

Carver McGriff

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Interviewed by Leah Cohen

Transcribed by Eric Bradach

Edited by Eric Bradach & Leah Cohen

Web Biography by Eric Bradach

Production by Brad Guidera & Angel Melendez

Cohen: Today is July 24, 2019, my name is Leah Cohen and on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I have the honor of conducting a phone interview with Dr. Carver McGriff. During World War II, he served in the 90th Infantry Division, 357th Regiment, M Company, which invaded Normandy. He is a recipient of two Purple Hearts as well as the Bronze Star Medal, and we are looking forward to hearing your story. So, let's begin at the beginning, where and when were you born?

McGriff: I was born in Indianapolis, [Indiana], in 1924, since that time as a young man and when the war started, I was a teenager and like most teenagers, I could hardly wait to get into the armed forces.

Cohen: And what was your life like growing up?

McGriff: Well, I had a very fine mother and father. They worked hard, my mother was a graduate of Wesley College [in Dover, Delaware], my father was a graduate of Michigan and also Indiana with a law degree. And they were fine people, but I got in time for the end of the Great Depression. So, we struggled but it was fun.

Cohen: What made it positive despite its challenge?

McGriff: I had two parents that were so ethical that we never even discussed that. In family life, they got along with each other well. I had the benefits of having a good home bringing up, although I had my own problems in the course of things, like most kids do.

Cohen: Which high school did you attend?

McGriff: Shortridge High School in Indianapolis. It was kind of a family joke, Shortridge High School was chosen at the time during my era as one of the top ten high schools in America. And my mother used to boast that her son was at the bottom ten percent of one of the top ten schools in America. [Laughter]

Cohen: What were your interests at the time?

McGriff: Oh, my goodness. You're asking me to remember back a long time now... So much that exists today that did not exist then. All the technology, for example, it had never been invented, in fact, they didn't even have automatic washing machines, they didn't have dryers, of course, there was no television, and just so much of what exists today didn't exist then and as a result of that, as a child I was--I was formed in a society that was quite different than today's society.

Cohen: Yeah. Did family members serve in the military?

McGriff: My father was a company commander with the rank of captain in World War I, and my brother served in the [US] Navy. he was a year younger, and he served on a minesweeper in the Pacific. So, yes, we all did our part during the war.

Cohen: Where were you when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

McGriff: Oh, I remember that moment. Everybody does my age. I was listening to the radio with my parents, who were listening to some kind of a church program and they broke in and made the announcement and, of course, at that point, they didn't know exactly what had happened. They didn't know exactly how many people had been killed, but they knew it was a terrible event, and I well remember that. And my father, of course, understood what this meant and was ready to go re-enlist. Of course, he was too old to do that. [Laughter]

Cohen: But he wanted to serve?

McGriff: He wanted to serve, yes.

Cohen: And what effect did it have on you and on your friends?

McGriff: Well, I think we were too young to realize what might lay before us as of that time. It only seemed like some terrible event almost like a plane crash or something. An event that would not have any particular meaning for us in the future. But slowly, as we thought about it, as we read in the paper, as we were talking to older people, we began to understand. And I think most of us, our reaction was, "I better get ready to go into the armed forces." It was all... two of my friends in high school left high school after their junior year to join the Navy... and I wanted to get into the [US] Army.

Cohen: What interest did you have in the Army versus the Navy or other forces?

McGriff: Well, I thought it was more dangerous place to go. I didn't know anything about Marines, but I did know that the Navy floated around on ships. And I thought, "Well, that sounds pretty safe, I want to do what my father did because he had been an infantry commander," and I of course, I didn't have the faintest idea what I was saying when I said I wanted to do that. When the day came that I did it, I had second thoughts, but as a young boy, I thought it sounds pretty exciting.

Cohen: Oh, and what did you do after you graduated from high school?

McGriff: Well... I mowed lawns, I delivered handbills, I found other short-term jobs because I was pretty sure that I would be going to be drafted into the armed forces, and I was finally drafted at the age of eighteen. I had a minor health problem, it wasn't anything serious, but enough that they delayed me for six months. So, by the time I was actually was drafted into the Army, I just turned nineteen.

Cohen: Where were you drafted? Like where did you have to go for tests?

McGriff: Well, it was in Indianapolis... They had a building downtown where all of us were drafted. Back then everybody was drafted, every young man knew he was going into the armed forces. Not wanted to or didn't want to, you were going, and the only exception was people who couldn't pass the physical. And they had a category, they called "4F" and the worst thing that could happen to a young man, the worst thing of all, was to be turned down and called "4F."

Cohen: That's interesting. So, how long was it since you were drafted before you were sent -- I believe it was Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana?

McGriff: Yeah, that was unimportant part of the experience, really. We were there--it was called a reception area. That's where they gave you your uniform kind of... got you used to getting up at 5:30 in the morning. And as quickly as possible, we were sent off for training and I was sent down to Florida to Camp Blanding [Joint Training Center] in Florida. That was an infantry-training location, and there we were... we were introduced to what it meant to be in the Army, taught what they called the, "manual of arms." Learned how to throw a rifle around. We ran obstacle courses and whatnot. And for some reason because I had been in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] in high school, I guess, they made me an acting sergeant... That was an enlisted rank but I lost the rank as soon as I finished training.

Cohen: Oh, I see. And what did a typical day look like at Camp Blanding?

McGriff: Well, looking back I thought it was pretty excited, but at the time I'm not sure I felt that way. We got up early and we'd go out and compete on what was called an obstacle course, and then they had what was called a bayonet assault course, and we'd take a bayoneted rifle and we'd have to run all over obstacles. And also they had imitation people, manikins filled with straw that we would have to stab with our bayonets. Everything was designed in other words to get us accustomed to the idea of being in combat. Then we did many other things, we had classes on various other things. We were taught to use all the different weapons that were available. It was a pretty busy time.

Cohen: Had you have any previous experience shooting like namely through hunting?

McGriff: No. I had a BB gun, and my parents were pretty careful with where they let me shoot that in the neighborhood. [Laughter]

Cohen: [Laughter] Were you assigned to the 90th Infantry Division there at that point in time?

McGriff: No. I arrived in England. I was assigned--let me back up. They put us on a ship in New York and I was assigned to a Navy gun crew. I don't know how I got chosen for that, but temporarily, for the thirteen days that we were at sea, my job was to stand at a gun position. I did it from twelve midnight, until 4 a.m., and then I had to go back at noon until 4 p.m. And I did that every day for thirteen days, which spared some poor sailor from having to do the same thing.

Cohen: Okay.

McGriff: My job was to look for submarines, by the way. There were some that were still out there, and I'm glad to say I didn't find one. [Laughter]

Cohen: [Laughter] Going back a little bit to the basic training, what was it like being an active sergeant? Was it more challenging?

McGriff: Yeah; I mean, I had to theoretically be better than anybody else at all the different things, so that they would let me tell them how to do it, which was silly because when I arrived there I didn't know any of it. But neither did they, so it was merely a matter of pretending that I knew, I guess, but it worked out all right... and we had--it was just all of the things that soldiers have to learn do. It's hard to bundle it all into one sentence here. But there were many things we had to learn to do, and my job was to be quick enough to learn it to teach it to some of the other people.

Cohen: Oh, yeah. It doesn't have to be in one sentence if you want to describe it more at length, that's great, too -- about the different responsibilities.

McGriff: Well... I think that what I said pretty well overview.

Cohen: Okay. Where were you sent next for the... for the advanced individual training? The AIT?

