

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
John Purcell
Military Police, Army, World War II
1999

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Purcell, John (b. 1924). Oral History Interview, 1999.
User Copy: 1 sound cassette (c. 33 min.); analog. 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master Copy: 1 video recording (c. 33 min.); ½ inch, color.

Abstract:

Madison, Wisconsin native John Purcell discusses his Military Police duty in England and France during World War II. Drafted in February 1943, he went through basic training and Military Police training at Fort Riley (Kansas) and Camp Custer (Michigan). Purcell left the States in September, 1943. Once in England, he was stationed for approximately a year at Cheltenham with Services of Supply headquarters for the forthcoming invasion of France. Purcell characterizes his MP unit as having been a “spit and polish outfit,” meant to impress. Although he also policed at other locations in England, he accounts his transfer to the American Embassy in London where he frequently saw General Dwight Eisenhower, and the US Secretary of State (Cordell Hull, 1933-44; Edward Stettinus, Jr., 1944-45; James Byrnes, 1945-47) as the highlight of his MP service. Purcell comments upon his daily routine as an MP, and the perspective he took toward policing. He expresses wonderment at the British people’s fortitude in the bombing of London by “buzz bombs” and credits the proficiency of “the girls in the artillery.” Purcell relates a close encounter with a V-2 in London, and muses on the good fortune that the Allies prevailed over the Germans when they did. Before shipping home, upon war’s end Purcell finished his MP duties with a 6-week stint in Paris. Although he liked his MP duty, in consideration of the domestic climate of the 1960s, Purcell is glad that he did not pursue a career in law enforcement.

Biographical Sketch:

John Purcell (b.1924) served with the US Army in the European theater as a member of the 255th Military Police Company.

Interviewed by James McIntosh.
Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein 2011.
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Abstract written by Jeff Javid, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: All right, now we're talking to John Purcell. It's the 21st of July, 1999. First, before we get started we have to get your vitals down, and then we need to have you sign this showing that we can use this stuff, make movies, and guarantee your ten percent of the movie rights [Purcell laughs]. P-U-R-C-E-L-L?

Purcell: Right [laughs]. My agent should be here.

McIntosh: Yes, right. What's your address again?

Purcell: [REDACTED]

McIntosh: The ZIP is eleven?

Purcell: 53715.

McIntosh: 1-5. Okay, I should know that. I had an office at 20 South Park [St., Madison, WI]. We need your signature, John.

Purcell: Right here?

McIntosh: Yup. Right here. All right. Now tell me, what year where you born?

Purcell: 6-17-24.

McIntosh: And where were you born?

Purcell: Madison [WI].

McIntosh: Madison. And when did you enter military service?

Purcell: February 1943.

McIntosh: You were you drafted or volunteered?

Purcell: Drafted.

McIntosh: Where did they send you first?

Purcell: Went to Camp Grant [Rockford, IL, where he was inducted]. I mean, then Camp Grant to Fort Riley [Manhattan, KS].

McIntosh: From Camp Grant to Riley?

Purcell: Right.

McIntosh: In the US Army?

Purcell: Yup.

McIntosh: Did you specialize in anything particular?

Purcell: Well, they just trained us. We had basic training. Then they formed a military police company.

McIntosh: You went and became an MP right off the bat?

Purcell: Right. Yeah, we had our own small police department, had the whole works so we had—

McIntosh: You had the MP training at Fort Riley?

Purcell: Fort Riley and Camp Custer [Augusta, MI]. We went up there before we went overseas.

McIntosh: But you had no previous experience of police duty?

Purcell: No, I was eighteen years old [laughs].

McIntosh: You didn't know anything except they taught ya.

Purcell: [laughs] No, no. See, we had our own—must have had about three or four attorneys in our outfit, you know, in case—

McIntosh: Oh, you mean the officers were attorneys?

Purcell: No, they were just enlisted men, but when they formed this company they were just gonna—they were gonna have a—we were like a small police department. We'd go into a town—

McIntosh: But you had no previous police experience?

Purcell: No, no.

McIntosh: Was the training hard particularly?

Purcell: No, it was just basic.

McIntosh: I mean for an MP.

Purcell: Oh, it was all right. I was happy I didn't go into police work after I got out of the service because I was about—I was thinking of the '60s at the time, and I didn't want to get involved in that garbage.

