

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MARION J. KRAAK
Guard and Equipment Operator, Army, World War II

2004

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Kraak, Marion J., (1917-), Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 25 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 25 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Marion J. Kraak, a Vermont, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service in the Army at an air base in Greenland and at Camp Blanding, Florida. Kraak talks about working in construction before being drafted in 1940. He touches on basic training at Camp Walters (Texas) and heavy weapons training at Fort Snelling (Minnesota). Sent to Greenland, he describes fishing and watching civilians build an air strip without knowing how to properly use the equipment. Kraak portrays losing his sergeant's fish hook while fishing and seeing another sergeant get his shoe nailed to the floor. He recalls the sinking of the *Dorchester* off the coast of Greenland, helping carry survivors to the ambulances, and seeing the line stop when some Southern men refused to carry a Black survivor. Kraak also states the non-commissioned officers went through dead sailors' billfolds. He talks about seeing a corporal crack up after getting a Dear John letter. Shipped back aboard the *Dorchester*, he speaks of going through a storm in the Atlantic and the ship's being completely coated in ice by the time they arrived in the States. Assigned to Camp Blanding (Florida) as an instructor, Kraak tells of his unit's difficulty adjusting to such a different climate and being out of shape from being inactive in Greenland. He recalls one shooting demonstration when his men were trying to have fun with him by stopping a gun target from being knocked down and his foiling their plans. Kraak touches on using the GI bill to farm and eventually moving to Rockford (Illinois) for a career in construction.

Biographical Sketch:

Kraak (b.1917) served in the Army from 1940 to 1945. While growing up in Wisconsin, he lived in Vermont, Blue Mounds, and Mazomanie. After the war, Kraak moved to Rockford (Illinois) where he worked in iron working and construction, and he eventually settled in Madison (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and I'm a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, and today is July 30, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with Marion J. Kraak, a World War II veteran of the United States Army. And we are meeting at Marion's home on the west side of Madison. And, Marion, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview. Can we start, Marion, at the beginning?

Marion: You might as well because you might as well get it all.

John: Where and when were you born?

Marion: I was born October 3, 1917, in the township of Vermont.

John: Okay. Your early life? And family?

Marion: Well, I had a mother and I have three sisters and one brother. And we lived in the town of Vermont for about five years.

John: You mentioned your father was a cheese maker?

Marion: My father was a cheese maker and he didn't get along too good with a lot of the people because he started testing milk, and he caught up with the people who were skimming the cream off. And they called him an old crook. But, anyway, we moved to Blue Mounds, then, he was up on Blue Mounds.

John: Right on top?

Marion: Right up on the side, it would be to the entryway to Blue Mounds now. But, anyway, we used to--

John: You mentioned being a gate keeper?

Marion: We used to be the gate keeper for people who would come up to the mounds. And I would run down and open the gate. And they would give me nickels and dimes and quarters. And I picked up some money that way. And my father was in a car accident and got killed while we were there. I wasn't six years old at the time.

John: Wow.

Marion: But, anyway, I started to school in Blue Mounds. I put my first day of school in Blue Mounds school. And then we moved to Mazomanie. And then I went to school for seven years in Mazomanie. And the eighth year, I moved in with an

uncle. And out on the farm. And I graduated from the eighth grade in the Booth School, in Vermont. And I worked on the farm for a while, and then I started working in highway paving. And I worked for Joe D. Von Ess and I also worked for, we put the highway in from the Iowa County line to Cross Plains in 1937. And in 1939, I worked for Victor Nelson Construction Company up in north central Wisconsin. He was from Superior, Wisconsin. And then I was, in March, I was drafted into the Army.

John: That was March of '40?

Marion: March of '40. Yeah. And drafted into the Army. And we started out at Camp, right outside of Rockford, Illinois. I can't think of the name. I been there many times. And anyway, we went to Camp Walters, Texas. And had our basic training. And at Camp Walters, Texas, I had a lieutenant who was the platoon leader who was the best soldier while I was in the service.

John: Do you remember his name?

