

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL W. GIRARD

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

LAWRENCEVILLE, NEW JERSEY

JULY 8, 2004

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Michael William Girard on July 8, 2004, in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Mr. Girard, thank you very much for having me here for this interview. To begin, can you tell me a little bit about your father? Where was he from? What did he do for a living?

Michael Girard: My father, well, my father was an iceman, delivered ice to homes, small pieces of ice and large, and he also had taverns, beer taverns, that he ... took the ice to, you know, bigger pieces to keep their beer cold. ... In the long run, that ... phase of business died out because refrigerators came in and delivering the ice went *kaput*. Now, they don't do that.

SI: Did he make deliveries with a horse and wagon?

MG: Well, he ... started with a horse and wagon, but that wasn't too good, because it was too much upkeep to take care of the horse and that phased out, and then, he ended up with two trucks, big trucks, service trucks, and I guess we delivered, in a day, [to] maybe ... forty, fifty customers for ten cents, ten-cent piece of ice, twenty-five cents, and it was a tough job, because we had to go up, sometimes, three floors, two floors, and you had to ... empty the thing where the ice goes and some ice boxes, they weren't too tasty, whatever you want to call it; ... the ice [box] smelled.

SI: They were dirty.

MG: Yes, a little bit.

Madeline Girard: Where was your father born?

MG: Oh, my father was born in Philadelphia and he moved to Trenton. ... I guess he got married in Trenton and stayed there for a while. ... My father left my mother for somebody else and he left; there was four boys in our family ... and he left four boys for my mother to raise, to fend for herself and, for a while, we all lived in this one house in Trenton and we managed. ...

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother? Where was she from?

MG: Yes. My mother was born in this country, way back in the 1900s, 1897, in that area, and she had a job. She got a job ... working in the doll factory, making little dolls. ... The name of the place was Horseman Dolls; today, they're probably worth a few dollars, because they're out of date, but I don't have any dolls saved up. ... As time went on, my three brothers and myself, and my mother and an elderly woman, ... she also lived with us, she paid a little bit of rent, and then, the three brothers, we did jobs and I had one brother who ... ended up being a lawyer, my brother, Vince, who was my twin brother, and he made out good in the Army. He was in the Ordnance Department down in Delaware and ... he ended up as a major. ... Me, I ended up ... as an orderly [in the medics] and I did that for a year or so and that was the job that pertained to cleaning up, keeping the hospital clean, sometimes, helping the nurses to deliver the pills that the soldiers needed. The soldiers ... came from the field hospital, the station hospital, and, if they needed more treatment, they would go to a general hospital and, from the general hospital, they

would find out what they're going to do with them, whether the soldiers could go back to duty or send them home for recovery.

SI: You enlisted in 1943, when you were twenty-nine.

MG: Yes, yes.

SI: You were a bit older than the average Army recruit. Why did you join the Army?

MG: I was inducted. I didn't join. I was drafted. There were four brothers and we all went into the Army. One was in Africa, one was in Delaware, I went to England and ... my brother, Anthony, went to Italy and he acquired a disease, sciatica, it was like a rheumatism, and they discharged him and sent him home. ...

Madeline Girard: I think, Shaun, at that time, ... it was pretty messy. They needed more help, probably like what's happening now with the Reservists [in Iraq]. So, we never thought he'd go in. They thought they'd leave him.

MG: You know, they'd taken four brothers, ... that was unusual and I had tried to stay out of the Army, to help my mother with her condition, you know, because jobs were scarce, ... but she did have this job and she maintained the house and we did all right.

SI: Where did you work before you went in the service?

MG: ... I worked at [the] John A. Roebling Wire Mill and the thing that was so important about the wire mill job and John A. Roebling is that we made submarine nets, they were called grommets, and it was a circle about sixteen inches around and we intertwined the wires within all these other wires and made a big, big net and they would take it to the Army. ... I know that they were to protect, ... like, at Pearl Harbor, they would put the nets down in the water to prevent the submarines from coming in.

SI: How did the demands of the war affect your work in the factory? Were they pushing you to get the nets out faster?

MG: Not really, because it was a tough job on the hands and, like, I had to make these nets. When I got done in the morning, I could hardly pick up a cup of coffee, because it hurt, ... but the job did pay good and I guess it was worth it, because I made a few dollars. My brother, he was discharged, my twin brother, he became an officer, down in Delaware. ... My youngest brother, Frankie, he became an aviator and he flew the Hump, what's called the Hump, over the Himalayas, and he had some stories that he could tell and he told me one where he was flying this airplane and he fell asleep, because he had the plane on automatic, and he almost crashed, but, luckily, he woke up in time and it all worked out all right.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect you and your employment?

