

**John Boothby oral history with Conrad Gagnon**

**MCC-00052**

**Finding Aid**

**Prepared by Lisa Ornstein; revised by Kathryn Donahue, August 2013  
Acadian Archives/Archives acadiennes  
University of Maine at Fort Kent  
Fort Kent, Maine**

**Completed February 2000**

## John Boothby oral history with Conrad Gagnon

### SUMMARY INFORMATION

*Collection Title:* John Boothby oral history with Conrad Gagnon

*Citation:* John Boothby oral history with Conrad Gagnon, MCC-00052, Acadian Archives/Archives acadiennes, University of Maine at Fort Kent.

*Accession Number:* MCC:00052                      *Shelf List Numbers:* A 131

*Provenance and Chain of Custody:* John Boothby created this sound recording as an assignment for a University of Maine at Fort Kent Fall Semester 1987 course entitled History 353: History of Maine. The recordings were initially submitted to Professor Paradis in Spring 1987, who brought them to the Archives in March 1991.

*Inclusive Date Range:* 1944-1945      *Bulk Date Range:* 1944-1945

*Language:* English

*Physical Characteristics/Condition:* C-60 audio cassette, fair audibility (a constant low-frequency hum makes for difficult listening and occasionally obscures the conversation)

*Quantity:* 1

*Access:* There are no restrictions on this collection

*Prepared by:* Lisa Ornstein, February 2000

**Scope and Content Note:** The 60-minute audio cassette which constitutes this collection contains an interview with Conrad Gagnon of Fort Kent, Maine regarding his experiences in World War II. The tape was created by John Boothby as a class assignment for a University of Maine at Fort Kent history course which he completed in Fall 1987 entitled History 353: History of Maine.

#### **Summary of Recording:**

Tape 1 of 1 (shelplist #A131)

**Side A:** 30-minute interview with Conrad Gagnon of Fort Kent, Maine regarding his experiences in World War II during his military service from January 1942 through December 1946. Mr. Gagnon discusses his service in the United States Army's 60<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Division and 334<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, in which he served as a bazooka anti-tank infantry man. He relates his participation on the battlefield in

France, Germany, and Belgium. He discusses his capture during the Battle of the Bulge by the Germans in December 1944 and his subsequent transfer to Stalag 2-A, a prisoner-of-war camp near the “hospital town” of Brandenburg, Germany.

Mr. Gagnon relates in detail his experiences as a POW between December 1944 and May 1945. He describes his transfer with 79 other POWs from Stalag 2-A to another camp where, due to his ability to speak both English and French, he headed a 16-man POW work detail which labored seven days a week unloading wounded German Soldiers, burying dead German civilians and military personnel, and repairing damaged railroad lines. He describes the hunger, exhaustion, exposure to the cold, and fear of execution for stealing food which he and other POWs experienced during their imprisonment. He reminisces about the kindness of one of the Stalag guards who shared his own food with the work detail and who informed Mr. Gagnon and his companions that he would not keep the camp gates locked if invasion by the advancing Russian army appeared imminent. He talks about the Russian army’s advance into Germany and of meeting with a Beltian SS soldier who had enlisted to fight against the Russians.

Mr. Gagnon describes how the American POWs split into small groups and fled from their camp as the Russian army overran the area. He relates how his group searched, before leaving the camp, for Red Cross provisions which had been withheld from the POWs. He describes his seven-day trek toward the Allied lines, during which time he and his group had several encounters with German civilians and soldiers who were also fleeing the advancing Russian army.

**Side B:** Mr. Gagnon continues to relate his 7-day trek in early May 1945 from his POW camp to the advancing Allied forces. He relates meeting some wounded German soldiers who bargained for the protection of his group of POWs in exchange for getting them through a German defense line. He describes the experience of being caught between retreating German and advancing British and Russian forces. He describes the destruction of a munitions factory by fleeing German forces and how his group of POWs drew straws to determine who would venture down through an open field to see if they had reached the Allied front. He relates how his group made contact with a group of British military personnel, who directed them to take over a lakeside resort spa which was occupied by German officers. He describes their successful takeover and their one-night occupation of the spa. He describes how their group was ordered to take the main road toward France on the following morning, and how they managed to commandeer a variety of vehicles along the way.

**Biographical Notes:** [Archives Director Lisa Ornstein gathered the following information during a phone interview with Conrad Gagnon on 8 February 2000.] Conrad Gagnon was born in Fort Kent on 27 May 1922, the son of Onésime Gagnon and Marguerite Deschenes [my spelling]. He spent his childhood in Fort Kent, had worked for the B&A railroad, and was doing state road construction work when he was drafted in January 1942. He spent approximately two years in basic training at army facilities in Colorado, Texas, and Georgia as a bazooka infantryman attached to the 60<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion.

Mr. Gagnon shipped overseas with the 60<sup>th</sup> Battalion, landing in Scotland and traveling to France via England. After his unit was “busted up”, he was assigned to the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division “Rail splitters” and fought in France, Germany, and Belgium. He was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and spent the next several months as a POW in Germany. He succeeded in making it to the Allied front in May 1945 and was sent to a hospital in France where he spent several weeks. He was subsequently shipped back to the United States, sent home on furlough, and then spent some time at a convalescent hospital in New York (during his term of overseas military service he had dropped from 208 to 128 pounds). He then took an assignment as a military police officer on naval ships out of Boston and Searsport, Maine. He was discharged in December 1946.

Upon his discharge, Mr. Gagnon returned to Fort Kent where he married. He worked for seven years as a delivery truck driver and then returned to the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad, where he was employed for a total of more than 37 years.

Mr. Gagnon died on October 20, 2003.

**Provenance:**

Submitted for a course with Roger Paradis at the University of Maine at Fort Kent in Fall 1987. Brought to the Acadian Archives/Archive acadiennes by Prof. Paradis in March 1991.

**Order and Arrangement:** 1 C-60 audio cassette.