really suffered were in the Battle of the Bulge and the terrible things that happened with trench foot to their feet.

McIntosh: Right. But you didn't encounter a lot of trench foot where you were; apparently you were on the move long enough—

Giles: We were on—yeah, right. We were very fortunate.

McIntosh: The prisoners of war that I've interviewed all had a severe problem with trench foot. 'Cause they were inadequately clothed, and they were wet most of the time.

Giles: That is absolutely right. And in some cases, company commanders would send their men back so they could have a warm meal, and then shipped 'em up to the foxholes again. It's just a horrible, terrible, degrading experience.

McIntosh: Did these people who were being rotated pass through your camp, that you talked to?

Giles: Oh, yeah, yeah—quite a few of them did. And I got assigned to be a medic to a service command unit in Green Haven, New York. And so for seven months I had charge of a dispensary, and I was handling up to a hundred men a day.

McIntosh: That's where you finished your duty?

Giles: That's where I finished the duty; I was performing the medical duties of a male nurse. You know, I was sterilizing the instruments and equipment and administering hypodermics.

McIntosh: Have you kept in contact with any of your buddies in your unit?

Giles: No, no.

McIntosh: Not one of 'em?

Giles: Not one. That's a little unusual—no, I take it back. I did have contact five years ago with Prof. Joseph—um, Gusfield, his name was. And he was a PFC [Private First Class] with me and a medic with me, and he ended up as a professor of sociology in California. He was a guy I liked a lot.

McIntosh: Did you ever join any veterans' organizations when you got home?

Giles: No. No, I—

McIntosh: You had no interest in it?

Giles: Uh, not that I didn't have an interest—it was just that reliving the experience was too much.

McIntosh: That's made the low interest [laughs]. How about your GI bill? Now, tell me about that.

Giles: The GI bill was one of the greatest things that could have happened.

McIntosh: Greatest piece of social legislation ever.

Giles: And it gave me a chance to finish pre-med and medical school. And after medical school and graduation I was then commissioned as a medical officer. And I probably should have stayed in.

McIntosh: In the Reserve?

Giles: In the Reserve. I was in the Reserve for nearly twelve years.

McIntosh: The Active Reserve?

Giles: No, no.

McIntosh: Inactive.

Giles: Inactive Reserve.

McIntosh: Yeah, I stayed in for about fourteen years.

Giles: Oh, so you were close.

McIntosh: Then I just quit.

Giles: Didn't you want to go on for your twenty years?

McIntosh: No, I didn't—there was no advantage. You know, inactive reserve wouldn't have paid you any money.

Giles: No, that's right.

McIntosh: And it seemed pointless, so I just quit. Now, let's get back and more general questions. What about your training? The training you received, was it adequate for the job that you were asked to do?

Giles: No, no.

McIntosh: Okay, tell me about that, and why it wasn't.

Giles: Well, the thing is, most of everything I have picked up, you know, either from the battlefield or from my previous inadequate training as a medic, before we went overseas. But I stuck with the doctors, and that way I learned a lot; I mean, about treating shock and—

McIntosh: So, you learned on the job watching them.

Giles: Yeah, yeah. And so, as I say, they promoted me to be a male nurse, and so I did all of the things that one would expect.

McIntosh: Sure. All right. Anything else that you haven't talked about—about your feelings? Any feelings that you might have here?

Giles: Well—

McIntosh: Other than the fact that it was horrible.

Giles: Let me think about that a little bit.

McIntosh: Here, I'll shut this off for a second, *give you a little breather.*

Giles: *Okay, I can tell you what happened following my discharge. I returned to [portion no longer exists in the original recording] the university here, finished pre-med and medical school in 1951, commissioned as a medical officer, stand-by for the Korean War, the one that you participated in. Um, and then I had an internship, a residency, and a fellowship from the University of Virginia, um, San Francisco, and Berkeley, and then the university here. And subsequently I was boarded in internal medicine and became a fellow of the American College of Physicians. And um, got married, had four kids, um— took up scuba diving, in which I was certified. Took up flying; I was certified as an instrument-rated pilot. And subsequently, during the last five years I've become very interested in Old English literature and Scandinavian literature. Um, **but I was struck down nearly five years ago now with a very rare and lethal disease called amyloidosis, which was confirmed at the Mayo Clinic. And I'm on intermittent chemotherapy, which has prolonged my life, and I've been very fortunate that way. But, looking at the world, which is really your question and**[portion no longer exists in the original recording] follow-up here, I have felt that war is really so terrible that we should turn to real democracy as a method of solving conflict, and not violence. That's an idea—we haven't solved it yet. As you look at the world history, I mean, there are wars everywhere. But, um—*

McIntosh: Man's greed will prevent any change in the situation.

Giles: I'm afraid that's true. Um, the question that comes up is, can one person, can *you*, make a difference? And I start thinking about that, because, um, there are some names that have changed history. Alexander, Caesar—and what's ironic about those two names is that they were military people. And then you have Jesus. Literary speaking, Shakespeare. Leonardo. Beethoven. Marx. Einstein. Freud. Salk.

McIntosh: Lyndon Johnson.

Giles: Well, he did change things.

McIntosh: You bet he did. As mean a cuss as he was, he's the guy who pushed the Medicare and the Medicaid bills. He's the one who ramrodded that.