MG: Well, I was fortunate enough to work in the hospital.

Madeline Girard: ... Before you went to war, the Depression. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were discussing the Great Depression.

MG: I did all right, because I used to play cards, poker, whatnot, and, if I was lucky, as a matter-of-fact, for many, many years, I sent my whole check [home] from the Army. That wasn't much money. What is it, fifty dollars a month? ... We used to play cards. Maybe I would win, maybe I'd lose; if I won, I sent the money home, if I lost, okay. So, while I was in the Army, they gave me a job, ... they called it a dog robber. ... That was the nickname for a guy, soldier, that would keep the huts clean for the officers, keep the huts clean, build a fire in the cold weather, get everything ready for the next day for the soldiers and I did get paid five dollars a month for doing that. So, that was another revenue that's coming in to me and I would send that home. So, in the long run, everything was working pretty good. My brothers were safe where they were. I was safe in the hospital, but, like, in 1944, I was a little worried, because that was the time of the Bulge, you know, and I was worried that maybe they would take me and put me in the frontlines over there, but they didn't do that, but, anyway, it ended up, all four brothers came home alive and in good health.

SI: What was your first experience in the Army like, your induction, when they brought you in and sent you off to basic training?

Madeline Girard: ... Here's your chance to tell the story I want you to tell. [laughter]

MG: Am I doing all right so far?

SI: Great.

MG: I must tell you about this story. They had amateur boxing. I was not a boxer. I could handle myself with my fists, but not a boxer. So, me and this fellow from New York, I forget his name, we entered into the amateurs. So, while we were waiting to box, this one big, tall guy, five, six feet, we talked. He says to me ... that I look like ... I've fought before. I said, "No, no, I never fought before," but, anyway, we got in the ring and this guy, big, tall six-footer, he hit me with a hand that came from the floor and that was in the first round and he hit me and I was dizzy. So, I fought for three rounds, ... like, in a fog. So, anyway, after the three rounds, they gave the other guy a big ovation. They liked the fight, they liked the boxing match and they had a hard time figuring out who's the winner. They had these three guys; they decided by tossing up a coin. I mean, it was so close, but I didn't win. I was eliminated, but, in the meantime, I knew, if I won that bout, I knew who I was going to box next and that was a little, short Indian, muscular, and he looked strong. So, I was glad that I lost the bout and we left, and then, when we got to our hut, ... the soldiers at our hut, they were all saying, "That was some fight." ...

Madeline Girard: Michael, I think Shaun wanted to know, did you want to know when he was first inducted?

SI: Yes.

Madeline Girard: Where did you go?

MG: I went to Fort Dix.

SI: Was going into the Army a shock?

MG: You could say it was a shock, because, well, I was in the National Guard. I did join the National Guard when things were tough. I just joined it to get the little pay that they gave you, but, eventually, I got out of that. Then, I got this job making these grommets in the Roebling plant. That was paying good money.

Madeline Girard: Michael, when you left Fort Dix, where did you go then?

SI: Where were you sent for training?

MG: ... Camp Pickett, Virginia. That's where I took medical training.

SI: What did your training consist of?

MG: The funny thing, when I went in, they asked me what field I would like, you know, and I'd like to be a cook. Anyway, it ends up that they put me as a helper to the patients and I did that for a long time. ... I was in the Army two-and-a-half years, the big part was in the Medical Department, and I would take a job cleaning up for the officers. That was the dog robber.

Madeline Girard: Honey, he wants you to tell about the AWOL.

SI: Yes, please tell me about that.

MG: You want to hear about that? ... You won't go back and ... [laughter]

Madeline Girard: They're not going to get him. [laughter]

SI: No. [laughter]

MG: Well, anyway, while I was in the camp, me and this other fellow from Brooklyn, we decided that we would go ... AWOL, because I just had gotten married. I got married in April and I was overseas in ...

Madeline Girard: No, you weren't overseas, yet. You were at Camp Pickett.

MG: Yes, I was in Camp Pickett, but I stayed at Camp Pickett three months or so and ... they sent us overseas and, there, I joined the [hospital].

Madeline Girard: You were going to tell him about when you went AWOL.

