

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KARL KLEEMANN
Anti-Aircraft, Army, World War II

2006

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Kleemann, Karl K., (1923-), Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 27 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 27 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Karl K. Kleemann, an Oconomowoc and Madison, Wisconsin native, describes his World War II service in the Pacific theater with Battery B, 485th Anti-Aircraft Battalion, attached to the 10th Army. Kleemann mentions having German-American parents and two brothers who also served in World War II. He touches on his employment as a printer at Madison Newspapers and a rush to get the news printed about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Kleemann talks about being drafted, almost getting turned down for having a fresh scar on his lung, basic training at Camp Grant (Illinois), and training with the 485th Anti-Aircraft Battalion at Camp Hulen (Texas) and in California and Hawaii. He details participating in the invasion of the Philippine Islands: landing on Leyte, setting up the anti-aircraft guns, and doing guard duty. Kleemann touches on uneasy relations between the Filipinos and Americans. He describes the battle of Okinawa. He states an invasion of the Japanese home islands would have been a slaughter and says the atomic bomb was “a great blessing for us.” Kleemann touches on coming home aboard the *Exiria* and not getting discharged until after Christmas. He tells of four veterans returning at the same time to only three apprenticeship positions at Madison Newspapers, so he had to find other work for nine months before returning to his job. Kleemann talks about using the GI Bill to support himself during his apprenticeship and to attend Madison Vocational School. He mentions being a member of the VFW and attending a unit reunion, and he reflects on how he feels about his participation in the war.

Biographical Sketch:

Kleemann (1923-) served in the Army from 1943 to 1946. He worked as a printer at Madison Newspapers for thirty-five years until the strike in 1977 and at CUNA and Affiliates for ten years until his retirement. Kleemann settled in Madison (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

John: Okay, this is John Driscoll, and I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, and today is July 28, 2006, and this is an oral history interview with Karl Kleemann. We are at Karl's home in Madison, and Karl is a veteran of World War II, the United States Army. And, Karl, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and, why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Karl: Okay, I was born in Elkhorn, Wisconsin, Walworth County. It is all a German settlement, more or less. And I was there until about six years old, and then we came to Madison. And I went to kindergarten school in Madison, the East Side, little school. And then we moved to Oconomowoc. Which is about fifty miles east of Madison.

John: When were you born, Karl?

Karl: July 23, 1923.

John: Okay. How about brothers, sisters?

Karl: I have two brothers, Arthur and Walter, which are both older than I am. Walter passed away in 1985, at sixty-six years old. He was also in World War II. Arthur passed away in '91. He was seventy-six years old. He was also in World War II. Both of my brothers were in Europe during World War II.

John: Okay.

Karl: I went to the Pacific, the other way.

John: How about early education, and that. You mentioned kindergarten and grade school. How about high school?

Karl: I went all through grade school in Oconomowoc, and then we moved back to Madison, and I went to high school, the West High, for four years, and then I had almost a year of vocational training, to become a printer. And I was a printer at Madison Newspapers for thirty-five years.

John: Oh, wow. Okay.

Karl: And, of course, they put us on strike at that time. They cut our pay one-third.

John: Yes, I remember hearing about that.

Karl: So then, at fifty-eight, I had to find another job, and I got a job in the print shop in CUNA and Affiliates. And CUNA and Affiliates is on Mineral Point Road, and I worked there ten years, to get tenure in the pension plan, until I was sixty-eight years old.

John: Okay.

Karl: And that worked out pretty well.

John: You knew Frank Custer?

Karl: Yes.

John: I knew Frank. Not real well. I knew his daughter, better. Okay, and then coming along, do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Karl: Oh, yes. Yes.

John: Will you tell me about that?

Karl: I was in, we had a little room, there was some machinery in it, where we ate our lunch, and I was eating lunch, and then all of a sudden they said that Pearl Harbor Day. So we had to get back to work, put together what we could for the paper. I worked days. I worked at the *Capital Times*. The evening, the night crew, worked mostly for the *State Journal*. So we had to get what we could together quick, before the paper went to press about two o'clock, and three o'clock it's out on the street. So we had to really hurry for Pearl Harbor Day.

