

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
VICTOR KUESTER
Musician/Truck Driver, Army, World War II.

2007

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Kuester, Victor, (1923-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 32 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 32 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Victor Kuester, a Wisconsin native, discusses his Army service in the South Pacific during World War II. Kuester talks about growing up on a farm north of Marshfield (Wisconsin) and hearing about the attack on Pearl Harbor while attending Wartburg College (Iowa). He recalls being drafted, basic training at Camp Roberts (California), and being shipped to New Caledonia. While mopping up at Guadalcanal, Kuester tells of a bomb hitting fifteen feet away from his foxhole. He describes being offered a transfer to the regimental band of the 37th Division and playing alto horn with them for a year. Kuester details the invasion of Bougainville with the 145th Regiment and seeing fortifications put up. Stationed on Hill 700 during a period of heavy combat, he tells of hauling ammunition and wounded for three days as well as operating a machine gun. After the fighting, he describes seeing enemy remains get buried in a trench. Kuester talks about street-fighting training, preparations for the invasion of Luzon (Philippines), joining the invasion fleet, and witnessing kamikaze attacks on nearby ships. Transferred to a service company, he discusses driving a truck ashore at Lingayen Gulf and driving ammunition runs during his unit's attack on Intramuros (on the outskirts of Manila). Kuester portrays seeing the remains of Japanese soldiers that had been killed with flamethrowers. He touches on policing Manila and providing food to Filipino civilians. He details combat on Sugarloaf Mountain, where he drove a caterpillar, and he describes driving trucks through the Cagayan Valley to Aparri, where the Japanese surrendered after the atomic bombs were dropped. Kuester describes meeting up with his brother during his homecoming and eating his first meal back in the States.

Biographical Sketch:

Kuester (b.1923) served in the Army in the Pacific theater of World War II. He played in the 37th Division Band and saw combat while in a supplies company of the 145th Infantry Regiment. He settled in Milwaukee (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by John Driscoll, 2007.

Transcribed by Shiela Trego, n.d.

Transcript edited by Andrew Baraniak, 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

- John: This is John Driscoll, and I'm with the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Archives, and today is May 23, 2007. And this is an oral history interview with Victor Kuester, K-U-E-S-T-E-R—
- Victor: Correct.
- John: A veteran of the United States Army in World War II, and Victor, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and coming over from Milwaukee. Why don't we start at the very beginning, when and where were you born?
- Victor: I was born in Ripplinger, Wisconsin, which is just north of Marshfield, northwest, 1923.
- John: Family?
- Victor: Family, I come from a very large, if not very large, family, ten children, my mother and father, I'm the youngest of the group and I'm still the baby of the family, I'm 84.
- John: How about early life and that?
- Victor: Early life I remember I was born and raised on a farm, so I did a lot of raising cattle, I had chores like getting the wood and water we didn't have any running water or anything like that, and my boyhood days was during the depression, and I remember very well how tough it was to make a living, so thank God we were on a farm, with eggs and meat, and plenty of milk so that was my bringing up. I can continue by saying I went to grade school in Ripplinger at Soo Grove, and then two years of high school, we had a junior high there, and then I finished my high school education in Colby, Wisconsin where I graduated in 1941.
- John: Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?
- Victor: Pearl Harbor Day occurred when I was in college, my freshmen year, and on December 7, 1941 we had just finished eating, I ate in the cafeteria, and lived in a dormitory.
- John: What, where were you going to school?
- Victor: What school?
- John: Yes.

- Victor: Wartburg College in Waverly Iowa. And after dinner, this is at noon, we relaxed by lying down listening to music, a lot of times we listened to symphonic music, New York Symphonic Orchestra. There was no TV or anything like that, not in that day and age, so it was a matter of relaxing and we would hit the books again for Monday's classes. And while listening they interrupted and they said Pearl Harbor has been bombed. Well you can imagine the excitement in this dormitory, what we're going to do now, some were going to get going right away, some were going to wait until they get drafted, some were going to stay in school so it was that kind of discussion, it was kind of an exciting day. I remember my Dad saying, "Where in the devil is Pearl Harbor?" Nobody knew.
- John: We had gone for a ride in a car with a radio, it was someone else's car, and we were listening to the radio when it came on.
- Victor: My dad didn't know where Pearl Harbor was.
- John: What did you do then, did you stay in school?
- Victor: I decided to stay in school and I decided to wait until I was drafted. I wasn't going to volunteer at that point, and I mentioned in the spring of that year, that school year, my mother died. And it was a blessing in disguise because it would have killed her to see three of her boys going to the service. In fact my one brother had already decided to go in and he went to O. C. S. School, he was older than I of course, and he didn't tell mother that before she died because she couldn't take it.
- John: Then where did you go in?
- Victor: I went in February of 1943. I went back to school my sophomore year, and I got my draft notice then, and I could finish the first semester of my sophomore year. And I went home and I waited until February 13 to go in. And I went to Loyal Wisconsin, that was our draft board location, boarded the bus and went to Milwaukee to take our physical.
- John: What were you taking in college? What were you studying?
- Victor: Wasn't decided. I wanted to be a music teacher to start out with. But lacking the background for like piano playing or even instrument playing I didn't have enough of that, so I just switched, and when I came back I went into teaching business administration.
- John: Good, then where did you report in?
- Victor: I reported in at Fort Sheridan, Illinois –

