



Gilbert J. McLean

United States Army

Corporal

European Theater

Date Interviewed: 2/14/05

Location of Interview:
Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:
Rick Randle

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Rick: We're happy to have Gilbert McLean with us who was born and raised right near Liberty Park in Salt Lake City and lives right near there today. Gilbert, can you tell us a little bit about your early life?

Gil: Well I was born in 1920 and that's a long time ago now but looking back it was just typical of how things were in the 1920's and '30's. I went to kindergarten and grade school and junior high. Later I went down to South High School, which is now the Community College. Then I went up to the University.

Rick: You graduated from South High and then attended the University of Utah?

Gil: I was in there about two years or a little over in Mechanical Engineering school and that's where I was drafted out of school in spring of '44. My honorable discharge gives the date.

Rick: So you were here going to school in 1941 when the Japanese attacked and what was the attitude of the people in Salt Lake and what was going on around that time?

Gil: Well I think we all kind of wondered. There was a lot of uncertainty. I chose to stay in school as long as I could, taking advantage of my younger years to get a good education as much as possible during those years. I think I was typical of all of us who were kind of looking forward – you wanted to be qualified for whatever our field might be and to get a good education. To be a well rounded good honorable citizen and basically that's it.

Rick: When the war started was there a lot of feelings that we might not win the war?

Gil: I don't think there's any question – good old America, we'll find a way to do it and we'll do it!

Rick: There was a lot of patriotism?

Gil: That's right.

Rick: Then tell me how you got entered into the service and your early years in the service.

Gil: As I said I was inducted at Fort Douglas not far from here. At the time I went in I went in to find out about it and also in thinking in terms of getting a little more education I applied in the Navy. They were looking for trainees for Radar Technicians Training School. I took those papers with me and I said, "*well your Army orders are dated today and your Navy orders are not ordered until next week. So as of now you're in the Army*". And I was kept there that very day. I don't remember which building I was put in but that very day I was given a room assignment in Fort Douglas while all the paperwork was being shuffled and everything put in order.

Rick: Then where did you go to basic training?

Gil: First I went to Camp Fort Riley Kansas where that photograph I showed you is part of the group I was with. I was at Fort Riley Kansas (I don't remember just how long – several weeks) and then our group was transferred down to Camp Halsey Texas, not far from Austin I believe it was. Of course Texas is somewhat different from Kansas. We had typical combat infantry training (as I later found out) having been born and raised in a sheltered environment it was quite a drastic experience. Seeing movie transcripts and things of combat kind of getting us ready for what was to follow. It was a '*rude awakening*' I'll put it that way. I wasn't used to that type of thing.

Rick: Then after Fort Riley where did you go?

Gil: After Fort Riley we went down to this Camp Halsey in Texas and from there we were sent to a unit and the war was way underway at that time and as I mentioned earlier

we went over. We finally landed in Liverpool. We boarded a ship incidentally that was a big former luxury liner – I think it was The Manhattan that was converted to a troop ship. There were 10,000 of us put on that one ship and as we headed out across the Atlantic apparently the radar people picked up periscopes of German submarines that were zig-zagging through on the east coast. Well we started zig-zagging on the ship and of course I'm no sailor and I immediately got seasick. But we zig-zagged north, way up north to where we could even see ice floating in the water and came up over the North Sea and down into England from the north side – down around between the coast and into Liverpool where we landed.

Rick: What were your accommodations like?

Gil: They improvised tack-welded hammocks. They tack welded the various bunks and things and stacked them up. There were four layers in each room and we slept (*Slept*) in...

Rick: So if you're in the bottom bunk and the top guy is seasick you've got problems.

Gil: Yeah, you hope you were swinging in the opposite direction that they're swinging. It was a miserable experience to say the least.

Rick: How many days were you at sea?

Gil: Roughly ten days going over and incidentally later it was 11 days of seasickness coming back.

Rick: You landed in Liverpool and take us from there.

Gil: From Liverpool I'm not sure of the area in England but we went through somewhere on a train for a little while and then we got on another ship and crossed the Channel and

landed right into (I'm not sure where it was) within a couple of days we were in the area close to what has been known as the "*Remagen Bridgehead*" in Germany.

Rick: Was it in LeHavre France where you landed?

Gil: It could have been LeHavre, I'm not sure. I know we exited out of Liverpool coming back.

Rick: So before you knew it you were right in the middle of Belgium?

