

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

KENNETH WAGNER

Cryptographer, Army, World War II
and
Legal Clerk, Army, Korean War

2006

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Wagner, Kenneth, (b. 1925). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 88 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 88 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Kenneth "Ken" Wagner, a Racine, Wisconsin resident, describes his service in the Army as a cryptographer in World War II and as a legal clerk in the Korean War. Born and raised in Waterloo (Iowa), Wagner outlines his elementary education, portraying himself as a precocious reader (he skipped 4th grade) with an early love of history. He graduated in 1942 and worked as a wholesaler for Rath Packing Company in Waterloo which made ham and bacon. In February 1943, as soon as he turned eighteen, he registered for the draft and signed up for early induction. Wagner covers his physical examination for the Army at Camp Dodge (Iowa) and his training in the Signal Corps at Camp Crowder (Missouri). He relates that a month into basic training, he was in the sick bay for constipation when he received a telegram stating his mother had died suddenly. Wagner was not able to return for the funeral and expresses anger that his oldest brother, who he claims avoided the service by faking a back injury, took or sold all Wagner's possessions. Next, Wagner reveals he turned down Officer Candidate School because he "didn't want to be a dead second lieutenant." Instead, he attended an Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) at the University of Nebraska. Wagner tells how, while home on leave for Christmas, he read in the newspaper that the ASTPs were going to be disbanded and the participants sent overseas as infantry. Wagner resigned from the ASTP and was sent to Camp Kohler (California), where he trained to become a cryptographer. He describes the FBI background check required and details various coding devices and methods used to code and decode Army messages, including the M-209. In October 1944, Wagner was shipped to New Guinea by boat via Guadalcanal. He explains he was stationed at a message center in Hollandia (New Guinea) and later moved to Dulag and Leyte after the invasion of Leyte. He describes guard duty and how the moon played tricks on him. Wagner briefly touches upon combat, mentioning the Japanese regularly raided, strafed, and bombed the bases at Dulag and Leyte (New Guinea). Wagner reports he grew bored with cryptography and began to run a first aid center to supplement the sick bay. With permission from the doctors, he treated tropical illnesses like: heat rash, insect bites, jungle rot and allergies. To combat boredom, Wagner mentions he also cooked one meal a week in the mess hall which was not known for its tasty food. He claims the troops did not like the Red Cross because they charged for the donuts and cigarettes they distributed. Wagner clarifies that his signal center was located in the headquarters of General Douglas MacArthur. He characterizes General MacArthur as "egocentric" and disliked by the servicemen, and he criticizes MacArthur's planned invasion of Japan. In contrast, Wagner praises President Harry Truman and General Dwight D. Eisenhower who he felt treated the troops well. Wagner admits he did not vote for Truman in 1948, but as a teacher, he later came to appreciate Truman's leadership. Wagner recalls the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan; he and his team decoded

the news of the Japanese surrender before the rest of the base in New Guinea found out. He comments the soldiers had no idea what an atom bomb was and expresses his sense of relief that there would not be a prolonged invasion of Japan. In June 1946, Wagner was released from the Army and returned to the U.S., where he was greeted coldly by his father and older brother. He went to State Teachers College, now University of North Iowa, and became a high school history teacher. In 1950, almost immediately after he graduated college, Wagner was recalled to the Korean War. He was one of the higher ranking, more experienced soldiers in his unit at Fort Riley (Kansas) and the only enlisted man with a college degree. Wagner reports that he turned down OCS again and became company clerk because of his typing skills. Next, he attended shorthand school at Fort Benjamin Harrison (Indiana). When his training was over, Wagner explains he returned to Fort Riley and became secretary to the judge advocate (JAG) and company commander for the 10th Division. In 1951, Wagner was shipped overseas to Japan. He tells how, while stopped in Manila (Philippines), he witnessed a murder on his ship resulting from a drunken altercation between a Mexican soldier and an African American soldier. With his experience as a legal clerk, Wagner knew how to start an investigation, and his initiative caught the attention of the judge advocate at Camp Drake in Tokyo (Japan) who needed a clerk. Wagner explains he had been assigned to be the secretary of a lieutenant general, which he expected would involve running errands and polishing brass. He expresses delight that Major William Redman, the judge advocate, asked him to be his legal clerk. Wagner comments that legal clerks were supposed to be warrant officers and he was only a first class sergeant. Wagner explains his job was challenging, enjoyable, and carried lots of power. He repeatedly points out how company clerks and first class sergeants often exert more influence in the Army than befits their rank. He helped regulate disputes and investigate crimes including: murder, sex crimes, drug use, desertion and counterfeiting. Wagner shares a humorous dispute in which an Army truck upended a Japanese farmer's cart full of "honey pots" (jars of human waste used for fertilizer) and the Army had to reimburse him for damage to his cart and the pots, but refused to reimburse for the contents of the jars. Wagner describes interactions with Japanese civilians in street cars and hotels, and he recalls meeting a Japanese man who worked with Frank Lloyd Wright. Wagner values his time spent in Japan during the Korean War and says he felt it was his duty to serve in both wars. He was discharged from the Army in July 1953 and got a job teaching high school history and economics in Cincinnati (Ohio). He taught high school for thirty years and comments that if he had shirked his duty, he would not be able to "stand in front of a classroom and talk about the war and the draft."

Biographical Sketch:

Wagner (b. 1925) was born and raised in Waterloo, Iowa. He graduated high school in 1942 and worked briefly for Rath Packing Company before opting for early induction into the Army in 1943, at the age of eighteen. He served in World War II as a cryptographer in Papua-New Guinea. After the war, he attended college at the University of Northern Iowa but was called up for the Korean War in 1950, shortly after graduating. Wagner served as a legal clerk for a Judge Advocate (JAG) in Tokyo (Japan) for the duration of the Korean War. In 1953, he was discharged from the Army and became a history teacher in Cincinnati (Ohio). He taught high school for thirty years. He now lives in Racine, Wisconsin.

