

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
GORDON L. MCCANN
Gun Striker, Navy, World War II

2007

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McCann, Gordon L., (1923-), Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Gordon L. McCann, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his Navy service in both the European and Pacific theaters of World War II. McCann talks about having eight brothers who served in the military, quitting school, and enlisting in the Navy. He touches on boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), waiting at Newport News (Virginia) for his ship to be commissioned, assignment to the brand-new *USS Birmingham* (CL-62), and the *Birmingham*'s shakedown cruise. He mentions duty as a gun-striker during the invasions of North Africa and Sicily. McCann describes daily life aboard the light cruiser, including making raisin jack and once sneaking liquor aboard ship by tying the bottle to his leg. After passing through the Panama Canal, he discusses bombarding islands in the Pacific, including Wake and the Marianas Islands. McCann tells of the ship's getting damaged at Bougainville, having a few weeks leave at home while the *Birmingham* was being repaired, and colliding with a freighter as the ship was leaving Mare Island (California). He describes liberty in Pearl Harbor. During the invasion of Okinawa, he tells of a kamikaze plane hitting the ship and getting repaired in time for the invasion of the Philippine Islands. Assigned to Task Force 3 and Task Force 58, McCann tells of being on escort duty during the Battle of Leyte Gulf when the nearby *USS Princeton* (CVL-23) was hit by a suicide plane. He describes pulling up alongside the ship, efforts to put out the fire, and being wounded when the *Princeton* exploded. He tells of not realizing at first that he'd been hit and helping bury the dead. Transferred to a hospital ship, the *USS America*, along with an old buddy from Madison, McCann characterizes his nurse. He speaks of getting a haircut while aboard an Army hospital plane, being treated at Aiea Heights Hospital (Hawaii), and continually running into servicemen whom he knew while growing up in Madison. After the war ended, McCann mentions returning to the *Birmingham*, shipping to Australia, and transferring ships so he could date a girl there. Discharged in 1946, he discusses his career with the Boeing Airplane Company and his four marriages. McCann states he is a member of VFW Post 1318 in Madison, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

Biographical Sketch:

McCann (b.1923) served in the Navy from 1942 to 1946. After the war, he settled in his hometown of Madison (Wisconsin) and worked for the Boeing Airplane Company. He was senior vice commander of the Disabled American Veterans in Madison, as well as chapter commander and department senior vice commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, and this is an oral history interview with Gordon McCann, who is a veteran of the United States Navy in World War II. And we are having the interview at Gordy's home on Madison's west side. Today is February 13, 2007. Gordy, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Gordon: Madison, Wisconsin.

John: When?

Gordon: November 23, 1923.

John: Okay? Family?

Gordon: I have brothers and sisters. I am the fourth oldest of twelve. And my oldest brother is a half-brother, but I call him a brother. He was in the Army. And my real brother, oldest brother, was a chief warrant officer in the Marine Corps. And he was over on Guadalcanal. Then my third oldest brother, he was in the Army. He was a major in New Guinea. Then myself, I come in the Navy. And I done time both in the European Theater and the South Pacific.

John: You got to both sides.

Gordon: Yeah. And then my next brother, he didn't get in because he was under contract with the Boeing Airplane Company when the Korean War broke out. He missed out. But then my next brother, he was in the Army. He was a first sergeant. And he was a cook for General Van Fleet and General Westmoreland.

John: He must have been a good cook.

Gordon: He is retired and he is down at Fort Leonard Wood, in Missouri. And General Westmoreland happened to come into the camp and he spotted him. And he went over and talked to him. He said, "Son, I need you, as I am going over to Germany. And I want you to come along." My brother told him he was ready to retire. He said, "I'll make it good for you. I'll give you three months leave right now. You take your wife and boys. Come back to Wisconsin. See your family. And when you get back, bring your car down to the dock. We'll put it on the dock and send it over. And we'll move all your furniture." He said he would go home and talk it over with his wife. Why, she jumped at the conclusion that would be a good deal. So they went to Germany for three years, and then he came back and retired. He

had thirty years in the Army. And my next brother, he done, I think, three years in the Army, as a sergeant. My next brother was a sergeant in the U. S. Marine Corps. And then my youngest brother, I don't know how old he is now, around sixty-five, I think. He was in the Army.

