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"They call you a battalion surgeon. I didn't know surgery; really, I was simply trying to save lives." (Audio Interview, 9:58)

William M. McConahey, Jr.



War: World War, 1939-1945
Branch: Army
Unit: 2nd Battalion, 344th
Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry
Division
Service Location: France; Germany;
Czechoslovakia; European Theater
Rank: Captain

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In the summer of 1945, William McConahey, a physician working with the Occupation forces in Germany, decided to write a memoir of his experiences in the European Theater. He had landed in France on D-Day Plus Two and had seen the casualties of fighting from Normandy through the Battle of the Bulge and beyond. He had also visited a liberated concentration camp at Flossenberg, expressing frustration at not being able to save so many dying prisoners. McConahey's memoir, Battalion Surgeon, wasn't published until 1966, when he was already on the staff of the prestigious Mayo Clinic.

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Minnesota Liberators of Concentration Camps Oral History Project: Interview with William McConahey

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Dr. William M. McConahey was born May 7, 1916, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and

moved at age nine to Sharon, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1942, took a commission in the Army and was called to active duty on July 17, 1943. He was assigned as an assistant battalion surgeon and sailed to England in March of 1944. On June 8, 1944, two days after D-Day, McConahey landed in Normandy, France, leading an aid station of thirty-two men who gave first aid to wounded soldiers before sending them for more extensive care. While moving across Germany with the Third Army in early 1945, McConahey heard Army reports of concentration camps, and in late April of 1945 his division liberated the Flossenburg concentration camp. McConahey went there a day afterward to work as a medical officer and to witness the scene for himself. He was there for four or five hours before having to return to his own troops, which were moving across Germany toward Czechoslovakia. A few months after the war ended, McConahey also traveled to the Dachau concentration camp. After the war McConahey returned to the United States for training and a career in internal medicine. SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: The Allied invasion of Normandy; his duties as leader of an aid station just behind the front line of combat; Flossenburg concentration camp, which could hold 15,000 prisoners, and where 60,000 to 100,000 people passed through or were killed; the camp's crematory, which was still being operated by a few prisoners when McConahey arrived; physical condition of the prisoners and their barracks; difficulty in feeding the survivors, who were unable to eat regular food; Dachau concentration camp, described as "just like Flossenburg, only on a bigger scale"; the whole war's effect on him, convincing him that things like money and power are less important than simply being alive; the difficulty in describing war to people who have not shared such an experience.

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Mary:

Hello, this is Mary Adams Martin, 606 Memorial Parkway, Rochester, Minnesota. Today is February 5, 2003. I'm interviewing on audiotape Dr. William M. McConahey, Emeritus Member of Mayo Clinic in Rochester. He was born May 7, 1916, and lives at 1122 6th Street S.W., Rochester. In addition to Dr. McConahey and myself, Erin Mathei of Tom Jones Recording Studio is also present. Dr. McConahey was a colleague of my late husband, also of Mayo Clinic, and I am the

president of Mary Adams Martin Enterprises, a small business which I started when I retired from Mayo. Most of my work in recent years has been consultative and voluntary. To open the interview, Doctor, I'd like to ask you just a few routine questions. For instance, what war did you serve in?

William McConahey:

In World War II.

Mary Adams Martin:

And what branch did you serve?

William McConahey:

I was in the infantry, the Battalion Surgeon Medical Corps.

Mary:

And what was your rank when you were discharged from the Army?

William McConahey:

I was a captain.

Mary Adams Martin:

And in what theater of war did you serve?

William McConahey:

The European theater.

Mary Adams Martin:

Now before we continue, I'd like to add that Dr. McConahey is the author of the book entitled Battalion Surgeon. It's an account of his wartime experiences in Europe and is now in its sixth printing. Before we get into America's involvement in World War II, Doctor, can we talk about the period between the defeat of Poland and the attack on Pearl Harbor, when the country was so ambiguous about entering the war in Europe? Where were you at that time and what were you doing?

William McConahey:

I was in medical school at that time. I was in medical school from 1938 to 1942. Now, during those years, more and more of the country was really wide open, ripped apart by different factions of the [?] who wanted no part of war, that's the Europeans, let them fight it. And those that thought we should go in, give 'em a hand. So we were all completely divided on that, until suddenly came Pearl Harbor, and then it was all a united country, ready to go, we got attacked, now we'll go to war.

Mary Adams Martin:

And what were your thoughts about joining up, then?

William McConahey:

Well, I had been a draftee back in 1940, '39 or '40 they had a draft and I had a low number, but they told me at that time, since I was a medical student, I wouldn't need to go in until I had my education. Once I had that, a year of internship, then I should go in. So I was waiting to finish up and then join the armed services.

Mary Adams Martin:

So the Army taught you, a physician, to be a soldier. How did they go about doing that?

William McConahey:

Well, what they did, in the Army in July of 1943, after one year of internship, I went first to the Medical Field Service School in Pennsylvania, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Well, there, their job is to make Army doctors out of us civilian doctors. And they taught us many, many things. First, how to wear a uniform, how to salute, whom to salute, about reading compasses, running night compass traces, about sanitation, health care, all the many things about the war and battle conditions and various combat, the way they did it. So, we learned quite a bit. But they never told any of us how to be a battalion surgeon, because you can't do that, really. You gotta go through that, and find what's it like, make your mistakes, don't make 'em again if you survive. You learn by doing there. But I wasn't ready for all the rest. We had to drill troops, had to march 'em around, and a lot about the Army life, which we learned there.