John: What kind of news was coming in? Very little at the time. We didn't have television, and all that stuff. How were you getting the news? By radio?

Karl: Just by radio. Mostly. Yes.

John: Oh, okay. Let's see, you were how old then? In 1941?

Karl: Eighteen. I was nineteen when I was drafted. I was nineteen when I was drafted, July 18, 1943. Went in for three years, and eight days.

John: Prior to that, Karl, you knew that things were cooking in Europe, and that things were tight in the Pacific, and that. You and your friends, what was the feeling, what did you guys feel about the way things were going then? Did you know something was going to happen?

Karl: Well, we kind of thought something would happen, because my folks both coming from Germany. And the news would be less and less from our relatives in Germany, because of the fighting in Europe.

John: Okay. And then you got greetings from the government? You were drafted?

Karl: Yes. In January. I worked one year at Madison Newspapers as an apprentice. And then I was drafted. And left for three years in World War II, and came back to the printing trade, at Madison Newspapers.

John: When you got your notice, and that, where did you report?

Karl: I had to report to Milwaukee.

John: Okay. What happened there? Tests, and that?

Karl: Well, just before that, in November, the foreman had me work sixteen hours on Saturday with an apprentice. He could do that. And my one lung collapsed. I was walking back and forth. Work was always walking. And one lung collapsed. And I have a scar on that left lung. In November. And in January, I was inducted into the Army, and in Milwaukee, they took most of the day to decide whether I was in or out, because I had a fresh scar on the lung. And they decided I was in the service.

John: Okay. Where did you first report?

Karl: In Illinois.

John: Fort Sheridan?

Karl: No, let's see.

John: Take your time.

Karl: Camp Grant. Camp Grant, Illinois.

John: Where?

Karl: It was the northern part of Illinois.

John: Okay.

Karl: It's probably not there anymore.

John: I'm not familiar with it.

Karl: And I was there for not too long, and we were sent to Camp Hulen, Texas. And that camp is no longer any more, either. That was to be training to go fight in the Pacific. And I was a 40 millimeter anti-aircraft, attached. We were the 486th Anti-Aircraft, attached to the 10th Army. After we went overseas, we were attached to the 10th Army.

John: Okay. Okay. What about, where else did you train?

Karl: Well, from Camp Hulen, we went to, made two camps in California. Camp Young, and Camp Coxcomb. "This was your camp," they told us. "Put the brush aside. Put the tents up." That was it. And it was November, let's see, that was November of '43. And we were there nine months, those two camps. And it was hard to get used to. It was forty degrees at night, and a hundred and ten in the daytime.

John: Oh, wow. Oh, man. That's extreme.

Karl: Because it was the winter season. But it was really extreme. And then they gave us little stoves to put in the tents. We would have coal. They'd have a little heat at night, but the minute the sun went down, it dropped right down to forty degrees. And every once in a while one of the tents would catch on fire. But it was quite an experience. It was hard to get used to that extreme in temperature each day. And that was a hard time. So we were out there nine months in the Mojave Desert, and then sent to Hawaii.

John: Oh, wow. Before you went to Hawaii, what outfit? You were with the 10th Army, but what?

Karl: That would be the 485th Anti-Aircraft. We made our own outfit. When we started, all of our people were privates. One corporal in charge. It was a brand-new outfit. 485th Anti-Aircraft. We made our own outfit. We weren't attached to any. We were made our own. And then this corporal was the old cadre, and the rest of us were privates. Our people became sergeants and corporals and pfc's later, and this corporal, stayed in charge, he went to first sergeant. He was our first sergeant. He went from corporal to first sergeant. Six stripes.

John: Boy, that is doing it on your own. And then you said you went to Hawaii?

Karl: Yeah. I came home on furlough in November of '43. For a few days. And from there we went to Hawaii.