McGriff: Well, our next step that after we arrived in England was to be assigned to temporary organization with a couple hundred men. We were replacements, they called us. What we later learned, of course, most of what I know I found out after the war was over, but we found out that an invasion was to take place. They counted on heavy casualties so they had another group of men, and I was in one two-hundred-men group, who were to stand ready so we could replace the first two-hundred men that got killed or wounded. And that took three days, and so the day after the invasion, I--as a matter of fact, I was riding in a truck heading toward the water where we would then board a vessel to cross over to Normandy, and I looked up in the air and I saw fifty airplanes flying at very low altitude, each one pulling a glider filled with men. I didn't know then, but I would later learn that it was the second wave of glider troops going into the invasion.

Cohen: And this would have been the next day on June 7th?

McGriff: No, this would have been on June 6th.

Cohen: Okay.

McGriff: Yes, and I later found out that two or three of those planes would be shot down with all of those men onboard. Of course, I didn't know at the time. Then I was placed in the holding camp for a couple of days, and then I was sent along with everyone else to Normandy, and we didn't know it was Normandy or France even until somebody told us once we got there.

Cohen: Oh, and where had you been training in southwestern England before being trucked to the holding area?

McGriff: Yes, we called it training, but the problem was the people in charge had no idea where we were going or what we were going to do, and they had it all wrong. It was hilly and we walked up and down hills and we did all kinds of things to stay physically alert and physically in shape. But the truth of the matter it was that Normandy was covered with hedgerows, and nobody knew about the hedgerows. So, the fighting that took place at Normandy was totally different

from what the... what our leaders thought it would be. And therefore the training that they prepared us for--the kind of fighting that they prepared us for was not at all what we encountered. But we spent six weeks doing that.

Cohen: Did you have opportunities to go to the local town or did you have contact with British soldiers or civilians?

McGriff: I don't have any such connection as that, it's been too many years, but as you know, my wife and I began leading tours of Normandy. And by doing that, I've been able to go back to some locations. For example, there's a little town called Gourbesville, and that was the first major battle that the division in which I was assigned, the 90th Division, really fought and had heavy casualties, and I had just arrived in order to take part in that battle.

Cohen: Were there any rumors going around while you were in England about what might happen or any rumors that there might be an invasion in France?

McGriff: You know, it was pretty obvious there had to be something. And yes, there were all kinds of rumors and I don't even recall what it might have been. They were all... probably wrong, but we were... you know, we were having a good time. I was. I was over there; I was away from home. I was with a bunch of guys that I liked. We were getting a lot of exercise. We were in the rain, of course, it rained all the time and we were soaking wet most of the time. But when you're nineteen years old, those, things don't bother you.

Cohen: No, no. That's true. So, on June 6, you're already on the LCI, the landing craft infantry, and what happens next?

McGriff: Well, what happened next in my case, we were... we were walking up the beach... well, we crossed from... Let me backup, I'm getting my thoughts here backwards. We got off the boat that took us over, we got on a small vehicle, a landing craft for infantry and it took us up to the shore. The front of it dropped down, we stepped into the water, and it was about up to my shoulders, but we were not under fire at that point. The fighting had gone in a mile or so, and so we waded our way up onto the beach. We started walking up a hill that would take us to the mainland, and I looked over and saw a dead sergeant, 101st Airborne, and I realized for the first time that this was serious. And only then did I begin to realize that we were actually going to go where people get shot.

Cohen: It really sunk in?

McGriff: It did then, yes. And then we went on up... I know you read my book but maybe wouldn't recall what happened there; a young officer--and when I say officer, I mean he was probably twenty-one or two, but because I was nineteen, he was what we called him one of the older men. And he had the rank of 2nd lieutenant and said, "Follow me." by the way, I'm getting a beeping sound, here; are you hearing that?

Cohen: No, I'm not.

McGriff: Okay, well, then it's probably something here. He said, "Follow me." And he led us for maybe an hour. And when we started out we passed a field that had several damaged gliders on it - they had crashed from when the first wave of gliders came in. And after about an hour, we came back to another field and it had several damaged gliders in it. One of my friends turned to me and he said, "Do you realize that's the same field we saw when we first got here." He had gotten lost and he led us around in a circle. So, that's when we began to know about our officers. They weren't really any smarter than we were. They were just older. [Laughter]

Cohen: Did he have a map or compass?

McGriff: I have no idea. He acted so sure of himself. But there wasn't much to know anyway. I don't blame the man looking back. I think it might have been fairly the kind of thing you would expect to happen if you've never been there before.

Cohen: What was your first night like in Normandy?

McGriff: Well, my first night was rainy and cold and I went for the next thirty days of my life, I was never under cover at any time at night. We would lie down on the ground, nothing under us, and just hopefully go to sleep, which we did. We were so tired, usually, and the first night I laid on the ground, folded my field jacket over me, and put my head on my helmet and fell asleep. And life was like that pretty much all the time.

Cohen: Did you dig trenches?

McGriff: Yes, we did... when you read the history of World War II, you often hear about foxholes. And I never saw one over there. That would be something you could stand up in maybe up to maybe shoulder high. What we had was slit trenches because we moved so much... two or three times' a day. So, we would dig a trench maybe wide enough and long enough for our body plus, maybe eight or

nine inches deep, if you lie completely flat, then your purpose was to avoid being hit by artillery fire. So, we'd sleep in that every night.

Cohen: And I think you mentioned in the book that the ground was very hard; do you want to describe it?

McGriff: [Laughter] Well, it was just hard. When they talked about foxholes, I thought, "Are you kidding? You want us to dig something deep enough we can stand up in it? I'm having trouble digging it deep enough I can lie down in it." And that's kind of the feeling we all had. The ground was hard. And, of course, you... one of the things that was part of being there, you did so much digging that pretty soon your gloves were worn out, pretty soon your hands were sore. You eventually reach the point where digging a trench like that was just kind of second nature. When you stopped, you dug a trench because we were constantly under artillery fire and artillery fire doesn't aim at anybody, it just covers the field with a lot of explosions, and you hope that you're not close to one of them. So, of course, each time that does happen, somebody gets hit.

Cohen: Yeah...

McGriff: We were exposed to that automatically every day.

Cohen: It's constant... constant threat... yeah. What was the reaction of the company with whom you were supposed to link up? You talk about the veterans of three-day fighting, in your book; would you like to talk about their reaction to your company's arrival now?

McGriff: Well, you have to remember, I was the lowest rank there is, and I had no position from which to view what was happening, or what our leaders were thinking, or what was happening in the world. It was just a matter of doing what we were told to do by someone who was six months older than me, [Laughter] and that's kind of what was going on. The problem is that a lot of what we know now that we didn't know at the time, but really nobody knew how to fight in the hedgerows, and you learned how to fight in the hedgerows by fighting in the hedgerows. But the problem with that theory is that by the time you learn how to fight in the hedgerows, you've gone beyond them. So, we were all in this kind of mysterious setting of wanting to cope with our environment and... not having anybody else around who was expert enough to know how to do it. So, even our officers, our young officers--I'm not talking about lieutenants and captains--were struggling as much as we were. They didn't have any maps by which to know

exactly where they were. It was pretty much trying to climb over that hedgerows and see what you see on the other side. That's why we had so many casualties.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah. You mentioned I think the first time there was a sniper shot in your direction was when you were near the hedgerow... do you want to recount that now?

