

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOSEPH H. MILLER
Surgical Technician, Army, World War II

2004

OH
516

OH
516

Miller, Joseph H., (1918-2009), Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 52 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 52 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Joseph H. Miller, a Cleveland, Ohio native, discusses his service in the Army as a surgical technician in the European theater of World War II. Miller describes growing up in Cleveland during the Great Depression, tough competition for jobs after high school, and working two jobs until he was drafted in 1942. He speaks about basic training at Camp Grant (Illinois), medical training at Fitzsimmons General Hospital (Colorado), and assignment to Percy Jones General Hospital in Battle Creek (Michigan) as a surgical technician. Miller states the hospital also hired his wife and they lived together off base. He portrays his friendship with an airman and receiving a letter from him a few days before he was killed in Europe. Assigned to the 124th General Hospital, Miller discusses being stationed in Newton Abbot (England). He mentions his hospital treated Battle of the Bulge casualties. After the war in Europe ended, he comments on being reassigned to a battalion aid station in the 110th Regiment, 28th Infantry Division. Miller states his division would have been assigned to the invasion of Honshu (Japan), so the atomic bombs probably saved his life. He talks about using the GI Bill to attend Case Western Reserve University (Ohio) and states he was an active member of Jewish War Veterans in Canton (Ohio). He characterizes a forty-five-year-old inductee he befriended in basic training who later paid for Miller's wedding in Denver (Colorado).

Biographical Sketch:

Miller (1918-2009) served in the Army during World War II. Prior to the war he worked for the Ohio Department of Liquor Control and for General Electric. After an honorable discharge, he earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Case Western Reserve University (Ohio) and had a career in public accounting in Canton (Ohio). After his retirement, Miller settled in Milwaukee (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

John: Okay, this is John Driscoll, and I'm with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, in Madison, and today is March 4, 2004, and this is an oral history interview with Joseph Miller. We are at Laurel Oaks, in Milwaukee. And Joe is – is Joe okay?

Joe: Oh, sure. Preferably.

John: Okay. Thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and coming down here to the conference room.

Joe: My pleasure.

John: Okay. Can we start off with where you were born and that, Joe?

Joe: Yeah. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. I believe it was down around, I was born on May 22, 1918, in Cleveland, down on 38th Street, which was right in the heart of the city. And I attended Chesterfield Elementary School.

John: Okay.

Joe: And from grades one to six, and then moved on to junior high, which was Patrick Henry Junior High, from the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, and then moved on to high school where I was, where I attended Glenville High School for the ninth, tenth, or tenth – in those years it was the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth that were the high school years. I came from a very poor family, poor financially, but I think I did very well in high school, and then we graduated in 1936, which was right in the heart of the Depression years.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Depression years that, you know, they were good years but, you know, they left scars on you, because as we had to do without so many things, but in spite of doing without all the things that we did, we always managed to have enough food and clothing and the necessities. But we lacked a lot of the better things that we hoped for. For example, I never owned a two-wheeler bicycle because they were too expensive for us. And, as I said, in spite of that, we had a lot of good times. We created, we made a lot of our own toys. We had to do more on our own. I grew up, always had some means of earning money. I had a paper route for the *Cleveland Press*. I don't know if you remember that.

John: Yep. Yep.

Joe: And I remember carrying that canvas paper bag, with the papers in it. And, of course, I had a younger brother who always looked forward to going on the paper route with me every day. And, believe it or not, he got into, he crawled into the bag, so I could carry him around. He didn't weigh too much.

John: That's great.

Joe: Yeah. There was ten year's difference between us. So that was really cute. Along came, I went to work for, in the early years, and when I got into high school, jobs were so scarce, you wouldn't believe. I think, as I remember, the federal minimum wage at that time was twenty-six cents an hour.

John: Wow.