- John: Okay. I assume you shipped over to Hawaii.
- Karl: Shipped five days. I was in the Army so I never flew anyplace in the service. My brother was in the Air Force and they flew everywhere they went. But we went by ship.
- John: What did you do in Hawaii?
- Karl: We trained. On the island of Oahu. We trained for going overseas. We were there, oh, we were there about two months, and then kept going to other islands to train. Back and forth. We were at Kaneohe Naval Air Station, in Hawaii, which is now a Marine station. And that was, and we left there in August of '44. And then we went to Pali, Oahu. That is one of the islands. And left from there to a staging area. They didn't, we didn't know where we were going at first. And they told us we were going to some island. We ended up going into the invasion of the Philippine Islands.
- John: Oh, wow. Oh, man.
- Karl: Infantry went in at eight o'clock that day, and we went in at two o'clock in the afternoon, 1400.
- John: Oh, you were right behind them
- Karl: We were anti-aircraft. Set up our forty millimeter guns to shoot down Japanese planes.
- John: Was there much Japanese aircraft activity?
- Karl: Yes, at that time. Yes. They were fighting us, trying to keep us off the Philippines, and we were trying to take it back.
- John: Okay. Wow. Where did you land in the Philippines?
- Karl: Leyte. That was the big island. We were stationed on that island, and other troops, of course, were stationed on the other islands.
- John: What was living like there?
- Karl: It was always in tents. We had a twelve-man tent, for the crew, and they had a five-man tent for the sergeant and two corporals. And then we were always, well, in Hawaii, we were most always on guard duty. We had around the clock

protecting the Kanehoe Naval Air Strip from any supposed Japanese planes that would come in. So all the while we were there we were twenty-four hour guard duty. We had a fifteen-man gun crew, with each gun. We had eight gun crews for the, like, Battery B. There was Battery A, B, C, D, and E. Four batteries, D. And Battery B had eight gun crews. We were the last gun crew, Section 8 Gun Crew, they called us.

John: Okay, okay.

Karl: So we trained around the clock, guard duty. That was our job. And then in the Philippines, we would move around to different spots. Our headquarters would determine that. Which was the best spot to be moved to, to shoot at Japanese planes.

John: Okay. Did you have any action with Japanese planes here?

Karl: Yes, we shot down about half a dozen there in the Philippines.

John: Yeah. Wow.

Karl: I remember one plane coming at us, he came over the hill and then he put the bottom of his plane right at us. Made a big target. We know we hit that one. And later on, he went over the hill, and then we saw the smoke after.

John: Wow. How long were you in the Philippines then?

Karl: From what, we landed on October 20th, of '44, and we were there till April 1, of '45. Which we had the invasion of Okinawa. Okinawa is one of the islands of the Ryukyu Islands, of the Japanese Islands.

John: I know. I spent 1958 on that beautiful island.

Karl: Yeah. It didn't look so beautiful.

John: It hadn't improved any from the time you had been there, believe me. Yeah. April Fool's Day.

Karl: Yes, that was April Fool's Day. We went in an invasion, and that was at 1400, two hours after the first wave. The infantry went in first and we were anti-aircraft, we went in.

John: Do you recall where on the island you were?

- Karl: No.
- John: It's not that important. Okay, then April, how long did the battle of Okinawa last? Quite some time.
- Karl: Yeah, till the war was over. That was October, October of '45. The Japanese surrendered.
- John: Okay.
- Karl: I don't remember the exact date, but it was October. The war was over May 8th in Europe, May 8th was V-E Day. September 2nd, I got it here is the correct date, September 2nd of 1945 was V-J Day, and that was when they surrendered.
- John: Karl, when you were on Okinawa, the invasion of the Home Islands was in the planning. Were you guys going to be involved in that?
- Karl: We were going to be involved in that.
- John: What was the thinking among you fellows?
- Karl: Well, we thought it would be quite a slaughter, because any guns that the Japanese had ready were all, they knew all the ranges. If we landed, I think we would have many American servicemen would have been killed because they had everything zeroed in on us, if we landed.
- John: And they say on the Home Islands, you would have been fighting little girls and grandmas. They were just fanatical.
- Karl: Yeah. So, when they dropped the bomb, that was a great blessing for us. I know when they dropped the first bomb, they didn't surrender. We had to drop the second bomb to make them surrender.
- John: Wow. In fact, the first one was on my birthday, August 6th. Wow, that was something. Then, did you stay on Okinawa? After the war.
- Karl: No. Well, we waited to come home. We thought we would be home for Christmas. As it turned out, I missed three Christmases. Three Christmases at home. But we thought we would be home for Christmas, with the war being over. And September was V-J Day, but October is when the signed papers and everything, for it. We thought we would be, every time a ship came in to take any servicemen home, but there was a general in charge, and he would say, "No, we don't want to go yet. It is nice duty sitting here." And so we just sat there. So the

