

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DARRELL KRENZ
Infantry, Army, Korean War
2005

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

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Krenz, Darrell J., (1931-). Oral History Interview, 2005.

Video Recording: 2 videorecordings (ca. 57 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Darrell J. Krenz, a McFarland, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service in the Army and his thirty-seven months as a prisoner of war and “Tiger Survivor.” Krenz touches on enlisting at age seventeen, training with the 101st Airborne Division, asking to go overseas, and being stationed in Japan when the Korean War broke out. He speaks of being shipped to Korea with the 21st Division during Task Force Smith. He describes being assigned a bazooka but discovering all they had to fire were practice rounds, so he was assigned a sniper scope rifle instead. During a chaotic retreat, he recalls finding white phosphorus rounds laying around and firing them at the enemy. Krenz details his capture in Taejon and almost being shot for having a South Korean flag in his pocket, and he states he was one of only three survivors out of a thirty-man platoon. He tells of seeing American dead with their hands tied behind their backs, thinking he would be shot, and seeing a North Korean officer shoot Lieutenant Cordus Thornton in the head. Marched north for nine days with 800 other prisoners, Krenz tells of seeing Chinese troops going south, trying to help a soldier keep up, and hearing the prisoners who could not keep up be shot. He portrays spending the winter in a school building and tells of inadequate food, cold conditions, not being allowed to bury the dead, and getting severely beaten by the guards for stealing red peppers. Krenz characterizes a major who had the men get outside and exercise every day. He recalls the camp being shown off to some Russian officers. Later transferred to Chinese control, he compares treatment of POWs under the North Koreans and the Chinese, saying the Chinese gave all the rice the prisoners wanted, but the prisoners had to go to “school” every day and hear communist propaganda. Krenz tells of work details hauling wood and having cotton-padded uniforms but no shoes. He recalls one prisoner who got appendicitis and was operated on with a jackknife. He describes watching Russian and American airplanes have dog fights, some prisoners getting killed by friendly airplane fire, and being given two strawberries by a North Korean woman. Krenz explains that some prisoners would betray other prisoners to the guards in exchange for cigarettes, and he portrays the jealousy of those left behind during Little Switch. He reflects on his morale while he was a POW and recalls seeing other people just give up. He states he and others wrote down names of dead POWs in code on scraps of paper, and he reveals he kept his list in an ink blotter in his mouth. Krenz tells of giving the guards nicknames, dreaming about home, and talking about food with the other prisoners. He describes being exchanged during Big Switch, hugging the pole of an American flag, marching through Seoul, and receiving medical care for chest and ear problems. Krenz talks about working to get a war memorial built, the long-term psychological effects his experiences had on him, and feeling unfairly compensated for the time he spent as a prisoner. He touches on his civilian career, lingering health problems, and attending reunions.

Biographical Sketch:

Krenz (b. July 28th, 1931) served with the 24th Infantry Division during the Korean War. A “Tiger Survivor,” he was taken prisoner of war in 1950 and was held first by the Korean Army and later by the Chinese. He was released from prison in 1953. After the war, he married, raised four children, worked in elevator construction with the Otis Company for thirty-four years, and settled in Madison (Wisconsin).

Citation Note:

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Context Note:

Raw footage interview filmed by Wisconsin Public Television for its documentary series, “Wisconsin Korean War Stories.” Original WPT videocassette numbers were WCKOR085 and WCKOR086.

Related Materials Note:

Photographs of this narrator’s military service can be found in Wisconsin Public Television. Wisconsin Korean War Stories records (VWM Mss 1389).

Interviewed by Mik Derks, May 2, 2005

Transcribed by Wisconsin Public Television staff, n.d.

Transcript edited and reformatted by Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff, 2010

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010

Transcribed Interview:

Mik: Start with how you first got into the military.

Krenz: Well, I was living in McFarland at that time, when I was growing up. My father and mother were divorced many years before that. I was nine years old when I moved out there. I graduated from tenth grade or ninth grade. Then we didn't have a high school in McFarland. So I rode my bicycle into East High School from McFarland. My dad didn't have a quarter for the bus station or for the bus. And I did that and I graduated from tenth grade and I says, "That's it. I'm seventeen years old and I'm going in the service." So, I kinda hated to do that because my folks were divorced and I had a little sister that nobody would take care of us, so they eventually put her in a home. Took her kinda away from my father [unintelligible], which I've always regretted that [unintelligible].

Mik: And that was because you were gone?

Krenz: Yeah, because I was baby sitting too, you know. My dad was working at Oscar Meyer's at that time. I went in the service. I wanted to be a jockey, I guess--and go. I went to Breckenridge, Kentucky. It was training the 101st Airborne at that time. And then I graduated from that and then they wanted me to go advanced training in the States and I said, "No, I joined the Army, I want to go overseas." So I had a choice actually, Japan or Germany. So I says, "I'll go to Japan." Well, I was seventeen and I turned eighteen in Japan, I was there fourteen months and the Korean War broke out. We went on alert immediately on the 25th of June 1950. Fourth of July we were shipped to Korea.