Joe: And I got a job working for a drug chain in Cleveland. Weinberger Drug was the name of it at the time. And the minimum wage, as I said, was twenty-six cents an hour, so my gross pay for a forty hour week was ten dollars and forty cents, from which they deducted one percent Social Security, or ten cents. And so my net pay for the week was ten dollars and thirty cents. And I mean, you put in a good day. Good work week. I wasn't able to go on to college right away so, but oh yeah, from there we are moving up to about 1940. Things were just starting to move a little out of the Depression and I got a job with the state of Ohio, working with the Department of Liquor Control, at one of their wholesale warehouses, where the barkeepers, bar owners, came down to buy their whiskey. Then, along with that, at the time I was, I guess, I held that job. Oh, yeah, I worked for the Department of Liquor Control, then I was already moving into the higher income. I think there were almost, I don't know how many jobs were open, but just a few. There were something like a hundred jobs open and you had to take a test, pass a test to get those jobs. And, let's see, I am trying to think here. Well, that job was already paying me sixteen hundred a year, so I really, but the year was 1940. And, again, I forget how many came down. I think there were something like sixteen hundred people came down to take the test, and there were only about a hundred jobs. Luckily enough, I did well on the test and I was hired. And, of course, we were getting close to Pearl Harbor Day, December 7th. Soon after Pearl Harbor Day, which was almost the most difficult thing, I believe, we were living in a country that, where, somebody just could come along and perform such terrible acts on us. Being not too anxious to get into the service, and I think that was when the draft came into effect. And so, while I was working at the Department of Liquor Control, I thought, well, as long as I am still here, I'll try to get into defense work. And I went to work for General Electric.

John: Okay.

- Joe: And worked in the Cleveland Equipment Works. The Cleveland Equipment Works was the division that manufactured the machinery that manufactured the light bulbs.
- John: Okay.
- Joe: Let's see, now. I maintained, I kept both jobs. I didn't give up my job with the State of Ohio, with the Department of Liquor. I kept that and I went to work for GE, and I was able to manipulate the hours because my job at the Liquor Department started at 8:30, till 4:30, and I was able to get job at GE which would start at, I'm trying to think, now. It would start someplace around 5:00 o'clock and I would work there till eleven at night. Holding down two full time jobs. And then, I would rush home to hit the sack so I could get enough sleep so I could go to work in the morning. So, you see, I didn't have an easy childhood, but I was happy. I had good friends, good parents. And, of course, then, I got my number in the draft. Was the first number called Number 158?
- John: I don't know.
- Joe: I think it was. I think I sort of remember that because everybody had their ear tuned. But I got into the draft, and got into the service, I think it was August 1, of '42. Can you read that?
- John: July 18th, of '42.
- Joe: Yeah. Okay.
- John: Or August 1, of '42. I can't read the small print.
- Joe: Well, within a couple of weeks. That is when I was drafted into the Army. And I remember my family seeing me off at the railroad terminal downtown.
- John: The Terminal Tower?
- Joe: The Terminal Tower, yeah.
- John: My grandfather took the first train in there, when they opened it. He knew the Van Sweringtons.
- Joe: On, the Van Sweringtons. They were the biggies that developed Shaker Heights, and all that.
- John: They called the Erie Railroad, got in touch with them, so he would take the first

train in.

Joe: And, of course, there was, for my mother, it was a very scary time.

John: Where did you go to?

Joe: I went to, well, I was inducted, at Camp Atterbury, Indiana?

John: Okay.

Joe: Do you remember that name?

John: That could be.

Joe: And from there I was shipped off to Camp Grant, in Illinois, for basic training.

John: Okay.

Joe: I forget how long the basic training was but they were moving along pretty fast. Six weeks sort of sticks in my mind. And they were giving us a lot of testing to see what job we would fit into. And, again, on those tests, I faired pretty well, so, as you think they would do in the Army, they said, they sort of mentioned that we'd be going into the medics. So, yeah, they said I had a good background for becoming an x-ray technician. So that was fine. But, when they ran all the papers and reports through, I never got to that third division at all. They shipped me out from Camp Grant to, it's where Lowery and Buckley Airfields were, and Fitzsimmons General Hospital was nearby. Colorado. Denver, Colorado. So I was shipped out to Fitzsimmons General Hospital where I was put in some medical training and, believe it or not, they created a surgical technician out of me.

John: Oh, yeah? Great.

Joe: In fact, I even have my diploma. And so, there we, you know, they kind of gave us some basic medical training and now they then shipped me out to the hospital where I was going to be stationed at while I was in the States. This was in Battle Creek, Michigan, to Percy Jones General Hospital. That is the home of the Posts and Kellogg cereals, Battle Creek, Michigan. And also the home of Fort Custer. Which is nearby. And there we had a good situation, in Percy Jones General Hospital, because I was given the job of being in charge of the men who would be working the operating rooms. I was a surgical technician, and fortunately, they were hiring some civilian help, also. So my wife got a job at the Percy Jones General Hospital, also.

John: Oh, great.

Joe: In fact, she worked on the same floor with me. I was in surgery, and she was down at the laboratory. So that was, and we lived off the post. Yeah, that was real good. And we lived at 93 North [?] Avenue. Yeah, I remember that. Right in the city, so that they allowed me to live off the post, but I would be subject to the call of the doctors. Which was fine. We just lived a block or two off the post. I could get over there real fast. And, of course, we were there close to a year. Made some real good friends there. And time came for us to be shipping out, overseas. So, where did we ship out of? New Jersey, someplace.