McIntosh: Right [Purcell laughs], that was not a popular time to be a policeman.

Purcell: No [laughs], not in Madison.

McIntosh: What weapons did they teach you to use in MP school?

Purcell: Everything, I mean, we fired every—

McIntosh: All of the hand weapons.

Purcell: Big ones, but I carried a .45 for about two and a half years, but I don't think I could hit that wall with it if [laughs] I wanted to.

McIntosh: Did you have to achieve sort of degree of expertise with that?

Purcell: [laughs] Well, I had a marksmanship medal, but they would usually go company against company in service [laughs], and I never—I think I fired a .22 once before I went in the service. Guns were not my [laughs] hobby.

McIntosh: I see.

Purcell: And [laughs] they were out there spearing [both laugh] the whatchamacallits with knives, you know, so I really don't know if I ever hit the target [laughs] but I got a sharpshooters medal.

McIntosh: Oh, great. So where did they send you now with all this expertise? Where'd they send ya?

Purcell: Well, see we went from Fort Riley to Camp Custer for additional training, and bingo, we were on our way overseas in October, September.

McIntosh: September of '42, '43?

Purcell: '43.

McIntosh: And then where did they send you? Where did you go?

Purcell: Went to England. Then I went to a place called Cheltenham. We were there about a year. That was the headquarters for the supply operations before they had the invasion. We were under a guy by the name of General Lee who was the head of Service & Supplies. So we were more or

less as a, oh, a spit and polish outfit if you wanted to impress somebody or whatever [laughs].

McIntosh: You mean you had those shiny hats?

Purcell: Yup, white hats and the whole bit.

McIntosh: Do you have a picture of yourself dressed like that?

Purcell: I got a ton of them somewhere, yeah. I've tried to forget my military career [laughs].

McIntosh: Do you have any—some good things like that the [Wisconsin Veterans] Museum always likes donations of pictures of unusual kinds.

Purcell: That's where they belong, in the museum [laughs].

McIntosh: Right. You should bring them down sometime. They'd like to look at 'em.

Purcell: Oh, I have them somewhere. But no, we wore the hats all the time and white leggings and the whole bit.

McIntosh: Did you have any special marching instruction?

Purcell: Oh man, we were in dress parades constantly.

McIntosh: When all the brass showed up you were there, too.

Purcell: Oh yeah, yeah. We were in I'd say in Cheltenham about a year, and then we got transferred to London, and to me that was the best time because—

McIntosh: What was your duty?

Purcell: Well, I got assigned to the American Embassy because they took the Marines. They were running short of men in the Pacific so they took these security Marines out of jobs like that and shipped them over to the Pacific. And this was right before the invasion, you know. It was an interesting job because you'd see maybe Eisenhower would come in and secretary of state was constantly coming in.

McIntosh: See Churchill?

Purcell: No, the United States secretary of state.

McIntosh: Right, but then Churchill was sent up [??]—

Purcell: No, I didn't—

McIntosh: I guess they had to go over to his place.

Purcell: Yeah, I [laughs] imagine he went to Downing Street [10 Downing St., residence and office of the British prime minister] to check him out. But I mean it was interesting 'cause all these bigwigs you'd read about in the paper and maybe or week or so later you might see 'em coming in the American Embassy 'cause that was kind of the headquarters for going-ons before the invasion started.

McIntosh: What was your duty cycle at the embassy?

Purcell: Oh, well as far as—

McIntosh: Time and so forth.

Purcell: Oh, heck, it was—

McIntosh: Four hours on and four hours off or—

Purcell: Yeah, it was like four. No, it was I thought a super job. It lasted about a year or so. They broke us up and shipped us out to three or four different towns, in small companies. As I said, it wasn't over interesting, but that's about the highlight.

McIntosh: Sure. Did you—anything different in the smaller towns, anything particular, or just keep the boys out of trouble?

Purcell: Right. Well, that was prior to going to London, but you'd run into problems with race then, you know, if you were working with a guy from the South. They'd bring in English girls to a black Red Cross or something like that.

McIntosh: So how'd you handle that?