John: So, a whole bunch of you served.

Gordon: Out of nine of us boys in the family, eight of us were in service.

John: And one worked for Boeing.

Gordon: No, he don't any more. All of them are retired. And it was great. They don't live in Madison. They live all over the country. I got one brother here in Madison.

John: How about schooling? Grade school? High school?

Gordon: I went to Longfellow Grade School here in Madison. Then I went to Madison Central, which is no longer there. And half-way through my sophomore year, I quit. I didn't like school. But I had to go. My parents were the kind that wanted their kids to get educated. But I quit. And my father said, "Well, you got to get a job." Well, at that time they didn't take kids. For jobs. And he said, "Well, I am going to give you two choices. You go back to school or you get a job. If you don't want them, join the service." Well, I preferred to join the service.

John: What year was that, Gordy?

Gordon: 1942. Early '42. So I joined the Navy, and never regretted it at all. We had bad times, but we had good times. And the good times made up for a lot of the bad times.

John: Where did you go in at?

Gordon: I went down to Great Lakes, Illinois. Spent time there. And I did not want to go to school for the Navy so I was shipped to Newport News, Virginia. And I met up with a bunch of guys down there, and we were waiting for our ship to get commissioned. Newport News. And we waited three months, I think. And then we got aboard the U. S. S. *Birmingham*. It was a light cruiser. But before that, I was on board a battleship from World War I they used for training purposes.

John: Do you remember what the battleship was? The name?

Gordon: U. S. S. *Wyoming*.

John: Okay.

Gordon: I don't know if they are still using it as a training ship or not. But I went on there for two or three weeks and then, when the *Birmingham* was ready, I transferred off to go back on the *Birmingham*.

John: Now, was the *Birmingham* new?

Gordon: It was brand new.

John: So you were a plank owner.

Gordon: January, sometime in January, I think it was January 13th, of 1943. That the *Birmingham* was commissioned. We took it out on our shake-down cruise. Found everything was okay. And we came back into port. We had a couple days there. And then we took off again. And the captain said, "We are headed for North Africa."

John: What was your job on the *Birmingham*?

Gordon: I was a gun-striker. And we went into Africa. We had a campaign there. And then we left Africa for the invasion of Sicily in 1943. And after the invasion of Sicily, we came back to the United States, at Norfolk, Virginia. And we all got a five day leave. That wasn't much time to get home and all the way back. From the east coast to Madison. But I did it. And there was three of us that were on the *Birmingham* from Madison at the time. One of them I went to high school with, and the other ones Dee went to grade school and high school with them. At Longfellow and Central.

John: What was life like on the *Birmingham*? Living on a light cruiser?

Gordon: It was nice. Yeah.

John: How was the food?

Gordon: It was good. Lot of guys didn't like certain kinds of food. If you wanted to eat, well, you ate what they served.

John: Just like living at home.

Gordon: Right. Don't eat it. Then you starve yourself.

John: How was the *Birmingham*, a cruiser, in seas? Heavy seas?

Gordon: Good. Real good. It handled real good in the weather. It had its up and downs, like any other ship. But I never got seasick. We live around so much water here, and I lived on the water. I went swimming every chance I had.

John: What kind of guns were you on on the *Birmingham*? You were a striker?

Gordon: Five inch, thirty-eight. And it was something that I wanted to do. I never made a rating because I wouldn't take one. I would just as soon work on them as take a rating. Because we had more fun that way.

John: Were you there for the invasion of North Africa?

Gordon: Yeah. Part of it. Then the invasion of Sicily. Then we come back for five days. And then after we got back from our five day leave, well, we took off for the South Pacific.

John: On the *Birmingham*?