Marion: I wish I did. But anyway, from there I was shipped up to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and we went into the heavy weapons company and, anyway, we had quite a bit of training on that. And what have you. And I finally made aide to an instrument corporal there. I used to figure out indirect fire problems. Then we shipped to Greenland and the main thing we did in Greenland was guard duty and the likes of that. And Greenland itself was a very desolate place.

John: Don't know where they got the name Green?

Marion: The green came from the moss on the rocks. And Greenland itself is supposed to be seven-eighths ice. And we used to go back on the ice cap and even do some fishing back there. And they had these fish there that were nice looking fish, but they would not bite on a bait, you had to hook them out.

John: You mentioned about watching the civilians building the air strip.

Marion: Yes, the civilians were building the air strip up there and, at the time, a lot of them who were there, they didn't know how to run the equipment that they were working on. And I had run every bit of that when I was working in highway paving. And at the time it happened, well, I know at one time I was a longevity sergeant drawing ninety bucks a month. And I imagine they were drawing nine hundred.

John: Yeah. Yeah. They were getting good money.

Marion: They were.

John: And didn't know how to do the job. You mentioned about going fishing and the great big hook.

Marion: Yeah, this one time we went, we had, well, what happened, we were out, we didn't have any fishing equipment. And the first sergeant I had had some hooks and he gave them to me to use. A guy in my squad talked him into doing that. And anyway, we went fishing and we tied those hooks and stuff on some blasting wire. And we threw the hooks out and the blasting wire broke, and we lost the hooks. And then the sergeant was down to the shop down there. Anyway, this guy told the sergeant that we got onto a great big hook fish and he broke the line. But the sergeant was down to the shop down there and he got a great big hook made to catch that fish. And every time I turned around and if he wanted something, I wouldn't give it to him, he would tell me he was going to turn me in.

And one other time we had a guy, he was a section sergeant. And there were two or three guys who got a little tee'd off at him, and he came in the barracks one night, and one guy grabbed his arm, and the other guy grabbed his legs, and the third guy grabbed a hammer and drove a big nail down through the side of the sole of his shoe, and nailed him to the floor in the barracks. And he couldn't go anywhere. The only way he could get out of his shoe was to untie his shoe. And then he took, he had to work on his shoe and get his shoe loose. And they had been outside in the cold, and he couldn't go out until he got his shoes. And when he came out, he was laughing too.

But, anyway, and we were also there when the time the *Dorchester* was sunk a day out of Greenland. And there were survivors brought in, and there were also more dead people in the hold. But, anyway, I was on a detail to carry those survivors from the corvette to the ambulances and it was real cold and windy. And all at once the line stopped. Nothing moved. And I stepped around and walked up to the front and looked, and there was a guy, a black guy, on the rail that the people from the South would not carry off. And it was kind of a sorry situation.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Marion: But anyway, that same night, the non-commissioned officers in the hold going through the bodies, they said they were looking for volunteer lights but they also got into the billfolds.

John: Yeah.

Marion: And I thought that was a pretty sorry thing.

- John: Yeah. Yeah. That was. You mentioned why you were in Greenland. That was mainly air?
- Marion: At the time we went to Greenland, it was the only way they could get airplanes over to England. They would fly from the U. S. up to Newfoundland, then over to Greenland. Then to Reykjavik, Iceland, and then on into England. And I guess the main reason we were there was to keep things going up there, because the different details they used to have up there to guard the planes and what have you.
- John: And you mentioned, had you guys not been there and that taken place, we all would have been walking the goose-step.
- Marion: Yeah. Well, no, I didn't like it. I didn't enjoy any of it. But at the same time, somebody had to do something so we wouldn't have been goose-stepping for Hitler.
- John: Yeah. You mentioned about some of the, one guy getting a Dear John letter, and that.
- Marion: Oh, yeah, the one guy, especially. He was a very good corporal leader. He got a Dear John letter from home and the next thing he was in the shower. I don't know what his problem was, but he really cracked up. And turned the hot water on, and then the cold water. And said this will get them. He must have thought he had some sort of bug, or something.
- John: You mentioned the temperature and the winds up there.
- Marion: Yes. I saw the wind up there, they said, at times, the winds were a hundred and twenty miles an hour. But after I was home, I saw a person in a wind tunnel, and they had winds at eighty miles an hour, and he was walking just exactly the way we used to walk up there. And then they put the wind up to eighty-five miles an hour, and it took him off his feet. So you question about that hundred and twenty mile an hour wind.
- John: Another thing you mentioned that I found very interesting was the story of the four chaplains and the life jackets.
- Marion: Oh, yes. On the *Dorchester* ship, they had four chaplains and I have read stories where the chaplains gave up their life jackets and saved two people who were getting off the boat. And I do question that because everybody had to have a life jacket on and it had to be buttoned at all times. So some of these writers get going on that.