Purcell: Well, you just—hopefully nothing ever happened [laughs]. I mean you might be walking the beat with a guy from Columbia, South Carolina or somewhere, and they would usually—whatever outfit sent a crew in they would send some of their own men with you to take care of it. After a while I thought I was going to die in England 'cause out of our company we had, oh, maybe 140 or so, and I think like twenty-three, twenty-six, seven, married English girls. They were over there [laughs] so long. That wasn't going to happen to me.

McIntosh: No, it wasn't.

Purcell: No way [laughs].

McIntosh: You tried to avoid those kind of entanglements?

Purcell: You got it [laughs]. Well, I mean what the heck, I had no education, just out of high school, no job. I was smart enough to figure that out [laughs], and I'm not too smart.

McIntosh: So all you did was date 'em but you didn't get involved with them.

Purcell: I didn't even date 'em.

McIntosh: Oh, you didn't?

Purcell: No [laughs]. No, well, I'm still single so.

McIntosh: Oh, I see. Okay. Well, you've managed to avoid all kinds of troubles.

Purcell: Oh, yes. Yeah, I thought, boy, how lucky I was when I didn't fall over the edge.

McIntosh: Sure.

Purcell: When [laughs] I was in England, ooh! Because part of the deal when I worked at the embassy, every now and then you'd work at a side door, and that's where all the people came in there to get visas to go back to the States. The guys that had married English girls, and, you know, you wonder—I wonder now how many of those girls actually stayed or they went back to England. But, no, that's about all I can—

McIntosh: No riots?

Purcell: No, not really.

McIntosh: They had some problem in some parts of England, I know, but you apparently were not involved in that.

Purcell: Not that. I mean, everybody was so interested in getting the invasion started and stuff like that.

McIntosh: What part of that did you get involved with, the invasion?

Purcell: Well, we were doing—did a lot of traffic control down in around Cheltenham, and, you know, the American vehicles weren't made for English roads, boy o boy, and you could just tell that something was real

near to happening because it's a wonder that island didn't sink, there were so many GIs over there.

McIntosh: That equipment must have been just—

Purcell: Oh, well, it was massive. I mean, to get some of those things hauling tanks and whatever just to turn a corner was [laughs] brutal for some of those drivers.

McIntosh: Oh, I suppose those small towns, tryin' to get a tank through there was a—

Purcell: Yeah, well they'd have—I don't know the size of these trucks, but, my God, they're huge.

McIntosh: So they'd inch back and forth till they got around the corner?

Purcell: Yeah.

McIntosh: Did you get down to the landing—the embarkation works?

Purcell: No. No, we just did it in our own town and wherever they went the next town they took care of theirs.

McIntosh: Did you get over to the mainland?

Purcell: To?

McIntosh: France?

Purcell: France? Well, I got over there after the show was all over. I was about due to get dumped out of service when they ran short of MPs in Paris, and sixty or ninety of us were shipped over to Paris for six weeks.

McIntosh: When was that?

Purcell: Oh, the end of '45. Because they knew—they said, “What the heck did they ship you over? ‘Cause you're about ready to get dumped out of service too.” So I did spend six weeks over there, saw what France was like.

McIntosh: You didn't have very much to do?

Purcell: Well, we were doing MP work over there.

McIntosh: Which consisted of what?

Purcell: Oh, mostly hanging around the downtown and dance halls and stuff like that. It was—I mean, how vast or how big the Army is, they can't get everything right all the time. We just got sent over there when we probably should have stayed right where we were [laughs].

McIntosh: Then you were sent home from Paris?

Purcell: Yeah. We left for Le Havre, I think it was, and [laughs] I was never so sick in all my life. We came home on a washtub [laughs]. Went over on the [R.M.S.] *Mauretania* [Cunard Line], which is next to the *Queens* [also Cunard Line ships] as far as size of ships, but we came home on a Liberty ship, and oh man! I was sick for seven days I think [laughs]. Found out I was no sailor [laughs]. Oh, I think I knew that before I left.

McIntosh: Yeah, most guys got sick.

Purcell: Oh, God [??]. Well, some it doesn't even phase. I don't know. I can't believe it. They can eat, and I didn't even eat anything 'cause it's the smell of that salt air and whatever. I always say I was in three years, three days, sixteen hours, and twenty minutes [laughs] till I got out.