McGriff: Yeah. Well, there was a little group of us, half a dozen of us, who was going through the process of all of this, and once we... When we arrived there at night...It's very compli-- I'll try to make this real quick. It's midnight, we're standing in line near a hedgerow, there's a man seated at a card table, he has his shaded flashlight, and that's the only light. And one by one, we'd go up to that table and we are assigned a position in which case I was told I was in a machine gun squad in M Company 90th Infantry Division. "Go over there." So, I went over there, I was met by a man who said, "I'm your sergeant, I'm Earl Brewer, dig a hole and go to sleep because we're going to get up in a couple of hours." And that's exactly what happened. So, then we got up in a couple of hours and he led us down a lane, a country lane, along a hedgerow, and we then came to a certain point when he said, "Look over there." We looked over the hedgerow, and about eighty to a hundred yards beyond us was another hedgerow with several men lined up along and firing M1 [Garand] rifles at something or somebody on the other side of their hedgerow. And he said, "Climb over there and join those guys." That was our introduction to combat. So, we climbed over the hedgerow and about halfway... by the time we were not even at that hedgerow, they all started running back toward us. [Laughter] In other words, they were retreating. So, we turned around and I followed them. Went back to where I'd started. And just then I heard a rifle shot and one of the men that I'd came over with, went over, he'd been shot in the leg. And as he was doubling over with that, he was shot again in the arm. And that was then end of the war for him. Then I looked over and I was standing near a hedgerow and on the other side of that hedgerow was a small outbuilding farm--looked like two story... a small banr. It was obvious that the sniper had been hiding in that barn. So, two of the men who had a couple of days of experience, ran up the steps went into the barn and killed the sniper, and that was my introduction to combat.

Cohen: Hmm. What happens next?

McGriff: Next we... We did our usually digging a fox--or a slit trench. Lied down in the mud. I say the mud because it rained almost all the time and we head out the next day and we... we started moving out. That was the expression, "Move out,

Men,” which meant, “I don’t know where we’re going men, but follow me.” And that’s pretty much what we did.

Cohen: So, it seems that there was just some instinct of where the front was and to head in that direction?

McGriff: Yes, it... if you... I’ll use the analogy of a football team. There’s a coach... and then there are players, each of whom knows what their job was, and if each player does their job then you win the football game. Well, same thing. You’ve got a general, he can’t know where all his fifteen-thousand troops are. What he does is he tells his four... [28:18 - 28:25 -call is cut off]

Cohen: Hello?

McGriff: And he tells them what they should do, and they get the company to go out. So, everybody knows he has a job. Well, when you’re a private--I finally got promoted to private first class. I thought, “Wow, that’s really great.” Anyway, when you’re a private, you follow what somebody else tells you to do, and you do not have a picture in your mind that you might have... well, you know today with... video from airplanes and whatnot, they get everything with pictures. We didn’t have that.

Cohen: I think you mentioned that it was only twice when you received the *Stars and Stripes*?

McGriff: Yes. I actually... I have a copy that I stuck in my pocket and went home with it. But they were pretty controlled. The *Stars and Stripes*, there was two kinds of people publishing that paper. There were the guys--the reporters, who wanted to tell the story the way it is and then there was the people in charge that didn’t want any bad news going out. So, the *Stars and Stripes* usually was a pretty tame magazine, or newspaper.

Cohen: Was there any humor in it like Bill Mauldin cartoons and did people...?

McGriff: Oh, yeah. We all liked Bill Mauldin’s cartoons. “Willie and Joe.”

Cohen: How did you come across and share them?

McGriff: Well, prior to going into combat, we, of course, got an occasional *Stars and Stripes*, and I guess we all saw those, and everybody saw them...We all kind of identified with it. He was--he was marvelous at being able to pick out what we felt and what we experienced. He was right on every time.

Cohen: Did you have a favorite cartoon?

McGriff: Oh, I probably did at the time. There were half a dozen that were... I always loved the one where he was... talking to a guy who was also a GI, and he had a rather... clearly identifiable face. And in the background were all these little kids--this was a French town now--all these little kids walking up and down the street in various directions, and they all looked just like the guy that Willie and Joe were talking to. And the guy says to Willie and Joe, "This is the town that my father told me about." I guess you have to think about that one.

Cohen: From World War I. [Laughter] Out of curiosity, did you find that the men used humor to cope; like what were some of the ways that people coped with all the stress and all this combat?

McGriff: Well... that's a good question. I suppose each one of us was unique among all the rest. There were a lot of inward things you didn't tell anybody else. So, that would be a hard question to answer for anybody but me. But I think the one thing you tried not to think about was home. I didn't want to think about home too much because it would just make me depressed to not be there. And we... there's lots of joke telling and telling of stories and that kind of thing. But we didn't have much time to ourselves, we were on the go almost constantly. And if we weren't, we were probably lighting up a cigarette and trying to rest.

Cohen: Yeah. You also describe in your book the first time you experienced a barrage of the 88[mm] canon fire; do you want to talk about that now?

McGriff: Well, one comment I made there, and I say, probably people watching news reels had a better picture of what artillery barrage was like than we did for the simple reason was the minute you hear artillery coming in, you flatten yourself out on the ground to reduce the chances of getting hit. And if you're not in a... protective situation, of lying in a slit trench or something, it's just the luck of the draw. Pretty soon you hear somebody yelling, "Medic! Medic!" Means somebody just got hit. Sometimes the artillery barrage would last only... thirty seconds, maybe ten or twelve explosions and that was it. Sometimes they'd go on for a long time, and everybody knew it was just a question of who was the unfortunate guy that gets hit by an artillery shell. And over a period of time, the number of casualties begins to add up, and almost every day, we were hit by one or more artillery barrage.

Cohen: Wow.

McGriff: And then the one thing that characterized Normandy for most fighting is you rarely saw an enemy soldier and he rarely saw you. So, what they did, they had these... we called them a machine pistol that fired like a machine gun. It just fired rapidly, and they would hold them over a hedgerow – they're ducking down, their heads down, too. They can't see what they're shooting at. But five or six of them would fire and empty those weapons all at once, so you had maybe a hundred bullets all of a sudden in the air, and so you had to duck down. A lot of the fighting was of that kind, just... when you poured enough ammunition out against the enemy, you weren't aiming at anybody, you were just filling the air with lead while some of your men are able to advance while the enemy has his head down. And, of course, they did the same to us. It's all very complicated, I think that you have to be there to kind of get the picture.

Cohen: But I think you are giving us at least a glimpse, you know. Yeah. Which type of ammunition did you and the others in your unit have?

McGriff: Well, the best; the only weapon that we had that was equal to or even better than the enemy's, was the M1 rifle. And it was better because it was... semi-automatic. You keep pulling the trigger, you'll fire eight times. Whereas the German's had a bolt action, and each time he fired he then had to pull the bolt back and shove it forward again, and he then he had five shots. So, we were superior there. Otherwise not. And that's what most of us had. I, however, had a carbine, they called it. It was a fifteen shot, 30 caliber rifle, but not as powerful as the M1. And it was—usually, carbines are carried by officers and by men in things like what I did in a machine gun squad, where you had to have both hands free to carry other things... I'm trying to describe it all and it probably doesn't call up much of a picture in the mind, but that's the way it was.

Cohen: So, it sounds like with the carbine, you would be able to use your other hand to move things...?

McGriff: Well, yeah. If you're carrying a machine gun, which is pretty heavy, you needed both hands to do that. The... the men with rifles were called riflemen. They had one job, which was to look for a German so you could shoot him. Of course, that rarely happened. They say that... what is the statistics? About seventy percent of all the casualties in Normandy were inflicted by artillery. And that would include mortars, which means that if the enemy served – was in a battle and suffered a hundred casualties, then probably seventy of them were inflicted by artillery.

Cohen: Oh my goodness.

McGriff: So, most riflemen never shot anybody... They--what they did do, they contributed to that wall of fire [Laughter] that was making other people keep their heads down.

