

**Henry F. Gurney
Veteran**

**Interviewer
Wayne Clarke**

**Interviewed on
28 October 2008
Saratoga Springs, NY**

Q: Interviewer

HG: Henry F Gurney

Today is 15 July, 2008. We are at the Isaac Griswald Public Library in Whitehall NY, and we are interviewing Mr. Henry Gurney, who is a World War Two Veteran.

Mr. Gurney, for the record, would you please state your full name, and date and place of birth please?

HG: (Smiles) Henry F. Gurney, March 24th, 1925, Whitehall, New York.

Q: Okay. And did you attend school in Whitehall?

HG: Whitehall Central. Yeah, Whitehall High School.

Q: Okay. And before you entered the service, did you go onto college at all?

HG: No (shaking his head no)

Q: Or have any advanced schooling?

HG: Shakes head no—No.

I; Okay. And do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

HG: I was working as an usher at the Capitol Theatre. But at that time, we didn't have any idea where Pearl Harbor was.

The jets that bombed Pearl Harbor were Pearl Harbor.

Q: Well, most people didn't (know where Pearl Harbor was)

HG: So, we got the geography books to find out where it was, and we didn't have a clue.

Q: And in what year did you graduate from High School?

HG: '43 (=1943)

Q: '43. Okay, when and where did you enter the service?

HG: When did I enter the service?

Q: Yes

HG: August of '43.

Q: August of '43.

HG: I got my draft notice when I was 18, in March. But they allowed me, they allowed all of the graduates to [??] their current, so they could graduate. Some of them didn't bother. Some of them just went, enlisted and went right away.

Q: Okay.

HG: I took the deferment, and graduated, and then I got called up in August. August the 3rd.

Q: All right. And whereabouts did you go for your basic training?

HG: Fort Hood, Texas. Fort Hood Texas was a Tank Destroyer base.

Q: Now, did you pick Tank Destroyer School?

HG: No. You didn't have the opportunity. They assigned you.

Q: And was that your first time away from home?

HG: It was, yeah.

Q: OK. And what was basic training like?

HG: I enjoyed it. (smiles) It was very regimented, but, uh.....it suited me.

Q: What was the climate like?

HG: Texas was hot. We were there.....We took a long basic that went from August until December, which was longer than usual. But I can remember it was so hot, and an extended period of no rain at all. Hot and dusty.

And when it did rain, it rained hard. Everything turned to mud. (chuckles). Fortunately, we had duck boards, which was slabs of wood that you would put over the dirt to make it easy to.... What was the name for them—Can't think of them now. But it rained so hard that I wrote home and told about it. It was an experience. (smiles & chuckles). After so many days we had finally got some rain. Then the whole place turned to mud. And a few hours later the sun come up, and it's dry again. I mean its' just that—that one extreme to the other.

Q: Any problem with snakes or scorpions there? Anything like that?

HG: Beg your pardon?

Q: Any problem with, like, snakes or scorpions there?

HG: Um. There wasn't a great deal of problems with it. We were alerted to the fact that when we did the, what they call the Battle Conditioning Course, which you ran every morning, there was one section of it where you had to crawl under barbed wire. And you're on your back & you got your --- you're pulling yourself forward, and trying to keep everything... But we were warned, occasionally there'd be a snake. But when you're doing this, you got a machine gun firing over you. So, you don't want to pop up and get in the way of a machine gun.

And apparently one young fellow, I guess, did pop up, or got surprised by a snake, but fortunately he didn't get hit by a machine gun.

I think they probably had a machine gun aimed high. (Motions w/his hand)
You hear the bullets whizzing over you, and they make it real realistic.

Q: Now, did you get any advance, or specialized training after basic?

HG: No. That was it. In basic you either learned to drive the tank, or you were a gunner, or you were an ammunition loader. And in the process, you qualified for the various weapons.

45 Revolver. The N-1 Rifle. And the 30- & 50-caliber machine guns. That's what we spent our time doing.

Q: Ok. And what was your specialty? What job did they train you for?

HG: I was a machine gunner.

Q: Machine gunner. Ok. And you trained on the 50---was it the 50-Caliber?

HG: No. The 30.

Q: The 30-caliber. And once you completed your training, where did you go from there?