MG: I went AWOL. We bummed rides. We found out that, instead of coming south, we're going the wrong way, anyway. So, anyway, we get this here ride and the guy dropped us off at the entrance to the hospital where we originally started. So, finally, we got the ride and we went home. I was married less than three months and I was glad to have that little bit of time at home with my wife and family and, anyway, [I] ... went back to my outfit and they had my name listed as a worker for KP, kitchen police, and the first sergeant, he came up to me and told me that I'm being reprimanded for going AWOL. So, he says I have a couple of choices; either I could be reprimanded by general court-martial or give you kitchen police, KP. I said, "Well, you know, I'll take KP." It was only going to be for a week and I was going to be confined to the outfit in the KP. So, it's an experience that I didn't mind doing, KP; it was worth it.

SI: How did you travel overseas?

MG: Boat.

SI: What was the voyage like?

MG: We went over, half of us were on one boat and the other half on another boat, and, in that boat, between the two boats, they had the (shells?). This is the Army. So, I found a good book to read, it was called *The Robe*, religious. It was a good book. So, I read that book. Anyway, then, ... they gave me an outfit to join. It was an outfit that was from Iceland and I joined that outfit and it wasn't bad. ... I had to deal with the nurses and, while I was there, after a time, they brought nurses in and the nurses were black and it's the first outfit ... that had black nurses and that seemed to be the big thing, the nurses, you know, because ... [of] the discrimination and all that stuff there. So, anyway, they were happy, and so, everything was going fine, doing my job, and then, after [a few] years, it was time to be sent home. So, we came back [through] one outfit and all the outfits were called after a cigarette, like, Camp Chesterfield, Camp Sir Walter Raleigh, Camp Lucky Strike. So, that's where I went to a general hospital; we were discharged from there. It was the 239th General Hospital ... and that's where we got discharged from to [go to] the States. ...

SI: Can you describe what you did when you were helping the patients? What were some of your duties? Does anything stand out in your memory?

MG: Just I would deliver pills to the different soldiers. Some of them were banged up pretty well, pretty good, and a lot of them made it home, some didn't, had to go back to the war. That's the way it was at the time.

SI: What kind of interaction did you have with the nurses and doctors? What kind of relationship did you have with them?

MG: Well, you know, I get along good with the nurses and the doctors and I got a job, another job, as, I called it, a dog robber. I would take care of the hut, the hut that the officer was in. ... If it was the cold weather, I would prepare the fireplace for the officers when they got off duty

and I was paid for that. I got five dollars a month. I was working for a captain in one. I had two huts, ... a captain in one hut and a lieutenant colonel in the other hut, and I can't remember ... who the officers were, but I know there was one officer, the lieutenant colonel, he got away without paying me my five dollars, which, you know, it was a big thing for me, five dollars. I think, five dollars, at that time, was worth, like, a pound.

Madeline Girard: How did he get away? Did he get discharged? Was he sent home?

MG: Who, the doctor? Yes, we were headed for home, all of us, doctors and all.

Madeline Girard: ... He just forgot to pay you.

MG: Well, whatever happened, I imagine he did, but I didn't go broke.

SI: When you were in England, did you ever go on leave? Did you visit London?

MG: No. When I was over there, I was, like, just married, lovesick, and so, I didn't do too much of that. I could have gone to London, you know, anywhere, but I didn't go.

Madeline Girard: But didn't you go to Paris? Where'd you send all that perfume and everything [from]? Remember that? You sent the jewelry, the perfume, the toys. Where did you send them [from]?

MG: I was at this hospital, but you could take trips, too.

Madeline Girard: Did you go to Paris?

MG: Sure. I went to Paris. I was in London.

Madeline Girard: That's what Shaun wants to know.

MG: No, I was taking these little trips, not long, you know, but just a couple of days, overnight.

SI: Do any of them stand out in your memory?

Madeline Girard: Didn't you go to Versailles when you were in Paris?

MG: Yes. I went to Versailles, where they made the big treaty, the Versailles Treaty.

SI: Do you remember where you were when V-E Day was announced?

MG: Well, probably at this station hospital.

SI: Were there celebrations?

MG: Well, everybody was happy. So, yes, everybody did what was natural when you heard the war was over. ...

SI: After V-E Day, did you think that you might have to go to the Pacific?

MG: I was just saying about 1944, they were tough times ... and they needed men in the Pacific. So, I was a little worried that they would put me in the infantry and send me in there, because I did have the training, the basic training, to hold the gun and all that kind of stuff. So, it was possible that I could have gone there, but it didn't happen.

SI: Were the African-American nurses at the hospital Army nurses?

MG: Army nurses.