Mik: So you must have been about the first to be shipped over.

Krenz: Just about. There was two platoons out of the 21st Division. They called it Smith-- anyway--

Mik: Task Force Smith?

Krenz: Task Force Smith. Yes. Hard to get that out. But we were there but they had met the enemy before we did. It was only just a couple of platoons. They figured they'd see the United States soldiers that they'd run like hell but they didn't. They run all right, right over us. Out of thirty people in our platoon, there was three of us left. The rest of 'em got killed and then--one of the other guys was missing in action at that time but we were still--we bounced around to another platoon right away. So on the 20th of July of '50, we got surrounded in Taejon. That's when they caught us. So we were immediately took our shoes off and our shirts, and then stripped our pockets and took our money or whatever. And I guess I made a mistake. I had a South Korean flag in my pocket. And that really ticked the guard off, North Korean guard, and he put his burp gun on my head and was just about ready to pull the trigger. I could almost see it. I said good-bye to my family and my little sister.

Pretty soon here comes a guy, a North Korean running down the railroad tracks hollering and screaming. So we come up there and he told the guy, evidently, in Korean, "Put the gun down," then he told us, he says, "We're not gonna hurt you." So, that took care of that episode, I guess. Then they marched us a ways out of town there and put us in a mud shack for a couple of days. They took us out and took us north some more. Walked a little bit further and further and pretty soon there's a whole bunch of people doing a course of that for some time. They had 800 of us.

And that's when hell started, really. As far as being a POW, we didn't know what was going to happen. They thought--we seen GI's laying all over the place in this town. Their hands tied behind their back and shot in the back of the head and all that stuff. We thought they'd do that to us too. We were sleeping in a corn field at that time and that was in--eventually in October, late October--Halloween, in fact. Our officers came to us and says that in the morning we're gonna move out and be prepared. I don't know how you can be prepared to do that but, in your mind get prepared to. "It's gonna be bad," they said. So that next morning there was a big North Korean officer and they had us all around there and he's standing up on--I don't know what he was standing up, it's hard to remember. Someone says it was on a little rock or on a table or something. And he called for an officer to come up there and--he has his interpreters on the scene. So there was a lieutenant, Second Lieutenant [Cordus] Thornton from Texas went up by him and saluted him and he's hollering and screaming and are they talking about how the American aggression and all that. And he turned him around and shot him in the back of the head. Well, he wanted us to know that he's gonna be the boss. And he was the boss.

Then they lined us all up and a way we see--quite a way off over the horizon--he said, "We go over the mountains." So we started walking and we walked for, like I say, about nine days--a little over one hundred miles. But during that time they took us off the road, at one time, all night. And all night long was the Chinese coming in. It was all five abreast on the road--just walking south. And we had no way of warning anybody that they're coming, of course. Then we were taken north farther in the winter of '50, then it really got cold. That's when we really started losing a lot of guys, but on this march, if you fell behind, the last [unintelligible] platoons kinda. If you fell behind the last one and there's a line of guards, if you fell behind them, that's where you're gonna be. And ah--every once in awhile you could hear a gunshot. I was helping a kid from Edgerton. Name was Bill Pierce. He just gave up completely and we got behind, really getting behind, really getting behind and pretty soon we're back by the guards. And one guard wanted me to put him down and I didn't want to. And he turned around with his rifle and he hit me in the knee. Probably was trying someplace else but--and I had to put him down or I went down too. The big Korean put the pistol in my face. There I go again, you know. I looked him in the eyes and I just stared at him and pretty soon he took the pistol, [motions] "Get going." So, I got caught up to my guys again eventually--and I heard the gunshot go.

We got to our destination finally and it was cold and I was in a mud shack with about ten by ten, there was twenty of us in there. And one of the walls was just mud and like corn shucks put together and half of that was gone and the elements were pretty cold. We lost about five or six of them people out of there and then a little farther away they had a school which had a lot of GIs in it and they lost a lot of guys too. Four or five a day, at least, would die. So they moved us out of that little shack into that school. Cause there was room there. And that was a little bit better as far as sleeping. You had more people to keep you warm and didn't have half the building down. It's tough to live on one little millet ball a day too. A little sip of water once a day. A millet ball, it's just the size of a snowball about, not even a big one. It's all canary seed. That's what it is, more or less. They just boil it and that's it. So we had to take our dead away once every three--four days and put 'em up on the hill. We couldn't dig no holes for 'em. If you found some little hole or something, you tried to get 'em in it. Their arm would stick out, you just try to break it and put it in the hole, try to cover 'em up but--didn't do any good anyway.