HG: When we completed our training, they took us out of the tank destroyers and sent us to Camp Persh [5:40 ?] in Colorado, which we were told was for the formation of the 71st Infantry Division. So, we were up there for a few months in the winter time. And for the few months that we were there, we trained as infantry people. And then from there we went on maneuvers to California. A place called Hunter Liggett Military Reservation. I guess it's probably still used.

Q: Was that in Northern or Southern California?

HG: Southern California. Right below..... I think it was north of Los Angeles. Somewhere around San Jose.

In taking the maneuvers, we were up in the mountains. And just the fact that we were in California we thought we were going to be shipped to the Pacific. It didn't work out that way.

At some period during the maneuvers, I think during the spring, we were granted a furlough. And I know I had a 15-day furlough to come home from California. So I had to go from San Jose I guess it was, up to San Francisco to get a train—to come to NY.

The train was called the Challenger. It was a Day Coach. Day Coach all the way from California to New York. It took 5 days. It gave me 5 days home, because I had to allow 5 days to get back. Well, 15-day furlough and I got 5 days home.

Q: ok, now this was....

HG: I remember that we ate box lunches most of the time.

Q: So this was, you're talking the Spring of 1944 at that point?

HG: Yes. Right

Q: Ok, And then once you got back again, what happened next?

HG: This is kind of ridiculous, because we got back, and we weren't there a week or two, and they put us on a troop-train and brought us to the east coast, to Fort Mead Maryland. When we think about it, why the heck didn't they give us a delay in route and let us have more time at home? Save us that trip of going cross country & back again.

Q: Well that's the wisdom of the military.

HG: But the trip by Troop Train back to the east coast was much better, because we had bunks, and we had hot meals. They fed the troops. That was much better. But the fact that we...Then we went to Fort Mead Maryland which was a port of embarkation for going to Europe.

Q: Ok. And, do you remember, you went over by ship?

HG: By ship and a huge convoy Because when we left Fort Meade Maryland, I know there was a convoy. There was a convoy that left for..... and north of us there was another group of ships in the convoy. And south of us. As far as you could see—in front of us and in back of us, there was convoys. Of course you can only go as fast as the slowest ship.

And then on the edge of all this convoy you got your destroyers and your protective naval vessels that are protecting the convoy against the U-boats, or the submarines, or any enemy action that might occur.

Q: Did you go over with the 2nd Division?

HG: No. We went over.....we were unattached. I think we ended up being the replacements.

Q: Now what was the living conditions like aboard ship? Was it pretty crowded?

HG: It was. You had thousands of men on a ship. So crowded in fact that it was a continual chow line. You only ate twice a day, because there were so many people in front of you. They just finished one meal & they'd start all over again. And then they'd tried to get you—for at least an hour—up on deck. Because of all the decks, there were probably three or four decks that were just loaded with troops. And the sleeping accommodations were just hammocks, 2, 3, 4 high. We had a division of me. If the ship was large enough you'd have a whole division on that ship

Q: Now did you get sick at all on the ship?

HG: Beg your pardon?

Q: Did you get seasick at all?

HG: No. That's unusual. We didn't get seasick going across the ocean, but going across the English Channel, that's where I did it. (chuckles), and ruffled in the ocean.

Q: Whereabouts did you land?

HG: Plymouth England. We were only there for a short while, and then we... The thing that I remember there was that the English accommodations for their barracks were primitive compared to ours, what we had in the United States. They had straw in their mattresses, which we found unusual. (Smiles & shakes head.) But we weren't there long enough to find much fault with it. And then we were moved to the dock to go load up to prepare for D-day.

Q: Do you want to tell us what that was like? Did you go with basically the first or second wave on December, I mean June 6th?

HG: The division that I got attached to went in on D-1. I can remember, as I mentioned before, we got sick going across the English Channel as opposed to going across the Atlantic and no sign of illness.

I remember as we --- I think I was on a huge tugboat going across the channel, and we went from the tugboat, and we got on the rope-ladders & the LCVP's, which is Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel. And we went down the rope ladder. Before we went down the rope ladder, the cook stood there with a whole bunch of doughnuts—laughs—and gives each of us a doughnut. It's probably the last thing he could do, or the only thing he could do for us. Fill us up.

But he knew where we were going And I thought, that's all he could do—give us a doughnut.