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

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

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and we were with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, at the conference room in Madison, and today is May 8, 2006. And this is an oral history interview with Ken Wagner. Ken is a veteran of the United States Army in World War II, and post-World War II, right after World War II.

Ken: World War II and recalled for Korea.

John: Oh, good luck! Okay. And, Ken, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and why don't we start at the very beginning? Where and when were you born?

Ken: I was born in Waterloo, Iowa, February 1, 1925, at 11:30 Sunday evening, on a very cold winter night.

John: Okay.

Ken: I was born at home. Anyhow...

John: Brothers? Sisters?

Ken: I had two older brothers, both of whom I disliked.

John: What did they think of you?

Ken: Well, of course, I was the youngest, so I got by with things that they used to get by with, that had long since forgotten. I didn't like them because they abused me, physical abuse and all of those kind of things.

John: Okay.

Ken: Anyhow, went on to school. I started, in those days, we used to have mid-year entry into school. In other words, I could start kindergarten on February 1, or January 29, whatever it was.

John: Okay. I've never heard of that.

Ken: The deadline, you had to be five by February 1. I was five on February 1, so I went in and consequently I ended up being the youngest person in my graduating class because I skipped part of elementary school. I was a curious individual. My grandmother, who died just before I was four, had taught me how to read.

John: Oh, great.

Ken: Consequently, I was more interested in books than a lot of the other things. I went on to school. Kindergarten.

John: Where?

Ken: That was in Waterloo, Iowa. And it was, again, mid-year, meaning I started in January, at the end of the first semester. But my first semester was in the middle of the year. And that lasted, they used to have two graduations. But during the school year, during my schooling, it was a case they finally wised up to themselves and realized I was brighter than what I appeared to be. And I skipped first semester of fourth grade. So I went from 3A to 5B. B, the intelligence that educators have. And first semester was a B, and second semester was an A. It was the worst experience that I have ever had in school. The teacher and I did not get along.

John: Okay.

Ken: And she used the rubber hose. Oh, yes. And it was a case of, after the first of October, I was probably beaten by her from neck to ankles, oh, sometimes as often as three times a day. She didn't like me. I don't blame her. I wouldn't have liked me, either, but on the other hand, just out of nowhere, "Out in the hallway!" And so forth. I enjoyed history. She taught history, and I really enjoyed history, but it was a case of it was kind of difficult to enjoy history and dislike your teacher.

John: I can understand that.

Ken: Likewise, in sixth grade, we had ancient history. Went on to seventh grade for American history. Eighth grade, the second year of American history. Ninth grade, no history. Tenth grade, I took world history. Eleventh grade was American history again. And so on. I rather enjoyed school. It was challenging and, although being the youngest one in the class, well, I didn't have the maturity that the others had, I probably had more brains than they did for being devious, and creating problems. Somebody else did it, on the other side of the room! Kind of thing. Anyhow, I enjoyed school, and as you may know, I have contributed about three hundred books to the library here. History books.

John: I didn't know that. But that is wonderful.

Ken: World War I and World War II. Diplomacy, and all of that stuff. So I been a great reader. In fact, I kept track since 1958 of all of the books that I have read, and I have read close to nine hundred books.

John: I can believe it.

Ken: I traveled a great deal. I enjoyed travel. Although now with my deafness, it is kind of difficult to do it.

John: When did you graduate from high school?

Ken: I graduated, I should have mentioned that, in June of 1942.

John: Okay.

Ken: There, and here. The diploma, and the invitation to the graduation.

John: Oh, okay.

Ken: The, I frequently forget where I am and diddle a bit.

John: I do that, too.

Ken: Graduated from high school. I was out in 1942 and I was able to get a job at Rath Packing Company. At that time it was located in Waterloo. You may recall the product. Ham, bacon.

John: I remember the logo, the Indian head.

Ken: Yes. Uh-huh. I got a job in the wholesale market, where you would put up orders for meat markets around the state. And so on. It was sort of boring. Truth, it was not challenging. And it has always been something that was intellectually challenging that I liked to do. So, went there. Was eighteen in February, of 1943. At which time I went down, as was required, and registered with the draft board, and volunteered for early induction. That meant the first time I could go in would be for the month of April, because February's had already been selected by name, and so on. They had selected and notified the ones that would go into the service in March, and I was one of the first ones to sign up for the month of April. Went off to Camp Dodge, Iowa, which was at the time left over from the Civil War.

John: Okay.

Ken: I can recall the physical examination. When you got in the door, the first thing you did was get stark naked.

John: Right.

Ken: You spent all day in this area bare-assed naked.

John: Yea. Yea.

Ken: It was hell because I no sooner was sitting there waiting to be released when they called my name and told me they had lost my shot record. So I had to go through and have all the shots done the second time. Well, from there I went to Camp Crowder, Missouri.

John: Let me back up just a step.

Ken: Okay.

John: Why did you sign up to go early? What were you thinking of there?

Ken: Believe it or not, I was a patriot.

John: Yea, okay. Sure.

Ken: I felt it was a duty.

John: Okay, okay. That's good.

Ken: I looked back on my life, and I had, since I had never married, probably at the request of the women, I have had a great life, be it the service, the training for the work I eventually do in cryptography, very, very interesting. I have traveled a great deal, and so on. So I was drafted April 12, given the week off between the day you were drafted and inducted, and then you were brought back a week later and were assigned. In this case, I was assigned with the signal corps and, as you know, in most instances, they check your intelligence as to where they send you. If you happen to be a genius, they put you in the infantry to get shot. Anyhow, I went off to Camp Crowder, Missouri, the largest signal corps camp at the time. They had a hundred thousand people there.