One time during--in this building was--they had a little shack next door and everybody always wondered what was in that shack. We had a big fence there too. So I'm game about anything, you're not going to go home anyway, you might as well just get shot doing something. Had a guy watch for me, I went over the fence when the guard was around the building. I found a bunch of red peppers. So I stuffed my pockets full of red peppers. He was supposed to whistle for me when it's all clear for me to come back and he never did whistle. I said, "Well, I'm freezing out here, I'm going to freeze to death out here." So I came over the fence and obviously there was a guard. He grabbed a club, and he started beating me and he took me in the building and there was three rooms in this building and he took me in front of all the guys and beat me on the back. And then every time he'd smack me one he'd make me eat some peppers. They were hot too. So when he finally got done with me and then another guard come in and he learned what's going on and he told him--he took the club again, he's hitting me so hard, just real high on the neck this time, knocked me out. They thought they killed me, so they dragged me out on the dead pile. After awhile I woke up and I--"Where am I," you know. I crawled back in the building and all the guys just jumped on me right away. Started rubbing me and trying to warm me up. So they probably saved me.

So anyway, the winter of '50 finally got over and then they moved us further north again. They said we're gonna go home. They put us on trucks and we went north for--we went up by the Manchurian border then. And that's some of the pictures you see on there was a barge. When they started turning us over again. Then there's a lot more stuff went on during this time but I'm sure that--I gotta back up. One thing that--I never told too much about this part because where we buried all these GIs. Well, in Korea they have a farm and they call it some kind of farm, everybody has their pig and they put 'em all together and they let 'em run wild. They had no trouble finding them pigs in the spring. They were up eating on all them bodies. I mean there was a lot of 'em cause we started with over 800 and only 283 of us got out, in Big Switch. We got turned over to the Chinese. I say they took us down the river

after--when they went to Manchuria there for awhile and then--the Chinese, I gotta really say, they were a little better for us. They gave us all the rice we wanted to eat. Before, I think they really started negotiating, cause some of--a lot of my friends were POWs under the Chinese and they weren't very good either. They would stick you in a hole in the ground, which, if you did something bad I guess you had to suffer for it. I was in the hole for a couple of days but didn't do nothing bad, just didn't salute the guard, that's all.

Mik: When do you think that was that the North Koreans turned you over to the Chinese?

Krenz: Um, let me think, um--let's see, we come out of--it must have been in the summertime of 1951. '52--yeah, it must have been '52 because I got out in August of '53 so I was under the Chinese or under both of 'em about as much--about fifteen--fourteen months. Something like that. I was in thirty-seven months and twenty days, something like that. But the Chinese, like I said, they made us go to school, though. Seven days a week we had to go down to this one building and listen to 'em talk about how good the Communist government was and all that stuff. And how bad ours was. In fact, they even read a book, it was "Grapes of Wrath" which they thought at this time, that's the way America was yet, you know. How poor the people were, just struggling--which it is--was at that time, I guess. Probably it was but--but they still thought it was that way yet, today probably.

Mik: So they were reading it to you?

Krenz: Yeah, they read it to us. Any kind of propaganda they had. They'd give us no magazines at all, of course. No way of getting any outside--what's going on, how the cars looked or nothing like that.

Mik: Did you have work details or anything?

Krenz: Yeah, they used to take us across into Manchuria for wood hauling. We'd have to get a log and bring it back so their guards could boil their rice and stuff. If you didn't bring back a big enough log they made you go back again. That would've been the winter of '51 then [unintelligible]. I remember some of the guards, they didn't have the right clothes either. One of ours that was in charge of us, his ears just got big like elephant ears. They're froze.

Mik: How were you dressed at that point?

Krenz: The Chinese gave us some cotton-padded uniforms. But during the whole time of the Korean thing, marching through the mountains and living up there in that cold place and all that, I still had no shoes. I had just rags and stuff around me and then if someone died, you would need a shirt or something, finally it caught up to all of us where we all would have some kind of a shirt and stuff.

Mik: But no boots or--

- Krenz: No boots. I had a pair of boots actually that were thrown away where there was just a sole was left of 'em. I had them not too long and someone stole 'em from me.
- Mik: When you were with the North Koreans after you stopped marching, did they do any kind of education or interrogation?
- Krenz: No, no.
- Mik: Just kept you in the room?
- Krenz: Just kept guard over us. That's about all they did. They didn't--they took us on work details, you know but, like I say, maybe some--unload something off a truck or something but that's about all. They didn't--they just let us lay there and die, I guess. But in the mornings, we had a major that would get us all up make sure we got outside and did some exercises and stuff. He just passed away just not too long ago. Major John J. Dunn. We had some civilians with us also, that made that trip. They were missionaries from England and couple other countries--Turkey. Some Turkish girls--guys. One woman even had a baby when we were POWs there but they kept us not together, you know what I mean? Separated. And one of our guys, under the Koreans, had appendicitis and we had a doctor with us but had no anesthesia or nothing to kill the pain but he did operate on him with a knife, a jackknife. Which very few had. They finally found out that in your combat boot was a nice little piece of metal. They'd dig them out and make a knife out of 'em. Just for--use it yourself, you wouldn't kill anybody cause you couldn't go anyplace.
- Mik: Did the person with appendicitis live?
- Krenz: He did, but he did die in POW camp later on. I mean he got to be well again but--
- Mik: Did you have any sense at all--I mean, obviously you didn't get any news or anything, how'd you think the war was going?
- Krenz: The only way we kinda knew a little bit was that we were in MiG Alley, they called it. That's what we named it anyway. The Russian jets would come in one way and then the United States, our jets, would come the other way and they'd drop their wings, wing tanks, the gas tank things. They'd have dogfights. Jeez, we'd be watching 'em all the time. And then all of a sudden they'd be gone. Then we'd all, "Oh man, we're going home now", you know. "Everything's done with, it's all over with." But, it never happened that way. And Little Switch came by and we thought, "Boy, now we're gonna go." And they just took some of the people that were--we had a lot of names for them guys that kinda turned on us. The GIs themselves would turn anybody else in for a cigarette or something. Some of them got out real first, you know. Cause they were good boys. And the wounded. And it was some time before we had Big Switch again. One of my best friends, he lives in North Carolina now, he was so sick, I don't think he--none of us would have lasted a

