

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MAY LEON
Postal Officer, Army, World War II.

2004

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May, Leon, (1917-2011). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Leon May, a Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin native, discusses his Army service as a postal officer in the European Theater of World War II. May talks about his education and being drafted in 1942 while working for the Postal Service. He describes basic training at Fort McClellan (Alabama), waiting for several months at the newly built Camp Harahan (Louisiana), and graduating as a second lieutenant from postal school at Fort Washington (Washington, D.C.). May highlights the prevalence of smoking amongst soldiers. Assigned to Hampton Roads (Virginia), he speaks of working with Navy personnel to send mail to England with convoys. He talks about assignment to Elizabeth City (North Carolina) as a liaison officer with the Royal Officer and sending mail across on Lend Lease Program airplanes. May discusses being the postal officer for the Ninth Replacement Depot at New Orleans until he was shipped overseas to England. After three weeks in London, he talks about taking over the 515th Army Postal Unit in Chester (England). He comments on how they kept track of the location of Army units, visiting servicemen from Sturgeon Bay, and eventually being sent to France with the Oise Base Section of the Allied Expedition Force in Reims. May touches on getting married to an Englishwoman, spending his leaves in England visiting his wife, and the hospitality of the English. He speaks of USO shows, getting accidentally locked inside Reims Cathedral, mail censorship, and the rumors that preceded V-E Day. May reflects on the positive effect that the mail and the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper had on morale. He comments on the service provided to families who were trying to get in touch with their sons. May addresses the ship ride home after his unit was disbanded, a quick discharge, and his homecoming. He discusses joining veterans' organizations, including signing up with the American Legion while he was still in France.

Biographical Sketch:

May (1917-2011) served in the Army from 1942 to 1946. In 1944, he was married to Elsie Williams, in England. After the war, he and his war bride settled in Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin), where May worked for over thirty-five years at the Sturgeon Bay Post Office. Following retirement in 1972, he became a real estate broker with his family's firm, May Realty.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2004

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

MacDonald: This is an interview with Leon May, who served in the United States Army during World War II. The interview is being conducted at 1:00 p.m. at the following address of 118 South Fifth Avenue, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of July 8, 2004. And the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Well, Leon, can you give me a little background of your life circumstances prior to entering into the military service?

Leon: I was born in West Sturgeon Bay in 1917. We moved across the bay to 130 South Fifth Avenue in 1918. I attended St. Joseph's Catholic School through the eight grades, graduating in 1931, and entered high school and graduated in 1935.

In January of '36 I went to Spencerian Business College in Milwaukee for a period of time, and then returned to Sturgeon Bay, where I took employment with The Fair Store, a general department store in downtown Sturgeon Bay. I worked with them until May of '37, when I entered the Postal Service.

I stayed in the Postal Service until I was drafted on March 30th, 1942. When I was drafted, I went to Milwaukee and then on to Fort Sheridan, and then on to Fort McClellan, Alabama, for Basic Training.

MacDonald: When you were drafted, what was the feeling? Was there a lot of people being drafted at that time?

Leon: Yes. There were all kinds of us being drafted at that time.

MacDonald: Did you go with some people from Door County at the same time?

Leon: Yes. We got on the bus over here at the courthouse, and they took us to Milwaukee, where we were examined and then sent on if you passed the physical. Of course, after Pearl Harbor, you just had to be warm, actually, in order to be accepted.

And, okay, I went to Fort Sheridan. I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama, for Basic Training, after which I was sent to New Orleans, Louisiana, to Camp Harahan, a newly built camp. I stayed in that camp from June 1942 until October 1, 1942, when I was taken and sent to the Adjutant General's School at Fort Washington at Washington, D.C.

MacDonald: Can I just back up a second? When you were at Camp McClellan in Alabama, what kind of living conditions did you have when you were in boot camp?

Leon: We lived in tents down there; we lived in tents. And there were about fifty thousand troops in Fort McClellan at that time. I always can recall getting up in the morning about 5:30 and walking down to the latrine to clean up. And you'd hear all these fellows. Everyone was getting up at that same time. You hear everyone coughing all around the area. It was just, we didn't realize it then, but it was strictly cigarettes.