third ship that came in, nine hundred enlisted men went around the officers' tents, "We want to go home!" So then, the next ship, we were on it.

John: Yeah. That's great. Generals have a different view than enlisted men. All out of kilter. And then, where did you come back to?

Karl: Then we came back to, we were on the *Exiria* and we came back to San Francisco.

John: How do you spell *Exiria*?

Karl: E-x-i-r-i-a.

John: When I transcribe this, you would be surprised how the different words come across and I can't figure out what they are.

Karl: That was the ship. And we had enough points to come home. I had sixty-one points. But there was other fifty-five pointers that were allowed to come home, too. I said, well, we were a little mad about that, too. We should have gone sooner, according to the point system. But, anyway, we arrived in San Francisco on January 10th, of '46. And we went to Camp Stoneman, California. We left Camp Stoneman, California, on January 13th, 1946. Arrived in Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, on January 17th, '46. I was discharged Saturday, January 19th, 1946.

John: You got out right away?

Karl: Yeah.

John: The outfit you were in, were there many fellows from Wisconsin in it?

Karl: Most of the outfit was from Chicago. Illinois, Chicago, area. There was a few from Wisconsin. There was one fellow, I was a PFC. The corporal ahead of me was from Milwaukee. And when we come back out of the service, he had me be in his wedding party when he got married after he came home. He has since died with MS.

John: Oh, that is great. What did you do afterwards? You mentioned printing.

Karl: Then I went back to the printing, but there was, our union contract allowed three apprentices at one time. So when I started as an apprentice, in 1943, two of the apprentices were already in the service. So I was the second apprentice at that time, because two were gone. But all four of us came back out of the service. They wouldn't accept the fourth one. There was three by contract. So I had to wait

nine months to come back to the newspaper as the second year apprentice. And I worked cleaning at Jack Simon's Log Cabin Tavern. I helped clean there, and filled coolers and stuff, for nine months, until I could get back into the newspaper trade. And I stayed with Madison Newspapers until 1977.

John: Was that the strike, '77?

Karl: Yeah, October 1, 1977. I worked there thirty-five years, in all.

John: There were a lot of hard feelings on both sides about the strike, I recall. I had just moved to Madison then.

Karl: Well, they wanted other people to do our work. And the printers had been doing the work for a hundred years. And they wanted other people to do it. They wanted, they were just looking for cheaper help. They were getting, I ran a Linotype machine for twenty years. That was hot lead. Now it is all paper work, now it is all typewriter keyboard. Which is different than a Linotype keyboard. So they could get typewriter, young women in there and do the typesetting, and eliminate our jobs. That's what the big squabble was about.

John: You didn't go back to school after you got out?

Karl: No.

John: But you did have the GI Bill.

Karl: Yes.

John: Did you use it?

Karl: I used the GI Bill during my apprenticeship. During my apprenticeship, I would go to school one afternoon a week, and I would also receive pay. Apprentice pay was slim. I started out thirty-five cents an hour. And then I got up to twenty-three dollars a week the second year. And so then, from that the GI Bill helped. I would get a check from the government, under the GI Bill, plus half a day of schooling.

John: Okay. Where did you go to school?

Karl: Vocational school. Madison Vocational School, some more printing. Learned some more printing. Which is now Madison Area Technical College.