Mary Adams Martin:

Well, I learned from your book, Battalion Surgeon, that you joined the Army in July of '43 and less than a year later, you were in England awaiting D-Day. Most of us know about D-Day from Sergeant Ryan and other films and so on, but what was that like for you?

William McConahey:

Well, I went overseas with the 90th Division. I joined them in Fort Dix, New Jersey. They'd been all trained, ready to go, packed and ready to go to Europe. And that was a place, one of the men that couldn't make a trip. So I became battalion surgeon at that time with the 90th Division, and with the 357th Regiment. We sailed for England about March 23rd in a big convey, about sixty ships, and a very, very rough crossing, which was good in that we didn't have much of a chance for submarines to hit us, but bad because the guys were so seasick. I was never seasick in my life, so I was alright, but boy, those poor GIs down in the lower hole, on those cots, they had three of 'em up high, three in a row, oh boy. They got sick and a mess down there, I'll tell ya that. But we got there alright [sic], around the 30th or 31st, end of March, and then trained in England for some days that we went in. First, we didn't know where we were gonna go. Was it gonna be France? Would it be Norway? Would it be Italy? Would it be the Balkans? We didn't know where it was gonna be. Somewhere, we thought. But most likely chance, of course, was in France. As we trained there, our commanding officer one time said to us, well, we're on the first time, which I'm not sure impressed us too much because that meant going pretty early. We didn't know why when or what. We used to listen sometimes on the radio - e had radios in them places - to German Axis propagandas. Axis Sally and Lord HaHa. Axis would say, "Axis Sally, well, fellas, this is Axis Sally talking to you Yanks in England. Why are ya here? We know. You do too. To fight for those Jewish bankers and stockbrokers on Wall Street. That's what it's for, to make a little money. You're gonna die out here for that, ya know? That's a silly thing for ya to do, Yank, but you're in war for them, now. And you won't make it on the Atlantic wall, of course, but, we'll play a nice song now and listen to some of your favorite music. Remember the nights you sit in the evening with your girlfriend, summer night, she'd be in your arms, she'd say, I love you, you'd say, I love you too. And you'll never see her again, ya know, you're gonna die here." And then they would play the music and those songs we liked at that time. Then, Lord Ha Ha would come on and say, "Oh, Yanks, here you are in Europe fighting for those Wall Street capitalists and Jewish bankers. You're gonna die, ya know, on D-Day. What's D stand for? Death (German word). We got a laugh at those guys, it didn't bother us much. But we [?] [?] go in at all and see what we got on the ships and sailed outta the harbor.

Mary Adams Martin:

You landed where?

William McConahey:

Utah Beach. The Fourth Division made the beach; they landed first. One of our combat teams, 359th Infantry came in with them, behind them, to help them along. The rest of us came in on D plus two, which I did, on D plus two. And Utah Beach, yes, and luckily not the Omaha, which is Bloody Omaha, it was terrible. Utah was bad enough, but nothing like Bloody Omaha.

Mary Adams Martin:

On Omaha, there weren't the cliffs, or were there?

William McConahey:

There were on Omaha, but not on Utah Beach. No, it was flat, flat surface. And the 82nd Airborne jumped inland because, you see, here were long causeways leading in from the beaches which, they're generally gonna flood before we got there, but the 82nd Airborne jumped in and held the other side and the Germans couldn't flood them, so we could get ashore much easier that way. Thankful for the 82nd Airborne.

Mary Adams Martin:

Then you really became a battalion surgeon, but you're an internist. I know that from your reputation at Mayo. What exactly is a battalion surgeon?

William McConahey:

Well, they call you a battalion surgeon. I did know surgery, really. I was simply trying to save lives. They bring in the wounded to the Aid Station, first thing is to stop bleeding. And then give lots of morphine for pain. We used a lot of that, sometimes intravenously. And set fractures, and cleaned out the wounds, which were mess. Often they were filled full of dirt and debris and grass and torn uniforms. Cleaned them out good. Now we had no antibiotics in the [?] days, except we had some sulfur powder. No penicillin. They had it back on base, in the hospital behind us, but we didn't have any. We'd sprinkle some sulfur in on the wound and put on a sterile dressing and pack it wide open and send them on back. We also gave tremendous amounts of blood plasma. We had no whole blood, but these were, we had cases of one bottle of sterile water packed under pressure and a bottle of blood plasma powder packed under vacuum. See, this was blood plasma with no red cells, but just dried protein part of the blood which gave the body and brought them back out of shock. They put these two bottles together with double ended needle and stuck the water bottle into the plasma bottle and in about 30 seconds you had a bottle of blood plasma. We put it intravenously and we gave that by the bucket full. We have hundreds and hundreds of those things in the Aid Station. And that would get them out of shock in a hurry and that's what saved lives time and again, was the blood plasma we had.

Mary Adams Martin:

Tell us a little about the personnel within your unit. Were there any nurses along with you?

William McConahey:

Not with us. I had 32 men in my medical Aid Station and one officer, assistant battalion surgeon with me, another captain. Then these 32 enlisted men. Of those, 12 were company aid men. These guys lived up on the front lines with the company. Each company, there were four in a battalion. Each company had three aid men with them. These guys would lie in the foxholes with the rifleman and they'd say "medic" and they'd run to the aid of the wounded and they would put on a doggone as good dressings I ever saw, lying on their bellies and the bullets going over their heads. How they did it, I don't know. Did quite a job. And then they would let us know in the Aid Station if there was some wounded up on the front line with walkie talkie radio we had. So I'd send up a litter squad, four men on a jeep, and a jeep driver, and he would take

them as far as he could forward, then they would walk across the fields until they found the wounded man was. See, no helicopters then. So they'd put them on a litter, haul them back to the Aid Station and bring them back to me and we'd take care of them. So we had these twelve men on the front lines, eight litter bearers, and two jeep drivers, and ten technicians to help me in the Aid Station. They would help clean wounds out, give plasma, all the rest, helped me a great deal in the Aid Station. That's what we had in our group.