MacDonald: Oh ho.

Leon: Yeah. It seemed at that time, smoking was just one of the common things. Everyone smoked, it seemed at that time. In fact, every hour they'd give you a break: "Okay, we'll take ten. Smoke if you've got them." And smoking was such an accepted thing.

I just can't get over now when I look at the films and see how little cigarette smoking is shown on films, and that's so good. I know I quit smoking about fifty years ago.

MacDonald: Before you went to Washington, D.C., when you went to the Adjutant General's Office, was that—what was the reason for that?

Leon: I was sent to, being sent to, school. It was Officer Candidate School, and I graduated December 23, 1942, as a second lieutenant. We had the various schools there. They had the Postal School, the Machine Records School. I graduated from the Postal School.

MacDonald: Well, what was it like from going--? You were in enlisted personnel when you first went, and then after you got out of your training you became an officer then, right?

Leon: Yes, that's right. Then, immediately upon graduation, we were given a leave, which I came home.

And then I was sent to Hampton Roads, Virginia, at that time. And my job at that time was, I was given the assignment to contact these ships that were lying at anchor in Chesapeake Bay. I worked with the Navy on that. I would report to the Naval Operating Base at Norfolk. And they would furnish a boat and a couple of naval personnel who would take me all around Chesapeake Bay.

I had a list of the ships that I was to contact. And I would contact these ships. And my job was to contact the captain to find out when we

could put mail aboard them, because we knew that the convoys were all headed for England, of course, at that time. We'd find out how much mail they could handle and when we could load it.

MacDonald: Because everything at that time was shipped by boat across.

Leon: At that time, at that time.

MacDonald: How many people did you have working under you?

Leon: Oh, I just worked on my own out there. I was just going around Chesapeake Bay, as I said, with two Navy personnel. And then after we'd find out what they could handle, then I'd leave that word with my head office in Hampton Roads, Virginia. And they would take care of the rest. That was another department that took care of that.

And after I left that job they sent me to Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where I was made a Liaison Officer with the Royal Air Force. At Elizabeth City it was a Coast Guard base, and we were flying in the PBYS under the Lend Lease Program. We were flying them into Elizabeth City and would turn them over to the British Royal Air Force. And would take and fly them over to the U.K.

And my job then, in being Liaison with them, was to find out when they were flying out and how much mail we could put aboard there. And I kept the mail in the Post Office at Elizabeth City, the civilian office. And when we found out if they were going to be flying the next day, or just what day they were flying, I would have a truck go up there and pick up. We'd clear the amount of mail that we could handle, take it out there and put on board these planes, these PBYS, [unintelligible] U.K. That was my job.

MacDonald: Yeah. Just give us an idea what kind of volume of mail were we talking about?

Leon: Oh, we're talking, oh, maybe a hundred bags of mail. This was letter mail. This wasn't packages. Packages we put on these ships, because time was not of the essence, so to speak. This took care of first class mail, so to speak. That's what we put on these PBYS.

Then after I was there for about three months, I recall one day I was sitting at the hotel after lunch, and I saw a little fellow walking up the stairs and also walking up the stairs some Captain. Gee, he must have been at least forty years old. I thought, "Well, here's an old-timer coming in. And, well, I bet you a dollar he's come to replace me." Because this job I had is too good. He went to the desk across from

where I was sitting. He asked for me, and they pointed to me. He came over to me, and he said, "I'm your replacement." I said, "I suspected that when you walked in the door." So I turned it over to him, oriented, gave him all the instructions.

The next day I took off and went back to Hampton Roads, Virginia. And then after having been staying there for about a week, I received orders sending me to New Orleans again to join the Ninth Replacement Depot, which was formed in New Orleans, in your age of overseas.

Because they had a big job, these replacement depots did, in the theater of operations. Because you had all the personnel came into these depots. And then you'd get your requisitions from divisions saying, "We need fifty fellows that can type." And you take those, and they'd ship them out. My job was being in this--, I was the Postal Officer for the Replacement Depot. That was my job.