Gordon: On the *Birmingham*. Then we went to Panama City, Panama. Through the canal. And that was a great experience, watching that. And when we got to Panama, well, there were a certain number of the crew that were allowed to get liberty. And I did. I was one of them. And when we got there, here they had all the liquor you wanted. There was liquor from the United States there. So I bought myself a fifth of Old Granddad. And I tried to get it back aboard ship, but the officer of the deck, who was a chief warrant officer in the gunnery division, and he told me go down off the ship, take the left shoe string out of your left shoe, tie the bottle on your right leg, and come back aboard. Just remember me at sea. Well, I didn't drink liquor at all then. I drank beer. But from then on, I gave up beer. But the bottle of whiskey, he got half of it. We had a lot of fun there. We did crazy things that no one else would do.

John: Such as?

Gordon: Oh, we made raisin jack aboard.

John: Oh, yeah. Raisin jack.

Gordon: The guys liked that. It was good. But they had to be careful. And then we went on to Pearl Harbor. And from there, we would go up and bombarded islands, like Wake Island. Then we made the invasion of the Marianas Islands.

John: That was Saipan, Guam, Tinian.

Gordon: Yeah.

John: What were you doing there? Bombardment?

Gordon: Bombardment. The five inch, thirty-eight was a big gun, but it was also an anti-aircraft gun. And the biggest guns we had on the *Birmingham* was a six inch. That is a little bit bigger than a five inch. And that is what we used for more or less bombardment. Then we, oh, made a few stops around. And then we went in and invaded Bougainville. And we got hit in Bougainville. And so we came back to Pearl Harbor for repairs.

John: How did you get hit? Aircraft?

Gordon: Aircraft. And that night we took two bombs. One bomb and one skip bomb. But the holes that the bombs made were big enough for a semi to go through. Side by side, and still have room on both sides of the truck to drive through without getting scratched. Then we took two torpedoes, and one suicide plane. And out of all that, we lost one man.

John: Oh, that's miraculous. That is a miracle.

Gordon: And when we got back to Pearl Harbor for repair—

John: You were still able to make it back to Pearl?

Gordon: Yeah. We made it back to Pearl, and when we got there, Admiral Nimitz, who was later Chief of the Pacific Fleet, told us that we could go back to the States to get repaired. So we came back to the States, and we ended up in Mare Island for repair. And when we got back there, well, we were all allowed two weeks vacation. So I came back home again. And after that, I went back. I got back and the ship was already repaired, ready to take off again.

John: That is amazing.

Gordon: And as we were leaving Mare Island, under the Golden Gate Bridge, we had a collision with a freighter. And he rammed us in the dark, you know. And they let him know what happened. And they asked if we thought we could get in to Pearl Harbor. So were not damaged so we could not get to Pearl Harbor. So we went on and got repaired there, and back out to the South Pacific.

John: Quite a ship. Quite a crew.

Gordon: We were called “The Fighting B.” The *Birmingham*. And then we went all over down there, and did a lot of bombardment. Some islands. And then when we got back, we already ended up in Pearl Harbor. And got a little liberty. And went back out again.

John: What was liberty like in Pearl Harbor, during the war?

Gordon: The people were awful friendly. Since I didn’t drink, and the guys I palled around with didn’t drink, we always went down town in Pearl Harbor. And they sold a lot of pineapple. And pineapple juice. It was real, real good at that time. And the university was right down there. And we visited around, all over there. Then we went back out again, and at that time, it was almost time for the invasion of Okinawa. And we were there at Okinawa, bombarding and that, and we were kind of lucky at first. Because we were the only ship that would not get hit. Then one night, an LST passed in front of us. And as it went by us, we took a suicide plane. And it hit right up there in sick bay. And so, we got pulled away from that. And come back to Pearl Harbor. And we buried our men at sea there that were killed.

John: How many did you lose?