Q: Now did you get to practice going down that rope ladder beforehand?

HG: Oh yeah! We had practiced that both in the states & over there.

Q: And you landed on Omaha Beach?

HG: On Omaha, right.

Q: Do you want to talk about that?

HG: I don't remember a great deal about it. I know all of the obstructions that were on the beach that were there to delay the events of the troops and to just stop the advance of vehicles and the tanks particularly. And there were barbed wire to stop the troops that way. And the only way you got over them was to lay flat on them, and somebody jump on your back and jumped over them. An awful lot of guys got killed that way (shaking his head).

Q: Now you were under, when you were crossing, or going across the beach, you were under heavy fire?

HG: Oh yeah. It was so, all enemy fire. In fact there was still enemy planes flying over.

Q: How long did it take you to get off the beach and undercover?

HG: I don't know. (Contemplates). Actually I don't remember the time of day that we hit the beach, if it was morning, afternoon, or night. Seems to me, for practical purposes it should have been morning. And if it did, it should have taken us all day to get on the beach and to get beyond the cliffs. And there's a cliff right there in front of us, and we had to ---someone had to repel up the cliff to get to where we were going.

There was a pillbox up on that cliff, which was taking shots at all the ships that were coming. And heavy artillery. There was some of the ships that got hit. A lot of the ships that were carrying the personnel, the troops, a lot of them got hit. I mean they were sitting ducks. The guys are sitting up there with their with these huge cannons, plus the machine guns that they had. (Shakes his head). There's an awful lot of troops that lost their lives on the beach.

Q: Now were you separated at all from your group or unit?

HG: No. Our group stayed pretty much together. The work group, so that didn't land where they were supposed to unfortunately. That happened particularly for some of the paratroopers that went in ahead of us inland. But they did their job and made it easier for us to get to where we were going.

Q: So after that first day, come nightfall, did you get dug in or dig foxholes?

HG: Yeah. Every time you stopped you dug in fortunately. The first experience that I can remember is after we got off the beach and we were moving in to some,... inland, somebody tripped a wire, and it activated a German grenade. And we actually saw the grenade rise up, and we thought surely the thing

was going to explode. Then we all scattered and hit the side of the road, but it turned out to be a dud. (Chuckles & smiles) We got lucky.

Q: And then, what happened next.

HG: There was another occasion, I don't know what the hell happened, but I got hit right in the center of my helmet (Points to the middle of his forehead), and the bullet went between the helmet & the helmet liner. It went around the right side & came out the back end. And it tore the cover off my entrenching tool, which was a shovel that had a canvas cover on it. I didn't know this until, when we stopped and I needed the shovel So I went to get it, and I took my pack off & I see the canvassing was all tore apart. But all I got out of it was a little flesh wound that breached my forehead. It bled but it wasn't even serious enough to go to a first aid, so there's no record of that. That was apeople would look at me with a hole in the center of my helmet and say "what the hell are you doing walking around, you ought to be dead" you know.

Q: Ok. And where did you advance to after that? Did you fight in the hedgerows?

HG: Oh yeah. We went through the hedgerows, and which was remarkable. There were so many of them. It separated, the hedgerows is what separated their various fields, probably the various properties of one owner to the other.

And there were times when the Germans would be on one side of the hedgerow and we'd be on the other. We could hear 'em talking. It was only a matter of using the mortars, to have a direct hit of the mortars there and get them out of the way. Or having the explosive high enough so they'd get the order to move out.

One of the greatest things I thought happened was, as far as the tanks was concerned, was that...these hedgerows were high, and they were thick, and they were overgrown with bushes. I mean just to get over them you make yourself a very visible target. But a few days into the battle, they discovered they could put a snow plow in the front of the tanks. So one of these tanks would come up & hit one of these hedgerows where you got a path threw it. And this made things a lot easier. So the engineer deserved a lot of credit for coming up with that idea.

I can remember going through St Low—that was one of the big battles. I tried to review some of these names beforehand, but I couldn't find them. St Low. Like the whole Normandy province, that was the first campaign. Northern France. The 2nd division got assigned to go to Brest, (France) which was a submarine pen for the Germans. They had an extensive submarine base there. Very well fortified. The top of it, 10 foot thick concert on top—I'm being conservative. Probably more than that. It was very well fortified and they didn't want the bombers doing any damage to the submarines & they had a lot of them there.