And then finally, I was with them a couple of years. And we were just--one day the Colonel called me in, and he says, "Hey, Lee, I just found out our new table of organization no longer calls for a postal officer." But he said, "I like your work. Would you like to stay with me? I have to tell you I know we're going overseas." And I said, "I'd love to serve with you. I'd love to go overseas and serve under you, Colonel."

MacDonald: What kind of a guy was the colonel?

Leon: He had a chest full of ribbons from World War I, and he was a gentleman way up in his sixties. And I did a lot of odd jobs for him because I had the time. And so he and I got along well.

So he said, "I'm glad to hear that." I said, "I'd love to go overseas with you." He said, "I'll put you in my Classification Section." He says, "I know your friend, Captain Burns. You two work well together, I know. So you two will be my Classification Officers. That's fine."

So we shipped overseas. When we arrived in England, we were sent to southern England. We arrived in southern England, and an order came through that took our unit and cut it right in half, took half the officers and half the men, sent half to Cheltenham, England, to form another Replacement Depot, while I stayed with the Ninth Replacement Depot.

And after about a month, an order came through from London, and they found out that I was a Postal Officer. They were in need of them. I was transferred out and sent to London. After spending about three weeks in London, I was sent up north to Chester, England, to take over

a postal unit called the five hundred and fifteenth [515th] Army Postal Unit, which consists of eleven men and an officer.

And we ran a post office at a base section up there which exercised control over quite an area there. We were the source of supply of all kinds of services there. So that's where I was sent up to have this post office. And I stayed there until after D-Day, and quite some time after D-Day before--. And finally, we were alerted several times to ship out, but it seemed we were always put off. And then finally we didn't get over on the Continent until into '45.

MacDonald: Well, when you were in England, there, and they were building up for the D-Day Invasion, there were massive amounts of troops in England and Scotland and that area over there.

Leon: Oh, yeah.

MacDonald: How did you keep track of the guys where they were at?

Leon: I had a book which showed the location of every unit in the U.K. That book, that catalog, was kept in my safe every night. That gave every unit that was in the U.K., so I knew just exactly where every one was in the U.K. And so, any mail that came in to me, I mean, in bags or that sort of thing, I just redirected by British Mail trains to where it should go. So we had a very fine record of who was over there.

When I'd get my weekly paper—it wouldn't come weekly—but whenever I'd get the *Advocate* [*Door County, WI, newspaper?*], I'd look in there, and there was a column for service people. And I could see where certain fellows had gone overseas, and the unit. Well, soon as I'd see the unit, I'd find out if they were in my area. If they were, I'd go and see them.

MacDonald: Did you catch up with quite a few guys?

Leon: Yes, I should say so. It was a difficult situation.

MacDonald: So, then when you got over into the Continent, uh--.

Leon: When we went onto the Continent, we landed in Cherbourg. And after two weeks there we were sent to Reims, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expedition Force. We were sent to that headquarters. Of course, they had just moved out, and our unit, I mean the organization to which I was going to attach myself, was located there. Called it Oise—"o-i-s-e"--Base Section. Took care of the administration for the whole area, and that's where I was sent with my unit. And we set up a post office

right in the middle of the courtyard of the Little Red Schoolhouse. Talk about The Little Red Schoolhouse, that's four blocks square, and it has a courtyard about the size of, oh, about the green space over here of the old school location and the market square. That was the courtyard.

MacDonald: Oh, so this is about five hundred feet by five hundred feet or something like that.

Leon: Exactly. All the way around it was the Little Red Schoolhouse; that was about two and three stories high. We occupied a national-style hut, a couple of them, in the middle of that courtyard.

MacDonald: When you were over there, did you ever have any time off? Or mostly you worked?

Leon: Well, when I had leaves, I'd go to England, because I married in England. I married in England, uh, November 25, 1944. And so, every time I had a leave on the continent, I would take it and go back to England, naturally. Whether you need to take a ferry boat back, or you'd catch a plane.