Gil: Oh yeah. Almost immediately we were across part of Belgium. I had a little advantage there, I happened to learn to speak a bit of French language in high school so I got along fairly well in Belgium and part of Holland. When we got into Germany I was totally lost with all that gibberish. I didn't speak any German. I got along fine in France and Belgium.

Rick: So you found yourself right in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge then up there in the Ardennes region?

Gil: We were moved quickly by convoy trucks up as reinforcements (or replacements as I found out later). The Germans had a desperate drive on at that time trying to break through and of course the allied forces were equally desperate trying to push – there was kind of a stalemate for a few days right up across the river of the Remagen Bridgehead. I was personally there (being mechanically oriented and that type of thing). I actually worked on that bridge for awhile replacing some of the timbers and things to get equipment and jeeps and small pickup trucks and various things carrying supplies across that bridge. I worked for a couple of days there just repairing that bridge to get equipment across. Some places we reinforced it so that heavier equipment could roll across it. We put additional pontoons underneath places to give it a little more buoyancy.

Rick: I understand you were attached to the 99th Division.

Gil: 99th Infantry Division, yes. It was called *'The Checkerboard Division'*, I've got a shoulder patch of that.

Rick: That was the first group of Americans into Germany because the Remagen Bridge was the only one that was not blown.

Gil: Right. It was still in tact but it wasn't the best of bridges as we would mechanically speak of good bridges but it was passable. It was adequate.

Rick: Tell us about some of the combat experiences you had during the Battle of the Bulge.

Gil: Well it's hard to know where to start or which ones to enumerate. There are so many memories and of course it's been 60 something years ago so I don't remember which was first second or third.

Rick: It was in the wintertime and I understand there were a lot of men that had feet that were frostbitten, what were your conditions like as far as your uniform and stuff?

Gil: As we got into Germany I was given an escape map; I think I showed it to you. Neither our leaders nor the enlisted men really knew much detail about what we were getting into. It was so quick and such a rapid push we really didn't know what to expect and we soon almost memorized that map in that particular area. There were a lot of details giving where rivers were, where roads were, where any railroads were, almost like contour lines on a surveyors map – elevations and that type of thing so we knew a little bit about what was up in front of us. Of course all hell was breaking loose all around us.

Rick: As you were advancing you were a Forward Observer?

Gil: That was after the first few weeks in actual frontline combat and I of course was given almost at that time a combat infantry badge. Of course we didn't wear it because as a Forward Observer we purposely didn't want to be recognized. We didn't wear anything that would be recognized as *'allied'* or *'American'*. I soon found an old farmhouse that had been abandoned and fortunately there was a fellow that was almost my build. He had little coveralls with strap-overs and a bib in front. He had one of those and a beat up old shirt with ragged sleeves and I mussed up my hair and put on some of his shoes even. Mine are a size twelve and fortunately he was a big man and I even wore his shoes. As a Forward Observer your basic main purpose is to get information and see what's out there. To keep undercover so you wouldn't be seen as far as possible and even if you were seen you wouldn't be recognized other than a typical old farmer. When you could you'd get back to where some of the communications people had laid telephone wires and we'd tap into them and relay information back where it was safe (as far as we could tell) and others where there were a concentration of troops or camps or equipment that you would see – *"don't go there, go around this other way"*. That type of thing.

Rick: Then as you advance, where were you when Germany surrendered?

Gil: Oh there's a lot that happened between now and then but I had gone through what the military says *'DS'* – Detached Service. I was originally with the 1st Army and later in the war I was transferred into the 3rd Army as part of the Forward Observers and I was right up almost into Austria at the time the 6th SS Panzer Division surrendered to our unit. Some of the remaining (still alive) officers that were around asked me to go out and bring him in. They knew I'd been through a lot of things before and I was one of those that always found a way to come back or to communicate back. Sepp Dietrich was the Commandant of the 6th SS Panzer Division and according to German tradition if you surrender the commander turns over his personal pistol as a token of surrender (he gives up his own protection so to speak). I've still got that gun, it's a typical Luger with a beautiful leather case and engraved in the back of it you can see the Swastika sign stamped into it. As near as we could determine he was one of those that occasionally was

in the extermination camps. It was really a genocide situation; they were killing anyone that was a German-Jew basically. Anybody else that happened to get in the way was likewise taken care of. But I've got that Luger that was a token of surrender and I brought him and his gun back but I was given permission and authority to keep it and bring it home – I still have it. That 6th SS Panzer Division was one of the key frontline troops and Sepp Dietrich as I mentioned was a close personal friend of Adolph Hitler and he was kind of tutored along in the warfare methods and part of this genocide program that I referred to that they had going. Some of it has been shown or explained on TV and lately I've seen a lot of it on television some of the details of that are things you wouldn't believe. I will try to explain some of them. Things happen that...you talk about man's inhumanity to man.