Mary Adams Martin:

Now, how far were you from the actual fighting, in the Aid Station?

William McConahey:

We would get as close a we could. We didn't want to be under direct observation, direct fire, of course. We'd try to find a house to get into, or a shed, or something, because you couldn't work out in the cold. In the summer it wasn't cold, but it was a little rain sometimes. We wanted to be in a shed or a house somewhere. So we got as close as we could to the front lines so we weren't under actual fire. Maybe about a quarter a mile behind the front line, something like that. And then we would go to work and they would bring the wounded into us on the Aid Station there. And once they were in good shape, we put them in the ambulance and send them back to the Collecting Company, the next group behind us, which is about five miles back. And then they would look them over. If they were okay then, back to the Cleaning Company, ten miles to the rear, and that was almost a small hospital, with a couple of surgeons. They could do emergency surgery if they had to at that time.

Mary Adams Martin:

And then after that, where did they go?

William McConahey:

If they weren't badly wounded, they stayed in the Clearing Company for maybe a week or so, if they were back in good condition, send them back to the front. If they weren't, they would go on back then to an evacuation hospital or a field hospital, something behind maybe 30-40 miles to the rear and be taken care of there. And then, if even more badly wounded, they'd take them on back to England. And they might be there for a couple months, get them fixed up, then ship them back to the front, go back to duty. If they were badly hurt, send them on back home, sometimes, then too after that.

Mary Adams Martin:

What kind of skills did those men need, medical skills?

William McConahey:

Well, we had just, enlisted men were trained in first aid work. I, of course, had my medical school internship experience. The Collecting Company had the same people as I was looking them over, and then back in the Clearing Company, they had some anesthesia people and some surgeons and they could really do major work at that time.

Mary Adams Martin:

What kind of wounds did you see? What were the most prevalent kind of wounds?

William McConahey:

Terrible things. I've never seen any worse. Men with bellies ripped open, chests ripped open, arms off, legs off. One guy came in with both feet gone. Another man walked in, one of the aid men, whole jaw shot off. Couldn't talk, of course. Another man lay wounded, couldn't move, a tank rolled across his legs. One guy they brought in to me, lead him in, hit in the head with a piece of shrapnel, went through his helmet, through his skull, into his brain, but not very far. Had not very much damage, he'd be fine alright, except for one thing. Came in the middle of his forehead where the optic nerves cross, from there they go to the eyes. Both nerves cross there, hit both of those things, knocked them out, he was blind forever after. Never see again. So I saw all sorts of horrible wounds that I can't ever forget what they were like, what we did.

Mary Adams Martin:

In the midst of all this, did you carry a gun?

William McConahey:

Oh no.

Mary Adams Martin:

Or did your men carry guns? You had no protection, then, really.

William McConahey:

No, we didn't carry guns because the Germans had signed what they called the Geneva Convention, in which they said they would not try to shoot at Aid people. So we all knew that and we had red crosses painted on our helmets on all the four sides. We had red crosses on our arms. Our jeeps carried red cross flags. I know that my life was saved many times by Germans not shooting at us. We didn't carry any weapons and they knew that. And often they had me in their sight, they wouldn't fire. It happened, I know, several times. I had been fired at, [?] one man took a shot at me and missed me by about four inches. That happened now and then, but usually they did not shoot at us. So we were safer to be

without arms than to be carrying them. Then, on Japan, they hadn't signed the Convention, and they did let each other kill medics. Those men there wore no red cross insignia and carried weapons, but we did not.

Mary Adams Martin:

So the picture on the front of your book, which is a picture of three GIs carrying a litter with a body on it, and then very prominently you see the red cross insignia on the helmet. It was very representative of what was happening to you.

William McConahey:

That's right, it was indeed. And we all were marked this way. Well, one time I just briefly mentioned this. I went behind lines by mistake one time. I was trying to find the Aid Station after I had gone back to check with the Collecting Company. I was coming back in the jeep and I missed a turn-off. I went back behind German lines by two miles, didn't know it. I came around a corner and down the road the German had a tank gun, pointing right at us, ready to fire the thing, the first tank or trunk that turned the corner. They didn't shoot. They saw the Red Cross flag on the jeep, saw the Red Cross flag, they didn't shoot because we were medics. So we looked at us, all around us and the sides of us were little German soldiers digging foxholes, the guns right beside them. They looked up and wondered what was going on. Well, the driver jammed the jeep in reverse, went back up and around the corner and outta there, but they could have killed us, captured us, but they didn't, because they saw we were medical corps people.

Mary Adams Martin:

And with all the other problems that you had, what about the victims of battle fatigue? How did you treat - did you have a policy to treat these guys?

William McConahey:

Well, what we did was this. I had a good friend who was decorated three times, wounded three times, terrific guy. Company commander said to me, Doc, every man has his breaking point. Some guys can stand this for six months in combat, seeing their friends killed, dirt, disease, mess, no food, digging foxholes, being shot at. Others crack up in two weeks, he said, they're all different. Well, yes, we would see men come back in the Aid Station, o-o-o-o, I-I-I-I-c-c-c-c-can't take it, I-I-I-I-can't take it. Well, they'd gone to pieces, of course. We'd just send those men back to the Collecting Company or Clearing. They sometimes would stay there maybe two weeks, get warm food, good warm bed, and a cot to sleep on, and rest and relax and they'd be better and come on back up to the front in another two, three weeks. If they were worse and went to pot, then they'd send them back to the psych hospital in the rear. But we got, a fair number of those people came back, yes indeed, we saw them right along.