John: Oh, wow. What part of Missouri?

Ken: The southwestern corner. And almost spitting distance from Oklahoma. It was there that, what was it, on the second of May, I was in the hospital, bluntly, I was so damned constipated that I went, this may sound strange, I went ten days without going.

John: Oh, my God!

- Ken: I went to sick call and they gave us what was called the Brown Bomber. Maybe that was still being used. A mixture of mineral oil and some other stuff that they put in there.
- John: God knows what.
- Ken: It didn't do anything. Bluntly, all I did was fart, in technicolor. Anyhow, I was in the hospital on the morning of the second of May. They finally gave me an enema, which I had been asking for, for days. And the nurse came in with a telegram, telling me that my mother had died.
- John: Oh.
- Ken: It was a case, I went in on the 19th, and she died on the 1st of May. Completely unexpected. She walked me to the bus station when I went into the service. She kissed me goodbye. I can still smell her face powder. And that was it. I had no idea, and neither did she, that she would be dead in two weeks.
- John: Wow. Oh, man.
- Ken: So, thereabouts. Anyhow, it was a very sad thing, but it was also very fortunate that I was in the service. That sort of took your mind off of things.
- John: Well, that's true.
- Ken: And, by the way, I was able to take care of my digestive system properly for the rest of the time I was in the service. Anyway, it was a sad thing. And I was selected for Officers Candidate School. I was just eighteen, but, nevertheless, they needed second lieutenants. And it was a case that I rejected that.
- John: Oh.
- Ken: I wanted control of my life, as much as possible in the service.
- John: Okay.
- Ken: And I was somewhat of a rebel, and I got along beautifully, as you can imagine. And it was a case that I was finally selected to go to ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program. And that was sort of the Army's answer to the Navy's V12. And it was, I went to Nebraska. University of Nebraska. Used to drive the football players mad there because as we marched to class we'd sing the song, the school songs, of the schools that they were going to be playing football that night. I guess we so demoralized them that the coach went to the commanding officer and he

ordered us not to sing. That was bothering the team. So we'd hum when we would walk by the practice field, we'd hum the song. Oh, one way of doing it. Then I went home for leave following Christmas. That was because the railroads would have been too damned crowded during Christmas vacation, and before. So they gave us our Christmas vacation after the rush, which made good sense.

John: Were your two brothers in the service at that time?

Ken: Yes. The oldest brother, he was a medic. He was also a damned liar. He was able to come up with some idea what was wrong with his back and, let's face it, in those days, they didn't have anything but x-rays, and it was a case he was able to get discharged. The other brother was in the Navy. Neither, the second brother, in the Navy, was not able to get back for my mother's funeral. My other brother, the oldest one who stayed home, took everything.

John: Oh, wow.

Ken: Everything. I didn't have my school yearbook, I didn't have my school ring, I didn't have my graduation watch. None of that stuff. They took over and sold, or what have you. Good, honest brother. You want to know why I dislike my brother? All right. Anyhow, while I was home on leave, I read in the paper, the *Chicago Tribune*, that the Army was going to close down ASTP. And it was-- they were planning for the invasion. So get the heck out of, get them back to the service. So I went back and resigned from the ASTP. And the requirement was that if you came from the signal corps, you went back to the signal corps. So I went back to the signal corps, to Camp Kohler, California, just outside of Roseville, California, or Sacramento, California. And the fellows that stayed in ASTP, they ended up in the infantry and had the hell shot out of them because they didn't have any training.

John: Yea. Yea.

Ken: And I think they went to the 96th Division, which was not well led, and the casualties were tremendous.

John: Terrible, terrible.

Ken: But, anyhow, while I went back to Camp Kohler, I was sent out there to become a cryptographer, which meant investigation. And in those days, your security clearance was determined by your FBI. And I know a friend who was interviewed, we had to provide names. He was an assistant fire chief in Waterloo. In his office, knock at the door, looked up and there were a number of fellows in suits, playing the role, came in and introduced themselves. They were there to check on me.

Clearance came through, and the training started. It was kind of exciting. First thing they did was give us a plastic card. Of all things, they had plastic then. It was covered with something, I don't know. Anyhow, they had a picture on it, our picture on it, specifications, who we were, serial number and so on. And in bold print, as big they could put it on the card, that in the event of our being arrested while on leave or taking the night off, or what have you, we were not to be put in the same cell with anybody else. The reason being is that we had secrets. If we were drunk, they'd talk. Well, I didn't drink, so I never had to worry about that. But I still had that card, for some time, until we went overseas and then we had to turn them back in. Well, it was very interesting, although California in Central Valley can be hotter than hell.

John: Oh, yea.

Ken: I learned how to be a code clerk, so to speak. I am leaving you the pamphlets I have here on the machine and they will have copies of it here, I am sure. And, if you wish, have one made, if you want one.

John: A copy?

Ken: If you want one. Anyhow, it was a case that we were restricted to the company area. If you wanted to have beer, you had to have one person, or two persons, or whatever it was, go over to the nearby PX, get the pitchers of beer, and bring them back to the company. Remember, that used to be a court-martial offense to bring beer in the company area. Well, that's where it had to be. Because, again, talk. I didn't drink so I didn't worry about it. And they discovered that I could sort of figure things out. And they had lost statistically half a dozen fellows. The company clerk had screwed up in the calculations of the company strength and people had left on AWOL, some of them transferred out, and what have you. And so they decided, the captain decided that I would come up and do the work. Straighten it out. So I finally solved that problem. It took hours, days, weeks to run down this guy's assignment and when he left, and so on. And it was terribly interesting.

John: I'll bet. Sure.