John: And then you left there?

Marion: I left there, what was it, the, well, I don't know the exact date, but I will say on the way home we were in a ship and, it was the *Dorchester* we went up on. And we were making about three hundred knots a day. We run into a storm in the North Atlantic, and in three days, we made a hundred knots. The propeller was out of the water most of the time. And when we got into Boston Harbor, the rails on the ship were so coated up with ice, well, I am glad the ship didn't capsize.

John: Yeah. Oh, I've been in a storm in the North Atlantic. Then you went from Greenland to?

Marion: Camp Blanding, Florida.

John: Military intelligence.

Marion: No, it was very hard, because you get out of the Arctic into a southern climate and I dropped from a hundred and seventy-two pounds to a hundred and forty-eight. And there were people I was with in Greenland that I'd see and I would hardly recognize them. And at Blanding, Florida, I was kind of disappointed because we had been very inactive in Greenland, and I used to get so many demonstrations to run all the time. And when I had to make a speed run, three hundred yard run, I didn't think I was in shape or anything to do it. But I run it, and I made the time. And out of about two hundred and sixty men, there was one trainee and myself were the only two that qualified. I was kind of disappointed with the rest of the cadre, and so on.

John: Yeah. Sure. And then, down there, you were doing what?

Marion: Well, in the end I was a senior instructor in that place. I know another thing down there. I used to be able to run, then. And anyway, there was one guy that was pretty fast and quick, and I know I run him down and caught him. But anyway, what really got my gorge down there, one time, I don't know, I get in those demonstrations a lot, and there was one deal we had to shoot at, I don't even know the name of it any more, but they put a target up in the pits. And there would be a silhouette cardboard man on it. And it was fastened to a two-by-two. But anyway, I always shot pretty good on that one. And I had to fire the demonstration on that. And the guy in the pit was going to have some fun with me. But anyway, he put it up there and I shot and hit it. It didn't go down like it was supposed to. I had five shots. The second shot, the same thing happened. The third shot, the same thing happened. And then the fourth shot, the top of the target fell over. I shot the stick in two. I'll never forget that. He said "We were going to have some fun with you,

and damn you, you shot the stick off.”

John: Okay, and then you got out before the war ended?

Marion: Yeah, June 3, I got out.

John: June 3, of ‘45?

Marion: Yeah. Well, here on this one here they got the 31st of March, ‘45.

John: Okay. Well, okay.

Marion: You know, it was all just getting too much for me.

John: Yeah. Oh, I can imagine. Especially that long on that icy rock up in Greenland.

Marion: Well, I’m a different person than most of them. No, I see somebody mistreating a child, I go wild.

John: Oh, sure.

Marion: Because, I mean, I took some awful beatings as a kid, myself. When you take a thirteen-year-old out on his own, boy.

John: Then I mentioned, you had the GI Bill. You said you didn’t use that.

Marion: No, I didn’t take any. Well, no, the first year I farmed. I did do something on that, the one year. I didn’t think about that. In short, I would have been broke if I didn’t have that GI, on the farm that year.

John: Okay. And then you mentioned that you went to Badger?

Marion: Well, right after I got out of the service, I went to Badger. And the next January, I started farming then. And then, it was about the next January, I think, yeah, I filled my contract out and I took off. The next thing I was in Rockford, Illinois, and that was where--

John: That’s where you got into iron working.