Mary Adams Martin:

And how about the self-inflicted wounds? Is that a different cut of cloth, different breed of cat, I guess?

William McConahey:

Yes, it really was. These guys were men who got sick and tired of it, they hadn't quite cracked up completely, well, I'll just, so they would take a gun and shoot themselves in the hand or foot. Now, you can get shot in combat in hand or foot, but usually not. So, they'd come back to the Aid Station with this hand or foot wound and you'd sometimes see a powder burn up close. Well, the thing that tipped them off was this. They acted like they thought a wounded man should act. Now, the real, a guy that had done his job, fighting hard, wounded, would lie on the floor quietly on his litter, wouldn't be complaining, might be some pain, wouldn't say a thing. He'd done his job, he's out of it now, he wasn't gonna get killed, back to rear for a while, maybe back home. He'd be quietly lying there. These guys acted like they thought a wounded man should. "Oh, Doc, look it, a guy shot me, ooh, I hurt, it hurts, ooh, I'll get back at the guy, ooh, Doc, it hurts." Well, that guy shot himself, we always knew.

Mary Adams Martin:

You were so close to the Germans for so long, just across the street maybe, did your attitude change toward this enemy that was so ever present for you?

William McConahey:

Yeah, I think it did. Ya know, we were trying to kill the Germans, they were trying to kill us. We knew that. And yet, we somehow felt a bit of kinship with these guys doing the same job. We were out there in the cold, foxholes in the ground, not much food, miserable time. We sometimes felt closer to them than guys in our rear echelon, back many miles that were doing nothing there but watching TV shows and having a big time. So, yes, in a way, we didn't hate these guys, but we, of course, we tried to kill them, they tried to kill us too. But it was a strange feeling sometimes.

Mary Adams Martin:

Sort of commonality.

William McConahey:

It was, in a way.

Mary Adams Martin:

You served in the third Army, of course, under General Patton. And we, ever since the war and during the war, we heard so many contradictory stories about the General. What did you think about him?

William McConahey:

To me, he was the greatest field commander in the entire Army, maybe in either army, any army. Tremendous man to lead the troops. And a complete flop in Eisenhower's job because they had no idea of getting along with people. And he was really a dictator in many ways. But he was tremendous at leadership. He had us together, talked to all of our division officers and men in a big amphitheater in a field in England before we went in. Giving all this high powered, talking about going to get these Germans, kick them up one hill and down the other and get the son-of-a-bitch paper hanger and all that kind of stuff. We were gonna get these guys, he said, dig foxholes or die, that's bullshit. [?] Keep going forward, Germans never shorten [?] lengthen it, keep going. Well, he really fired things up.

Mary Adams Martin:

The press did such a job on him, you know, and you never quite knew really, but certainly the men must have worshiped him, really.

William McConahey:

We did. Unfortunately he didn't believe in such a thing as combat exhaustion. There was. We knew that, but he didn't. He thought that's cowardice. Get those guys, get'em outta bed, up there in front and make 'em do their job too. Well, that's not the way it was and he should have known better, but didn't. But, he was wrong, of course, in slapping that soldier, but you did, that was terrible. But as far as a leader goes, he was terrific and we rode down to Normandy finally. He told the 4th armored division, which lead the way in front of us, he said, go in that road and when you're on the [?] tanks and walk. If you're around a strong point, get around them. Because they did and we come along and whop up a strong point that they left behind. Also, he would, right across France, without any flank coverage, and that you don't ever do in a war, that's terrible. But he had the Air Force flying cover for him. He knew. Nothing on the flank at all. [?] generally [?] nothing there, so he could go right ahead and push, so we did. He did all these special things. He had some very good psychologic ideas too, and I used to see him many times go into front to inspect troops. He'd be riding up in a jeep, waving at people and saluting them and there's three stars on his helmet and this jeep, get up to the front and he'd finish his job to come home that evening. He'd fly home in a cub plane, have his jeep covered up and his driver drive it back incognito. He said it's a bad morale to see a general go in the rear. All these things that he knew about and used. Quite a guy.

Mary Adams Martin:

With those 18 months of combat, you must have had some times that were pretty hairy, shall we say, and close calls? Can you tell us about some of those?

William McConahey:

Yes, indeed, 11 months of combat, you see, but we were there 18 months. Yes, there were, the one I talk about, going by German lines by mistake. That was one. Another time going down the road, I pulled off to take a look at my map and see where I was and just about that time another jeep came along, hit a land mine, blew up and killed them. We straddled it, and they hit it. Another time I was lying in a field in a big German bombing attack in France and heard the bombs coming down closer and closer, one was real close, it was coming down, hit near me and went 'plunk'. It didn't go off, it was a dud, never went off. And, then another time I was going down, I saw, I wasn't quite sure what it was, I saw down ahead a crossroads. I thought, well, I'll stop down there, look at the signs, see where I am. Just before I did, a man, oh, come in, come in, help me, won't ya? It was a man, he said there's woman in a farmhouse that's going mad from all the bombing [?] had there, so I went in to see this lady and do what I could for her and while I was there, if I'd been down at the crossroads about that time, a whole battery of German [?] hit the crossroads and killed all the people that were down there. I'd a been there if I hadn't stopped at this crazy French woman. All these times that I got like this, and never know what's going to happen like that, but you do at times. Many, many, many times, of course, I missed death by a fraction of an inch. The first time I was in combat, there was a little house, an Aid Station, I stepped into it and this was the first day in combat. I stepped out to look around and all of a sudden, machine pistol fire, I heard a shooting and all of a sudden, bullets hit my, about four inches from my head in the door. So I fell back on the floor and crawled back in and the 82nd airborne guys who were in the shed not far away said, oh, that German sniper in the tree out somewhere, took a shot and missed me, luckily missed me. Then they come out and shot him out of his tree. It was another one of those lucky things too.