Gordon: Well, there was quite a few in sick bay at the time. And then, after we got repaired again, we went back out to sea. And getting ready for the invasion of the Philippine Islands. When we got to the Philippines, we were in Task Force 3 and Task Force 58. Task Force 3 was commanded by Admiral Foster, I think it was, and the other one, Task Force 58, was commanded by William Halsey. His nickname was “Wild Bill.” Then, while we were escorting, one of the carriers, escort carriers, got hit by a suicide plane. I can name it now because the war is over and that business is. The U. S. S. *Princeton*. And then we were assigned to go alongside to put the fire out. And as proceeded to put the fire out, and had it under control, the crew, ninety per cent of them abandoned ship. And they only had to jump. The captain of the ship was killed instantly. And the executive officer, he got hit, so he was going to take over. But the captain wasn’t ready to be relieved, but he didn’t make it. He was killed first. And the captain that was going to take his place lost a foot.

John: Oh, man.

Gordon: So it had to be somebody else to take over. So, it ended up that we went alongside to put the fire out. But then we got a submarine contact. So, they thought they were going to get two of us at once. We got out of there. Our own ship got the submarine. And then we went alongside of it again, to put the fire out. And as we were alongside of it again, she explodes.

John: Oh, wow.

Gordon: And we lost nine hundred men, dead and injured. And that is where I got hit.

John: What happened to you?

Gordon: I was putting the fire out, and when it exploded, like I said, we lost an awful big crew. A lot of our crewmen. They were sightseers. What we called sightseers. They had nothing to do with putting the fire out at all. But I got hit. I got shrapnel. Big hole in my stomach. And I didn't know it until--

John: Wait a minute and let me flip this, okay, Gordy?

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: You said you got hit twice?

Gordon: Yeah. So, when we pulled away, I helped bury the dead. And I was hit myself. And I didn't know it. Because the concussion is what did it. And from there, my chief gunner's made in my division noticed I was limping. And he asked me what was the matter. And I said I didn't know. He said that my pants were all blood. He took my pants down and he found that hole. He carried me down to our compartment which was used as a sick bay, because the sick bay was filled up with the guys we had left. Ah, we had the mess hall. That was all filled up. And then we were ordered to Hurvis Bay (?), an island out there. There was a hospital ship, the U. S. S. *America*, there. And I was transferred on there. And I was transferred there, and a buddy of mine from Madison that I went to grade school and high school with, he was transferred on there.

John: Were you still able to get around?

Gordon: Not too well. I couldn't use my right arm. My leg. But we were transferred on this hospital ship, me and my buddy got in the same ward. And we were the only two there except the nurse. And me and my buddy were talking and the nurse said, "You guys sound like you've known each other all your lives." I said that we had. We only lived a couple blocks away from each other. And went to grade school and high school. And she said, "Where was that?" I said, "Madison, Wisconsin." She said "I took my training at Madison General Hospital. And I worked there." And I said, "What is your name?" "My name is Annabelle Larson." I said, "Annabelle Larson. That rings a bell. I used to deliver papers to a nurse at Madison General whose name was Annabelle Larson. What happened it, I joined the Navy, I got beat out of some money because she never left me money for the papers." I had a lot of fun with that, telling her that.