Ken: I really enjoyed that. And I looked forward to being a cryptographer. Little did I realize that when I got to New Guinea, when I first went overseas, being a code clerk, as we called them, it was boring as all get out. It was just sitting there typing, and we had five, as you know, five letter code groups.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Ken: And you would type out the five, and go to the next five, and the next five. And they would go through the machine, which was very much resembled a teletype.

John: Yeah. Come out on tape.

Ken: And I imagine. I don't know whether they were made by Western Electric or what, but the coding devices. It was interesting to learn, but boring as hell after you've learned it. There were other coding techniques that we learned. For example, strips. That doesn't mean that she takes all of her clothes off. It means you have a board with slides through them. And you put alphabets in there in different order. And certain alphabets were required to go in there each day. I think there were, it was about eight and a half by eleven. And how many lines would that take in each one, maybe twenty-eight strips would go in there. The code would come in X-Q-R, what have you, and you would line those letters up vertically, and then you would slide it over and then the clear text would appear. If you got the code here and you got the clear text suddenly appear, if you got them all lined up properly. There was also, which you may remember, the M209, which was a very small machine, a little bit smaller than the tape recorder there. And you could put the letters, code it in there, and it had a crank. And it would make the code, and so forth. But it was very easy. It was used primarily by companies as opposed to battalions.

John: Okay.

Ken: What they wanted to know, they wanted to know right away. And fifteen minutes later the Germans may have decoded it already. But that was of no concern. I never used one of those.

John: I don't recall those.

Ken: Although I knew how to use it. And there were some other ways that we could code things. Eventually, in I think it was either August or September, I was pulled out to go overseas. I was assigned to this unit, and the unit was pulled out to go overseas. It was a battalion. And we went on a Victory ship, so we traveled alone because it was a faster vessel than a Liberty ship. We arrived at Guadalcanal, and went through Iron Bottom Bay on October 12, of 1943. No, '44. It was really quite an experience for me because the water was absolutely not moving. You could spit in it and it would make rings appear in the top of the water. And then on to New Guinea. At New Guinea, we eventually made it to Hollandia. And were there where we took over as message center operators, and replaced the outfit that had been in there. The technique was to have message center groups leap frog one another. There were various bases. There was Base A, Base B, Base C. Let's see, what was the one, I forget what it was, at Hollandia. I do know that in Leyte, it

was Base A. Why, I don't know. But, again, in alphabetical order. And we did the work in Hollandia. And, as I said, that is when I learned this is not for me. I liked knowing things that other people didn't know. It's fun. But, on the other hand, to find out those things was boring as all get out. Eventually, we moved on to Leyte, and I arrived there shortly after the invasion. And the invasion was, when was it? October 20, of 1944.

John: Okay.

Ken: And the landing craft was a Higgins boat, and I was up near the gate, the front end of it. And the coxswain of the landing craft went up as far as he could go, and hit the sand bar that was about a hundred feet out in the ocean. And, being at that gate, or the ramp, I was one of the first ones to get off, carrying my - I learned to do this - carrying my duffle bag, which was heavier than hell, on my head. And stepped off over my head, and I am scared to death of the water. I cannot swim. But, fortunately, the duffle bag was light enough to float. So I just pulled myself back up and, eventually, I hit bottom and walked ashore. Soaking wet, of course. Well, it really didn't make any difference because it was raining at the time.

John: Okay. Oh, wow.

Ken: That was at a place called Dulag, and it was pretty well shelled by the Navy.

[End of Tape 1, Side A.]

John: Okay, go ahead.

Ken: We got off at Dulag. It was a mud hole, and that is where our brilliant battalion commander said we should set up. There was the night that the Japanese came over and crash-landed bombers and cargo ships, and what have you that were loaded with soldiers. Japanese soldiers, by the way. Not American soldiers. And they thought that maybe a few of them would be surviving. And we knew about it, and I was on guard duty that night. And there was something off on the distance that moved. Of course, when you are there alone, your imagination runs amok. And it was a cloudy night. Have you been in the tropics?

John: Oh, yes.

Ken: Then you know, clear nights, beautiful clear nights, clouds go over, dark of the moon, and it is pitch dark. Then it comes out and the whiteness of the moon is brilliant. Well, this damned thing, I was sure it was a Japanese soldier who was bearing down on me. I kept looking and looking and, okay, the next time the moon comes out, I am shooting. The next time the moon came out, it was one of

the carabaos, or water buffaloes which I damned near killed. Well, anyhow, we had other raids. We were strafed. We were bombed. I recall one time a Liberator coming in and it came in, as bombers were required to do when their IFF, Identification Friend or Foe, the way they have to come in when their IFF is not working. And the bomb bay doors were open. All the lights were on. And as I was standing there looking at it, all the lights go off, the engines, which were out of sync before, are now going like mad, and it was the Japanese who had captured the bomber and was using that to come in and bomb Tacloban. But, we had a few experiences like that.

John: Oh, my God. Yeah.

Ken: There we remained, operating the message center, and, if you wish, I will show you the pictures of them.

John: Let's get to that afterwards, okay? Unless you want to use those as you are talking.

Ken: I'll just sort of get it out so I can just show you what it looked like. Our headquarters, I mean our signal center was located in MacArthur's headquarters.

John: Oh, wow.

Ken: Once again, to a different area on Tacloban, in anticipation, as we learned after the war, we were to be the signal team that went to Japan in Kyushu. We obviously would not go in on Day 1, not with all the secret equipment we had. And, but, nevertheless, we were to make the invasion. That we learned later. It was, as I said, boring as hell for me. And so I began to find other things to do, and one of which I developed an aid center, a first aid center for the fellows. After all in the tropics, you have all sorts of skin diseases, and this, that, and the other thing. And those that were going on sick call for, you could imagine, in a company of four to six hundred, I forget exactly what it was, the size of the sick call. And they were there at the place with the two doctors all day long. And it really loused up the operations.

John: Sure.