John: Fort Lee? Newark? Bayonne?

Joe: Well, my wife had relatives in Philadelphia, so she came all the way up to that area with me, so we could be together as long as possible. But, I became part of the cadre that was known as the 124th General Hospital. And we were sailing off to Britain. I forget the dates of sailing, and all that. But I do remember, would you believe it, there were ten thousand men aboard the ship I was on.

John: Wow.

Joe: Yeah, you were sleeping on these hammocks. You could touch three or four guys around you. Anyways, we made it across to Britain, the northern part. And we took the train down from that point to a place called Newton Abbot. Yeah, it was a real nice area. They called it the Atlantic City of England.

John: Okay.

Joe: And we set the hospital there. I guess the timing was so that we were getting the casualties from the Battle of the Bulge.

John: Okay.

Joe: So then I was in England most of the time. I think, maybe, close to a year. And got to see a lot of the effects of war, you know. Not only physically. Mentally, too.

John: Yep.

Joe: And then, oh, yeah, so that I never saw any action. But the war ended, now, wait. I am trying to think. Oh, yeah, I was reassigned to the 28th Division, known as the Bloody Bucket.

John: The Keystone Division, the Pennsylvania National Guard.

Joe: They lost a lot of men.

John: Did they?

Joe: Yeah. So, I was, I am trying to think. I was assigned to the 110th Regiment of the division. And so I was shipped out as a soldier across the English Channel over to the, sailed down the Seine River and joined up with the 28th Division. That was, yeah, I joined them. That was right around the time the war had ended, and the 28th Division was coming home, but, I don't know how much, what their service was, but we came back to the States. I came back with them. And I was then attached to, or I would have been attached to, running a battalion aid station.

John: Okay.

Joe: And so we came back, and we went down to, I can't remember where we landed but we headed for Camp Shelby, Mississippi, for retraining. And when the information came out, we were, our division, most of it would have been in the invasion of Honshu.

John: That would have been awful terrible.

Joe: Oh, yeah. So, actually, the bomb, as far as I am concerned probably saved my life.

John: Saved a lot of lives.

Joe: That would have been a very rough one. They were dug in and we would have been going over. That was what it was all about. All right, so, at that point, everybody started talking about how many points do you have? You know? I forget how many you had to have at the time. Fifty? But those of us who had, I didn't have any combat medals. You know, or anything that gave you extra points for being wounded, or things like that. So, there we were, at the end of the war for me. And, of course, every, say, for every adverse thing that happens to you in your life, sometimes it turns out to be good. And it was at that point, when I came back out of the service, I took advantage of the education.

John: Okay, I was going to ask about that.

Joe: So I went-- **[End of Side A of Tape 1]**

John: Let me flip this over. So, you got the GI Bill.

Joe: Yeah. I forgot to mention. I brought this along. I thought you personally might be interested. But, going back, when we were living in Battle Creek, Michigan, I was

working at Percy Jones General Hospital.

John: Just take your time.

Joe: A very close friend of mine. I received this from him. He was in the 8th Air Force. Can you read it?

John: A little bit.

Joe: Can you read it to me?

John: “Dear Joe and Prudy. Great life over here. As yet I still haven’t done a thing except loaf, attend school for a week, go to town about every night, and spent ten days taking in London. It’s marvelous. Reason for all this leisure, well, you know, the Army snafu - - but I am not complaining. Maybe we’ll have a little calm before the storm, and I sure am making the most of it.”

Joe: Yeah, and that was the calm before the storm. He was shot down and killed a few days later.

John: Oh, man.

Joe: I don’t know why this gets to me.

John: That’s okay.

Joe: That was so long ago.

John: Well, you know, friendship is, yeah. That’s a letter. That’s V-Mail.

Joe: Yeah, he was the nicest guy. I remember, money was so scarce those days, during the Depression, and he was in high school with me, all the way through. So we were real close. And he bought a jalopy, you know, an old car for maybe \$50.

John: Okay.

Joe: And, for oil, he used to use drained oil, you know, what would be drained out of other cars. When you got an oil change with your new car, that was what he would put in his car, because you only paid five cents a quart for it. Money was hard to come by.

John: That is great.

Joe: So, what was the date on there?

John: December 25, 1943.

Joe: Yeah. Things were moving hot and heavy, with the bombing over there where they had this continuous bombing runs all the time.

John: Yeah, D-Day was just six months away, five months.