Cohen: You mentioned in the book and I don't know if this is something you realized after the war from your reading or at the time, that I believe the next objective was to cross the Merderet River?

McGriff: Yes.

Cohen: Was that something you had been told or was it just continuing to do bocage fighting from field to field in a certain direction.

McGriff: Well, in my case it was just a matter of doing what I was told. But, we'll see if I could do this quickly, tell you a story... Let me try to phrase this. There were four of us, all of us of low-ranking men, except there was a sergeant with us, he was my sergeant. And we were in a little town Gourbesville and we looked over and saw one of the only undamaged homes. All the people had left the town because all the fighting was heavy right there in the town of Gourbesville and so we saw one home that was undamaged, and we decided that we would go up and break into the home. Not to damage the home, but to see if we could find something to eat because we had been living on K-rations. So, we knocked... one of the guys--there were four of us--one of the guys knocked a window out of the door, a small window pane, reached in, unlocked the door, and went in. Now, we were later ashamed of breaking into a man's home, but this was in a battle area, where most of the homes were destroyed, and we went around looking for food. And the guys stuck a couple of souvenirs in their pockets that they found on the table and whatnot. Not of any great value, but the only food we could find was some beans and some butter in a lettuce leaf. So, we took that and one of the guys said, "Let's take this down to that little barn down there." There was another outbuilding out there, maybe a hundred yards away. "And make soup." So, we went down there, we left the house, and turned upside down a couple of helmets. Put water in there, put the butter in there with the beans... if I didn't say, we found a whole bunch of beans, and then we cut up some meat from a K-rations and stirred all of that around. One of the guys said this will make soup. We build a fire, put the helmet over the fire, and low and behold, we're making soup and I thought the fact that we'd used water from our canteens to make the soup, so I said, "I'll go back up and refill our canteens." So, while the other guys were doing what they were doing, I went with several canteens. There was a pump by the house that we just left, and I started pumping water from the pump

filling up the canteens when I heard a sound. I turn around, looked through the window, and I saw a movement. I realized there was somebody in the house when we were there. It must have been some Germans, maybe upstairs because we didn't go to the second floor. And as I stood there, I looked over, and I saw knob on the door starting to turn. So, I shoved a shell into my carbine and waited, and as a man dressed in black stepped out I shoved my rifle into his stomach, and I looked up and he was a Roman Catholic priest.

Cohen: Oh my goodness.

McGriff: And I was holding a rifle on a priest. I thought later, "I'm the only Methodist minister that robbed a priest at the point of a gun." [Laughter] Well, he was horrified. He didn't know what I'd do, and I was horrified of what we had done. So, I turned around, I ran down to the barn and said, "You guys aren't going to believe what we did. We just robbed a priest. And we had taken all his food and he's probably just as hungry as we are." And as we were standing there, who walked in? But the priest with all the rest of his food, which he had hidden. And I thought, "I had just learned a lesson." And incidentally, I had stuck in my pocket an item that I forgot to return. I said to the guys, "Give me everything you took. Give me your money, put it in this helmet, and I'll take it out and put it back in his house." And I did that. As we were walking away to go on, I reached in my pocket and I still had a little silver box about three inches long, and on the top of it was the word "Lourdes." It had been his... symbol... his souvenir of his pilgrimage to Lourdes, which I'm not Catholic, but apparently, it's the belief of the Catholic people that a miracle took place in Lourdes, France. And I had stolen his little silver box. I always hoped I could return it, but I never succeeded in doing it. And that was a lesson for us. A man there in the midst of all of that horrible, hellish life we were living, a man had the kindness and grace to come in when we had stolen from his home and bring us what we had missed... That's one of the lessons.

Cohen: Do you think he felt gratitude to you and the US Army?

McGriff: Perhaps. I wasn't mature enough at that time to empathize with him beyond the fact that I was impressed that a man whose house I helped to rob, wanted to give me something... Okay, enough of those kinds of stories. [Laughter]

Cohen: Okay, that's good. [Laughter] So, you're near Gourbesville, and I believe that you had written that you injured your ankle? Like how did that come about?

McGriff: Well, I got hit as I went over him. It was very minor. But I thought, "Heck, I'll go have them wrap it up and they did." What it amounted to--I could have stayed in the... in the medical... what do I want to call it here? It was a place just a medical station that would be moving on. They let me stay there overnight and I get a nice night's sleep on a cot someplace. And I saw the rest of my guys walking by and I thought to myself, "I don't want to get separated from them." So, I just jumped up and went after them and left the medical facility. I was not supposed to do that without telling them. But I did and never heard from them.

Cohen: Do you think friendship made a big difference during the war?

McGriff: Yeah. You know, friendship is a word that covers many areas of life and feelings. They weren't friendships of the kind that I would always be friends together and I look forward to seeing and have a cup of coffee with him, someday or let's meet for dinner with our wives and all that. Not that kind of friendship. It was the kind that said to me that, "I can trust him to take care of me. And I'm gonna be sure that he can learn to trust me to take care of him." It was kind of--I think a temporary arrangement, and we... we veterans, we kind of like to glorify the whole thing a little bit about our closeness. But it wasn't the kind of closeness I have with friends today; it was the kind of... shared... we're in this together sort of thing. But then sometimes there was the case when one man did risk himself for another and then it became a more deeper affection, I suppose...

Cohen: Yeah.

McGriff: On that point. I know you're gonna run out of time, here, and are gonna run out of energy if we keep going like this, but I suppose, jumping ahead a few weeks. I was in a battle and... we were... I'm trying to pick out from this what's of any significance, here. There were three guys in my platoon, and I didn't like them. They were... their color was different from me, their religion was different from me, their culture was different from me, their language was different; I didn't like them they didn't have anybody like that in my town and so, I stayed away from them. And it turns out they were Hispanic. And, I just ignored them, and there were three, in particular, and they would get together, they hung together, and we hung together, and we didn't have much to do with them. I know now, of course, they were homesick, but I didn't know that then. We were then caught under artillery fire and I was badly wounded and lying in the middle of the street and I couldn't move and shells going off around me. And I started calling for help, and a man came out and picked me up and carried me over to a place of safety. And when I looked up into the face of the man that was saving

my life, it was one of those Hispanic men. And I was so ashamed that I would look down upon a man because he's different from me. And he was the better man, and that's a lesson I took away forever more, and I tried--never to look down on another person because they're different in any way from me. So, I've had friends, I've had Jewish friends, I've had black friends, and Hispanic friends, and been grateful for all of them.

Cohen: So, it was a huge lesson?

McGriff: It was. It was one of the lessons I carried away along with that priest.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah... So, you're in Gourbesville and I think at that point you mentioned you had run into some German soldiers who surrendered, and I was wondering if you could describe that group a little more; were they young? Were they elites? Were they conscripted prisoners? I was wondering about that.

McGriff: No, they were the real thing. We were fighting the German's 3rd... wait a minute... the 5th Parachute Division, the 15th Regiment of the 5th Parachute Division. They were the counterpoint to our 82nd Airborne, our 101st Airborne. They were the real deal. But we had our guns and they didn't, so they put their hands up, and I was there to watch them surrender. There was about a dozen or fifteen of them. And they had that look on their faces: "Okay, you got us. You win. What are you gonna do now?" And we, of course, just took them prisoner and then they were sent them back to the prison cages. Probably, it's the best thing that happened to them because it almost guaranteed they'd live through the war. [Laughter]

Cohen: Right. That's true. [Laughter] I don't... sorry, go on.

McGriff: No, you go ahead.