Mary Adams Martin:

After you go through something like this, how long does it take you to recover? I'm thinking myself in an automobile accident, it takes me weeks to get over it. How do you get over it and then start on doing what you're supposed to be doing?

William McConahey:

Well, I think it takes a while. I know that in combat if they pulled us out of combat for maybe a day or two, two or three days, be back in the rear and they come back to the front to get back in the battle, I sat in my jeep and they got closer and closer to the front, we'd hear the big guns firing and then the German shells coming in, closer yet, closer yet, we hear the machine guns firing, the rifle and I would get tighter and tighter and tenser and tenser and I'd get really tight, sitting there holding my [?] with my [?]. Got to the front, get to work, it was fine.

Mary Adams Martin:

Once you got into the action, you were alright, is that it?

William McConahey:

That's right. I got home, I didn't have any flashbacks. If I got back, heard a backfire of a car, I'd almost hit the dirt sometimes, thinking it was a shell coming in, but I think some of the guys had terrible times of our division and they, even just coming out today, they're finally getting it out. I think that two reasons. I didn't have much of a problem because when I got there, I wrote this book at the time I was over there. Got it all out of my system at that time. It was all out.

Mary Adams Martin:

Did you take notes while -

William McConahey:

No, I did not because they asked us not to, in case we were captured by the Germans, see. So I didn't. But every day, about the time I wrote this thing, was in the summer when I was in occupation duty, about July, June, July, and August, I knew every day at that time [?] clear as a bell in my mind at that time every day, I had maps to look at and a few orders, but I could do it, now today impossible to do that, long gone. So at the time there was nothing to it, but now I couldn't do it. So I came back and I think that was the main reason. The second one was I never killed anybody. Because I was a medic and trying to save lives. Well, I took out a German mood in the Aid Station too, and I never had any feelings about that, but other guys would kill, a lot of people might.

Mary Adams Martin:

So you think sort of what happened to you and what you had to do is part of your duties?

William McConahey:

I think so.

Mary Adams Martin:

Makes a difference.

William McConahey:

I think it does. I would have killed a German too if I'd a been a rifleman, of course, my order,

Mary Adams Martin:

But you didn't carry guns.

William McConahey:

Didn't carry guns, didn't have to, didn't want to, of course, so I felt, when I got back, somehow, I don't know, I thought about it much, but it may have been a reason I didn't have too many flashbacks. That, plus the fact I

Mary Adams Martin:

Well, do you have any thoughts about the difference between Vietnam and World War 2, as far as talking about it because I know from my own experience, the people in World War 2 just didn't talk about it.

William McConahey:

I think this, in Vietnam, it was terrible there. The wrong war, the wrong time, the wrong place, shouldn't have gone at all. But those guys were doing a job just like we were, they were fighting for our country and they had just as much honor as we ever had. We knew, we were over, during World War 2, everybody back home was with us. They were buying defense bonds, the girls were turning in their silk stockings for parachutes, they were turning in metal and old coins. They were backing us the whole way. We knew that. But Vietnam, poor guys, got spit upon, called baby killers and all that stuff. They were horribly treated. It was wrong for those guys to come back that way and they had much more trouble than we did, I think, in readjusting, really.

Mary Adams Martin:

Well, after VE Day, I take it you became a member of the Army of Occupation. Did you have any experiences with slave labors?

William McConahey:

Oh yes. I said before, when the war came along, I joined. Well, I should, my country had been attacked so it was my duty to go to war, so I did. In Europe and in France and there was just tremendous [?] crowds of French people. Oh, merci, merci, liberated, and they were so ecstatic, so happy and some of the stuff they'd been doing to the French they could stop and all that kind of stuff. And then we got farther into Europe and Germany and release some of those slave laborers who'd been working in the fields for Germans because they needed help and they had them from all over Europe and France and Italy and clear across into Slovakia and Hungary and all over Europe to work and they didn't treat them very well. They weren't paid, they were just given food now and then, worked hard. So they were really happy to get out of that mess. Then we saw some of our, [?] we recovered later on in the war, and they were in terrible shape. They'd been horribly treated. We finally saw the concentration camp in Flossenber, and that really, that was it. We had to be here. We knew.

Mary Adams Martin:

How, as a doctor, how did you feel about Flossenber?

William McConahey:

Oh, kind of hard to believe. I did see it, hard to understand it because here was a camp, it was just terrible, torturing, starving, beating, killing them, these thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of people died in Flossenber. It was one of the smaller concentrations camps in Germany, but nonetheless, a very bad result. This was a terrible camp. They worked in a stone quarry digging up big rocks and they had to carry them up, running up stairs, [?] nothing. When they got there, they had two great big strands of tubing, barbed wire fences around the camp, the outside one was electrified. And they of course, guarded by dogs and troops every night go into the camp. Nine o'clock the lights went out and if you stepped outside you were shot. Then I walked in their first and saw what they called the hospital. It wasn't a hospital. It was a place they dumped a guy to die. I walked in here, just a big building, a big barn-like building, straw floor. Lying there were a couple dozen men dying. I leaned down, grabbed someone's hand, looked up with empty eyes, turned back and died. I couldn't do a thing. I felt helpless. Around the camp with these guys, walking around like zombies. And others that were beaten down to nothing. It was incredible, just incredible.