- John: Did she ever pay you the money?
- Gordon: No. That night when we got aboard, she put us both in the wheel chair and we went up to see the movie. It was a musical movie. It was good. Then she took us back to our quarters. And we sang "Bell Bottom Trousers" twice. We used the right version. And then we sang it the Navy way. Using every cuss word. Then, about five days later, we were transferred off there again. By a Navy plane, we flew into Pearl Harbor. And at Pearl Harbor, well, we stopped off first at New Caledonia. And transferred off the Navy plane onto an Army plane, like a hospital plane, because there was nothing but bunks in there. And I couldn't get up. My buddy couldn't get up. And a few others that were on there. Well, anyhow, we flew into New Caledonia and we couldn't get off. And we were there for almost an hour. And they asked us if we wanted anything. I said, "Yeah, I'd like to get a haircut." Well, the barber came aboard, and the barber's name was Sam Fidele, from Madison, here.
- John: I'll be darned.
- Gordon: Yeah. So he give me a haircut, and then we flew into Pearl Harbor. They had ambulances all lined up there, ready to take the guys off. So when they got us, we got in this ambulance, in the stretchers, me and this buddy of mine. And who happened to be the corpsman there was a guy named George Parisi, that went to school with me and this buddy. And he was the one took care of us while we were in the hospital. Aiea Heights Hospital.
- John: Do you know how to spell that?
- Gordon: Aiea. And when we got there, well, we rested. They took care of our wounds, and all that. I could get liberty, but I had to have clothes. So the hospital gave us uniforms. And the guy in charge of the uniforms, our clothing, was a guy named Bob Snyder, who also went to school with us.
- John: This is old home week.
- Gordon: Yeah. So, we got together, the four of us, and then right across the street from the hospital was [indecipherable] and a guy by the name of Georgie Corcoran. And he happened to be a guy that we all went to school with.
- John: So, isn't that something?
- Gordon: We didn't go on liberty because we went to another hospital to visit another guy. His name was Ken Hittman, and we all went to grade school and high school

together. And Ken Hittman was in the Marine Corps. He lost both of his legs in Iwo Jima.

John: How was the medical care?

Gordon: Good.

John: Especially early on, before you got to the hospital ship? I guess that was just first aid, wasn't it?

Gordon: Pardon?

John: Early on, right after you got hurt, that was primarily just first aid, wasn't it?

Gordon: Yeah. Another guy died because they couldn't get to him, or that they were too far gone. I know one guy, he was a boatswain's mate second class, and he wanted to kill himself, because he was hit in the head so bad. And he rolled himself over the side. He couldn't stand the pain no more. And there was one guy, the doctor was beside him, he said, "Doctor, you got to save me. That little thing down there never has been used yet." He died too. He bled to death. But we buried a lot of guys that week. To think back, I still have glimpses of all that back there. Interesting, though.

John: Where were you when the Japanese surrendered?

Gordon: They surrendered, we were somewhere at sea. But, no, we were in Pearl Harbor. And when the war was over, well, we thought we would be going home. The captain said that we were leaving the next day, there had been no liberty that day, the day he told us. Leave. We thought we were going back out to sea again, going home. And when we got out to sea a little bit, the captain made the announcement, "As you see, we are not going back to the States." And he said, "We're headed for Australia."

John: You were still on the *Birmingham*?

Gordon: Yes. So, we went to Australia. And we had a lot of fun there, and I met up with a girl there. The Navy would not let you get married unless you were stationed there. So we came back. I got transferred off to another ship and came back together.

John: What was the new ship?

Gordon: I don't even know. It was a troop ship. So we came back from Australia in that.

John: When did you get back to the States?

Gordon: I left Australia that last part of January, '45. And got back to the States February 5th. And I was transferred from Treasure Island, at San Francisco, to Great Lakes. And we were in Great Lakes for a few days, and then on Valentine's Day of 1946, I was discharged.

John: Great. Happy Valentine's Day.

Gordon: Two days before my oldest, which was younger, got married. So I made it for the wedding. And I got to see a brother that I hadn't seen in six years. Because he was a major in the Army. And he wasn't discharged. He stayed in the Army. He did thirty years in the Army. That is about all.

John: What did you do after the war, Gordy?

Gordon: Oh, I laid around for a while. And I lived at home. And I finally went to work on the railroad. Cleaning coaches. Only a dollar an hour, but it was a job. Then I left there and worked for the VA hospital. Left there after six months. And I went to Boeing Airplane Company, and my kid sister, the one that got married, her and her husband were there. Then first I was what we called a baker. We baked aluminum after it had been heat treated, you know. Formed. And then I got out of that. And the boss at Boeing Airplane Company had his office right in back of us. And he was way up. And he could see everything going on, you know. And he called my boss and said to get ahold of me and go up and see him. So we went up there and he said, "McCann, I like the way you work." I said, "That is what I come here for, to work." He said, "How would like to be a heat treater?" That was quite a bit of a jump in money, too. I took it. And after I did that for a while, well, he thought I would be better off on another job, so he gave me a job as an inspector, where I did inspections of B-47's as they came off the line. And my brother was, a had a brother down there, which he is still there. But he is not working now, he is retired. He worked for Boeing as a plaster pattern maker. Then when he found out I was getting this big raise, and he not getting any, so he talked to his boss about it. And his boss gave him a one cent raise. And he thought he deserved more than a lot of other people did. But he didn't get it. So he quit Boeing and worked for some other outfit doing airplane parts. And then there was an opening at Lear, so he went to Lear Aircraft. And that is where he retired from. He built a Lear for John Denver. And Mickey Rooney.