Cohen: I wondered if you want to talk about the two terrible days of fighting at Gourbesville. Like the fighting itself from your perspective.

McGriff: Well, if you look back--that was the very early part of my time there, and the really... three weeks later would come the battle of my life at a place called Beaucoudray. A place called Hill 122. You know, it's people today cannot conceive of the casualties that we'd suffered back then, when you stop to think the population of America was less than half of what it is today, and to give you an interesting comparison; in all the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, all of the other lesser wars that have gone along with that, in the last thirteen years, there

had been about eight-thousand Americans killed in action. In two months in Normandy, there were twenty-nine thousand Americans killed in action.

Cohen: It is staggering. I know... Before the attack toward Beaucoudray or a particular Hill 122, it sounds like you knew that it would be really tough because you mentioned writing a letter... addressed to your parents. Do you want to talk about that?... Hello?... **[52:00 - 53:20 call was cut and then was reconnected after redialing]**

McGriff: Hello?

Cohen: Hi. For some reason I stopped hearing anything at all. I don't know if you could hear me. [Laughter]

McGriff: No. I couldn't hear anything. I don't know how we got cut off. [Laughter]

Cohen: I don't know. [Laughter] Would you like to continue on?

McGriff: Well, I forgotten where I was now.

Cohen: Oh, sure, sure. Well, I believe this was prior to the... capture of Hill 122. You wrote a letter home addressed to your parents that you mailed to your brother and I was wondering if you wanted to talk about it?

McGriff: Well, we've been in an attack the day before I wrote the letter, and it was... we'd had quite a few casualties... and we didn't succeed in our attack, we had to draw back. So, then the word went around that we are gonna try again tomorrow. And I figured having seen what the casualties there? were from this first attack, I figured that there's a pretty good chance I won't make it. And I was a typical teenager... excuse me, I'm gonna take a drink of water... I grew up like most kids, I never really told my parents I loved them. I never thanked them for all they'd done for me. I was just, you know, I took what I got and that was life. I thought I better say that. So, I wrote a note, sent it to my brother and I said, "If I don't survive, would you please pass this along to Mother and Dad. If I do survive, just toss it." And, of course, I did survive, and he and I never discussed that, and I do not know whether he ever gave it to them or not. Knowing him, I think he probably did but it's never been mentioned.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah.

McGriff: But you realized when you're facing--I don't know what point we got cut off--I was saying how many casualties that had been over there... For instance, in the

group that I was with, seventy-four of us were killed and over a hundred were wounded in just one battle in one battalion. So, the odds of surviving were not all that good when you're in an infantry company in Normandy.

Cohen: No, no.

McGriff: And I don't know where to go from there.

Cohen: Do you want to talk about... the next fighting up the hill toward Hill 122, like what happens next?

McGriff: That was probably one of--our division history; a division has about fifteen-thousand men in it. And most of the fighting is done by infantry division. There are many other arms, there are many other organizations within the Army, but it's the infantry that are the ones that does almost all of the on the ground fighting and... it... now I forgot where I was going with that. I was going on a different tack there... Oh... go ahead, I'm interrupting you. Go ahead.

Cohen: No. I'm... I was just wondering what happens next in the battle from your perspective.

McGriff: Well, it was... yes, thank you. You got me back on track here. The history of my division records this as the most costly battle of World War II, and our division had more days in combat than any other division after the invasion. So, this was a pretty terrible... fight, and going up.. Probably Hill 122 cost about fifteen-hundred men killed in action, and about up to... I'm gonna guess thirty-five hundred to four-thousand wounded in action just to get that one hill. And you say, "Well, why would you want to get that many people wounded and killed on a hill that nobody's ever seen, and nobody is going to see? Well, the problem is that the hill from the top, you could see for miles. And there had been so much flooding in Normandy that the problem was that for any major unit to advance in Normandy, American unit now, you had to be out on the open roads. And the Germans from the top of Hill 122 with binoculars, they could look for miles. So, they could see where we were and what we were doing without being... without being at risk of us being able to get to them just yet. And so, the consequence was that hill had to be taken in order to advance. We'd been in Normandy now for well over a month and we couldn't get out of Normandy. That had kind of like... I don't know, it be like Rhode Island is to the United States, you know, it's a very tiny part of France, and we had been in there for two months and we can't get out. And that was the dilemma. So, that part of it was, you've got to get Hill 122, so they can quit watching us when we're moving.

Cohen: Were there still hedgerows going up along the hill?

McGriff: Yes. It wasn't hedgerows, not going up the hill, but it was heavy underbrush. And we have... I've been back there several times in modern times now, so I could look at it and kind of... another one of [Bill] Mauldin's cartoons was he had the guys standing on the top of a hill and... they're talking now it--must have been years later or somethin' he looked up. He said, "My God, we was here and they was there?" [Laughter] While they're looking out from the top the hill, you know... That's kind of what we had.

Cohen: So, how were you able to proceed, you and your unit able to proceed with that huge disadvantage?

McGriff: Well, they had to get by without me after a little while. Once I was wounded, as I mentioned, I was also captured by the enemy... and they... they put me in... in the... we were in a tiny little village. By tiny I mean two-hundred people or something. But there was a little cafe there on the edge of the street, and they took me in and put me on the table, and they also brought in maybe twenty-five other American GIs, who'd also been hit in this horrendous artillery barrage. And they left us there for the night. A German sergeant came in, walked over to me lying on the table, and asked me in English if I was all right. And I said... let's see; what's the German word for water, "Wasser. Wasser." I wanted water; I was so thirsty after having been wounded. And he said--he didn't say anything, he handed me this canteen and smiled. And I started drinking it and it was hard cider. Now, I'd never had alcohol before, and hard cider was pretty hard, and I got as drunk as a skunk just lying there on that table with this canteen full of hard cider. [Laughter] Anyway, I fell asleep for a while, mercifully. Then I woke up about 2 a.m. I would guess. Then I decided that I got to escape. But I couldn't walk, I'd been hit in both legs, and I was gonna spend months in the hospital getting over it all. But I thought maybe if I kind of scoot around on my rear end, I could get out the door and out into the woods someplace. Then I thought that's probably a dumb idea, but at that point I fell back asleep, and I woke up that morning and this is one other story I'll tell you. A makeshift ambulance pulled up. It was really a school bus, and now it's daylight, now time's gone by, and the Germans put four or five of us... in the school bus and drove us to the little town Mortain, [France], and when they opened up the back of the bus and I looked out, we were in the parking lot of a hospital, and I saw; I'd swear, a hundred men on stretchers off in every direction. It wasn't raining, then, so they just put all of us out there in the parking lot, and looking at their uniforms, I could see they

were nearly all German. Their uniforms were kind of a dark green, and I didn't see any other Americans, but they pulled me out of the... makeshift ambulance and laid me next to a German boy, whose arm had been badly damaged, and he was one of their paratroopers. Well, he and I looked at each other and we kind of smiled, and we kind of bonded. I've read stories about this sense, the way... wounded men from opposite sides would bond in a way that they'd never bond with somebody else other than other these circumstances. Anyway, after a few minutes, they picked me up on the stretcher and carried me to a little room and gave me medical attention. They did surgery on me and took big pieces of metal out of my legs and whatnot. But they'd given me a local anesthetic for that, it hurt, but not all that much. I looked out and realized something, they had given me medical attention while at least a hundred of their men are lying out there on stretchers in varying degrees of pain and disability. And they took me first.

Cohen: Isn't that something?

McGriff: And I saw that as an act of mercy. And what I derived from that was that even though they're my enemy, even though I know that some of them are capable of terrible evil conduct, that among my enemies, decent people with kindness and grace. And I'd never forgotten that no matter how much I may dislike any group of people for any reason. Among them there will always be the good folks. The decent people, and I must look for them. So, that's kind of one of my life's lessons.