Giles: Yeah, I should mention Churchill, too. Because without him, and his pudgy little ways and his chronic alcoholism and his cigar smoking—he said, "We will endure."

McIntosh: Yeah, he gave the British hope when they really had no hope.

Giles: They had nothing left. If Hitler had invaded England he would have smashed them.

McIntosh: In weeks.

Giles: But the attitude of the average Brit was something I will never forget.

McIntosh: They're incredible.

Giles: They really—iron in their blood. So I think, one person can make a difference if that person is up to influencing others in a fair way.

McIntosh: If he's in the right position, right.

Giles: So, now I'm old, and life is too short to kill people. So, now what I do is I write poems.

McIntosh: Right. That's a much safer occupation. Much safer.

Giles: Well, you can't always go by that, either, because it's important that you live a little bit close to the edge.

McIntosh: Well, you've done that. You've done that. All right.

McIntosh: I think that does it.

Giles: We can close with a poem of mine called "Winter Rain", if you want me to do it.

McIntosh: Do it. [portion no longer exists in the original recording] You want me to get that piece of paper?

Giles: Yes. And this [poem] has to do with, "What do you do when peace comes?" I think there's another sheet that goes with that. Just bring them all over, yeah. There's another sheet [laughs]. Yeah. Thanks. I did have a very warm experience when the war ended, though, on V-E Day, Victory in Europe Day, which is the tenth of May, 1945. I met a sweet little Belgian girl who was nineteen, the same age as I was, and we danced all night. I got terribly drunk from too much champagne. But we correspond—

McIntosh: Too drunk?

Giles: Not too drunk. But feeling, you know, the war is over finally, and here is a very warm and nice and receptive person.

McIntosh: Did you spend the night?

Giles: Well, not exactly—but pretty close to it, for a teenager [laughs]. And we corresponded for a while. But that lifted a lot of the depression I was feeling. And so I sat down when the war ended, and I wrote this—it’s called “Winter Rain”:

I have not asked ‘til now,
Nor wondered to, nor saw, nor cried
But a falling raindrop spattered through an archway light
And left me cold and wondering
Look—tell me, have you felt it, too?
So strange, so lonely, so wondering
A moment blown about between two midnights
Shivering with many hungers
Crouching in corners
Lingering here and springing up again,
Flaring like a candle in a great cathedral room
It will not turn its lighted path, where only seen before, blurred shadows
Dancing under gargoyle corners
Searching in darkness
Wandering by
Peering with many eyes on an unlit street
Now, haunted through alleys, huddled by muddy parapets
Walking to and back again as an empty moment
Sounding in the nighttime watch
Listen—the latch fall on a closing door forever long, and secrets still
The hollow shock of doom
Rattling three keys of death, and passing quiet like a wind in the chambers
Chills the fevered cheek, lingers a moment and is gone
Sudden is an arc of sparks from his hasty cigarette, spun into the nighttime
river
A second snuffed into eternity, leaving many images
Nor have I asked ‘til now, to live with many wonderings, and other times
before this death
I have been splashed by sea and surf, in bitter crossing
I have walked to plant my footsteps in growing puddles of winter rain
I have drunk of wine and taken bread
Joked with comrades, and slept on beaches
Was dead, and resurrected
In times of others’ sorrow still beautiful, I have not forgot with all my
wonderings
For once, I watched a woman’s hair stream with the wind and disappear
into the white clouds of the evening moon [??]
But all was witchcraft, that spoke of one man’s vanity
With disillusionment, hurt unsad eyes
For I heard, too, the still, lost cry of happiness, woven in the stolen
tapestry of silence

A thought expressed, a gull's feather floating out of time, between two
glasses tinkling, faint and gently far
Breathed on by the soundless lips of night are tales of pouting laughter
I have not asked 'til now, for from this magic, I could have made a bundle
of the nighttime's secrets
Shaped in falling rain, and sped swift home again to part from here, but for
the midnight and the moment that had gone
Still, I had not felt your fingers touch upon my lips
And watch you turn from me without a word, and walk away until my
blinded eyes could no longer see
I have not asked 'til now
When as a child, I saw the sun rise over the misty morning city tops
To scrape away these salty tears
Left in a wounded sky

McIntosh: Beautiful. Very nice, very nice letter.

Giles: Yeah.

McIntosh: Okay.

Giles: Well that was different.

McIntosh: Anything else you can think of to say? [Inaudible]

Giles: No. The only other thing is, you may want to look at those other two
poems that I have.

McIntosh: Oh, I want to read those—I don't want to read them now, I'll read them
when I get home.

Giles: Yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: Now, these are poems that you wrote when you were there?

Giles: Yes. "From Waterloo Bridge" was written there.

McIntosh: See, that's—when I take those to the museum, they'll want to know that.

Giles: Yeah. And what I'm going to do is, I'm going to give you my book—

*McIntosh: Where did you write those poems? I mean, on what did you write those
poems?*

Giles: I wrote these poems on yellow paper, [laughs], y'know, and a pencil.

McIntosh: While you're there, where are those yellow papers?

Giles: Oh, I don't know. They've long since been cast out. Uh, but I want to inscribe my book. I've had three publications—

McIntosh: Excellent. [portion no longer exists in the original recording]

[End of interview]