MacDonald: How were the English people? Did they treat you pretty--?

Leon: Oh, they were most hospitable. They couldn't do enough for you. They couldn't do enough. Soon as you walk in the house, they'd put the kettle on. You had to drink a cup of tea and have a cookie with them, a biscuit. Most hospitable, they couldn't have been more cooperative in any and every way.

MacDonald: What kind of entertainment did you have? Were there any USO shows, or anything?

Leon: Oh, we had various USO shows come there. And we had our own theater in the town, too, theater for GIs. We had our own theater, and occasionally we'd have a USO show come into town. And there was always something that they put on for us. We weren't wanting for entertainment of any kind.

I recall a night of walking downtown to go to dinner in Reims. And I walked by the Reims Cathedral, and I thought maybe I could use a few prayers about this time. So I went in there. And of course the Reims Cathedral is beautiful. It's one of the showpieces of Europe. And all the sides were sandbagged to take care of those windows. So I was in church about quarter to six, and there were a few other people in there.

And I knelt down and started to meditate. And I looked and my watch: “Holy Cats! It’s quarter after six!” I looked around and I was alone.

So I thought, “I think it’s time for me to get out of here and go out to eat.” So I got up and walked out, and walked to the front door, and, by golly, I was locked in. Then I checked all the doors around the place there, and they were all locked. So then I walked in the sacristy. And I thought, “Well, I think I’ll see how they’re fixed for robes here, in case I spend the night.” No problem. So I checked the sacristy, and I found all kinds of robes that the priests would use in the services. And I looked, there were plenty of robes, so, “Well, that’s taken care of me. I won’t worry about that.”

I went back out, and I went to the front door. And I attracted the attention of some civilians that went by. And I had enough knowledge of French to let them know that I wanted to get out of there. So, this one fellow understood me. He went, “I’ll be back with help.” So he took about fifteen [minutes?], and he came back with the janitor. Janitor let me out. Of course, I wasn’t worried, being locked in the cathedral. You know, couldn’t be a better place. [Laughs]

MacDonald: As the war moved on and the United States moved toward Germany, were you moving too with your postal service?

Leon: No, we stayed in Reims, because they were shipping the troops who were coming back from Germany. And around Reims we must have had about a million and a half troops in all these camps right around Reims. So we took care of all of their mail services.

MacDonald: Did you have anything to do with the mail going out also?

Leon: Oh yes, oh yes. We took care of that too.

MacDonald: Was censoring part of it, or is that somebody else?

Leon: Well, you usually censored your own units. A commanding officer of a unit, a company commander, he censored his. I was censor for my unit. Everyone took care of their own censoring.

MacDonald: So you met your wife in England. Did you get married over there?

Leon: Yes, we were married there. [Coughs] **[PAUSE]**

MacDonald: We were talking briefly. You married an English girl. Did she come back with you when the war--?

Leon: Yes. She came back [coughs] in 1946.

MacDonald: What happened when the war ended? How did you find out that the War in Europe ended?

Leon: Well, uh, there were rumors all the time. There were all kinds of rumors. The Army always called them “latrine rumors.” And, it just finally came over the radio. Bingo! Of course, we had our own talk radio network over there, too. We listened to that intently, because that gives you hot news, as hot as there was.

One of the fine things of the service was having a daily copy of the *Stars and Stripes* paper. That was just a morale factor, having that paper, because it gave the story of the GI and his efforts and trials and tribulations, etc. I think that’s a highlight. That was one of the great morale factors.

And, of course, the mail is a terrific factor, because when you’re in these units, the company commander—you know, they’d come and get their mail, and they’d have roll call at their barracks. And it seemed like that was big time, when you got news from home about their girlfriend, wives, so on and so forth. The mail was a terrific factor.