McIntosh: Did you make a lot of arrests [inaudible]?

Purcell: No. Well, they wanted—I mean, some of the stupidity I thought over in Cheltenham, they'd tell us, "Now, if you see a soldier coming down the street and his tie is ruffled or his shirt's unbuttoned"—I'm going give this ticket when maybe in thirty-six hours he's gonna be on the front? Forget it [laughs].

McIntosh: You couldn't bring yourself to do that?

Purcell: No way.

McIntosh: That's kind of silly [inaudible].

Purcell: Yeah. No, it was kind of funny, after the invasion we'd be doing police duty, and some of the guys who were in on the first wave were already backin' in England. I don't know if they had minor injuries, wounds, or whatever, and I think a lot of them thought that their career was over. They just got mended up and went back again. No, it—I just couldn't put myself into giving somebody a warning to shape up or ship out [laughs].

McIntosh: If you did arrest somebody where would you take 'em?

Purcell: Just back to our headquarters.

McIntosh: In your headquarters, you had a prison there?

Purcell: No, no, no. Well, we had a couple of rooms, you know, but we probably called their commanding officer, and they would come and—

McIntosh: Right. They'd be under custody of their unit?

Purcell: Right, yup.

McIntosh: You must have ran a lot of boys who were intoxicated that needed help.

Purcell: Oh, yeah. Yeah, of course, a lot of 'em—there's so many guys that pretend they're drunk and they aren't. I mean, they think they're—a couple of beers and phew.

McIntosh: Oh. Youngsters[??].

Purcell: Yeah. Well, I mean after all I was eighteen. There were an awful lot of eighteen, nineteen year olds over there at that time. But that's about it, Sir.

McIntosh: Yes. Now, did you get a lot of mail from home? Was that a problem for you?

Purcell: No, no, I got—of course, I thought, well, if I want to get mail I better write home. It was V-mail wasn't it? I think. You had to watch what you say because they—

McIntosh: Well, they censored the mail.

Purcell: Oh yeah. I did have one funny thing happen to me when I went over there. I knew one man that was over in England, and he'd already been in—I think he was in Africa and came up, you know. And [laughs] we landed in Liverpool, took us by train down to Cheltenham. Our sergeant says "Men, we're gonna have chow before we do anything." And I walk in this mess hall, and here's the only guy that I knew [laughs], over in England is in this mess hall.

McIntosh: Amazing.

Purcell: He's from Madison [laughs], and I thought I'll be darned.

McIntosh: Have you kept in contact with him?

Purcell: Oh, I see him. He walks every day out at Hilldale Shopping Center, Phil Gaffney.

McIntosh: Bill Gaffney?

Purcell: Phil.

McIntosh: Phil.

Purcell: Yeah.

McIntosh: He's not been down here [inaudible].

Purcell: I don't know, he might have been a master sergeant or something. In fact, recently they brought that body back, that Lieutenant Gaffney that they found his plane and body over in, where the heck was that? Guadalcanal or somewhere?

McIntosh: Yeah?

Purcell: Well, he was a relative of his.

McIntosh: I see. Phil with a G-A-F-N-E-Y?

Purcell: G-A-F-F-N-E-Y I think it is.

McIntosh: But he lives in Madison?

Purcell: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: I'll contact him.

Purcell: Well, don't tell him that I told you. He may shoot me [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh, I don't think so.

Purcell: [laughs] But I just thought, you know, this is really strange.

McIntosh: If he was in Africa he must have made that landing at Casablanca.

Purcell: I really don't know. But his parents and my parents were friends growing up.

McIntosh: Well, I'll contact him, but I have to tell him you know me.

Purcell: Just to know one guy that's overseas and I walk right into him, I thought this is really strange [laughs].

McIntosh: Did you come in contact with the Red Cross when they were over there?

Purcell: A little bit, not too much.

McIntosh: Salvation Army?

Purcell: No.

McIntosh: Didn't see any of them?

Purcell: I don't think I did.

McIntosh: Did they have dance halls for the troops?

Purcell: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: So you had to patrol those?

Purcell: Yeah, we had one place that we—I think they had dances twice a week or something, and two of us—

McIntosh: Were you always in pairs?

Purcell: Mostly, yeah.