couple of more months, I don't think. None of us, especially another winter. I was on detail one time and this mamasan just [says Korean word] that don't mean good-bye it means come here, you know, to them. She handed me two great big strawberries. Put 'em in my pocket and the guard didn't see us at all, of course. I got back into the room and I says, "French, how'd you like to have a big strawberry?" "Wow, yeah, really big strawberry. Never gonna see them again." And I took one out and I says, "Here." Gave him one and he still remembers that. We go to a reunion every year. I don't think I'm gonna make this one, though, this year. We got some things at home need to be taken care of. I have a daughter that's real sick, so--

Mik: How did you find out when something like Little Switch came along? Did they just call everybody together?

Krenz: Yeah, got us together and put us on trucks and--we're going down the mountain, it was quite a ways away. Overnight and no lanterns. During the morning, one morning we're going down the road and we only had the back open a little bit where we could see once in awhile, we kept seeing something laying along the side of the road all the time but we just couldn't--the guards, two guards right there, they wouldn't let us do much. All of a sudden the guard lifted up the thing, we're still going, going across this big bridge and all kinds of flags across the bridge and all of a sudden here--American flags. Then we knew, then we knew we were home. What was laying along side of the road, the guys would all take these cotton padded uniforms and throw 'em away. They didn't want nothing to do with 'em anymore.

Mik: So really, you didn't know when you got in the trucks--where you were going?

Krenz: No. I jumped, of course. The flap went up, of course, and then a couple of Marines come over, I guess they were Marines at that time, I said they were, I think. I can't quite remember now but they said, "Come on, we'll help you off the truck." And I says, "I don't need your help," you know. I still got some pride in me, you know. And I jumped off the truck and I went on my face. I thought I was stronger than I was. Then I looked over there and I seen the American flag and I couldn't--I went over there and I just, I put my arms around that pole and I couldn't hardly keep control of myself at all. I just hung on to that thing. Pretty soon an officer come over and says, "Come on now, you're--son, you're home now." I said, "OK." So, they put me on a--in a hospital there. I guess it was Seoul at that time, I believe they had taken that back. They had a little hospital there. I was there for a couple of days and then I--they took us by helicopter over to Tokyo General. I had a problem with--they thought I had something--my chest looked bad, I couldn't breathe good and I had--my ears were all plugged. So I got to fly home on a special pressurized home--ah jeez, airplane. So anyway, then I got home finally. I got discharged in November of '53, November 11th, in fact--Veterans' Day. I got a thing here, a story I wrote for the American Legion. I don't know if you're interested in something like that but--

- Mik: We're going to change tapes before long so I'll look at that then. Was there ever a point where you thought--I mean did you give up? Did you just think I'm never gonna get out of here?
- Krenz: Yeah, a couple of times I did and I said I'm not, I'm not moving, I'm not gonna do this. Might as well, I'm going to die anyway, why prolong it, you know. Always something sparked a, "Come on, let's go," you know. I don't know, I, I didn't have a good life when I was a kid. I did a lot of bicycle riding, like I say, and I camped out, I was a boy scout. I was going days and days without food, the way our family was. My dad couldn't cook and work too. I didn't eat much. Although in service, I never smoked. I always traded my cigarettes ration for candy at the PXs and stuff. So I weighed 180 pounds when I went to Korea. Then I come out as 102. I kind of-- someone else I'd sees given up and, "Hey, you can't be doing that" and I says, "Gee, am I doing that too," you know. And I'd just go grab him, "Come on, let's go walk around, let's do something." Just kept on going and finally got out.
- Mik: Were those health problems--did they bother you when you were--
- Krenz: When I first got out?
- Mik: No, I mean before. Did you know--
- Krenz: Everybody was that way, though, it seemed like, you know, they, you had so much stuff in ya that couldn't get out. Coughing all the time and everything but--my ears were real bad and that's why I got hearing aids for my ears. That's why I had that special plane--there was--they put us on a litter and there was like ten of us on this plane.
- Mik: Were the ear problems from infections?
- Krenz: Yeah.
- Mik: From the cold and the--
- Krenz: Mostly infections and stuff. We don't know. These guys that died, we have no idea what they died of, you know. Had pneumonia, I suppose and heart attacks, you never know. Had no way of telling. Some of the guys would--dying because of gunshot wounds and got gangrene in 'em and stuff.
- Mik: You talked about the guys that were released in Little Switch. What were the--I mean, did you know there were certain people that were cooperating-- was there--
- Krenz: Oh, yes. We knew and every once in awhile they'd find out that we knew. We kinda gang up on 'em a little bit, rough 'em up, try to get 'em straightened out but-- Some of 'em would go down to the headquarters and they'd get some cigarettes and a little sake, they'd give 'em, you know and--when they'd tell 'em who was doing