Rick: That pistol that you showed me, you mentioned that it had probably been used to kill thousands of prisoners.

Gil: There was no way of knowing but he killed indiscriminately. Anybody that happened to be there he'd show them he was the top man in his area. That was it.

Rick: Is there any other experiences that you'd like to mention to us? It was close to the surrender of the war, I know it was late '44 when you got into Germany and so it was close to their surrender.

Gil: Winter of '44 and early spring of '45 (I don't remember the dates) some of that is written on the back of that map that I mentioned. I purposely kept track of where the 99th Checkerboard Division was even while I was on detached service. I recorded the dates where that unit was so I could substantiate where things were at a certain date.

Rick: Tell us about when Germany surrendered and where you were when you first heard about it and what are your thoughts on that?

Gil: Well I was right up close to the Austrian border (I can't remember the name of the town).

Rick: That's okay. Was there a lot of elation and joy on part of the troops?

Gil: Oh yeah. You've seen the episodes on TV of M*A*S*H waiting for the war to be over...I won't go into that but obviously we were elated that finally it was over! That old expression *'This too Shall End'* (you know you cope with a lot of things). We were (as some would say) foolish but I think the American forces and the Allied forces were confident they were going to win. Let me just mention one other thing quickly. As a combat infantryman on the ground, after the war was over several years ago I got invited into a group at the VA Hospital – Post Traumatic Stress. I was subjected to that and so much had happened so quickly I was extremely tense and one of the things...Doctor Phil Christensen was the head Psychiatrist there and he said, *"Gilbert, you've got to find a way to get some of this out"*. Maurine had asked when I first got home (she was curious about it). I didn't mention a lot of details in my letters and I just didn't want to talk about it. He said, *"this is part of your Traumatic Stress, you've got to get it out and get rid of it."* And so from that point on I did start talking about it, not only to just Maurine but to others that I'd meet up with. When they asked a question I'd freely give my answers. This was hard for Maurine to understand really. I think she wondered why I was talking about it now and when I first got home I wouldn't talk about it. When you've had buddies that you've been with, trained with for months, been in combat with and to have them die in your arms or shot up. No matter where it happened to be – banged up or kind of riddled with ammunition and you're trying to stop the bleeding and they're dying in your arms – those are very tense situations! You know, I'm somewhat tender hearted and the tears just rolled down your face even thinking about it – even now. This one couple I'm thinking of – his wife and two children had come down to Camp Halsey Texas and I met his wife and two children. I had him die while I was holding him trying to stop the bleeding – that's extremely tough.

Rick: When you were doing this infantry work how long would you go before you could take a shower or was that just unheard of?

Gil: Yes, actually it's unheard of. This is a little on the course side, but true – for example, you're out in the forest with snow that deep and at night it was down as far as 10 below zero and you're coping with those kind of conditions...pardon this but I'm going to refer to it bluntly – you've got to have a BM and what do you do? You're out there, you have nothing on hand – do you use your fingers? Do you wipe it off in the snow? Get a snowball to get a finish wipe? Most people wouldn't even think about something like that let alone actually experience that.

Rick: Yeah, there were really hardships.

Gil: Let's get away from that.

Rick: All right. Well that's an interesting story – winning that Battle of the Bulge was the turning point to defeating Germany.

Gil: That's right.

Rick: Well now tell us about how you got home and what happened after the war was over?

Gil: After the war was over it took a little period of time for the transportation people to get things organized of course. I don't remember just how many weeks it was but it was several weeks before they finally got a bunch of us in a little train and we transferred to another train and then another train and finally ended up down in Marseille in France. We went straight across France down to Marseille down at the southeast end of France. There were so many of us there and they were lacking in facilities and so on. Another interesting thing – in trying to be fair to everybody it was based on a point system. The enlisted men had to have 65 points as a starting point to those that came home first. The

officers had to have 85 points. That was the determination, of course they got a few more points for being in charge or something and that reminds me of another thing. At one point the officers that I was with in my unit had all been killed. I was the ranking officer, I was the lowly T5 Corporal and that's in my Honorable Discharge Record. Automatically in combat the next ranking enlisted man becomes the Company Commander or Captain. I purposely turned it down because I wanted to get home quicker – instead of waiting for 85 points I wanted to get home starting at 65 so I turned it down. So I came home as a T5 Corporal and was glad to get home to my wife and a little baby daughter.