- John: Most of the guys from Wisconsin were there.
- Victor: And we were there a couple of weeks to get our clothing and that, because we would get our clothes back free of charge, I'll never forget that, [laughter] and from there we waited until we get our traveling orders.
- John: And where did you go then?
- Victor: And then we boarded a troop train, about a 20 car train went to Camp Roberts, California, that's located about halfway between LA and San Francisco. Paso Robles was our liberty town.
- John: Okay, okay, I know where that is.
- Victor: So that's where I did my basic training, and then from there, we went to Camp Stoneman and we didn't, we couldn't get no furlough to go home, because there was a need for replacements in the Pacific I found out later and so we went to Camp Stoneman, and then from there we boarded a troop ship, a converted freighter.
- John: Okay.
- Victor: Seven tiers high, and I was one of the top ones and my decision long after seeing people along the tee and going to the head and many of them staying there all the way through, I decided to stay on the deck, the deck, rain or shine, get fresh air up there. That's where I traveled.
- John: Where did you, where did you go to?
- Victor: We went to New Caledonia, which is just east of Australia, and just south of Guadalcanal. And we were there a couple of weeks everyone took our Guadalcanal, and we got papers to go there, and we were going to replace the personnel that were killed during the war during the campaign on New Georgia Island.
- John: Was there still action going on when you got there?
- Victor: It was a mopping up operation when we got, got to that point, and I wanted to explain an incident that happened there. Put on the front lines and the Japs would always send over one plane to antagonize us and nothing else, but looking for targets I imagine. And one guy lit a cigarette, and that was smoking banned at nighttime, one guy hit the cigarette; we heard the plane come closer and he dropped a bomb, he dropped another bomb, and a third one felt like it was going to land right on us, which it almost did, and a fourth one down the line and we knew it was passed. And we looked next morning at the foxhole about 15 yards from my

foxhole, there was a crater, a bomb crater. I remember my foxhole I had my helmet on and it shook me. I was on my hands and knees it just shook me like a [unintelligible]. So I was very fortunate there. So that's the incident that I remember there. And then to continue if I may, about a week or so we were relieved and we went back to Guadalcanal and I was with the 37th division. That's the Ohio National Guard. And everything was set up for rest area, they were coming off a campaign and so we went there too, and while there a walk officer from the Regimental Band came over and says to me, and he says, "You played in a band, didn't you, according to your record?" "Yes." "What did you play?" "I played trumpet and alto horn." "Well, we need alto horn players."

John: Oh, okay.

Victor: "So do you want to transfer?" "By all means yes! [Laughter] I'll transfer." So I did, and that was good duty so about a year I spent with the band. What we did was practice in the morning and the afternoon was free so we had liberty, of course there wasn't much you could do on the island, swim, hunt for souvenirs, which was sickening after a while, then we made, we prepared programs to entertain the troops, go to one battalion, and to another and we had a very good program, because the musicians there were terrific. They were from the big bands, like Glen Gray and Harry James you name it, we had representatives. And they'd get together in a jam session, and you should have heard how nice music they played.

John: Oh, yes, I'd imagine.