something wrong, you know. I brought out a code, the Chinese gave us pencils and--for writing home--and paper. I rolled up a little, real little piece of paper about that long, about an inch wide [unintelligible]. And I wrote codes down. And I had head letter on it, but I knew what it was for, who it was and what we were doing. There was four of us that did that. All the time it was under the Chinese. We kept names of people that died. The other guys that lost theirs', see. They found 'em or something and--I had mine in my mouth. I had found an ink pen. You know, in the old days you had that blotter inside of 'em. I took that out and that's what I stuck mine in. And if I had to, I was going to swallow it. But I never had to, so. But that was turned over to the FBI and they had it for, must of had it for two--three years at least. Finally, I got it back and it's right up on the square now. At the museum.
[End of Tape WCKOR 085]

Krenz: For us to get up in the morning at five o'clock, and fly 'em and then take them in at five at night, and hold them all if you don't have enough help. So got together, I says, "We got to do something else here." So we're right now building a memorial behind our legion hall and we put their names in granite now instead of a flag pole. But we'll keep them flags flying. I think I got a little picture of it--I think here too. Maybe, maybe not. I just grabbed some--I must of forgot it. But it's going to be a beautiful--there it is. That's what we're building right now.

Mik: Oh, and each of the names on the granite.

Krenz: Them are steps, yeah. Look like it's standing up in the air. I am not much of a artist, but that's thirty steps going up to the top of that. Then all along here, all along here all along this whole ridge is them 106 flags flying.

Mik: What names go on which?

Krenz: The first plateau on the bottom, we're dedicating that piece of granite there for the Spanish American War, WWI and World War II people.

Mik: Oh, I see.

Krenz: And the next plateau is going to be for the Korean and Vietnam Veterans. And the next ones are for Bosnia and Iraq and Persian Gulf. And the top one is for future whatever, we hope not, but--

Mik: Place to sit and contemplate no more war.

Krenz: Yeah. I hope not, it's terrible.

Mik: Um, are we rolling? [Videographer: Yes we are.] Is it difficult for you to talk about it at all?

Krenz: Well, I haven't done anything for many years after I come home. I wouldn't even let my wife wear a red dress. And she better not have any rice or anything like that in the house. But since I got in the Legion and the VFW and stuff and got going back starting to--these reunions that we are having all together, it's gotten a lot easier. I know three years ago I tried to give a talk at the Legion down there when we had Memorial Day and it just was, I couldn't even think about it, I was just breaking down all the time. It's gotten a lot better.

Mik: Just letting it come back to you and thinking about it was causing that?

Krenz: I been on anti-depressant pills for about two years, so it's gotten a lot easier. There's still some points where I start thinking a little bit too much about it and then I start going doing something else right away. It'll never go away. I mean it's been over fifty years, you know, and I still think about it. You just got to say, "It's never going away." I mean this is just a small amount of what I just said. It was over three years that we did that. There was so much happening, so much, so much death. It's terrible.

Mik: I would think in that kind of a situation it would just--nothing happened quickly. There's just slow, lingering and just awful stuff around you all the time. Do you remember the details of when you were captured? What the situation was, how that happened? And anything that you don't want to talk about, that's fine, just say you don't want to go there.

Krenz: They took--split our platoon up. We were on an outpost and all of a sudden we were just getting run right over. There was hundreds of 'em coming at you. And there was only ten or twelve of us left at that time. So we finally, "Well, they must of forgot about us." So we jumped--they had a truck there and we jumped on the truck and we went back into town not knowing that the town was surrounded already. We drove right into them. And they start shooting at us from the sides, from the roadsides and stuff, you know, they seen us. The driver, the guys who was sitting with him, the shotgun guy, they both got hit right away. There was four of us left in the back of the truck then at that time that were alive. And we jumped out. We run into this big ditch. This was towards the evening already and run in this big ditch and we crawled away and we got into the heavy grass and seemed to be pretty quiet then on. We could hear them talking and hollering and screaming, you know, but they never found us then. The next morning they come down--down in this big ditch and they uh, this one kid, just a young kid, he spotted us, he didn't even have a rifle he started running right away, up over the bank he went and then we knew they were coming back. So, we had nowhere to go--just absolutely nowhere to go. We were out of ammo now, at this time almost, I had a few rounds the other guy had a couple rounds. This one friend of mine, he got hit really bad, tore half his head off. The side of his head, he went out of it and he was just running around like a, like a chicken when you cut it's head off or something. I was on the sniper scope rifle at that time and I didn't have, maybe half a dozen rounds left. So I ejected the magazine out. I knew if something was going to happen, they weren't going to get