They also had an airport that entered on one side of Brest, and this was our objective—to take the airport & then get into Brest.

While we were at the airport, I got hit by a high explosive shell, and tore---a big piece of shrapnel tore another chunk out of my steel helmet. This put me out of action.

Q: So you received another head one.

HG: Well the first was just a flesh wound that didn't do much. It didn't prevent me from doing anything. I did what I had to do. But the other one there. That just knocked me out I guess.

And that was---we were preparing to go out on patrol. In fact, we were looking over one of these hedgerows to determine where we had to go. When the explosion occurred, from out of nowhere, we

didn't see anything. But part of that explosion, I had this great big piece of shrapnel tore, probably a 3 or 4 inch hole in the right side of my helmet (pointing to the right side of his helmet, behind his ear) So that kind of knocked me silly, and the next thing I know I'm picked up on a stretcher & I'm carried back to an aid station. And from an aid station I was taken to a ship, back to Cherbourg, to go back to England.

Just about that time, part of that time, they had just issued the camouflage outfits. These were just coming out. And I was a scout at that time, so I was a camouflage outfit. When I was placed on the ship to go back to England, the personnel thought I was part of the German POWs that were going back to England. I was put down in the hold of the ship. I didn't realize this. I just looked around and saw a bunch of guys with the German cap on, and I thought: Well, where's my guys. I didn't see any. And then they were starting to pass out K-rations, this is to give 'em something to eat. And I didn't think anything about that. We got K-rations and that's what we'd been eating anyway. So about that time, one of the guys came down one of the gangways, one of the sailors on the ship. And we looked at each other, and there was a recognition there. It turned out it was a guy I went to school with.

Q: Oh my God

HG: A sailor on a ship that I'm going back to England on. We took --Russ Norton was his name--we took geometry together, (Laughs), and he came over to me. I didn't recognize him at first because he had a mustache. He didn't have it in school. But he came over to me and said:

"What the heck are you doing here?" "Well", I said, "This is where they put me."

He said: "You're down here with the German POWs." He said: "You don't belong here."

So he got in touch with somebody and they moved me top side, put me on a bed with a nice soft mattress and saw that I got a hot meal.

He got in touch with my parents, or he got in touch with his father and told him that he had met me and that I was wounded, but I wasn't seriously wounded---I was gonna live. And his parents got in touch with my father, and told him. And this all happened before the War Department notified him. So that was one of the highlights of Russ.

Q: Now let me ask you this. Did you get to keep that helmet as a souvenir?

HG: No. That would have been quite a souvenir. (chuckles & Smiles) That helmet ended up on the battlefield someplace in Brest. I never got to keep it. But fortunately Russ & I both made it through the war and he ran a filling station afterwards and I used to be one of his customers. We often talked about it.

Q: Now how long were you in the hospital for?

HG: Well, I was there for a couple of months. Because this had to be probably in August, in the latter part of August we were in Brest. And September and October I was in a hospital in Oxford England. And toward the end of my stay there I was allowed to go into Oxford on a pass. And I went in to a USO. Never saw anyone from Whitehall, other than Russ Norton. So I go into a USO in Oxford England and I come across the name of a guy that I worked with in the Capitol Theater (laughs & smiles) who had been a visitor at the USO there. His name was Bill Hertz/Hervis. [24:50 ?] Well he'd been there before me. So I thought, he had been there before me.

And just to see the name from somebody, and he had "Whitehall" on it, (on the sign in page) Whitehall, NY. . Just to see somebody's name from home was a treat. (smiles)

But after recovery there, I was sent back through the replacement depots, back by the end of the continent [26:32 ?] And, in fact, one of our replacement depots was, a, Bastogne,

HG: No. No, they assigned me, at that time to the 104th Division, which was the Timberwolf Division. And this is under the command of General Terry Allen. General Terry Allen was the general in charge of the First Division when they landed in Africa. After that, after that campaign was over he got assigned to the 104th which is one of the latter divisions that entered Europe.

So it was after the 104th Division had landed in Holland and come through Holland, I joined them just after Holland at a place called Eschweiler Germany. And we went through-oh-over the Rhine River and Cologne and through Germany. And I was with them right until we met the Russians at the Elbe River.