Victor: Oh, boy, that was good. So that was really good duty. And then after that campaign then the 37th Division was starting to prepare for the next campaign which was Bougainville, another big island in the Solomons. And that island we were to set up a defense because they wanted to build an airport there, a fighter strip and a bomber strip to bomb Bropol, which was a Japanese stronghold. And Truk Island as well, came close enough for fighters to make raids on it. So that was our mission, so on a given day we boarded ship and made a beach head landing, in fact we were with the Marines doing this. We were detached with the Navy in fact because there was not enough troops there, and so we worked together under the Navy to make this invasion on Bougainville and sometimes we would lead, sometimes Marines would lead. And as we got the land conquered and set up our defense the Seabees were in there bulldozing the right-of-way, and they were making the airport and I tell you it was something else. And then our country set up this defense, and the troops they would build bunkers and everything on this. And we were on Hill 700, the highest point that was in our territory, we were all in the 145th Regiment, and that was their area. Low lands the 129th, and beyond us was 148th, and big defense, and it was all set up, as I said they built bunkers put up barbed

wire and did all kinds of gadgets, like, save the rain water for bathing and that, there weren't no river up in the hills. And drinking water was always delivered of course. And some of the guys even rigged up something on their barbed wire in front of them where they put diesel oil in a can and they basically would tip it over if you heard a noise put a gun into it, and that would start the fire, and that would give us light. Even though they had phosphorus shells they would shine down, they had that all rigged up. And so they just kept improving their fortification as we went on. And then in March of 1943, March 8th in fact they invaded. They tried to break through that defense line, in all places that Hill 700 was destroyed. They tried to break through. Somebody heard a noise and they shot up a phosphorus shell and there they saw movement, and so all hell broke loose then because the artillery, the Navy guns all zeroed in along that line, and then they really cut loose in there, and when they were all done there was about 3,000 soldiers were killed.

John: Oh, man.

Victor: It was a big bunch.

John: Oh, wow.

Victor: And it was during this part that I and another fellow the three of us were sent the band always helped out here and there, and we were sent to this Hill 700, the forward post and because a friend of mine and myself could drive a half track and operate machine guns we took over. The two previous drivers were killed. We took over and three days and three nights we hauled ammunition up and supplies and brought back wounded. And use the machines gun as well where necessary. On one of these rounds a knee mortar landed on the hood of my half truck while I was loading the bunker and it didn't go off, it went over the bank and then it went off.

John: Oh, wow.

Victor: So I was really glad. My guardian angel was really with me there.

John: You were fortunate, yes.

Victor: And when we got back and it was all over of course I was awarded a Bronze Star for that.

John: That's great. That's great.

Victor: So when that was all done the fighting was literally over except they tried again, by the 129th, the low lands they tried to break through and they

tried on a cloudy night, no moon shined, was shining, but what we did, our search lights you know, they put those on the clouds above and it reflected down just like moon light, here they come. They made Banzai attacks by the company, the company would Banzai, and as they failed another company would follow. And there too they lost a lot of men in fact we annihilated the 6th division. The Rape of Nanking? That division.

John: Oh, they had it coming then.

Victor: Wiped them out practically.

John: Good.

Victor: There were just a few stragglers up there. And when we went back to examine all these bodies, parts were all over the place, you know how that would be. And then in the jungle it's hot and the stench, was just something awful, you can just imagine. So then they went in there with bulldozers and dug deep trenches and just pushed it all in just to get rid of them. And there were MPs to keep the souvenir hunters away, you know, that was a big thing. And the ordinance people were called up there to help clean up the mess and they were willing to do it in spite of the stench. And so, and then after that it was quiet on Bougainville. We stayed there about, oh, the rest of the, that year, and then they started training again, but they started training for street fighting and so forth. And that meant we were going some place other than jungle. So we found out that our mission would be to invade Luzon in the Philippines. And so they trained for that. And then on, in December of 1943, no, '44 it was, 1944. They loaded us all on the ship, cleaned up the island where we were, cleaner than when we went there, that's the army way of doing things, and we boarded four ships, and we went to New Guinea and they practiced landing with these LCI's circling and so forth and they'd go on the shore, they practiced it. The Navy wanted to do that so every body would know what to do. And then after that we went to the Admiralty Islands, and rendezvoused with over 800 ships. Well that many ships, cruisers, you name it.

John: It was one of the biggest fleets ever?

Victor: Oh, yes, it was one of the largest invasion in the Pacific.

John: Bigger than D-Day in Normandy. Way bigger than that.