Ken: And we worked on shifts. We had a twenty-four hour day. Three shifts. And it was really a problem to deal with. And I said I will set up this aid center. So I went over to the doctors, and got their approval. And they authorized certain things. And, I will need this and that, and yeah, and they wrote it all down. I had a list that was as long as a Christmas wish list. Anyhow, it was a very good experience. Fellows would come in from the shower and they'd have the heat rash under the arms or in the crotch. The crotch was probably the worst place.

John: Oh, yeah.

Ken: And which meant that, I discovered, a way of dealing with that was with salicylic acid. Ten percent solution, which put them through the ceiling the first time. After that, there was no pain at all. The next time they would come in, they would back off, and, "I don't know whether I want that." And I would say it won't hurt this time. And it didn't. Remarkable. But there were insect bites. You name it. It was allergies.

John: Even a little cut.

Ken: Yeah. I had jungle rot. Just from mosquito bites, and end up with a hole right through the skin and into the bone as big around as a pencil. And some of the fellows I seen with jungle rot that was big as round as a quarter. It ate through the skin. That was always a problem. Incidentally, in the summer of 1947, I went to school in Florida and, lo and behold, I no sooner got there and the jungle rot and all of the other tropical things that I had came back on me the summer that I was there.

John: Oh, no.

Ken: I was usually the one who, what shall we say, if they needed something done that was devious, I was the one who was expected to do it.

John: Yep. Yep.

Ken: And I was rather proud of the fact that I--we had canvas cots. And the Navy had mattresses. So I went over there to Samar, is where the Navy had its base. And talked to the chief petty officer, who was in charge of the barracks, and with a case of beer I loaded up about five hundred mattresses. He just looked the other way. Just walked away. And I had a crew of Filipinos with me and, frankly, we walked off with about five hundred mattresses. Took them back. Fellows were just marvelous back at the company. Well, somebody said something about pillows. Oh, I forgot those. So the next day I went back and got the pillows. That cost me another case of beer. That was what I was good at. So we now had mattresses and pillows.

John: You were living high.

Ken: Likewise, I could cook.

John: Oh. Oh, that makes you something.

Ken: And it was a case and I would go to the mess sergeant, because the cooks that were there were terrible. I would say, "Well, what is your menu for this week?" And he would - for the noon meal - and he would tell me. "I'll tell you what. I'll do Thursday's meal." And I'd go over on Thursday in the morning. The other cooks didn't even show up. They did breakfast, but they left. The mess sergeant stayed there. The Filipino KPs stayed there, to wash the pots and this, that, and the other thing. And I'd go ahead and fry up chicken, or tell the mess sergeant - I was only a private, by the way - I'd tell the mess sergeant what to do with this, that, and the other thing, and he knew I was a better cook than he was. He would follow orders. And so I would do that periodically. And it was a case that, so often the case that fellows would go to the PX for something to eat. Rather than eat in the mess hall.

John: They'd live on candy bars.

Ken: But when they heard that I was cooking, "Wagner's cooking today!" And we'd have four or five hundred fellows eating there. Again, it was a case of something different. It was a hell of a lot more interesting than sitting there and coding. But it was enjoyable. And I have pictures here that may be of interest. Let's see if I can find it. Some of these I'll explain to you later. Oh, here, I don't know if you can get into that or not. The headline, "Japan Sues For Peace."

John: Oh, wow. Oh, God, that must have felt good to read.

Ken: And this was a newspaper, or a news sheet that came out every day, and it was posted there. We got one copy. And so I took pictures of it.

John: Wow, that is a story. What was the feeling, you and the fellows with you, when they dropped the bomb and then when the Japs surrendered?

Ken: Well, first of all, we didn't know what in the hell an atom bomb was. What is an atom bomb? They had all sorts of comparisons that were on the Armed Forces Radio, you know. Like this and that. But that didn't mean, and we didn't understand what it was. And, to tell you the truth, I still don't understand it. But, anyhow, well that was the way it was with most of the fellows.

John: But that meant you wouldn't be invading the Home Islands.

Ken: Oh, this is true. I've told you I read that would have cost how many millions? And one of the books I have up there was one that was relatively recent, having to do with the end of the war as it was in Japan, and the plans that they had made. They had over ten thousand planes squirreled away. Some of them just training planes,

private planes, light planes. They had ten thousand planes that they were going to use as kamikaze planes. They had two million men on Kyushu, which we didn't know they were there. MacArthur was extremely ignorant of what the defenses were going to be. So, on the other hand, when we learned that the war was over, well, that night, it was announced on the radio. We knew about it ahead of time because we decoded the message. It was, I remember, I was in my small tent at the time, this one. It was an officer's tent, eight by eight. And that was my first hospital, so to speak.

John: Okay.

Ken: And I remember on the cot, did I have a mattress then or not? I think I did, but anyhow, I lay there and I couldn't believe it. I was thankful. I am not a religious person, so getting on my knees and thanking God, and so on, as some kids did. And I respected them for it. But I am not of that mold. I was pleased. I must say that. And, in recent years, having read more and more, about World War II, I realized if we had gone into Kyushu, the tradition of martial and others that we would have experienced probably ten thousand dead the first day.

John: You would have been fighting grandmas and little girls.

Ken: Yeah.

John: And millions of troops.

Ken: It was a relief, but we didn't know it, until recently.

John: That's, wow, that's great.

Ken: We stayed there. Rotation, or going back to the States was based on points. And you got one point for each month in the service, and you got one point or two points for each month, an extra point or double points, for being overseas, and so on. And finally they got down to the number of points that we had. We nearly had a riot in Tacolban, in Leyte, as well as Luzon, because the fellows volunteered to take the freighters, and turn them into troop ships to take the fellows back. So they went out and put up wooden racks, but then the Army turned around and shipped the Japanese back on those.