HG: There was one point in the fighting there where we were in a forest and the Germans had commandeered a American machine gun nest. They had taken the American machine gun. And there's a very distinct difference between the German machine gun and ours. The German machine goes "brrrrrrrrrrrrrrr" at a rapid rate of fire. Where ours is "brrt brt" or "bup bup bup bup bup bup bup". You know you can almost count it: 1 2 3, where the German's (machine gun) was "boom".

And we were in the forest at the time. I don't know if It was the ... [29.57 ?] forest, or where it was, but anyway, it was in the wintertime. Snow was deep. It was deep. Couldn't see where we were going, but we hear this guy. We were yelling to him. "We're Americans. Just stop you're firing". Of course we didn't realize it was Germans that had an American machine gun.

HG: That was just before we met the Russians. Just before the Elbe River, where the two parts are joined up. Before we hit that we were in a small town and I picked up a stomach wound. I don't know if it was a bullet wound from a machine gun or a sniper or something got me in the stomach. I guess I could see the guys crawling up. Of course I got a machine gun at that time. Of course I was trying to provide cover for the guys that were coming in back of me. And then we got the order to withdraw, I guess to a more strategic location or back to where we dug some foxholes And somebody yelled at me that we got to move out, or move back anyway.

Here we had lost a hell of a lot of men trying to get as far as we were, and I felt so weak—what are we turning around and going back for. I could see the guys ahead of us, so as far as I thought we were

moving ahead, but apparently the elements on both sides of us were having problems, when they were. So we couldn't do it alone.

So we got the order to make what's called a Strategic Withdrawal. It's a retreat, not only a strategic withdrawal. So I was about the last one to leave there because I had to cover all these guys that are in the back, were in back of me.

So the machine gun was one of those that you could fire from the hip. It had a bipod in the front. Originally the machine gun had a tripod. You put the tripod down & you put the machine gun on that. Then they came out with the one you could fire from your hip and it had just two spindles on the front. Made it handier.

So that's the one I'm using. And I got a keg of ammunition—and that's heavy. And the machine gun on my hip, so I'm just giving them a spray (mimics holding the machine gun and moving it side to side) and you're just keeping 'em down while my troops get out of the way.

I'd just spray 'em, and then I'd turn around and run. Turn around and spray 'em again.

And one time I turned around to spray, the bullet got me in the stomach. It twisted the belt clip on the buckle of my cartridge belt. It went through a can, through a package of tobacco that I had in my jacket. It tore a gap in my abdomen.

I don't recall any pain—probably the shock of it, or something. And I was able to run. Still able to run. So after I was hit I got behind a wall—that's where I was headed for anyway—a brick wall. So if I could just get out of sight of them, well they wouldn't be able to follow it up and hit me again.

So after I got behind the wall, I guess I collapsed, and then I got picked up with a stretcher case. And some men carried me back. This time they put me on a plane and carried me back to a hospital in Paris. From Paris I was put on a hospital ship & brought back to the states.

Q: Now do you recall what, approximately what date that was in time? Was it towards the end of the war?

HG: While I was in the hospital in Paris, the Germans surrendered.

Q: Ok. Now do you remember where you were when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

HG: No, I don't remember where I were, but we heard about it, we learned about it through the Stars & Stripes, which was a newspaper. We never got the newspaper Stars & Stripes until days, or weeks after it was published. But that was the first indication that we got that President Roosevelt had died.

It was one issue of the Whitehall Times that I received that I learned one of my friends, Byron **Huptman [35:04 ?]**, another one of my classmates and a guy I worked with in the theatre, that he had got killed. I didn't know that until, what, I read it in the Whitehall Times.

Q: Now when you heard about the end of the war, of course everybody, the end of the war in Germany, was there a lot of celebration?

HG: There was a celebration of the war---right. Chuckles. I've mentioned this before, on another interview. The guys were taking their condoms and blowing them up and making balloons of them and bouncing them all over. (chuckles)

It was part of the celebration. (smiles) Everybody was happy.

Q: So you were sent back to the states to recuperate

HG: I come back on a hospital ship, which was great because---well you got fed three times a day. The hospital ships had rations and a half. They fed you well. So we came back to St Albans Naval Hospital. That was my first stop.

Q: How long did it take you to recuperate?