Cohen: Yeah, that is a life lesson. You know, can we back up a little bit because I do think it's important -- the fighting for Hill 122 when you and your friends... are basically.. have no choice but to go into a ditch; could you describe that a little bit, please?

McGriff: Add a little bit to that, I'm not recalling....

Cohen: Oh, I'm sorry, sorry. I remember it was in the fighting for Hill 122, and I think it's still lower down, I think it's still either under brush or hedgerows and I believe you and a few people in your group come jump into a ditch?

McGriff: Yes. Okay, I got it.

Cohen: Could you explain the context a little bit more and what happened to you?

McGriff: Well, there were a lot of drainage ditches in hedgerow country because it rained a lot. And they had to get the water off the fields. These hedgerows surrounded fields, they were six to seven feet high and four feet thick at the bottom and two feet thick at the top. And the water that would be... that would fall into the field would have to be cleaned off, so there was this drainage ditch along most of that field that are surrounded by hedgerows. And we were in a drainage ditch, which was probably five feet deep, probably four feet across at the top and two feet at the bottom in kind of a V shape, and I'd guess our drainage ditch was eighty or ninety yards long. We were under fire, so we ran and jumped in the drainage ditch. All of us. That means all they guys in L Company and M Company. There were probably--wild guess--a hundred and thirty of us there, maybe. And one of them was killed just as we got there, so he laid in the middle of the drainage ditch, so we had to step over him every time we went up and down the ditch. So, it was from there that we were kind of in a two-day gun battle with our enemies... and one by one, we suffered casualties. We had two lieutenants with us, one was a first lieutenant, who I think was the acting commander of C--of L Company, and then the second lieutenant was our platoon leader. Both of them were killed in the gun battles and a few others were. And that's when then, finally they attacked us, and we ran out of ammunition. A lot of what I know about all of this is the report that was written up later and published and now I can verify the fact that we, actually, did run out of ammunition. Our own troops were unable to get any more to us. Well, the Germans are attacking us, their paratroopers, and here we are without ammunition, we didn't have much choice so we had to surrender. And that's what happened that we surrendered and they marched us into town and that's when the artillery barrage landed on us then, where I was wounded as were quite a number of other people.

Cohen: Oh and that's when you were hit. Was that the town of Beaucoudray or is this a -
-?

McGriff: Yes, yes, that's where it was. It actually is almost a stopping point along the road. It's still called the village of Beaucoudray. But it's--if you can picture yourself out on a country road and you see a few houses, that's what the town was like.

Cohen: Oh, goodness. So, you've been hit, you've been taken to the hospital at Mortain, and they do surgery on you ahead of other Germans at that point; and what happens next?

McGriff: Well, then they took us to the town of Renes, R, E, N, E, S, which is a little distance away, and the Germans had taken over a girls' school and turned into a

makeshift hospital. So, I along with quite a number of other guys, was placed in that hospital in a hospital bed. Some people came around and looked at me and said, "Hey, you're all right." [Laughter] I said, "Yeah, right." Anyway, I was there for a month and I did start to recover. It was a great diet program, let me tell you. I think I'd lost about twenty pounds while I was there. [Laughter]

Cohen: [Laughter] What sort of food was provided?

McGriff: A little bit of food was provided. It was mainly horse meat and some kind of vegetables I didn't recognize, slowly but surely--seriously after a month, I'm not sure how much longer we could've gone on like that. But anyway, one of our divisions suddenly attacked the town, they broke through. That was the day they broke through Normandy on the fourth of August and the Germans retreated and left us there. So, I was rescued after a month. After that, they sent me to a hospital in England then, and I was there for some months. Eventually, I ended up in Paris, and that was kind of my reward for all I'd been through, I guess.

Cohen: You know, in the book there's some photos where you're recuperating in a place called Entretat in France? Was this after you'd been in England or...?

McGriff: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was. I was in England in a hospital until I was able to get up and around and there's a law by the Geneva Convention that a man who has been captured by the enemy on either side and then has managed to get back to his own people, whether by escape, by rescue, or by an exchange, may not serve in combat again against the same enemy. If he does, he may be executed immediately, which is to say that I could no longer serve in a combat outfit once I've gotten out of the hospital. And I had to say that's okay with me. [Laughter]

Cohen: [Laughter] Right, that's enough. While you were in the hospital at Renes, were you hearing any reports on the progress of the war?

McGriff: Yeah, while I was a prisoner of war it was when they tried to assassinate Hitler. And needless to say, nobody told me about that while I was a prisoner of war. But we get... of course, we didn't know what it meant. We couldn't see the big picture. I knew there was a big battle going on up there in the forest and whatnot, but I had no idea about it. And frankly, because I'm now out of it and I'm sort of thinking I've done my part here; I didn't give it a heck of a lot of thought. I really wasn't smart enough. I'm still nineteen-years-old. When I got out of the hospital and went to England, I was still only nineteen-years-old. I wasn't smart enough to see our situation in the light of the whole world situation. And so, I guess I was

just wrapped up mainly in the fact that I'm okay, but yeah, we did get some hints that maybe we thought we were winning.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. And... I think you mentioned that after you recovered from your other surgeries in England that you were sent to London?

McGriff: Yeah, I went to London for a while... and this is always, this is your government at work. They had an office there where they would interview former prisoners of war to get from us any information they could get about the enemy that we might have. So, I arrived at this place in downtown London, and I looked around and thought, "Wait a minute. I was a private first class, it's been several months, what do you think I know that you don't already know?" [Laughter] But they never asked me. The man in charge was a colonel, and I figured out he was probably in charge of a combat outfit and was so bad at it that they fired him from that and sent him to London to take care of us. Anyway, he was out partying and that's my judgement. I don't know that for a fact.

Cohen: No. Did you enjoy being in London?

McGriff: Yeah. Except the V-1s and V-2s were coming in, mainly the V-2s. Do you know about those?

Cohen: Talk a little bit about them.

McGriff: Well, right after the invasion, the Germans had figured out a way to send V-1 bombs. They were like geiser-like little airplanes filled--loaded with explosives, and they had an engine in there that was timed to fly for X number of minutes and then stop. And they timed them so that they would fly from launching pads over on the continent and fly over London, and then the engine would stop. Then when the engine would stop, of course, it would then fall and become a bomb. The Americans and the British were able to shoot them down somewhat. They could see them. They were like fighter planes. They shot down about half of them and about... another quarter of them dropped in meaningless places out in the open. But the rest dropped into London, and you never know where they are gonna stop. So you'll hear this, "Pop. Pop. Pop." This little plane up there, two-thousand feet, you could barely see it goin' overhead. And then you could see it go over when the engine would stop, everybody ducked because they knew it's going to drop and explode. And then they stopped with those and came up with their V-2, which was a... I lack the vocabulary, here, to describe exactly what they should be called. But they would come over I think it was thirty-five hundred miles an hour, anyway, they'd explode with no warning at all. And, of course,

London is big enough and has enough people, that probably 95 percent of London never even saw one, but they were aimed as much as they could to land in the heart of London. So, I was there for a while during those coming in.

Cohen: Yeah...

McGriff: But London was kind of a wonderful place to be, nonetheless. It was... you know, it kind of romantic, not in the boy, girl situation so much but romantic in the sense of, "Imagine being in London during war time. During the blackout and all of that." So, it was kind of an exciting time.

Cohen: Yeah. So, you said you were in Paris, was that like...

McGriff: I was there for a couple of months.