Mary Adams Martin:

It must have been a horrible experience for you.

William McConahey:

It was horrible, it really was. We heard about, oh there's some kind of a camp they had for the prisoners or for this or that, but nothing like this that we knew about, but here it was.

Mary Adams Martin:

So you really didn't have any preparation for the fact that were these camps?

William McConahey:

They did not, no.

Mary Adams Martin:

Well, we've talked a lot about the difficulties and the tragedies and so on, of World War 2, but I assume that you got some medals along the way. Would you tell us about that?

William McConahey:

Yes, we all got something. I had a Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Medical Service Badge, three Campaign Stars, it's a campaign, stripes I wore on my uniform, and then I had the Theater of Occupations Ribbon with five Campaign Stars, normally a [?] arrowhead. I had later the Liberation of Mets medal, the Landing of Normandy medal, and the Croix de Guerre. And that's the whole shabang, I think.

Mary Adams Martin:

And you went in the service as a first lieutenant, I take it.

William McConahey:

I did.

Mary Adams Martin:

And then you came out as a captain. When were you promoted to captain?

William McConahey:

When I left, I went out to Camp Carson, Colorado in August until January. My commander there, Colonel Shriver, said, Doctor, you're being transferred now to 9th Division. The only thing about you, you ought to be a Captain. I now the Sergeant General, I'll write to him, see if it won't do it. So, he did. I got to Fort Dix, my promotion to a captain right there.

Mary Adams Martin:

That was a nice reward. Could we talk about the living conditions in your Aid Station as you were going from battle to battle? For instance, where did you sleep?

William McConahey:

We had sleeping bags, we'd throw them on the floor in some barn or house or wherever we were, or field, foxhole if we were outside. Climb in, try to go to sleep.

Mary Adams Martin:

So, did all of your men sleep in the Aid Station?

William McConahey:

All by the company aid men, they were up in front, of course, with the riflemen. And, by the way, we sometimes we just crawled in there, in the summer, we wouldn't use a sleeping bag. Climb in a foxhole by ourselves and dig a hole and get in there and sleep all night that way.

Mary Adams Martin:

Did it take you long to get used to sleeping in a foxhole?

William McConahey:

You know, now it's funny, I have trouble getting to sleep sometimes. I could climb in a foxhole, a rock in my back, rain coming down, shells dropping around me, and go right to sleep. I was different, younger, I guess.

Mary Adams Martin:

And how about your medical supplies, like the blood and sulfa, and so on. Did that keep up with you? Because you went across Europe pretty fast once you got rolling, did you not?

William McConahey:

We did, but they had the Red Ball Express, they called it. The trucks that would bring all this gasoline and other supplies up to us and they would always bring us the medical supplies. We always had plenty of plasma and bandages and things like that. Whatever we needed, we had no trouble getting. They'd bring it right up to us in a hurry.

Mary Adams Martin:

And how about the food? That must have been delightful.

William McConahey:

Oh yes. All we had to eat was K-rations. Now, we never had a cooked meal. They would give us each day, we maybe had a four or five day supply, three packages for one day. These were boxes maybe about eight inches long and about an inch wide and three inches wide and an inch deep. For breakfast a can of [?] ham and egg loaf, crackers, some coffee, a couple cigarettes, some toilet paper, and that was it. And then for lunch it'd be the same thing. You'd have chopped, maybe some kind of ham loaf, and again crackers and a candy bar and a couple cigarettes and same thing for supper. It'd be a little different, some cheese maybe, crackers, and that was it. And you live on that all day long, month after month and that's the way it was. It's all you ever had.

Mary Adams Martin:

Did you have a family when you enlisted?

William McConahey:

Oh yes.

Mary Adams Martin:

How did you keep in touch with them, I guess, is my question.

William McConahey:

Not too well, I couldn't of course. My wife was at home with, I left a three month boy, little boy. And she was living, at the time I went over, with her friend whose husband was in the Navy, class A-9 in medical school. They both had kids the same age and they lived together in West Virginia. She later moved back to her parents' home in [?] Ohio, later on, and lived there. I usually write to her when I could and she'd write to me almost every day, of course, and I'd get about ten letters at one time. Nothing for three or four weeks. You never know when you're gonna get mail, but we did.

Mary Adams Martin:

I hesitate to use the word entertainment, but what about entertainment? You know, we always heard so much about the glamorous performers like Bob Hope and Bing Crosby and so on. Did any of them get as far as your Aid Station at the front?

William McConahey:

No, nobody. They're all way back somewhere in the rear. Once we were to the rear, they had a small group get a little concert, they started, and then, sorry, [?], you're going back to the front now, fellas, and get back in the trucks and go, so that's all we ever had, that was it. Never [?], never heard another one.

Mary Adams Martin:

You were kind enough to let us look at your collection of photographs. Could I ask you a few questions about some of them? You have pictures of scenes during the war and afterwards. Several are of the infamous concentration camp at Flossenberg. I've already asked you, but as a doctor, and you said there was practically nothing you could do, that must have been very frustrating for you.