HG: I don't remember. I think it was in August that Japan surrendered?

Q: Mm hm (yes)

HG: I was home on a leave from the hospital when Japan surrendered. And this was another celebration.

I come from a railroad town, and all the train whistles were going off. The church bells were ringing. Everybody was running down to church still to say a prayer for thankfulness. It was another big celebration. I thought, here I was in the hospital when Germany surrendered. And I was lucky enough to be home when Japan surrendered.

And the ironical thing about it was after the war, after the war in Germany was over, the second division was scheduled to go to Japan. And I wasn't looking forward to that at all.

Of course I wasn't put in the 2nd (Division) at that time, but the second division was scheduled to go to...In fact, they loaded up and were on the high seas to go to Japan when Japan surrendered.

SMILES BROADLY

Q: Now where and when were you discharged?

HG: After St Albans Naval Hospital I was put on limited duty and I was sent to Ogelthorpe Georgia. It was like a typewriter. All they did down there was type orders. Until, from whenever I got there until—for a couple of months when I got discharged in November.

And I got out on points, in November. November 5th 1945.

Q: And when you came back home, did you make use of the GI Bill at all?

HG: I took on the job training. I worked at a grocery store before I went in, so I took on the job training for store manager. So I was in that program for a couple of years.

Q: Ok. Did you join any veterans organizations?

HG: Yeah. In January of '46 I was invited to join the American Legion. Been with the Legion ever since (smiles)

Q: Have you maintained contact with anyone you were in the service with at all?

HG: No. I tried, but I wasn't successful.

Q: Ok. After the service you came back to Whitehall?

HG: Right

Q: And did you...? You mentioned that you became a store manager. Was that locally?

HG: Well yeah But then, after I went through the on-the-job, I decided that I'd rather have a different line of work. And, there was as civil service exam that came up for the post office, so I took that. I passed it. And I think it was in '49, March of '49, that I went in the Post Office

Q: And you stayed there?

HG: I stayed there until November of '85.

Q: All right. How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life.

HG: Oh, probably a great deal. I was just a hometown boy. Never got out of Whitehall. If I went to Glens Falls, that was a big deal. It broadens your horizons for one thing. You saw a different culture, a different way of living.

I was kind of glad in high school I had taken French, so this kind of came in handy when I was in France. I thought well---I often thought of it---our French teacher would say "A mes amis. I can't wait until you have an opportunity to see La Belle France" But we're sitting there thinking: When the heck are we going to go to France. (laughs) So we were just learning French words in high school. No one thought we'd go to France. You never realized someday we'd end up there. But at least you could make yourself understood. If you wanted something to eat you could tell them what you wanted to eat, or thank them for whatever they did.

Smiles & chuckles

Q: Ok. Well thank you very much for your interview

HG: You're welcome (smiles)

Q: Now we've got some photographs that you brought.

HG: Yeah they're some newspaper clippings over there

Q: Do you want to hold them up?

HG: (Walks to the table w/the articles he brought in. Sits down & Unfolds a newspaper) Well this is the Whitehall Times from November of 2007 for Veteran's Day last year. (Holding up the newspaper showing the front page) They interviewed me and the picture ...

Q: I can zoom right in on that. That's you in the photograph. (referring to the photo on the lower right of the front page of the paper)

HG: That's me in the photograph and that's with some of the awards I was presented with.

(Article is titled: "A world war remembered. WWII vet Gurney recounts enlisting, D-Day, victory")

(Holding up a newspaper article titled: "The first one got to me") This was taken, probably Memorial Day of last year.

Q: And you were also American Legion Post Commander too?

HG: Oh yes. I was Post Commander back in '49. I'd been active in the Legion and had gone from Post Commander, County Commander, District Commander and Department Vice Commander. I was on the Board of Directors for the American Legion ...?? **42:46**
State for 30-some-odd years.

Q: Well, thank you very much. What are the medals you received?

HG: Well, the Bronze Star is the highest one. And the Purple Heart with Cluster for the two wounds.

Q: And you received a Combat Infantry Badge.

HG: Yeah. The Combat Infantry Badge. The Good Conduct Medal. The Victory Medal. The New York State Conspicuous Service Cross. I guess that's about it.

Q: Well, that's pretty impressive. Thank you very much.

HG: You're welcome.