SI: All right. Did anyone not accept them? Were there any problems?

MG: I don't think so, none in my mind, anyway.

SI: Were there any patients who refused to be treated by them?

MG: No, not that I know of. I mean, they would have to be silly to refuse the help of the nurses, just on account of being black.

SI: Were they housed in segregated quarters?

MG: They probably had their own huts. I'm not sure whether they were intermingled; I am not sure about that. That's a long time ago.

SI: Were there any air raids while you were at the hospital?

MG: No, where we were was pretty safe. It was pretty safe.

SI: Did you ever interact with any British civilians, perhaps in the local town?

MG: Well, I used to go to town and have a few beers and had a beer with the British. We got along good.

SI: Did you get a feel for what they were going through? Did you find out anything about them?

MG: Not really, because I figured they were ... going through the same thing that we're going through. So, you know, it's all the same. What we do, they do.

SI: Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

MG: I guess I must have been in the camp, in the barracks.

Madeline Girard: No, you weren't in the service, yet. I was at home. We weren't married, yet. Am I right about that, Shaun?

SI: In 1941.

Madeline Girard: We were at home. You must have been at home. It was a Sunday morning. Remember that?

MG: I should remember, but ...

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, did you know anything about the war in Europe?

MG: Only what I read in the papers.

SI: Did you think that America would get involved?

MG: Well, you know, it was the draft and you're always worrying [when] you number's coming up.

Madeline Girard: You know, Shaun, at that time, people went to the movies to see the Fox News. That's where you got the real scoop. We thought that was a great thing. [laughter]

SI: You mentioned that you often played cards when you were in the service. Did you do anything else for fun?

MG: For fun? Yes, we played softball, baseball, and I was a pitcher. To make things short, I get a hit, I'm on first base, and then, I'm working myself over and around and I get to third base. For some reason, they hit the ball and they made a play for me at home plate and I slid into the home plate and I ran into the catcher and I dislocated my shoulder, my clavicle. So, I had it taken care of and everything was fine.

SI: How was the medical care?

MG: It was good. Yes, I forget how long I was walking around with a sling, you know, but I had the cast all the way down here [the wrist].

SI: Was there anything else besides softball?

MG: Softball and cards.

SI: Did you work set hours, nine to five? How often did you work?

MG: I'm just thinking, I was probably working a shift from three to eleven, maybe. ...

SI: Did it get boring after a while?

MG: Bored?

SI: Did they ever change your work?

MG: No. It was the same thing, cleaning up, take care of the patients.

SI: Did you ever talk with the patients and find out where they had been?

MG: No, I didn't. No, I was just doing my job.

SI: When you returned to the States, how long were you in the service before being discharged? Did you have another assignment after you came back?

MG: I don't think so. I was just waiting for my number to come up and send me home.

SI: Did you give any thought to staying in the Army?

MG: No way. Maybe I should have, ... because twenty years was up and it went by fast [laughter] and I [could have] got a pension for twenty years. I could have been retired at a young age.

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

SI: What did you do in the National Guard before the war? Was it just training?

MG: Yes, it was training. I can remember training to shoot the machine gun, but I wasn't in the National Guard too long, because, you know, it was a volunteer thing. ...

SI: Did you sign up for a certain number of years?

MG: I think we had to sign up for, I don't know about years, but, you know, months or whatever. We went to the Armory.

SI: In Newark?

MG: At Trenton and that's where we did the training. You had to learn to put it together with your eyes closed. ...

SI: Did your National Guard unit try to call you back when the war started?

MG: I don't think so.

SI: Do you remember rationing, before you went in the service?

MG: Gas, I remember gas, I remember green stamps.

Madeline Girard: Coffee, nylons.

MG: Silk. For some reason, I had a good source for silk, parachutes. I used to get the parachutes, you know, I can't remember where I would get the parachute silk, and I'd send that home to my wife and they made use of it. They made shirts, silk shirts, because the silk shirts, ... you'd be a good dresser with that.

Madeline Girard: ... We covered Kathy's bassinette with the silk.

MG: Yes, but I don't ... have a drop of silk.

Madeline Girard: We don't have any left.

SI: Do you remember anything else about how the war affected America, blackouts, civil defense drills, things like that?

MG: I can sort of remember blackouts in England, but we were pretty far back from where we were fighting. Whatever happened to me, I was on the safe road to coming home.

SI: Do you think that you were placed there because you had a wife (and child)?

MG: ... I mean, they had all the information, you know. I've got the three brothers that were in the Army, different parts and everything. I mean, they have all that information.