William McConahey:

It was indeed. And we knew, coming behind us before too long would be some other big medical units and there were, and [?] because those people couldn't be fed. They'd try to eat, they'd vomit. They hadn't eaten for so long their stomachs couldn't handle it. All they could have was intravenous for some time. They were all put in hospitals and given IVs and finally brought back to life, if they could. Some died, of course, in the hospital. But we could do nothing and the hospitals often could do something for them, but only IVs and treating. They had a lot of lice and typhus and they had bugs and everything else that they were having problems with. So they could be helped, some of them, but a lot of them dead right then. The camp they were at, they brought in some years before, a year or two before, they brought in about 4,000 Russian prisoners and they killed them all and put them in a big pile outside and bonfire and burned a great big platform, all 4,000 at one time. Huge fire. They went there and they, they got to the crematory, it was running. I walked up to the crematory because they were dying right and left in the camp and I saw, I think, four big furnaces there, still two of them being used and the [?] running it, opened up the furnace and looked in, there were three bodies [?] in the flames. Down beside us were twelve more to be burned, all of them about as big as 30-40 pounds, I guess, pick them up with one hand. Just skin and bone, nothing left there. Those people too, they were dying.

Mary Adams Martin:

Now, Flossenberg is in Czechoslovakia, right?

William McConahey:

No, it's about ten miles inside Germany, near the Czech border. We were heading, we got there in mid-April.

Mary Adams Martin:

And VE Day was not until June?

William McConahey:

May 8th. So we got into Czechoslovakia around May 30th or so, I mean, April 30th or May 1st, right around in there.

Mary Adams Martin:

It was right at the end of the war. We talked earlier about the picture on the front of your book. I read somewhere that it was taken at San Rafael, and where is San Rafael?

William McConahey:

In France.

Mary Adams Martin:

This is the picture of the lifter bearers.

William McConahey:

This wasn't [?], this wasn't wear [sic] we were, but the same thing exactly, it was right near there, a different division, but it was right near there in France.

Mary Adams Martin:

And who took that picture?

William McConahey:

Signal corps. The Army signal corps took a number of pictures.

Mary Adams Martin:

It's a beautiful shot.

William McConahey:

They have some great pictures they took. I used a few of those in my book, and I always gave credit to them for this, the signal corps.

Mary Adams Martin:

And I suppose the snapshots of your men and your fellow officers are probably the most meaningful to you. At the end of the war when most of these pictures, some of these pictures of the men were taken, what, after having gone through all of this, 18 months, I guess?

William McConahey:

Yes.

Mary Adams Martin:

What was your opinion of your fellow officers and your men?

William McConahey:

Tremendous respect for the riflemen, the officers too. I use to wonder when I first got there, why there would be three GIs lying in foxholes in a row, facing a German. Here came a German tank and troops attacking them. Why didn't one of the guys get up and run? Not because of patriotism for the government and everything else. It's buddies. If he left, they were in trouble. And we were all as closely knitted as could be. Talk about a band of brothers, we were a band of brothers. Almost like in love with each other. You'd just give you life for those guys, so you stay with them. Tremendous.

Mary Adams Martin:

Do you still see them, or

William McConahey:

Yes.

Mary Adams Martin:

Did you lose connection with them completely?

William McConahey:

No, most of them I do see, not all of them, of course. We have a 9th Division Association Reunion once a year in some Midwest city. I usually go to that, it's always a lot of fun to meet these guys again, talk about what we did, what was going on, [?] and all the rest. It's fun to meet these guys, yeah, we still get together. Once we get together, it's a terrific thing to again feel this spirit we had together.

Mary Adams Martin:

The Germans surrendered to the Allies on May 8th, 1945. But that didn't stop the war. We still had to take care of the Japanese in the Pacific theater. What system did they use, Doctor, to determine who went to fight in the Pacific and who went home?

William McConahey:

I really don't know that answer. I remember the war ended and we were in Czechoslovakia. They pulled us back into south central Germany to be occupation forces and do subtle things. It was a mess down there, of course, trying to settle things out, getting the country all organized again. Now, we were told that we were probably going to be sent right across the Pacific to be one of the assault troops on the shores of Japan, which didn't please us at all, of course. As far as going home, I know a few men did get sent home and a couple of outfits, but I'm not sure how they were chosen or why. I know about the 85 points and the war ended, how we all got home, but I don't know about the - there weren't very many who did this and were sent home at that time. Most of us stayed right there.

Mary Adams Martin:

And you mentioned the point system.

William McConahey:

Yes.

Mary Adams Martin:

What kind of points? I've never heard of that.

William McConahey:

Well, when the war ended, they said anybody with 85 points can go home first. Now, they gave points for being married, points for having children, points for the number of months you spent overseas, points for number of months in

combat you'd been, and points for any decorations you had, such as your combat decorations you might have. And if it totaled 85 or more, then you would be sent home early.

Mary Adams Martin:

I see.

William McConahey:

At the time, because the rest of the troops did go home, but they're shipped home the second time around, so it might have took several months to get them back. Those with the 85 points went home right away on the ships. We flew home because they said they needed doctors back home in a hurry. And so, any doctor who had 85 points was put in a plane and flown home, so we got there first.

Mary Adams Martin:

I see, so even though you'd been in combat for 11 months, there was a strong possibility that you'd have to serve in the Pacific right after VE Day. Did you and your men worry that your luck might have run out?

William McConahey:

We sure did. We knew we had tremendous casualties in the war so far. Our rifle platoon had been replaced five times over, 15,000 or more casualties, 3,200 men, and so do ever again, we want no part of it. Those of us who had made it were lucky, but now we might not be so lucky, so this did not appeal to us at all.