Marion: Yeah. I was into iron work before I went there but, I mean, that is where, well, I had a pretty good career. I worked for a subcontractor down there, and he would get contracts sometimes with the provision I run the work. It gave me a pretty good lift. No, I mean, being a nothing at home, and this and that, and then go

somewhere else end up like that. Well, I can tell you another good, when they built the telephone building out here. When they got out of service, all the people from Mazomanie went up to work for the telephone company. I didn't have a high school education. I couldn't qualify. But when they built the telephone building up here on West Washington, I was working for J. P. Cullen. And I went to work for them. And they had to set the stone down that one side. No room to get a rig down there. There was no room to get a rig down there, a crane or anything. And the superintendent there, well, I had worked with a stiff leg derrick down in West Virginia years ago. And I saw this stiff leg derrick out in their yard, down in Cullen. But I mean, they were talking about setting stone on that one side down through there. And I asked them why they didn't get that stiff leg derrick up there, mount it on the roof. And that is the way we did it. And the thing that really got me was none of the people knew much about a stiff leg derrick. But the superintendent on the job, I rebuilt it and fixed it up and get it set up and, I didn't know any more about it, but then the inspector for the telephone company came out one day and he asked me how long I had worked for Cullen. And well, I stopped and figured, and I told him. Well, he says, "Either they trust you a long way, or they're out to get you." I didn't think nothing of it. I mean, at the time, but then I asked him why. And he said, "You are going to run that stiff leg derrick, you know, setting that stone over there." Well, most of the time, a brick layer would run a stone setting job. And that was the first time an iron worker ever did it. And it made me pretty happy. Even though the superintendent on the job, it was all my idea. And I know, at one time, the bricklayer was talking about iron workers setting stone. And we were eating lunch one day at noon, and the superintendent on the job was there, and he said, "I know an iron worker can set stone." But, I mean, that attitude, that nobody else can do it.

John: Oh, yeah. When we went through this the last time, and I didn't have it on record, I asked, losing all that time out of your life, having to serve, how you felt about it.

Marion: Well, I'm not happy, but I am glad I contributed. And, like I said, those people are out there and you got to have somebody to fight them. That's all there is to it.

John: I mentioned the thing from Stephen Ambrose, who said to a bunch of vets, "You guys were giants." And they all argued with him. And he said, "Wait a minute. You went off and saved the world." And you did. Each, you know, it took what? Sixteen million people to do it, but you did it.

Marion: Well, that is the part that worries me so much today. I mean, we are not a one-man army, or one country. I mean, there is no such a thing as a one-man army.

John: This is a remarkable story. You have got a remarkable memory. You have a better memory than I do.

Marion: Well, I don't know why. I think, well, my wife is good that way, too. But I have a grandson, and we baby-sit him a lot. No, I think there is some genetic in there, and I think that grandson, when he was real small, we were out in the back yard, and he couldn't talk yet. And I told him which side of the lawn mower to stay away from, when I was using the lawn mower. And the next spring, I started up the lawn mower and he came over and he said to me, "Which side am I supposed to stay away from?" And he wasn't talking hardly. When I told him that.

John: How old was he?

Marion: I don't know. He must have been about three when he asked me which side to stay away from.

John: Wow. That is great. That is remarkable.

Marion: And one time, he was at our house, and I picked up, I was looking around and I didn't think he saw me. I picked up my cereal bowl and drank the milk. And I didn't think any more of it. The next morning, he had milk in his cereal bowl, and he says, "Grandpa, I drank that just like you did." Well, there is only one answer there. You don't want them doing it, don't you do it.

John: Well, before we wrap up, anything else? Take a minute and anything else you want to add to this?

Marion: Well, I hate to even see people go into the forces today because there is a lot of things in there that, I don't know if it should be put in there or not. Because it would hurt recruiting. Because I sooner it wasn't in there. So.

John: Fine. Want me to shut this off?

Marion: Yeah, if you would.

[End of Interview]