Joe: Yeah.

John: So, when you got out, what did you do? You said you had the GI Bill.

Joe: Yeah, we had the GI Bill. And I asked my wife, you know, what do you think we ought to do? She says, "You may as well go back to school and I'll go back to work, and, you know, we'll make it." And so that is exactly what we did.

John: Where did you go to school?

Joe: Western Reserve.

John: Okay.

Joe: Now, Case Western Reserve.

John: Yeah, right on Euclid Avenue.

Joe: You're familiar with that area?

John: Yeah, I worked at 55th and Euclid. That was fifteen years.

Joe: Yeah. What company was that?

John: Premier Industrial Corporation.

Joe: Oh, yeah, that was, I am trying to think of their name.

John: The three Mandel brothers. Mort, Jack and Joe Mandel. Yeah, Mort was my boss.

Joe: Oh, yeah. Quite a success those guys were.

John: Sure were.

Joe: And, of course, right at that corner was Warner & Swayze.

John: Yeah. The railroad tracks went right over the corner.

Joe: Yeah, the Mandel brothers.

John: Yeah. I worked there until I resigned to come to Wisconsin. We came here in '75.

Joe: Who did you go to work for, then?

John: The state. I was the purchasing officer, and I came up here as the head of State Purchasing.

Joe: So I went back to Western Reserve.

John: What was your field?

Joe: Went back to Cleveland College, downtown, which was part of Western Reserve. And I got a BBA, Bachelor of Business Administration degree. I did very well there, and so I went back, in '46. And I went summers, and I went right through. And graduated in '48.

John: Oh, that was fast.

Joe: Yeah. I had a few credit hours before I went into the service, from Reserve, yeah. And then, of course, their graduation exercises were right there at the music, where the Cleveland Orchestra played there.

John: Severance Hall?

Joe: Severance Hall, yeah. Gee, I am glad you and I--

John: Old home town, here.

Joe: Sure.

John: Before I forget, do you have a middle initial, Joe?

Joe: H.

John: And what is your apartment number?

Joe: 134.

John: So I can mail this to you. That's a remarkable story.

Joe: Yeah, then I got this degree, and I went to work, after I got the degree, I went to work at 93rd in Detroit. There was a company, they manufactured cast aluminum pots and pans. Clad aluminum. Yeah, I went to work for them. I wasn't happy with that job because I was doing a type of accounting which, to me, was not too interesting. So I met up with another high school friend, who was doing public accounting with a firm on 18th and Chester. And he says, "We can use you in our firm." So, I took that job, went into public accounting. I was there for a year or so. I got my CPA certificate. And then, I was with them for about a year, and I got an opportunity, my wife's, a good friend of my wife's who was married and lived in Canton, Ohio, down the road about fifty-five miles, had a public accounting office, small office. He was all by himself. And we had met with them a couple of times. Sort of thought we could get along good together. He was not certified. I became certified. He said, "I need a certified man in my office." He says, "Think about it." I thought about it for a while and, this was in 1956? Okay. And I told him, I thought I could be interested in it. I could come in as an equal partner. And he was a little older than me. And he thought, you know, that would work. And it worked. So, we were in Canton, Ohio, until the year '92. '92, we decided, well, he had passed away in '71 and I continued working until 1992. Moved back to Cleveland, to Cedar and 271, there, into a condo. And from there, I have a daughter here and a son-in-law. He's one of the local cardiologists here.

John: Okay.

Joe: And they felt that, at this point, we shouldn't be too far. We should be close to families. We had four kids, two boys and two girls. So, we have been here, it will be four years the first of the month. And, it's a nice place. Probably as far as retirement areas are concerned, this is probably as good as they come.

John: I was in Canton last summer, with my son, and my grandson, and we are all named John Driscoll, and we stood in front of John "Paddy" Driscoll's shrine at the Hall of Fame.

Joe: Oh, did you?

John: He played for the Duluth Seals, at the turn of the century. I didn't know anything about him, but we were going through and I said, "My God! That's our name!" So we got a photograph of the three of us.

Joe: Canton is the home of professional football. That is where it was born.

John: The Canton Bulldogs. And my brother lived in Shelby, which is over by Mansfield.