Cohen: Like after London?

McGriff: Yeah, and this is after the war ended. So, I got to Paris about, oh, it was a little less than a year, I mean.... A little bit less than a year after... after Paris was liberated, and so I didn't get there during the time that they were... the immediate excitement, but I got there in time to see kind of the process of recovery among the Parisians, getting used to the fact that they we're free now after four, almost five years of occupied by the Germans...

Cohen: So, do you want to describe the events for which you received the two Purple Hearts and the Bronze Medal?

McGriff: Oh, [Laughter] the first Purple Heart, I got, I was in the hospital and a guy walked by with a big cart, and he tossed the Purple Heart medal on my bed as he went by. He said, "Here McGriff, here's yours." It was no big deal, they just sent them out to us. We were... the whole thing of awards was so unfair. Guys would... one man would do something very heroic and nobody saw it and he gets killed, so he doesn't get a medal. And his parents never know about it. Another one of his buddies happens to be an officer and says, "Charlie, you've been a good guy. I'm gonna turn you in for a medal." And there was so much of that unfairness about it. We all kind of--I didn't even know about medals until I'd been there quite a while. So, there isn't anything to tell there.

Cohen: It wasn't for your fighting at Hill 122?

McGriff: Yeah, but if I'd fought someplace else I would've probably have gotten the same stuff. It would have been for there. But Hill 122 was pretty... was pretty awful. I think everybody deserved whatever they got for that.

Cohen: So, when did you return from Europe?

McGriff: Well, I was... they gave me a non... a job with no value at all. I worked in a post office for a while. Here I am, I'm just turning twenty, I'm not allowed to go into combat, that's the only thing that I'd been trained for, and so what they did was, they took men like me; and there were hundreds of us who had been wounded and maybe dismissed from the hospital, not well enough to go back into combat but they can do something. So, they took all of us, gave us jobs that were formerly occupied by men who had managed to duck having to be in combat. And so, they pulled them out and put them into combat outfits and filled up all those jobs with people like me. That is kind of how we won the war. They ran out of combat troops because we'd had so many casualties in the infantry. But fortunately, after Normandy, the rate of casualties was far less.

Cohen: Yeah. Would you like to talk about what it was like when you were discharged and getting back to civilian life and what you did after the war?

McGriff: Yeah... it was kind of a strange feeling really of coming home, going back to my old--where I lived. I moved in with my parents, of course, and sleeping in my old bed. It was as though it never happened. I mean life went on, as though it was a movie I'd watched or something. That's the way I recall it now. I suppose I experienced it with a little more a pleasure than the memory. But it was just one of those things you had this terrible adventure that you could never describe. That's why so many of us who were in combat came home never talked about it. What can you say to somebody, whose never had anything like that happen to them? So, we just decided not to talk about it.

Cohen: Do you think that having been in the war helped make you decide to become a minister?

McGriff: That's a question I've been asked more than once. In one sense, no. I mean I didn't come home, "Oh, my goodness. God was there, guiding me. I made it through. I'm gonna be a minister." Nothing like that. I didn't even go to church at the time, but when I came back it, of course, guided me in many decisions I've made in my life. But the day came when I realized that this is all meaningless unless it has meaning that I don't see. And bit by bit in my life, I began to feel that maybe there is a God and that maybe... you know, why was I... I didn't tell

you this, but I was standing next to my squad leader, Earl Brewer, and we were hit by the same artillery shell at the same moment and as I--dragged me over the curb and I was lying on the curb there wounded but a long way from being dead. And Earl was dragged over next to me, and he looked up at me and started to ask, "What happened?" And he quit talking because he was dead. And I asked myself, "Why did I get off so easy?" But those are things to this day I've never been able to answer. So, I guess the answer to that is that my life has been one that's been touched by so many strange events that I felt led to into the ministry.

Cohen: Just led into it, yeah... And do you feel as though your congregants, especially in the 1950s and '60s, were there were a lot of World War II veterans, could they relate to you more because you too had been in combat?

McGriff: Yeah, that's a good question. It's true, you'd have to go back to the '60s because I was a businessman--I laugh now when I say that, but I was a businessman for ten years. I was a terrible businessman, and I knew I had to find something I'd be good at, so that became it. Yes, in the '60s and later, that did carry weight for a lot of people.

Cohen: And had you used the GI bill to...?

McGriff: Yes. Yes, you remind me, that was the first thing I did. I went over to Iowa??? University, I'd one semester before I went into the Army, so I went there and got my degree, and most of us did. That was the smartest thing the government could've done I think because it kept us from sixteen-million guys out there looking for a job at a time when the population was half what it is today. So, most of us went back to school, gave the... gave the rest of the people here--you know, I meant to say this; when we were all gone, for a time everybody grieved, "Oh, my poor son who's over there." But then they got used to it. They got the jobs that we no longer took, they got a whole new way of life and they adjusted to... the way the world had now become. And suddenly, we were all back, sixteen million of us piling into America, and all of a sudden, even so, some of them were out looking for jobs and whatnot. There was a lot of--it was kind of interesting. A lot of parents whose sons were eighteen or nineteen years old who were gone for two years? who went away barely more than children. Now they come back and they're twenty-one, twenty-two and they're men. And you don't treat them the same you did when they walked out the door. All parents had to learn that. [Laughter] But yeah, it was an interesting, exciting time with these guys.

Cohen: Right. You know, one thing that I think comes out a lot was that... failure of the leadership in the 90th Division. I think there were like three commanders that were fired in the first three weeks and you contrast that at one point with the 30th Division that had a more courageous leadership and were celebrated for their victory at Mortain. I guess I wonder what you make of all--what do you make of all this whole question of leadership in the 90th Infantry Division?

McGriff: Yeah, well, the 30th Division, I picked that out because of that particular example. But General [Omar] Bradley, who was kind of the number two guy over there, said, "One division is just like another. They're all equal, except for the top leader." And I think he was right. We had an... an incompetent leader, and it wasn't quite in three weeks, but it was a couple of months. Our division commander was fired, and then one of his... well, they're also... a division has three regiments, plus a whole lot of other units, and our regimental commander was fired as well as the divisional commander and then our battalion commander--he's one ??? down--they all got fired. And then we got another division commander in and he got fired. And we got another battalion commander in and he got killed. I mean, for a kid like me, you didn't know who was in charge. So, you just kind of learn to do what you're told. But we won the war. [Laughter]

Cohen: That's right. That's right. [Laughter] The other thing I found moving is that you talk a lot about is unexpected heroes and the average man doing his duty. Would you like to elaborate?

McGriff: Yeah, it was... nobody knows how they will react when their life is at stake. There's guys who... the captain the football team, you know--and I'm not singling out captains of football teams, I'm just using it as an example--who gets under fire and they're scared to death. And then you get some weasley little kid that was always in the back row and nobody knew what to expect from them, and he goes out and saves someone's life and wins a medal. And that happened over and over. I guess you'd have to say--I think I referred, in fact, to a sergeant we had carried this automatic weapon and he was "Mister Wonderful" and we all looked at him and thought, "Gosh, I wish I could be like him." He was good looking, he was everything the rest of us wanted to be, and when we got under fire, he chickened out--dug a hole and climbed into it. And I never blamed him, I thought he had no way of knowing how he'd react. But this is what happened. There was a kind of heroism that doesn't win medals. The heroism of the kid

who stands his ground. The kid who says, "I know I'm gonna get killed here, but it's my job and I'm gonna do it." And there were thousands of people like that.

Cohen: You know, here at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, there's the idea of the citizen soldier, you know, we try to collect the stories and artifacts of the citizen soldier. What does that term mean to you?