Victor: Yes. And so when we got there, and when the battleships came in then we took off. This was in December. We headed for the Lingayen Gulf. And we went up and we passed to the China Sea between Mindanao and Leyte, the channel, and that was a risky taking but we made it through okay. And

then on when we were about two days out of Lingayen Gulf and the Kamikazes. And they came at us and I remember all on the outside lane, the middle lane, there were three lanes of ships and as far as the eye could see from horizon to horizon all you saw were these ships and it did that zigzag, and all in unison, that was beautiful to see. And anyhow this plane came and hit the ship in the center lane, right just right across from us, and all the firing of the other ships at that plane, holes were going through it, and it just nicked the rudder just didn't damage it too much, and they were able to fix it. And then one day out of the Lingayen Gulf, the same thing, you know, they came at us again. And then in Lingayen Gulf they tried again, I remember seeing the Kamikaze hit the battleship, you know, well he just bounced off like a rubber ball off a wall, nothing, no damage then.

January 9th, 1945, we arrived and that's the day we invaded Lingayen Gulf, Luzon. And I remember early in the morning the battleships were there and they started shooting at the targets with 16-inch guns, and a couple of times they volleyed fired, you know, big flames, and kaboom, in a little while later you hear the explosion where they hit. It was a sight to behold. And then going ashore the troops went, there wasn't no resistance to speak of, so that was good. And my turn was to go and see I should have backed up and said I had joined the service company after our deal on and the guys from the service company captain come over and said, "You want to join the service company and drive truck?" "Sure okay." So we drove truck, and we had to take care of the trucks and put Cosmolene, not Cosmolene, water proofing substance around the carburetors spark plugs, take off the fan belt, and put in pipes up in the air so we could go into deep water if necessary. And so that's how the truck driver would hit Lingayen Gulf. And it came my turn in midafternoon to get off, and my boat came up LCT front drops down and unloaded his truck in the water, like this, because there was so much activity going on and they had to hit it just right to get that truck in the boat. Then I had to climb down that rope ladder and there too I had to wait just right to get on the boat. And then one of those times the guideline holding of boat to the ship got underneath my steering wheel on the truck, you know it was open on top, and when the boat went down my steering wheel bent up. (Laughter) so what a mess that was. So when it went up again I got the guide wire on, but luckily my wheels were straight, I had. So when I got to shore I started my engine, it started off real good, drove off, and when I got to shore here was a mechanic with a steering mechanism and they worked on it a couple hours, put a new steering wheel and I was on my way.

John: Oh, that's great.

Victor: [Coughing] excuse me for coughing. And then to continue, the 37th Division was the spear head for our drive to Manila.

John: Okay.

Victor: And from [unintelligible] in the Lingayen Gulf, there was a cement road right on down to Manila. 160 miles, when we, when the drive went on and we had a hard time keeping up supplies and so forth, engineers had trouble keeping up at bridges and so forth, so they improvised whatever to get drive on down, so just kept on going. And we got to Manila outskirts, and we started there January 9th, and we got to Manila outskirts in the end of February: So it went pretty fast, 160 miles. And then when we got to Manila my outfit was to strike at Intramuros, the Spanish fort. The walls had real thick walls for earthquakes and so forth, all catacombed, and the Japs had a big stronghold there. We came to the Pasig River and right across was this fort, and they shot everything, small arms, mortar, and that didn't even put a dent. So what they did was lined up artillery guns on the bank and fired point blank. Now they needed ammunition for this. They organized a hundred truck convoys two 100 truck convoys to drive up to Manila, Lingayen Gulf, where our stuff was stored, bring it back, and just supply those guns. You were on 24 hours and off 24 hours on that run. So we would leave in the evening drive up there, get loaded, come back, get back by the next evening. So we made the run.

John: No problems along the way, no Jap stragglers?

Victor: Except one day, one day. Driving back we got word that the Japs broke through and had our highway on target to shoot artillery, so, whenever you see a truck they would try to hit it, and so we it stopped us, and they said we're going to send you not in sequence but alternate sequence so that we could not be in a timing, they couldn't time to set their target, so this we did. And just like you see in a movie where the shells are falling, we went through a couple of those. So that's where I got my second Bronze Star.

John: Man, that's great. That's --

Victor: Yes, it was quite a run. And then finally they broke through and killed a lot of people there, flamethrowers were used a lot, and I still remember later on we went to look at that tunnel between these administration buildings and at the end of the tunnel there was a Jap he was like this, on one knee, and they shot a flame thrower at him and he just froze like that, he was all charred. He was like a statue. Couple of them we saw.

John: Oh, my.