this rifle. And I smashed the lenses in it. Took the trigger house and threw it way over in the ditch one way, ripped the scope off and threw that against the rock over there. Made sure that something was going to be wrong with it. This French, he says, "I don't have no ammo left, what are we going to do, Krenz?" You know. Well, I guess we got to try if we seen these GIs all laying around with their ties, hands behind 'em, you know, and all that. So we put our hands up and that's when them two guards come over by us and stuck his rifle in my face and searched us and all that. And one of the other kids he got hit right, we were crawling in that ditch and he got hit right in the back of the head too. But we survived. Then I always kept saying after awhile, "One Jeep's coming out here, I'm going to be on it."

Mik: What about that-- the first time you were overrun when you said three of you survived out of your--

Krenz: One of the guys, he was prisoner of war already before, we didn't know where he went there, he was missing in action, yeah. One of the guys that was driving in that truck that I was talking about, the shotgun guy, that was his brother that was missing. His name was Charles McComas. And when we got to where all these other GIs were up north--there he was, was his brother. He was a POW and I had to tell him that his brother got killed. Kentucky, Williamstown, Kentucky, they were from. And I went to visit their graves. Both of them are gone now, I went to visit the graves here about two years ago.

Mik: What was your job in Japan?

Krenz: I was trying to go to school too, to get my high school diploma, which I was supposed to have it but they--somehow the records in 1950 got all screwed up because of the Korean thing. But basically I was qualified on a bazooka, the new bazooka they had, the 3.5 bazooka. I was on the machine guns, I qualified for all that. I had all that stuff. That's what I had done on the rifle range. There was three sniper scope rifles given out to a battalion and I had one of them.

Mik: To a battalion.

Krenz: Yeah. So, I was--when we went--way back again now, when we were lined up on the railroad track and in Chonan, which was the first town where we ever seen the enemy, I had my bazooka with me. Well, Captain Marlatt, he called for the bazooka team, because that's when the tanks were coming. So we went up there, I had my ammo bearers with me, he says "Them tanks are getting close, let's get them." Shot out there to 'em, hit the tank and just seen smoke go up. "What's going on?" It didn't explode. I said something to the captain, "What's wrong?" "I don't know try another one." So I picked out a box car, was over there on the railroad track, it was some North Koreans in the boxcar. It hit the boxcar and just bounced off, and I checked. We had practice rounds. "Blue rounds" we called them. But in Japan we had real rounds. We were blowing stuff up like crazy, here we had practice rounds, so. Then I went and got my sniper scope back. It was chaos.

Nobody knew what they was doing, you know. We found rifles and stuff just laying, GIs had left them lay and run, I guess, I don't know. I found a sixty, field millimeter mortar which--a whole bunch of white phosphorus rounds. I got my ammo bearers that were for the bazooka and I says, "Let's get this thing goin'," you know, we got--we could see the North Koreans coming. We couldn't carry the base plate because it was so heavy, had to carry rounds too so we--I says, "Leave that base plate." I propped it up against the railroad track and they started shoving 'em in there, you know. I was just going like this. But we got a lot of 'em with that white phosphorus. Oh, that's terrible stuff. I was awarded the Bronze Star for that.

Mik: And then they--you pulled back out of that right?

Krenz: Mmm hmm, yeah. We kept falling back all the time. Nobody wanted to be a retreat--it just, we were moving back now and reorganize. And then the time, by, pretty soon July 20th came and that's when our whole division got surrounded. The whole 24th Division, General William Dean, was my commanding general. He was on the road looking at a map on a Jeep, had it all spread out and we started getting hit real bad. He took off that way and I took off this way. He got captured about a week later, he held out in the weeds, I guess, or something probably. It was a big thing to have the general captured.

Mik: Isn't he like the highest ranked officer captured since WWII?

Krenz: Possibly, yeah.

Mik: What was your rank?

Krenz: I was a PFC at that time. And that was another thing that kind of got to us guys. I mean, we were on the battle line every day even though we weren't on the battle, you know what I mean? You battle to keep alive in POW camp. There was guys making ranks like every month they'd get another stripe or something. They gave us one stripe when we got out. So I was a corporal when I come home. Just about three years ago we got our furlough pay. Because we didn't have no furlough in three years, four years, whatever it was. So they finally said they'd give us our furlough pay. We never did get any combat pay which we were supposed to get too. Never did get that.

Mik: And I suppose it wasn't with interest [chuckle].

Krenz: No. We got a dollar a day for rations and a dollar and half a day for our sleeping quarters and that's all we got. And our back pay, of course, our regular pay. So that was over 1100 and some days as a POW. I should of invested it in land, huh.

Mik: What did you say thirty-nine months?

Krenz: Thirty-seven months.

Mik: And how many days is that?

Krenz: Over 1,100, around 1,100.

Mik: And you weren't counting by months were you? You were counting by days.