- Joe: Where?
- John: Shelby. And they had, way back, they had a small pro football team, the Shelby Chargers. And they keep a lawsuit going against the San Diego Chargers. They never do anything, but they say, "That's our name." And every so often they do something. Well, that is tremendous. What a tremendous story. How about vets organizations? VFW? Legion?
- Joe: Yeah, I belong to the Jewish War Veterans, for one, and also to the VFW. Yeah, in Canton. I had a very close friend who was very active in the Jewish War Veterans. I joined up there. Obviously, that organization, I never hear of it down here.
- John: You know, I haven't either, now that you mention it. In all the interviews I've done, I don't remember anyone mentioning it.
- Joe: Anyway, yes, I belonged for a long time.
- John: How about reunions, and that? Do you ever get together with anybody?
- Joe: No, no Army reunions, ever.
- John: I just, I never stayed in touch with anybody, and just this past, two Christmases ago, I got two Christmas cards, one from Denver and one from Texas, guys who found me on the internet. And since then, we have found two more. So there are five of us, after fifty years, that are in touch. We haven't got together.
- Joe: Well, back up here. You just reminded me of something. You mentioned Denver, and when I mentioned Denver before, what I forgot to tell you was when they sent me out to Denver, my fiancé and I talked it over and we said we would like to get married, you know, immediately. And out in Denver, in those years, at that particular time, they were inducting men up to forty-five.
- John: Yeah, my dad missed it by days.
- Joe: Yeah, they were inducting men up to forty-five, and one of the forty-five-year-old inductees that I got very familiar with, I got to know him pretty well. He was having a difficult time because he was forty-five.
- John: Yeah.
- Joe: He was not a kid anymore and it was pretty hard for him to take, and so, I

remember him. He was a funny guy. He couldn't take to it all, of course. You know, we always did laundry and all that kind of stuff. He would buy a dozen pair of shorts, wear it, throw it away. Socks, throw it away. And so, he said, "I'll tell you, I want you to do something. You have helped me an awful lot. And I appreciate that. I want you to have your wife come out here. I will arrange everything."

John: Wow.

Joe: He says he'll pay for it, you know, the rabbi's fees, for the wedding, all the wedding expenses. He says, "Don't worry about a thing." He says, "I will take care of it."

John: That's great.

Joe: So, she came out, and he took care of everything, and I think there was a Metropolitan Hotel there, in Denver, no, Cosmopolitan Hotel.

John: What a great thing.

Joe: Yeah, and then, I guess, the Army was thinking that these fellows couldn't handle it, and I forget how much later that they let them out. I think he was in less than a year.

John: That was a very, very nice thing. He was grateful for the help you gave him. That was super. Did you know the Mandels?

Joe: No. They were in the big time. And they were great contributors to all the charities.

John: Yeah, Mort was big in United Appeal, and so I did a lot of work in United Appeal. He'd lend me to it.

Joe: And every Jewish organization, he was on top.

John: I was a buyer there, and I used to buy nuts and bolts. And we had an operation in Canada. And I said, "Why not buy our nuts and bolts in Canada?" Well, the owners, I can't think of their names, of the big nut and bolt company in Canada were Jewish, and he and Mort had never met. So, I said, "Do you want to have a get-together?" And Mort said, "I don't want to approach him, but I wouldn't mind bumping into him somewhere." And I said I'd take care of that, arrange it. And I did. Yeah, he was very big in UJA and Community Chest, and the Mandel Foundation. They were good people.

Joe: And then they merged with some English company.

John: Farnell. And that didn't go too well. Mort's big take from that was stock, and that dropped. In fact, he retired, and he went back. And he had a vice president, Bill Hamilton, and the two of them had retired, and they had to go back and put things back together. I haven't talked to him in twenty years.

Joe: Is he still around?

John: I assume so.

Joe: When were you there last?

John: I was there November 1st, for a cousin's daughter's wedding.

Joe: You should look him up.

John: I should. I'll drop him a note when I get home.

Joe: We'll be going back to Canton. By the way, I forgot to mention it, when we moved back from Canton to Cleveland, my son-in-law took over our little office in Canton and he still has it there. He has that office on Cleveland Avenue. Yeah, the Mandels, they really. They must have been close to billionaires.

John: Yeah, they are among the top people in Ohio. He got into art, and every now and then we'd get a wire, or a call from Europe, to get hold of this dealer and have him crate up this statue. And we started saying to Joe, "You ought to get some security on your house, with all that stuff in there." Well, he put in a security system and about a month later he got raided. And you know who did it? The guys that installed the security system. Okay, that is a remarkable story. You know, a good friend of mine, Steven Ambrose, he just passed away. He was talking to a bunch of vets and he had given a talk and we were standing around later. And a lot of the guys were saying, "You know, I didn't do anything." And he said, "You guys were giants! You went out and saved the world." And you did. Each guy doing his piece.

Joe: It got it done.

John: Okay.

[End of Interview]