John: When I came to the state, I worked for the state. And State Printing was one my departments. I didn't know anything about printing. I had some pretty good people

running State Printing, and I was smart enough to keep my hands off, and let them do it. But, it was interesting.

Karl: When I came back after the war, to learn about the printing trade, here, one of the fellows was teaching me the trade was William Kompelmeyer. And he belonged to the VFW. And I didn't know much about the VFW at that time. I joined the VFW in 1948. Now I belonged to the VFW for fifty-eight years. But this William Komplelmeyer was a veteran of World War I.

John: Oh, wow.

Karl: That helped me learn the trade. And he was also a commander of our VFW Post 1318, years back. VFW 1318 started in 1925. And so it is way back.

John: How about reunions, and that? Did you ever get together with any of the guys you were in with?

Karl: We had one reunion in Chicago, but after that it kind of fell apart. But most the outfit, being from Chicago, we had one in Chicago.

John: And then I assume you got married, and raised a family, and that?

Karl: I got married during the war, but that didn't work out. And so, then, after that, my wife and I were married in 1951, fifty-five years this year.

John: Oh, wonderful. Man. Yeah.

Karl: The other, the first one, didn't work out.

John: One of the questions I ask, and this isn't a loaded question, believe me. You were a young guy, you were starting out in life, the world was in trouble at the time, but then, all of a sudden, bang, you got drafted, you got pulled out of it, you got sent into harm's way. Looking back on it, what do you think about that? What are your feelings about that?

Karl: Well, it isn't like the war we have today, in Iraq. In World War II, the wars were started by Germany and Japan. And we just had to fight to protect our people. And when they attacked the Hawaiian Islands, then that put us into the war. And so, I am glad I served. I am glad could help serve the country.

John: Okay. I've done a hundred or so of these interviews, and that is about the common reaction. Had to go, had to do it. Willing do to it. Glad to do it. Wouldn't go back to do it again if I didn't have to. Okay. God, that is a remarkable story. That really

is. While you were in the Philippines, did you ever have any reaction with the Filipino people?

Karl: No, we were set in outlying areas. I know I remember a little river along there, and the women would come down washing clothes in the river. But they would always kind of look at us. We weren't trying to fight them, we were trying to liberate them. What we did was liberate them. There wasn't a real smooth feeling with the Filipinos and the Americans. Until the war was kind of over. Officially over. Well, then, I wasn't even in the Philippines. I was over on Okinawa then. It was a shaky relations with the people because we were fighting, but also some of their people would get killed, in harm's way. And that would make us, make the American soldiers look bad. But it was all a matter of fighting the battle.

John: When we get done here, I'll take this back and give it to the museum. And they will keep this tape, and they'll give me a copy of it. And that I will transcribe it. I'll type it up, and they will send you a copy of the transcription, so you will have that. How we doing here, how we doing on time? Generally, if you were talking to a bunch of grade school kids today, what would you say about your time in the Army, in World War II?

Karl: Well, in general, it was a war that needed to be won, so I was glad I served. And helped win these countries back. It was terrible in Europe. I guess my brother, brother-in-law, was in the Battle of the Bulge, in Germany. So, it was, the German people are not the ones that caused the war. It was the Nazi regime. And that, I had relatives in Germany. But it was, I don't know what their thinking was, the Nazis. Just slaughtering people is not a normal way to live. So, we had to fight to get these countries back from them over in Europe, and we had to fight to get the Philippines back from the Japanese. And we just had to stop the Japanese from taking all these islands, too.

John: That is tremendous. That is a tremendous story. Anything else you want to put in there, Karl? Want to take a minute and run through your notes there?

Karl: Not that I can think of, no.

John: Okay. As I said, we will get a transcript to you. As I said, this is a remarkable story. I am going to shut this off unless you think of something, and then we will turn it right back no. Do you wear your uniform of Memorial Day?

Karl: Yes, on Memorial Day, and Veterans Day. We will have a ceremony this coming November 11th, at the Capitol, and then we are supposed to be marching down State Street. So I plan to wear my uniform then.

John: Okay, well, I am going to pack this in.

[End of Interview]