John: When you came out, you had the GI Bill. Did you ever use it?

Gordon: I didn't know what the heck I wanted, so I went to work at Wherman's Luggage.

And I left there, and this is when I went to Boeing Aircraft Company.

John: Well, let me ask you a question. I ask this of all the vets I interview. You were a young man. Now you were looking around for something to do. Your dad said get a job. But you were grabbed and taken from a nice comfortable life and stuck in harm's way, very much in harm's way. What is your reaction to the war, and having to serve, and that?

Gordon: What do you mean?

John: Were you mad about it? What did you feel about it?

Gordon: Well, everybody had different feelings. Either it was going to be us or them. And we all knew we didn't want that to happen to us. So we had to beat them to the draw. And there is movies on TV, like "Tara Tara Tara," and that tells it right there, that they wanted to kill off the United States. Which they had planned to do. But it just didn't work out that way.

John: You guys made sure it didn't. That's tremendous. That is a tremendous story. Wow. Did you ever get into the VFW, or the American Legion, or the veterans organizations?

Gordon: I belong to all of them. I am a member of VFW Post 1318 in Madison. I am a life member there. I am a life member of Disabled American Veterans here in Madison. And past senior vice commander there. And also Military Order of the Purple Heart. I am past chapter commander about six times. And past department senior vice. And I am life members in all of them. But it was just too much stuff.

John: Did you ever get together with any of the guys afterwards?

Gordon: My Navy buddies? Yeah. We used to get together once a year, but I don't do it any more. Too hard for me to get around. Well, when I first come home from the Navy, after I went to Boeing and worked these other jobs, but then when I got laid off at Boeing, I came back to Madison. Tended bar for a while for a buddy of mine. And then my buddy asked me if I had a girl friend. Well, my girl friend had got married. I hadn't seen her since I left for the Navy. And he said, "Have you got one now?" I said no. He said he would introduce me to one on the telephone. So he introduced me to this woman on the telephone. And I told her, I went up and seen her the next day. And she was a nice woman. She was thirteen years older than me, but we got together and before I knew it, we were married. Then she passed away. And six years later I got married again. She is still alive. She is ninety-two years old. I just heard last night that she ain't feeling too good. I didn't have enough nerve to call her up. We didn't get along at all. We got a divorce. I

got an annulment from the Catholic Church. And about six years later I got married again. I married a doctor. She was a doctor of psychiatry. I lived with her until she died. She did a lot of dirt on me that I didn't know about till then. After she died, I met up with my first girlfriend that was married when I come home from the service. And when I come home from service, like I say, she was married. But, back in 1950, her father died. And I went down to pay my respects, and I seen her. And she was married. And we talked. And in 1990, her husband died. And in 1992, my third wife died. The doctor. And then when she died, well, my third wife died, the girl I was going with before I went in service, she was a widow. And her sister always got after me to go down and see her. And I said I can't I'm still married. So, after my third wife died, she sent me, the one down in Beloit sent me a card telling me that she was a widow and that she would like to see me. So I did. I went down and seen her. And after my third wife died, I got married to my first girl friend.

John: Oh, wonderful. I am running out of tape. This is a remarkable story. This is the story of World War II, not the stuff you read in the books. Okay, I am going to knock this off, Gordy. I'm running out of tape.

[End of Interview.]