And one of our jobs was at that time, when we were in England, sometimes parents hadn’t heard from their sons that they were okay. Soon as he got in the Service, he was gone for eight weeks, and they hadn’t heard from him yet. Well, a mother might have sat down and written to the Adjutant General in Washington, D.C., and say “Hey! My Jimmy hasn’t--. What’s ever happened to Jimmy?” And he’d check it up and send a letter over to the commanding officer, or send the letter to the U.K., to a post office, and find out where he was. And they’d contact the commanding officer. Then he would contact Jimmy and get onto his case. And he’d have to sit down and write a letter to his folks, let them know that he was [unintelligible]. So that was a terrific service.

MacDonald: Uh-huh. When the war ended, did the guys do a lot of celebrating?

Leon: You better believe. You better believe. Well, see, we had all figured--. See, when we were at Reims there, all these fellows were coming back from Germany. And we had about a million and a half troops around our--. We were all ready for re-deployment to the Pacific. That’s what we were waiting for. And, thank God then, then after awhile, Bingo! they dropped the Big One on August 14. So that took care of all the--.

- MacDonald: Well, there was a point system that the Army used. How close were you in the point system to being able to get out or get shipped back to the States--because you had quite a bit of overseas duty?
- Leon: I went over in December of '43. I didn't get back--. I didn't have that much credit. I would have been around awhile. So, it worked out that I got back, soon as I, you know--. Then they disbanded my unit. That took care of that.
- MacDonald: So then, when they disbanded the unit, were they shipping everybody back to the U.S. then?
- Leon: Yes. You'd go to another camp where they'd put you on hold for awhile till you qualified to go, unless you were a special case.
- MacDonald: They shipped you back on a ship, then, a Liberty ship? Or did you get on a *Queen Mary*, or something like that?
- Leon: We came back on the Victory ship. About ninety to a hundred of us came back on the Victory ship.
- MacDonald: What was that like compared to when you went over on a ship?
- Leon: When we went over on the ship, we were on the *Aquitania*. That was one of the White Star ships, and we had about ten thousand troops on that when we went over. But on the way back, as I said, we just caught a different ride on a Victory ship. You take quite a beating when you're out on the ocean with those Victory ships.
- MacDonald: When you got back to the States, did they muster you out right away or did you--?
- Leon: Yes. We hit New York, and we were shipped to our areas, like, okay, Camp McCoy, boom! We hit Camp McCoy, and within two days we were "chkkk"*[sound]* out of there. "You're on your way home, friend."
- MacDonald: Well, when you landed in New York what was it like? Was there lots of people on the docks?
- Leon: Not any more, because they were there for this big "hoohah" when these fellows first came back, you know, right after the War was over. Because when we came back quite some time later, the excitement had worn off, you know.

- MacDonald: And then when you went to Camp McCoy they only kept you there for a short period of time. Then you were mustered out.
- Leon: Yeah. Within two days you were mustered out.
- MacDonald: What was it like when you got back to Sturgeon Bay?
- Leon: What a treat to get back to living life again, you know. It's quite an adjustment, but good to be back with your loved ones. That's the important thing. But, uh, I could say it was an experience that you wouldn't want to do over again, but you wouldn't sell it for a million dollars, the experience you had.
- MacDonald: And then did you go back into the Postal Service when you got home?
- Leon: Yes, I was back at the post office when I got back here.
- MacDonald: Did you use any of your GI benefits?
- Leon: I never have. I never have. I should have, but I just didn't.
- MacDonald: At that time the service clubs were pretty active. Did you join a local service club?
- Leon: Oh yes. In fact, while I was in France a member of the [American] Legion sent me an application blank and had me fill it out. And I sent it back. And that's the way I joined the Legion while I was in France. Then when I came back I joined Veterans of Foreign Wars. And that's the one I'm very active in now.
- MacDonald: Looking back over the military life, the military service and the impact it had, what kind of impact do you think it had on you, going away for that period of time and stuff?
- Leon: Uh, I learned something about discipline, which was a worthwhile experience. I attended so many different schools while I was in the service, and that sort of thing, especially the training I had in Washington, D.C. We had a terrific experience there, living on the banks of the Potomac. And we were able to get into Washington, D.C., every weekend for, oh, sightseeing and things like that. That was quite a treat.
- MacDonald: Okay, do you have anything else you'd like to say?

[End of Interview]