Krenz: Oh, yeah. I used to dream over there of home. When I get home I dream over there. Just reverse. I don't know. I still get--my wife is here, she's just--I wake sometimes at night just hitting the wall. And I know what I am doing. I am surprised she hasn't left me so many years ago. We've been married fifty-one years.

Mik: Well, she's probably not going to leave you now?

Krenz: No.

Mik: When you were on the march, did you have officers with you too?

Krenz: Yes. We had officers until they turned us over to the Chinese and then they separated us.

Mik: Was there anybody that they, that the North Koreans picked out for worse treatment or better treatment or, besides the people that would cooperate with them.

Krenz: I don't quite understand.

Mik: I mean was there anybody that they really had it in for? Aside from somebody with a South Korean flag in their pocket or--

Krenz: No I don't think so. They didn't pick us out saying, "Beat the hell out of you," or something. If you were doing something that they didn't like they would hit you with a rifle butt or something. They lined us up several times, and were going to shoot us all. I mean we refused to work one day, to go out in the hills, it was so cold and we had to go up in the hill and get--we refused to do it. And they'd take about thirty--forty guys out there. One guy got his burp gun out and he snapped her back. He shot a couple in the air. Well, I guess we went to work. He would of shot us too. I know. That guy was a mean one. They all had names, we had named this particular one "Burp Gun Charlie," of course. And um the Chinese, they had their supervisors they'd call them. They spoke perfect English. One guy graduated from the University of Texas, he was a North Korean. Luchia? I didn't like Luchia too much [chuckle]. You don't want to put that on tape.

Mik: Were there some that were better to you, treatment-wise? Or were they all--

Krenz: Yeah, there was. Some of the guards, I never took any, but the Koreans I am talking about too. They would give guys a cigarette or something if they liked them or if

they did something nice for him or something, you know. We really didn't get to know them too well, and you didn't want to--but some of the guys [unintelligible] they'd get to be--well, like our cooks. You know they'd take them to the kitchen and where they would have to cook our meal, little millet balls or stuff. They got to know some of the guards pretty well. They were nice to them, give them a cigarette once in awhile. We didn't mind that.

Mik: So your cooks cooked up your millet balls?

Krenz: Yes, some of the times, depends on what camp we are in. The last camp we were in they had cooks. And then the Chinese, we cooked all of our own rice. They'd give us all the rice we wanted and we were like this. Big bellies from eating all that rice, there's not a lot of value in strictly rice.

Mik: So you were all skin and bones with big bellies?

Krenz: Yeah. Well you see them people, like in Africa and stuff, they are walking around with big bellies.

Mik: Um, those photos of the POWs marching in the parades, in Seoul, I guess it was. Did you do that?

Krenz: I was in--way in the back probably.

Mik: But you did, you marched through the streets?

Krenz: Yeah, we went through Seoul, I think three times, we went through Seoul. First time we were pushing them north, next time we got rocks throwed at us, from the civilians and the third time we were POWs, so. I don't quite remember a lot about that there particular march going through Seoul, but when I seen the pictures, well I had to be with them, because that's us, you know, I recognized some of the guys.

Mik: Were you on display any other places?

Krenz: Only one time. There were Russians that come in, officers and stuff, they came and looked at us in winter of '50. One of them pictures, that one where we were sleeping, they came in there. We must of really stunk. 'Cause we didn't have no baths or nothing for years until we hit--under the Chinese. But they come in there and they go "Oh, [unintelligible]." And all we would say, "Lowsengower." That's Eisenhower in Russian. They didn't like that then. They left. We were on a little peninsula when the Chinese had us, the Yalu River. And they let us go out in the water. It was really neat. Of course you were always under guard. And you had no place to go. Might as well stick it out. How could you ever walk a couple hundred more miles back to our lines or something, you would never make it.

Mik: Undetected?

Krenz: Some guys--there was three or four that tried it and they, one guy did get back but the other ones got killed. I didn't know them, but I knew something was happening. We had, some of us planned it one time, but we would of never made it I don't think.

Mik: That winter of '50, I've just heard just awful things. How did you get through that?

Krenz: I don't know, you'd wake up in the morning and the guy next to you would be dead. He starved to death or froze to death. My sergeant, he just laid there in that corn field and he never got up the next morning, he just died overnight. It was cold. And one day we heard some planes and all of a sudden we seen the paratroopers dropping, and they were ours. They missed us! So we put a, we got up all of us in the morning, we got up, we got in lines and we, in the snow, we walked in the snow and put P-O-W on the snow. Just in case another plane would come over or something and find it. Had another plane come over one time, we were in the school house with big windows in it and there was a Corsair, one of ours, and it came over took a look at us. You could see the guys sitting in it, just as plain as day, just real slow. They made one more pass and they opened up. Took out three or four GIs and a couple of guards. He must have had to get rid of his ammunition or something and away he went. Didn't know we were there of course, just seen a bunch of stuff going on, I suppose. He was in enemy territory.

Mik: That must have been something watching those dog fights.