McGriff: A citizen soldier? Well, I guess that's what I was. I was a citizen; I was hired help. I was kind of... part-time, I guess. They hired me, they said, "Here's a rifle I want you to learn how to use this and go out and use it." And as soon as we won, why they said, "Okay, we're done with you." So, that was okay. And they took care of us. They took care of us. Not only the GI bill, but anybody... who was... you know, injured in such a way. Their limited but there's a pension and so forth.

Cohen: When did you and Marianne [his wife] begin to lead trips to Normandy?

McGriff: Eight years ago--nine years ago, a friend of mine who was quite active in my church. The church I served was a big one. When I left we had over four-thousand members. And so... you know, it was a pretty big market there, and he said, "I know there are people here that would like to go and see Normandy with somebody who had actually been there." I said, "I don't know." But Marianne is fluent in French. She's much younger than I. When she was in college, she went over and lived in France for I guess a semester of school with a family--a French family—and so she now is a very excellent speaker in French. So, my friend said, "Let's just put together a group of people." So, we got fifty-five people who wanted to go, and we went over, and we did it. Now we--we've never had less than fifty, and we've had sixty-some on one trip. And even now he's coming to me saying, "I got twenty-five people already and it's just starting."

Cohen: That's wonderful. [Laughter] What lessons do you hope that people will learn from the trip?

McGriff: What it costs to be free. How--because I can say whatever I want and can do whatever I want and don't have to try to be something I'm not because of a bunch of kids that went over and now can be found on Omaha Beach Cemetery. And this... we've had quite a number of young people, kids along. And that's the point of it all. Don't forget because if we hadn't won that war, we'd probably all be speaking German as the old joke goes.

Cohen: Is there anything that you'd like to add?

McGriff: Oh, no. I commend you for what you're doing. In fact, I wanted to ask you quickly, what is your connection with all of this here?

Cohen: Oh, okay, I'm a librarian and I married an American who lives in the Chicago area. And I also love history. I have, actually, a Masters in Jewish history. And I have some experience with oral history. I've interviewed Holocaust survivors years ago and so on. Then I began--I found a position here at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, you know, managing and organizing oral histories. And then we post them on the website. First, we'll send you a transcript for your review. You're welcomed to edit it, and we would write up a brief biography of a few paragraphs. If you wish to put some scans of photos on the website. And then there would be in this case an audio of the interview. Sometimes, we'll choose a highlight as well of about five minutes. The Museum and Library will sometimes use excerpts of the interview for different purposes. For example, right now there's a D-Day exhibit that just opened, and we have what they call a kiosk, where you can pick up a phone and listen to... you know, a few minutes of interviews of D-Day veterans. So, sometimes it can be used for exhibits is what I'm trying to say, or programs--there was a program aired more in the Chicago area, called like "Citizen Soldier" or "Pritzker Military Presents." And that consists of, you know, different speakers, either military or academics, public policy, you know. So, yeah, I think that's it. I also hope it's okay that I asked questions about Bill Mauldin. We--we -- the family did donate his works here, so, the special collections team will be planning a Mauldin exhibit. So, I hope that's okay I asked questions about that. [Laughter]

McGriff: Oh, sure. That's fine. I know he had a kind of unhappy last days of his life. At least according to his biography. I think he was wonderful, what he did.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah. And that's... and it's interesting to see how people reacted to him, to his work. So, yeah. So, that's--how I heard about you is that I think you have a friend called Garth? I've forgotten his last name. So, I believe I saw him here at the Museum at the opening of the D-Day exhibit. And he told me about you and gave us a copy of the book, which after reading it, it was intended to be a donation to the Library's collection... Yeah. [Laughter]

McGriff: Well, that was nice of him. I'm honored that he would do that.

Cohen: Yes, yes.

McGriff: So, you then... what will be the long-range objective of this program?

Cohen: I think the long-range objective is education. To be able to record the histories and... I wouldn't say testimony, but let other people know of the experiences of the citizen soldier. I kind of see it a little bit like creating primary sources and it will be up to others to use well. So, I mean if it's a researcher that's interested in certain topics or if it's for exhibits as we see here. Or also, I feel that there's a lot of potential, for example, I know there's oral histories from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library [and Museum in Springfield, Illinois], that have been used for this educational television network that was doing curriculum development on the Vietnam War because I think part of the challenge of the histories is for the people to cull whatever nuggets they need to show – you know, to their students for their films etcetera.

McGriff: Yeah, that's interesting. You know, Senator [Richard] Lugar [of Indiana] happened to be a member of my congregation. And he just passed away. He was a fine man, but he started this program for--I guess the Senate wanted to have veterans record their experiences. This is a negative thing I'm going to report, but it's the truth. They had to quit it because they were getting so many men say, "Yes, I won the Distinguished Service Cross," that they began to check up on them, and they found that most of them have never won the Distinguished Service Cross and it raised a whole question of veracity of so many men's report. And you could probably tell if a guy is telling how wonderful he was that you wonder about it. But anyway, they cancelled his program.

Cohen: They cancelled it?

McGriff: Yeah, and there's nothing you could do about that. When you talk to me if made up some of it, why you don't know that, it just happens that I didn't. You see what I mean. It's hard to recover the accuracy.

Cohen: No, this--this is true. On a personal note, I feel people have been exceptionally humble. As a personal example, my husband's uncle was in the Pacific in World War II—it was not combat but radar and so on--and I think his son was afraid he would give a very blown-up version, but it seemed to me, he ended up giving a very humble story. I guess--I guess...

McGriff: Well, they're the ones I believe.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah, and I think some people also are interested in the range of the experience. So sometimes there's an attitude that's even a little bit apologetic. "Oh well, you know I wasn't really in combat, you know, I was just here or there." Sometimes I hear that, as well. I think it would have to... be up to future

historians to confirm. Do you know what I mean, like, "Gee, does it make sense that..."

McGriff: Yeah, yeah.

Cohen: Sometimes... sometimes there's a degree of preparation before the interview as well. "Does it make sense that they were in Germany when we know this unit was in another place altogether." So, sometimes we do try to... I can't tell you every single interview, but some of them, we have a chance to check in advance, try to reconcile things that seem a little puzzling.

McGriff: Are you still there?

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah. Can you hear me?

McGriff: Yeah, the volume changed all of a sudden.

Cohen: Oh, sorry. [Laughter] I guess I'm trying to say we can a lot of times ourselves can notice if something seems a little odd and ask about it in advance if we know... and if not, in a way it's up to future historians that would say, "Oh, how can it be that this particular unit fought in such a battle when we know from our other sources they were somewhere else at this time."

McGriff: Yeah, yeah. [Laughter] Let me give you two reactions to what you just said. One is on the one hand, only about--I think it's only about seventeen percent of the men who went overseas fought in actual battle. Now, that does not include the Air--the Air Corps. I don't know what their statistics are. Even so, the men who were not in battle, had they not done their jobs and done them well, we could not have done our jobs well. And just because a guy wasn't under fire, doesn't mean he still wasn't a major reason for our victory.

Cohen: No, I totally agree. I think you brought this point up in your book, and I sort of saw it when I was doing preparation for some other interviews, you know, without supplies, without gas, without trucks to be able to move equipment and food; how can you... how can the fronts continue on, you know?

McGriff: Exactly. It took all of us... Well, I've enjoyed talking to you, Leah. I hope I contributed some small amount here.

Cohen: No, I enjoyed talking to you, and yes, you did. And at this point we--to be honest, don't have anybody from the 90th Infantry, and I really thank you, and also on

behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, we will send you by mail our challenge coin as a token of our thanks.