John: Oh.

Ken: They were about ready to kill. Oh, one other thing, too. On this matter of the invasion of Leyte, MacArthur had sent an order back that he wanted so many books of matches with his portrait on it and with the statement on the other side,

“I shall return.” Well, by that time we had Harry Truman as president, God bless him, and so they, the manufacture and the printing was delayed. And when they arrived in the Philippines to be distributed, in the Philippines, it said, “We shall return.” And that, I understand, really infuriated the egocentric Douglas MacArthur. I thought it was great. That is Harry Truman, I can see that now. I didn’t vote for him in ‘48 because, let’s face it, anybody who talked that way about a news reporter who didn’t like his daughter’s singing, doesn’t deserve to be president. But, after teaching history for thirty-three years, I realized that Harry Truman was one of our better presidents.

John: There is that photograph of him. He was a short man. He had his hand on MacArthur’s shoulder and the caption says, “You’re fired.”

Ken: MacArthur was not liked by the servicemen. You see pictures, we could go to the movies and they have newsreels, and there is Eisenhower, Ike talking to the troops. You recall, it was either the 82nd or the 101st Airborne, that had to make the pre-invasion drop, and he was out there talking to them. Bumming around, offering them cigarettes. He wasn’t being this way because there happened to be a news photographer there. He was that way because he was genuinely concerned. Whereas MacArthur never came out. We called him “Dugout Doug.”

John: Yep. Yep.

Ken: He was not liked. The Korean War...

John: Did you end up going to Japan?

Ken: No, about, let’s see, I was at sea twelve days, going back to Los Angeles. We came into Los Angeles. They had trains, coaches, at the docks. They even had milk and donuts. And they didn’t charge us, as the Red Cross did in the Philippines. They came to us one time when I was there at the mess hall, and the women wanted to have some flour, and so on. And, “What are you doing? What do you want the flour for?” “Well, to make donuts.” “Why do you charge us for the donuts when we are providing you with the product to make the donuts?” And the mess sergeant wouldn’t give them any. The Red Cross didn’t have a good reputation. It was, occasionally they would come through in the hospital and give out cigarettes, and then go back through and collect ten cents. They were not liked.

John: So, you didn’t go to Japan?

Ken: No, no. Not during World War II.

John: Okay. Well, then, when you came back, did you get out immediately?

Ken: I was back and discharged on June 6 of 1945. Is that right? Of '46.

John: The bomb was on my birthday, August 6 of '45. Yes.

Ken: I was discharged from Fort Leavenworth. People said I belonged there. In fact, for all of the thievery, or appropriations that I may have made, I probably could have done that. Anyhow, discharged. I didn't have a home to come back to. My father had moved out and my greeting from him was not hello, not a hug, not good-to-see-you. It was, "You're not counting on living with me, are you?" That was my greeting home.

John: Wow.

Ken: Of course, everything else was gone, as I told you. The only thing that I have that meant anything to me was, my mother collected crystal. That was gone. Furniture was gone. Everything was gone. My brother, my oldest brother, got everything. And, so I had nothing to come back to. So I had to find, my brother, the thief, picked me up at the bus station in Waterloo, and took me out to his house. And en route, in his Model A coupe, said, "You can stay with us but it will be five dollars a night." So that night I stayed there. Put five dollars down on our former dining room table. And left. That was the last I ever had much to do with him. He tried to make up for it but, I mean, make some sort of relationship, but I wouldn't have anything to do with him. So I had nothing to come back to. I had pay. And that was it. I think we got a hundred dollars extra. We got a total of three hundred dollars at discharge, as sort of a bonus. And that was paid out a hundred dollars at a time, if I remember correctly. I think it was that. I won't swear to it. So I had that. I found a place to stay and eventually went back to my job at Rath, wrapping, but that was forty degrees in there. And I just got back from the tropics where it was, I swear, a hundred and forty degrees. And I kept getting flu, colds, and so on. And I ended up having to leave there. The cold wasn't that uncomfortable. It just caused problems. And so then I started college that May.

John: Where?

Ken: University of Northern Iowa, it is called today. At the time it was called Iowa State Teachers College. But I had no idea what I was going to do, but I thought I better go to college, and I ended up as a teacher. Vanity requires that I say I was well respected. They damn well better respect me. But I had a most enjoyable thirty years of my life teaching.

John: History?

Ken: History and economics. Economics I didn't care for, but I had to teach it because I was the only one eligible to teach it. Anyhow, I graduated in 1950, May, and the graduation present was a recall for the Korean War.

John: Oh, wow.

Ken: This was June 25, when that broke out, as you will recall. And I went, oh, what date is on here? Does it say? 20th of May. Well, in a month and five days, we had the Korean War. I am sure the North Koreans did it deliberately, just to get at me. Probably, they thought I might steal the place blind. Anyhow, it was, I had to go back as a cryptographer. So I went down to the recruiting officer and I said, "Look, I don't want to be a cryptographer." Because that is what the letter said to me. He said, well, there is a way of doing this. You go ahead and enlist for three years and we can close your old personnel file, and we will start a new one, and we will make no mention of the fact that you were a cryptographer. So, that is what I did. And I went back in. The only one in the company, the outfit, where I was assigned, first of all, more tests. And I was asked to go to Officers Candidate School, to which I said no. Again, I didn't want to be a dead second lieutenant. And so I went to this company, which was a tank battalion company. But no tanks. And it was, it received the fellows that were coming into the service, to equip them with uniforms, and so forth. Then they went on to different places. So, because I could type, which was unusual for a man in those days, and likewise, I had three year's previous service, so I knew the Army vocabulary. And I don't mean profanity. You know what I am talking about. And the way things would operate. I was kept there at the tank battalion rather than, as a supply clerk, and then when they found out that very day that I could type, and that I was a college graduate. I was the only college graduate in the company. Well, we can use you over here. So I became a company clerk. And you know who runs the company. It's not the captain. The first sergeant and the company clerk who run the company.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

John: Okay. Let's see. We were, you had just graduated from college, and you got greetings from the U. S. Army. And then you were a company clerk. That is a powerful military position.