Krenz: Oh yeah. We had, one of the Russian pilots, they didn't have transportation there, we were in the hills and he come walking with some guards past our camp. One of our guys must have shot him down. We never did see any of our planes go down though. We are looking for a lot of them yet though. Some of them pilots and stuff over there. Especially Vietnam.

Mik: So when you, when you dreamt of home, when you were a prisoner, was it just of, of being a kid again?

Krenz: Some of the time, yeah, and bicycles but, I tell you I'm so close to it now, State Street. When we were kids we used to ride our bikes here and go to the museum over there at the, oh, the big red building that used to have a--before you go up, Bascom Hill, I guess it is. There was a museum that used to be way up on one of the top floors and the fire escape had a--

Mik: Old Science Hall

Krenz: The fire escape had a big tunnel and we always, we'd go in the building and go down that thing, just float all the way down in the bottom again. Like a water park, except for no water. We used to go looking shop windows and stuff, and I always remember that. Yeah, old State Street.

Mik: What do guys talk about for three years?

Krenz: Well, there's a lot more of 'em made now, candy bars. At night, especially food--we talked about food all the time. Well, at night we'd take turns going around who could name--well it's your turn to name a candy bar, you know, then it would be my turn. The next--there wasn't as many candy bars then as there is now. Everybody had O'Henry and Baby Ruths you know. Then we used to take turns, well it's your turn now, tonight, and in the morning you have your breakfast. What are we going to have for breakfast? Bacon, eggs and stuff, potatoes and all that stuff. Well the next day you would have hash or something. Mainly it was food. Couldn't stop thinking about food. All the time.

Mik: Well, I thank you for your service. And thank you for--I hope you don't have bad nights from sharing this with us, but I certainly appreciate it and hope we put it to good use. Did you have that sense when you got back that people weren't paying attention to the war or it didn't mean anything to people, did you ever feel that?

Krenz: Yeah. Sometimes I still think about it now. You know, it's so publicized now to be in the service. And I think, "Jeez, I wish--I wonder if it was like that when I was in the service?" I don't think so. Of course like the electronic stuff, they got guys getting shot over there and they've got tapes of shooting. You know the people are there taking all that stuff and there's so much more publicity about things. We were just overseas, we were just someplace, you know. Of course the Second World War they had a lot of that too, the picture taking and stuff. Just seemed like that's why it's named "The Forgotten War," Korea.

Mik: Yeah, guys talked about coming back and somebody would say, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in awhile."

Krenz: Yeah, yeah that's about it, yeah. But we didn't care, we went on with our lives, got a job. Now I'm retired, supposed to be not working and I am working harder than I ever have.

Mik: I don't see any retirement in my future, that's for sure.

Krenz: I retired, I got home and got a job at Holland Furnace Company, which I knew that wasn't going to do it. Then I worked for Solvit Chemical for a little while. Then I got a job, in Heller Elevator Company out of Milwaukee. My first job was to go on this hall, right over there on the corner. First elevators, it was my own mechanic over there to put them in.

Mik: Chadbourne?

Krenz: Chadbourne, yeah. First time I ever--1957 I think that was--when that building was built.

Mik: Did you have any lingering health problems?

Krenz: Oh, I'm one hundred percent disabled. I mean, government disabled service. Ulcers, arthritis is real bad. I'm on a super amount of pills for that. I've had two pulmonary embolisms; my lungs fill up with blood, no cause. Don't know where it comes from. I had a lot of returning stuff, post trauma stress disorder, stuff. That's been pretty well settled now. Just these last few years now I have been on drugs, sertraline, which has helped me a lot.

Mik: Well that's a lot to carry with you.

Krenz: Sometimes I get really down, I mean a low—sometimes, especially if I go to them reunions. We start talking about the old times. And it wasn't all bad either; we had some good times too. You know what I mean? We'd make playing cards out of any old things we could find, stuff like that [Pause]. Yeah--it was a long time.

Mik: And all those candy bars. [Laugh] Did you have a candy bar when you came home?

Krenz: They wouldn't give us too much when we first come home, the only thing--like--I still--when I first got out the only thing they gave us was eggnog, and a lot of penicillin. Boy I tell you I had so much penicillin stuck into me. Every couple hours I would hear the nurse come down the hall, and I'd pull my pajamas down, "I don't care what side."

Mik: You probably had to totally rebuild your digestive system.

Krenz: Oh yeah. And my knees are bad, of course this one is really bad, they want me to put a new knee in there and I keep putting it off and putting it off.

Mik: Is that where they hit you with the rifle?

Krenz: Yeah. Now the other one has so much arthritis in it. It gives me trouble.

Mik: Did you get wounded?

Krenz: Mmm hmm.

Mik: In the firefights?

Krenz: I got--went through my butt; cheek of my butt there. I got shrapnel. I got scars on my legs from shrapnel and stuff. I had a piece of shrapnel go in, very small piece, took this tooth out. I still got the scar inside. When I get a good suntan I can just go like that and it never, it don't suntan. It's just a very little mark. Took the tooth out.

[End of Interview]