Mary Adams Martin:

So how did you then hear about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

William McConahey:

Well, of course, we were in Germany, had news all the time about what was going on in the Pacific front. And we heard about the atomic bomb, and the second bomb, and then about the surrender. Oh boy, now it's over. We will get home pretty soon, alive, and not be sacrificed [?] of Japan.

Mary Adams Martin:

On the day of your discharge, I assume that's something you remember very well. Can you tell us about it?

William McConahey:

Well, yes. I flew home, as I said, from Paris to Portugal to refuel, to Azores to refuel, and again in Newfoundland to refuel, and down to Delaware for dismissal. I had to report in a few days to [?] for final dismissal, but I got some leave so I could meet my wife. So I called her and said we would meet in Pittsburgh, and she said she'd go there, drive from her home where she was staying with her parents in [?] Ohio, to Pittsburgh, and be there when I arrived. So I got to the hotel in a bus, got off the bus and walked in the hotel and asked if Mrs. McConahey was registered. Yes, she is, Doctor, she's in so and so. Went up to her room. I tipped the bell boy how much, I had no idea. I knocked on the door, my knees very weak, door opened, and there she was [?] long separation was over.

Mary Adams Martin:

And that was a long time ago and you're still married to the same woman.

William McConahey:

Sixty-three years this year, the same woman.

Mary Adams Martin:

Congratulations! You're now Emeritus Professor of Internal Medicine at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. That's quite a leap from the battlefields of Europe. Will you give us now, some ideas of, highlights of your career in medicine? For instance, when did you come to Mayo and why did you come here?

William McConahey:

Well, I started here, my fellowship in January of 1946. I got dismissed from the Army officially in October of 1945. And I applied and was accepted as a Fellow out here. Well, I'd heard of the Mayo Clinic and visited here once or twice before. My father wanted to take a trip west and I was in first year of medicine school. We drove west to Seattle where his brother was living at that time, hadn't seen him for a long time. So we stopped at Mayo Clinic on the way through. My parents had known Dr. Hench's parents in Pittsburgh, so we knew who Phil was, so we met Dr. Phil Hench here. He was very gracious to us, showed us around, and I thought it was a great place to be trained. So I went to get my training here in Internal Medicine, so I did. And once I got here, it was terrific because all these, really several hundred men coming back from the war, now again with their families, their wives and their kids, getting started in their careers again. It was just great to be together, all with the same idea and mind. We had a great time together. It was really, in many ways, a lot of fun.

Mary Adams Martin:

Right after the war, then, you were a Fellow in Medicine in Mayo. Before the war, that class would have been a group of young doctors recently out of medical school and internship, kids, so to speak. But your colleagues, like yourself, were seasoned veterans with years of combat service. That must have been quite a group to handle.

William McConahey:

It was quite a group.

Mary Adams Martin:

Do you have memories of those guys?

William McConahey:

Oh, sure. We were all seasoned, as you said, and we were grown up, mature men, not kids going to college anymore or medical school. And it made a difference. And we just went to work and we really got into our work and were very active and very serious in doing it. And, as you know, the Mayo Clinic built the prefabricated houses for Veterans down in, where Crossroads Shopping Center is now, and we lived there for a while. It was great down there because the wives would get together in the back yard and the kids would play together. It was really quite a group down there, lots of fun. But I really liked my career in medicine at Mayo very, very much. I joined the staff in '49, and I wouldn't change one iota of my career if I could. It was, as far as I was concerned, perfect.

Mary Adams Martin:

And when were you made Professor of Medicine?

William McConahey:

Well, I first became instructor in 1950. Then in '55 I became [sic] Assistant Professor. In 1960, Associate Professor. In 1966, full Professor. So that's what I was. And I retired later on, of course. I was, of course, Emeritus, now.

Mary Adams Martin:

Yes. Now, with all those medical people together, and Veterans of many years of war, did they talk about their service, their war service very much?

William McConahey:

Not too much. We were talking more about medicine, more about families. Oh, we'd talk a little about where were you, what'd you do, and all these things, but no big discussions really. We were more interested in getting back to life and getting into medicine, getting our training, going on from there.

Mary Adams Martin:

Moving on.

William McConahey:

Yes.

Mary Adams Martin:

And did the GI Bill play a role in your career as it did in so many others?

William McConahey:

Boy, it sure did. When I came here, the salary for a resident was \$125 a month, which wasn't very much, but in those days, it was more than it would be worth now. But also, the GI Bill gave me \$125 a month for my fellowship, which really helped us a great deal to get started. We got double the salary we would have gotten. It was \$250 a month, so we really were able to do many things we otherwise might not have been able to do. It was a big help, indeed it was.

Mary Adams Martin:

Doctor, you were discharged from the Army about 58 years ago. Did your war experience in any way affect the rest of your life?

William McConahey:

It changed my life completely, of course. After I'd seen what I'd seen, and then when I'd gone through what I did, I realized what things were important in life weren't some of the big things you used to think about. About being president of this, and big shot here, and making a million dollars there. More about getting back into your life and your country, living with your family, your wife, raising the kids, having time with them, working on your career and your medical practice, and doing what you could for humanity and your patients and that was it. Not all about other big stuff you might think about before that. But, indeed, it was just getting back to work and career you wanted to have all your life, and finally getting to do it.

Mary Adams Martin:

Well, thank you, Doctor, for a very generous and informative interview. We're very appreciative.

Thank you, Mary.