Rick: So you had a wife and a child?

Gil: She was two years old when I got home (between two and three). That was part of the background memory – you've got to get the job done and get home and get on with life.

Rick: That's an interesting story, we really appreciate your service and your willingness to come here today and share that information with us.

Gil: There were a lot of things that I brought home. When we were out in the Ardennes (that's one of the major campaigns that I was involved in as frontline combat) it was beautiful country – lush with big pine trees and beautiful forest land with rolling hills in that area. Somehow I felt impressed...there was one big pine tree about this big around up in front of me (50 yards maybe) and part of my military records don't just say that I was a good rifleman, it says that I was an expert – I'll show you that on my discharge paper. They couldn't hardly believe (I didn't wear glasses at that time, my vision was strictly 20/20) but I could almost see a fly on a pole way down there. My hearing was good also (I didn't have hearing aids that the VA has furnished me since) but it was all quiet and peaceful and I just felt like I better check it out. There was nothing going on, it was just as quiet as it is here in this room. I took very careful aim with my M1 Grand Rifle and chipped the bark off of the left side of that tree and then with just another single

shot a few seconds later I chipped the bark off of the right side of that tree. There was no obvious reason for anything like that to happen – the Gestapo man that was behind that tree knew that somebody knew he was there. I don't know how I knew that but I just felt...you know it was one of those things you just sometimes think of checking out. He pulled out a white handkerchief and very carefully from behind the tree just so that his hands were showing he waved this white handkerchief surrendering. Of course I took him in as a POW and I frisked him down at first to be sure he had no weapons, he didn't have any pistols but he did have a sidearm and a Mauser Pistol. After I checked him for no obvious reason I just kind of felt like I should re-check him to be sure and down inside his boot there was a knife this long. He was saving that as an escape weapon. Stahlingham Steel(sp?) – some of you might know that name – it's a special high-grade steel that was made in Stahlingham(sp?) in Germany. It was so sharp I actually kept it to shave with. When I was going back into the headquarters office again to report in I would shave before I went back (with a week or two of growth you look kind of scrubby to go back into the Colonel or the General) I'd shave with that knife and I kept that. I don't know, those kinds of things happened and I have no explanation for them but I just felt impressed I should, so I did. You know, thoughts go through your mind *'just be sure you've checked him carefully'*. He was saving that of course for an escape weapon and I kept it and brought it home. That Mauser Pistol is an interesting one – for those of you that might not be familiar with them, again it's a German Paratroopers gun. It has a wood holster; instead of a leather holster it has a wood holster. You take the pistol out, it's fairly long – total about like that and you could either fire it as a pistol or you could take this wooden holster and put on the clip on the end of the pistol grip and then you can hold it up as a rifle. They're a very accurate weapon. Again I brought one home and I had military permission to bring it home – General Walter E. Lauer I think was the one that signed the permit. You know they kept close control over that type of thing.

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Gil: ...this is a leather piece that I personally made out of some leather that I just happened to pick up in an area and as you notice I marked into it the 99th and put a

pattern like the Checkerboard Division shoulder patch. But this is the gun, this back part opens up...

Rick: And you took that off of the Paratrooper?

Gil: This was a Paratrooper out in the Ardennes, not far from where that big pine tree was. But this comes out of the holster and this is the pistol. The snap closure snaps into position and then it's a rifle with an adjustable site for range. I've also got in here a thing that I used for checking elevations. Being an Engineer, if I was giving an estimate for artillery (where to locate the test round) I would check the elevation as well as estimate the forward distance and call it back and they would send one round for a trial run to see where it landed then they would adjust it for the next range. But this was a very accurate...

Rick: It shows you the technology the German's had verses the Americans. They had better tanks and better guns actually.

Gil: This was a Gestapo Paratrooper's gun.

Rick: Pull out that SS gun too will you?

Gil: This is the one from Dietrich. As you notice it's beautiful leatherwork – it's still shiny. In the back if you look closely you can see a flying eagle with a Swastika in it's claws that he wore right on his side. That was his personal handgun. This was the typical Luger. It has serial numbers and identification could be verified, but this was assigned to him. Of course I put into the case my own unit with my name and G2 (that's the intelligence headquarters of the 99th Infantry Divisions that I was assigned to at the time on detached service) but that's his personal weapon. This particular gun has killed hundreds and perhaps maybe even thousands of people. That's almost a priceless souvenir. They were meticulous in detail. Let me mention this other thing – this group I met with – the Traumatic Stress Group...you know I soon came to realize that it's a team