Ken: And at the end of the fourth week, I was field sergeant of the outfit. Well, I still knew the, you don't forget. Some of those things, even right now we could go out and drill. I wouldn't do it. Anyhow, it is ingrained in us. Anyhow, as time went on, I prepared the morning report and, for a replacement outfit that this was. It was eventually changed to be called the 10th Replacement Company. There were only

six of us in the company, permanent party. All of the rest of them were casuals. Well, one day we may have six, and the next day we may have fifteen hundred. Can you imagine what that did to a morning report? Well, I would frequently go from two o'clock in the morning and work until ten or eleven at night putting the thing together, and over to the AT office, where they edit the morning report, there was a shithead clerk, that edited mine. And here I have fifteen, well, have five hundred transfers in that day. Coming in by train. At Fort Riley, Kansas. And he expects me to have all of the necessary things about, for that entry, for five hundred men who just came in, as well as the fellows who went out. Sometimes I would end up with a morning report of fifty pages. And he'd call up and then I found out he was a corporal and I was a sergeant. And I chewed ass. One thing nice about rank, though. Finally, after, as I said, the hours were commended. We had a flood at Fort Riley in 1951, I think it was. And it was a case that we were the farthest located from the river outfit at Camp Funston, the section of Fort Riley. And water was up to my knees. It had backed up that much. You could stand there at this height and look at the water coming over the top of the dike. Well, after doing that for a while, I also ended up being company commander. Because the company commander was stranded in town because Fort Riley was surrounded by rivers. He couldn't get in to the post. The first sergeant was at the hospital with a heart attack. So I ended up by being, as I said, company commander. I wrote the morning report. It was very small. All I did was announce the fact that the area was in a flood, and this, that, and the other thing, and sent it in. And signed it. An enlisted man signed it. That doesn't happen too often. Well, anyhow, I decided, ah, let's see what else there might be available. And I learned that there was a shorthand school at Fort Benjamin Harrison, which is near Indianapolis, you know. And so I signed up for that. I outranked everybody else there because the maximum rank you could be was corporal, and I was a sergeant first class. So guess who became student company commander? So I not only had to pull that crap but also do my studies, and so on. But I ended up learning shorthand. I could take about a hundred and fifty to a hundred and seventy words a minute.

John: Oh, wow.

Ken: I was typing. You look at my hands now and how deformed they are. At one time, I was able to type at about sixty, seventy words a minute. When I came back after, I forget how long the training was there, it was essentially over with from fall into winter, January or February. Back to Fort Riley and, since I had the training, I was going to be used in that training. And I was assigned to the judge advocate. And that is the first college graduate they had ever had. I took over as chief clerk of the 10th Division. Then it came time for movement to the Pacific, or to Korea. And I was assigned as the secretary to the chief of staff, Doyle Hickey, who was a lieutenant general. And I also am not dumb enough to think that is a great job

because you end up polishing brass, shoes, always there for parties, pouring drinks, that kind of stuff. And I didn't want it. On the ship going over we stopped off with the Air Corps, of course, and dropped them off in Manila, along with a cargo. And while there, the troop commander released the rest of the fellows, after that time on board ship, for over to midnight leave. Except you know damned well what happened. Ninety percent of them were drunker than a skunk. I didn't drink. I took a friend of mine and we walked around Manila. Had dinner that night in one of the seaside restaurants. And I remember I had chicken, feeling that was probably safer than buffalo. And then went back to the ship and was headed for the head, up at the front of the ship, and the cargo holds were open. The hatches were removed so they could remove the cargo, and I looked down to the deck below, which was also for sleeping for the fellows, and I saw a murder.

John: Oh, wow.

Ken: A black fellow and a Mexican. And they were buddies. Except they got a little bit too much to drink, I guess, and were drunk. And they had words. And I saw the guy pull out his pistol and, less than a foot away, blast the other guy in the head.

John: Oh, wow.

Ken: Well, I ran down the stairway, but other fellows in the hold grabbed the guy, and that was it. Well, we have to have an investigation. None of them knew how to run an investigation. But I had been chief clerk of a legal section. And had God knows how many investigations cross my desk. So knew how to do it. So I went to the troop commander right away. Told him who I was, and that I would be glad to help. There was a great sigh of relief. And I put a first lieutenant, I think it was, in charge of the investigation. As if it needed any. But, you know the Army. And we had the investigation. I took all of it in shorthand. I typed it up on stencils because I didn't know how many people wanted copies. So that was sent on ahead. It arrived at Camp Drake, outside of Tokyo, and immediately went to the judge advocates section. They said, "Oh, my God, we've been waiting for months for a legal clerk to come through." The position called for a chief warrant officer. The Army, or Congress, had said no one was to be promoted to master sergeant unless they were in combat. So I may have been a sergeant first class, but I could not become a master sergeant, let alone a warrant officer, at that time. But I took over. Let's see, Judge, as we called him, the major and later on a lieutenant colonel, told me, "You are in charge of the office. Everything that goes on this office you are doing. And," he said, "I am the judge. And I have to review cases. I can't very well review cases and at the same time do some of this other stuff." So here is this sergeant first class who has all of this stuff to do, with more damned power than most commissioned officers. And the judge and I got along beautifully. And it was a case of, during the day when we had regular hours, it was

at first, Major Redman and Sergeant Wagner, and at night when I would go back to work and he might be there, it was Ken and Bill. Now that seldom occurs. But he respected me and I respected him. So, it was a lot of fun. I dealt with murders, I dealt with lots of drugs, I dealt with counterfeiting. The Soviet Union was putting out counterfeit military payment certificates.