McIntosh: So you just patrolled inside the dance hall—

Purcell: Stay as far away as you could from 'em, you know. Then they'd give you a free grass sandwich after it was over [laughs], and there wasn't much meat then so they'd concoct some—it looked like four leaf clover salad [laughs] but they meant well. They had it pretty tough over there.

McIntosh: Did you meet any English families and have meals with English families?

Purcell: Ah, no, I didn't, I could have, but when I was at the American Embassy there were a couple that invited me out. I'd been hoping on the Tube [subway] and going out about fifteen, twenty miles. That's the greatest thing that England every put together, I think, is that Tube system. I don't know how they could have had it so far ahead of us because, man, too bad L.A. doesn't have something like that, oooh! [laughs]

McIntosh: So did your unit stay together pretty much, or would they break you up?

Purcell: No, we stayed together up until the time that I got bounced to Paris.

McIntosh: Then you never saw your original group again?

Purcell: No.

McIntosh: When you came back to the States, where were you discharged?

Purcell: Fort Sheridan [north of Chicago].

McIntosh: And then where did you go? Did you use any of the GI Bill?

Purcell: Yeah, I went to business college for a year, and I wasn't the greatest scholar in the world so I got a job with Cantwell Printing Company. And for the last twenty-seven years I've had my own business.

McIntosh: Doing what?

Purcell: Selling business forms and printing, jobbing it out of my house.

McIntosh: Did you join any veterans groups?

Purcell: Ah, no.

McIntosh: Have you kept in contact with any of these people other than Gaffney? That you met in service.

Purcell: Well, there's two guys I get Christmas cards from.

McIntosh: That you haven't seen or—

Purcell: Oh, we've seen 'em a couple of times but not for at least ten years or more.

McIntosh: Your unit ever have any reunions or anything like that?

Purcell: No.

McIntosh: Well, it's kind of a small group. I suppose it'd be hard—

Purcell: Well, a hundred—yeah, they were—awful lot of them were from northern Wisconsin or Georgia or southern Illinois, but I just—

McIntosh: How'd you get along with those guys?

Purcell: Southern Illinois?

McIntosh: Southern Illinois or Southerners?

Purcell: Oh, they're hillbillies almost [laughs], but—I used to have a couple of 'em stop by house and see how things were, but I'm in contact with a fella in Lynn, Massachusetts and another guy down in Wheeling outside of Chicago.

McIntosh: Would you say the attitude of the GI was fairly reasonable towards you when you were being an MP, or were they pretty hostile?

Purcell: Oh, I would say reasonable. It all depends I guess on what kind of attitude I guess you have. But I guess I'm not overly overbearing [laughs].

McIntosh: So you didn't attract any bad attentions.

Purcell: No [laughs].

McIntosh: Well, sir, I think that's about it unless you have somethin' you can think of that would—any particular happening that was different [??].

Purcell: As I said, I said I didn't have an exciting career [laughs].

McIntosh: I would think at the embassy you just would run into some people that you have chance to see which you would not ordinarily, but—

Purcell: Well, there happened to be a librarian at the American Embassy that was originally from Madison.

McIntosh: Oh really?

Purcell: Her name was McCarthy. I can't think of—in fact she died here, oh, within the last two years I think. She died in Ohio. I just happened to pick it up in the obituaries. She was the librarian at the American Embassy at the time, but very unexciting.

McIntosh: Because the whole war was circling around your head then.

Purcell: Yeah [laughs], right.

McIntosh: The potential for getting into big trouble was there all the time.

Purcell: Oh yeah, but, you know, I don't know how those English put up with that really.

McIntosh: With what?

Purcell: Well, you know, with the bombings. I mean, that was before we got there. They had buzz bombs when we were there, but they had that down to a

science. The girls on the coast were working these ack-ack [antiaircraft] guns. They'd shoot those things down like clay pigeons.

McIntosh: Well, it didn't shoot the V-2s down.

Purcell: No. We had one of those that scared the day lights out of us. It hit on a Sunday morning. It hit on Oxford Street, would be like, oh say, State Street in Madison.

McIntosh: I know Oxford Street.

Purcell: Did ya? And it hit there, and it just—oh, we were in bunk beds. We lived at 101 Piccadilly [London], right across from Green Park, and Green Park is right across from Buckingham Palace.