SI: Did you correspond with your brothers and your wife?

MG: Yes.

SI: How often?

MG: I wrote pretty often to my wife and, to my three brothers, periodically, just wanted to know how they were doing, whether they were alive, were they seeing action. ...

SI: Did any of them come to visit you while you were in England?

MG: No. ... [When] I was on furlough there, I did meet a guy from the 'Burg. I'm originally from Chambersburg and I met a guy that worked in the butcher shop, Johnny Carmignani was his name, and I met him in England and we had a few beers, you know, but that was like a miracle to see him.

SI: After you got out, did you make use of the GI Bill at all?

MG: I went to refrigeration [training]. There was a place on Broad [in Trenton], near the battle monument; there was a building over there. They were teaching the soldiers all about refrigeration. So, I went there for a few lessons and I find out that it was too tough for me to understand, so, I dropped out.

SI: Were most of the people in that program veterans?

MG: Yes. I would have liked to take up barbering, ... to be a barber, but it was too confusing. I would have had to go to Philadelphia ... to take the lessons and that was too much for me to go back and forth to Philly for lessons. ...

SI: What did you do after the war?

MG: After the war? I went back to Roebing. ...

Madeline Girard: I guess they weren't making nets anymore and let you go.

MG: I told you, we made the submarine nets, yes.

Madeline Girard: And then, you worked for my brother, painting.

MG: Yes. When I got out of the Army, her brother was in the painting business, painting garages. So, that's where I went.

Madeline Girard: Then, you took the test for corrections.

MG: Yes, then, I took the test for corrections officer and I come out first and I could never understand it. I used to take Civil Service exams quite a bit. ... So, anyway, I took this test for corrections officer and I come out first.

Madeline Girard: That's where he worked for about thirty years.

MG: So, I got picked to do the job and, like my wife says, I worked there for thirty years in the Corrections [Department].

SI: Which facility did you work at?

MG: The county.

Madeline Girard: I guess it was Mercer County Correctional [Facility].

SI: Is there anything that stands out from that experience? You must have had a lot of experiences with prisoners.

MG: Oh, yes. One thing, they had, they called them the Trenton Six; ... six guys killed a dealer, a guy by the name of Bundy. Anyway, they had trials and taking temporary leaves and, you know, they cancelled some of the dates, and so, the Trenton Six was a big thing at that time and they all were convicted, guilty. ...

Madeline Girard: They were all electrocuted?

MG: Oh, no. They were so long in jail that time went by; ... so, anyway, all these Trenton Six, they all died outside of the jail.

SI: Were prisoners incarcerated in this facility permanently or were they just held there until they went to another facility?

MG: No, the county jail was the jail that would hold the prisoners for certain dates for them to go to court.

SI: This will sound as though I watch too many movies, but did anyone ever try to escape?

MG: [laughter] I had a lot of jobs in the jail. I used to work in the kitchen, cooking, and one guy got out. ... The window was so small, this guy was small enough to get out of the window, and so, he got out, but he got caught, brought him back.

SI: Do you want to tell me how you met and married?

MG: Yes, we met at a wedding. I was not a best man, but an usher and she was ...

Madeline Girard: Maid of honor.

MG: Maid of honor.

Madeline Girard: My cousin's wedding.

MG: Yes. I think she asked me to marry her. [laughter]

Madeline Girard: That's his story, Shaun, not mine. [laughter]

MG: ... We got married and we've been married for sixty-four years.

Madeline Girard: No, sixty-one. ...

SI: Congratulations. Can you tell me a little bit about your children?

MG: Oh, sure. We have two children, a boy and a girl. The boy lives three houses down, over here. We also have a daughter, Kathy, who lives around the corner with her husband, Gary, and three children.

Madeline Girard: That young man that came was our grandson. ...

MG: We have seven grandchildren. ...

Madeline Girard: Don't forget, we have two great-grandsons.

MG: ... Our daughter lives around the corner. She lives in a ... historic house. ...

SI: Everyone pretty much stayed in the same area.

Madeline Girard: Yes, right. The only one we have living away is our granddaughter. She lives in Rhode Island. ... She gave us the two great-grandsons, but, other than that, we have this little enclave here.

SI: Is there anything that I forgot to ask about?

MG: Thinking.

Madeline Girard: Michael is recuperating from lung cancer.

SI: If there is nothing else, for now, I will say thank you.

Madeline Girard: You're welcome.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 7/22/04

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 7/27/04

Reviewed by Michael Girard 8/2/04