Victor: So, that was, that took care of getting Manila, but then we were policemen for Manila. In other words cleaning up, engineering went to clean up the mines and so forth, and while doing this our kitchen would send food in to

the civilians because they had no food, and what they would do was load a truck with food on the back end and send along a driver and a Jeep to lead us where to go, and we'd go there and the people would come up and any just pot or dish, and we'd feed them that way. And all the snipers were out too yet you know, so, we did that, and then engineers I said cleaned up the mines and intersections and so forth. And people started coming back to conduct their business again so we had them organized. And after that was done then we were to go to another campaign which was to preserve the water reservoir in the mountains.

John: Yes, I heard of that. Okay.

Victor: And we were in that battle and that was, we thought it would be easy to get in there, but it wasn't that easy because the Japs had, it was Sugarloaf Mountain, there's cliffs like two, three hundred feet high. And they had built caves halfway up, and they'd bring out their guns, shoot you, and then go back in. And it's very rough terrain to get through, in fact I worked supplying part of that, I drove a Caterpillar with a trailer. No road to go east and west, north and south yes, but not east and west. And so we used that to haul supplies to them. So that was quite an ordeal. On one of those trips I had to go on the crest of a hill of this Sugarloaf, and I heard a *bup bup bup* and here's the artillery shells that the Japs were shooting but they didn't go off. So I got out of there in a hurry. So there is a bit of luck again. Angel was looking over on that site. So we got that battle won.

Then on the final phase of the war Cagayan Valley from the south went to the north to Aparri and the Japs were pretty well disorganized by then, and all we did as truck drivers was to take the troops on the trucks, about six trucks, we'd go to a village, they'd spread out, clean out, capture, whatever, there was only a few Japs around. And we just drove right up to Aparri, to Aparri, and before we got up there, they dropped the atomic bomb. So that was the signal of the end. And then we were done, yet because all these Jap troops had surrendered and we had to haul them to war camps and then from there they were transferred to ships nearest to home. But had to turn in their rifles and everything. That's how it had to be done. And then we had to wait then to come home. We had a parade, a big final parade. And that was quite an experience. And we finally got the chance to go home, and we got on a large troop ship, a two stacker, I don't know how many thousand troops were on it, and that thing made a beeline for San Francisco.

John: [Laughter] Couldn't go fast enough.

Victor: We got there in December of '45, and I'll never forget our first meal, they took us to the kitchen, and they served us steak and milk and fresh vegetables, we never had any of this, maybe a little bit of meat, but milk

and butter and that never had before. German prisoners served us, that was something unusual and my one brother that was a captain, he came in the day before, he was at Okinawa and they came in the day before and he looked me up and he met me, and we had a good reunion there. But then I processed the papers and I got on the troop train and came home the central route over the mountains in December, they got us to Camp McCoy a week before December 24, before Christmas, and they hurried up and processed us and I got on a train and came to Milwaukee December 24, just got there in Milwaukee at 7:00 just as all those troops got off and my brothers were looking for me and they finally found me. So that's kind of my story.

- John: That's great. Man, that's a tremendous story. You got a tremendous memory.
- Victor: Well, you see because I've been doing this year after year, and then I got this archive to follow.
- John: Let me ask you a question.
- Victor: Sure.
- John: You were a young man just coming out of the depression, you were in college, and this thing happened. And you got dragged out of life and you got sent in harm's way, what was your feeling about that?
- Victor: Well my feeling was scary. I mean, I, you know, we were fighting two wars. We had to go in and help. We just couldn't not say we won't go. We had to go.
- John: How about the VFW, the American Legion, any of that?
- Victor: I was at first but I got away from it, and I just never got connected with it. But I had my son, he plays in the American Legion band in Milwaukee. He's First Trumpet in his trumpet section. He's a good one, and he does bugle calls for, and union drills.
- John: They're having a hard time getting buglers I hear.
- Victor: Oh, yes?
- John: Yes.
- Victor: He's, in demand more or less. And they do a echo, a bugle echo [musically] *da da da* and then--

John: Yes. That's great. How about reunions, get-togethers, any of that?

Victor: Not in the Army. Because Ohio state, that was --

John: Oh, that's true, yes.

Victor: So I never got together as far as the Army is concerned.

John: Well that's a tremendous story, you know these, a very good friend, that passed away, Steven Ambrose, a writer, and he was going to talk to a bunch of vets, and he was really going on and on, and most of them were pretty much saying, "I just did my job, I, you know, I carried a rifle or drove a truck" or whatever it was, and of course he's a big, probably a big B.S.er, but he said, "You know, you know, you were giants", and everybody looked at him, and he said, "You went out and saved the world." And you did. You did that. Well, that's it, okay?

Victor: Very good.

John: Tremendous. This is great.

[End of Interview]