McIntosh: Right. I know that.

Purcell: And [laughs] this thing hit the floor [??]. They got to those Germans just in time because, boy, if they were shooting those things over it may have been a different outcome.

McIntosh: How often were those dropping in London?

Purcell: Not very often. I mean, the only one I remember was this one on Sunday morning. I didn't know where the others were hitting, but, oh man, that bunk bed was floating around like a [laughs]—

McIntosh: So did you inspect the damage?

Purcell: Well, they had pictures in the paper the next day. But, boy oh boy, I thought they got to these guys in time because that would have been devastating if they'd—in fact I saw something on the—what's that History Channel—one time about how they got to 'em before—

McIntosh: Just in time.

Purcell: Yeah, oof [laughs]. You get a few of those—say, they hit three or four a week, my God, the damage they could have done.

McIntosh: But at that time the Germans weren't bombing London much otherwise?

Purcell: No, unh-uh.

McIntosh: None. Just—and they got to the—

Purcell: Just the buzz bombs [German V-1 flying bombs].

McIntosh: They didn't have many airplanes left anyways.

Purcell: I guess not. But it's amazing how these girls in the artillery could shoot these buzz bombs down, man oh man.

McIntosh: Oh, so the airplanes could shoot 'em down?

Purcell: No, the girls on the coast were—

McIntosh: I mean, also had to do that.

Purcell: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: Because they could fly so much faster a—

Purcell: Right.

McIntosh: Those bombs couldn't fly very fast.

Purcell: No, they weren't—didn't have much speed to 'em [laughs].

McIntosh: Right.

Purcell: Just like clay pigeons, I guess.

McIntosh: Did any of those hit near you when they got through and weren't shot down?

Purcell: Not that I recall, no. But no one—we were in London—in fact I had a relative go over there and I said, "Check out this joint, will ya?" where I used to live. Well, they came back and told me they think it's the Japanese Embassy now because they were redoing it when they were there. But, no, we'd play softball across the street in Green Park. It was a neat place to live.

McIntosh: Did you do any marching?

Purcell: Marching? [laughs] Well, we were always in dress parades.

McIntosh: Oh you were?

Purcell: Oh yeah [laughs].

McIntosh: When would those be held, a particular day of the week?

Purcell: Whenever some general got a bug in his bonnet, and he [laughs] wanted to—

McIntosh: Where would you march from and to?

Purcell: Oh, ah—

McIntosh: Just down the Mall [a road from Buckingham Palace to Trafalgar Square in London]?

Purcell: Down the Mall and back again.

McIntosh: With the prince or without?

Purcell: Oh, it was usually a combo. I mean, this is the American delegation and some British and whoever they could drum up.

McIntosh: Well, they're flashy on their horses.

Purcell: Oh yeah. Well, they love parades, and as I said we were in the spit and polish outfit, and [laughs] after a while it got to be—I mean, you know, I always dressed well and whatever, but gee[??], it got to be a little a much after a while [laughs].

McIntosh: And they were still particular—that thing—

Purcell: Well, we were supposed to look as sharp as we could in white leggings and white shoulder strap, and everybody was either on their off hours polishing their shoes with their holster, whatever.

McIntosh: What rank did you carry over there?

Purcell: I really didn't care about rank. I got to be PFC, and I stayed there.

McIntosh: Out of trouble.

Purcell: I didn't open my mouth, I didn't volunteer for anything. I thought, "This is it [laughs]. Well, when we went in and they formed the company, of course, some of us were just eighteen years old. Well, they didn't even look at us. Those idiots [laughs] don't know anything, forget 'em. **[End of Tape 1 Side A]** And some guy would be a clerk in a grocery store, or he might wind up being a sergeant [laughs]. But we had one guy, an attorney, he got a direct commission, and I think he is the only one that did, but we had three attorneys in our outfit that were very nice guys, very sharp. Basic training, we had—Jack Hemingway was in our company, Ernest's son, and he went on to Officers Training School; seemed to be a

pretty nice guy, really, but other than that, that's it. Let's see—my parking meter isn't up yet [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh, okay. Well, we'll shut her off here.

Purcell: I didn't give you much to work on, but—

McIntosh: Well, it is a—

[End of Interview]