effort. There's no way the infantry could have done it alone! It took the Air Force bombing the hell out of them checker boarding areas that we were coming up on and making it as safe as possible for us. It took the Marines, it took everybody working together – it was a team effort. Some up above, some on the ground, some kind of in-between – the Observers. It took supply people, it took Navy bringing troops and equipment supplies available in. It was really a team effort, no one group (not the infantry or anybody else) can claim they won the war. No way, it was a team effort of everybody involved, even including the officers who were back on a nice upholstered couch sitting down and we were out in the snow. I called this group with Post Traumatic Stress *'the Fly Boys'*, a number of them were retired and they were brought back from service when they'd had 25 missions and one day I couldn't help it I just said to this one fellow in group – he was saying that he had brought back (he had been over 25 missions over target in Germany) and I said *"you think you've had it rough really, now lets be realistic. You went over 25 times, you flew over in a nice heated plane with all kinds of supplies and equipment with a comfortable chair to sit in and you're over the target for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Maybe a half an hour at most. You drop your bombs, you turn around and fly back. At night you had a nice warm bed, a nice shower. Before you got into bed you had good food, a change of clothes so that the sweat that you had when you were over target for 15 minutes you weren't smelling from that"*. You know what happens to GI's that don't have a bath for a month or two or three or more at a time (I get emotional even thinking about it) and it still gripes me to this day every time I see some General or a man with row after row after row of ribbons – you've seen them and I can't help but wonder (now maybe they earned them, I'm not saying they didn't) but let me inject this. At one time as I mentioned this G2 Headquarters (3rd Army) and also on my Honorable Discharge it shows that I knew how to type – it was on my rating on the Discharge Papers as a Clerk Typist. I knew how to word things from a military point of view and I was typing up a recommendation for another ribbon for this particular man and the commander in charge of that (believe it or not this is true) said *"Gilbert, you've heard and you've got the details..."* but beyond that, he used this word (this is an exact quote) *"flower it up a little"*. That was my orders – to flower it up so he'd get another ribbon. I'd been in combat before that, I knew who earned them and who didn't. Every

time to this day I kind of question every time I see all these ribbons (maybe they're good, I'm not saying they weren't) but I questioned them because of that experience.

Rick: Well that's human nature and we have to appreciate everybody that was over there. So tell us about when you were in France after the surrender waiting to go home.

Gil: Well that's interesting – after the war was over we went down into Marseille in France waiting for a ship to come home. There was really nothing to do, we had no military assignments or anything. I had to find something to do to occupy my time and I got thinking – there were a group of us talking and we found out that several of us were musically inclined. As a little guy my dad taught me how to play the violin and as I got a little bigger and I got into junior high school I learned to play the viola. I got into high school and played the cello for a while and then shortly after that (I was a big boy now) I got a Marseille I found in an old music shop an old bass fiddle. I paid him for it with a little combat pay I had in my hand at the time and I got a group of us together and we went up from Marseille. On Friday night we'd drive up in a car that one of the fellows had there and we'd go just below the Riviera area and Friday night and Saturday we'd play in dancehalls up there. They knew we were available and they hired us to come up every Friday night and Saturday to play in dance bands up there. Of course they'd be drinking typical of the French and Germans, they drank a lot and as long as they'd keep drinking and keep paying us we'd keep playing. And sometimes that would go on until two or three o'clock in the morning or later even. Then we'd come back home.

Rick: Well that's interesting, we appreciate you being with us.

Gil: Just for the sake of record I ought to show you this – this is from the little town of Gauer(sp?) in Germany and when we went into this area in the distance I could see this Swastika flag flying (the wind was blowing as typical in those mountain areas) and I thought '*boy it would be nice to have that as a souvenir*' – I'll just open it up so you can see it somewhat. This is a genuine German Swastika flag that the Germans had put over this town. Let me describe it quickly, this little church had this high steeple and above it

there was a little ladder going up to it and it had two bands on either side with cross rungs about every foot and they had secured it so the Belgium people couldn't take it down.

The artillery was going to blast the church out and I didn't want them to, it was a beautiful little rock stone church *'ah don't break up their church. There's no reason for it other than the flag'*. I said *"give me a half an hour or so and I'll climb up there and get it"* which I did. I cut off some of the red, you can see where it was torn on the sides. It came out further on either side but I cut off some of the extra and I brought this home and thought *'well I'll keep that as a floor mat and wipe my muddy feet on it when I get home'*. That's the story of this flag. That's a genuine article. This flew over this town in Gauer(sp?)Germany.