John: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Ken: Aha. And the funniest thing I dealt with was the day the claims officer, you know, claims are affiliated with the office of the judge advocate. The claims officer, Captain Bastian, he was related to the family that makes the plumbing fixtures. Anyhow, he came over with a little beat-up Japanese farmer, dressed in denim. Hunch-backed, God knows what all. He looked about eight hundred. But, anyhow, it seems that while he was collecting the honey buckets from his customers in Tokyo. People want to know what honey buckets are.

John: I know what honey buckets are.

Ken: Anyhow, they are loaded with human waste. And he had an ox-drawn wagon that had three tiers of honey buckets, wooden honey buckets. When we needed a driver, he was Japanese. He was hired by the Army to drive. I couldn't drive an Army car. I had to get a Japanese driver who was assigned to that truck or that sedan. So, there is Captain Bastian with the Japanese farmer. What had happened, the farmer was driving slowly through the streets of Tokyo and, just to show you how busy, this is the busiest corner in Tokyo.

John: Oh, good Lord.

Ken: That is what it was for the year I was there. Virtually no driving at all. By Japanese. Anyhow, the poor Japanese farmer was struck by an Army truck, a two and a half, and tipped over. Buckets broke. And gallons and gallons of human waste all over. The wagon was ruined. God knows how many buckets were ruined. And all of them had been emptied. Well, the captain brought him over deliberately, just to see my reaction, and so he told me the story. And he said, "Well, in dealing with this fellow,"— we had a Japanese translator with us—"in meeting with this fellow, we can figure out the cost of replacing the buckets. We can figure out the cost of replacing the wagon. We can't figure out the cost of the contents of the buckets." And so I began to snicker, and I said to the translator, I said, "Tell you what. When he gets the buckets, tell him to bring them here and I will put them in the barracks, and we'll let the fellows fill them." I can just see the fellows squatting over one of those buckets.

John: Sure.

Ken: “Oh, no, no, no!” Well, what it translated into was, American shit wasn’t as good as Japanese. And that was the funniest one that I dealt with. And I dealt with murders, as I said. Lots of AWOL. Some sex crimes. The regular stuff. But it was a case, again, I would get a DR, a Delinquency Report. If you were driving down this street and didn’t stop for the stop light, and the Japanese or the MP would stop you, he would write it up on an eight and a half by ten, or eleven, sheet. And that green one I would get. And I would look it over. See who you are. See what the offense is, and if there were previous offenses. And then write up a buck slip. Remember, they were green also. And send it off to your commanding officer with a recommendation as to what was to be done to you. It was a case that I always signed William Redman’s name because can you see a sergeant first class telling some major what he is going to have to do to the clerk, or what? So I wrote William Redman more often than he did. It was a challenging job, and I thought very seriously, I could stay into this, and every day was different. But then I got out on July 30. I went in on July 31 and I was discharged on July 30, of 1953. No, ‘55. Yeah, the war, isn’t that right?

John: The war was on in ‘53.

Ken: Yeah.

John: It was over in ‘55.

Ken: I went in in ‘50. I spent three years in, and it was just about over in ‘53.

John: Okay.

Ken: I went back to the States and got a job teaching in a high school in Cincinnati. And that was my first experience. And I liked it very, very much. Still could have gone back in. You know, there is that period between discharge and re-enlistment wherein you don’t lose anything. And, of course, Eisenhower had indicated that he was going to reduce costs when he was running for president in 1952 and so the Army was being reduced in anticipation of getting out of Korea, and so forth. So I don’t know whether I would have been taken back in, or not. But it was very tiring kind of thing, because of the hours I had to put in.

John: Yeah, sure. You weren’t working an eight hour day. You worked until the work was done.

Ken: I had three days off in the time that I was in. And that is when I went to Nikko, which is a shrine area in Tokyo.

John: Oh, okay, sure.

Ken: The Japanese warlord who was in the, that one TV movie, Richard Chamberlain was in it, but anyhow it was that warlord who put up the money to build that shrine there. There was a Nikko-Kanayia Hotel. It was a wooden building. It had housed former President Grant when he went around the world on travel for a period after his presidency. And I stayed there. It was interesting to me because there was a revolving door, and seated right by the revolving door was a Japanese boy who, when a customer would come headed for outside, he would get up and he would start to revolve the door. Well, I looked at him. And he is revolving that the wrong way. So when I met the elderly Kanayia, I said, "You are wearing out that connection between the door and what have you," and I said, "The door is being moved the wrong way." And like so many of the Japanese, it was, "but we have been doing this for years." And when I left, at the end of my stay, it was going wrong. I went back there sometime later when I traveled on my own and the hotel was down.

John: Oh, that's too bad.

Ken: Too bad. I really would have been happy, and a lot of people say they weren't happy to be in the Army. But I was the boss.

John: Yeah, with the right attitude, and a little bit of luck.

Ken: I know that one time after MacArthur, I mean, Eisenhower had been elected, and they knew that appropriations were going to be cut, the post commander called all the officer heads into his conference room and said-- my boss was a trial judge advocate, and he was not there. And who had to go? I had to go. And there was a colonel here, and a colonel here, and so on. And the CO of the post said, "you are going to have to cut down and everything has to be justified." That was essentially what he said and he took an hour to say it. But I went back and began to make a time study of how long people spent at the typewriter, how many letters were written, how many words were in the average letter, the transcription time by the stenographers or court reporters, and turned in this report, and recommended that we had, we would have five or ten additional people assigned to the unit. So, the boss man told us all to come back again. And the post engineer, of course, he just handed in the usual Army BS, as did the rest of them. And the commander said, "There is only one person who did it correctly. And he is getting what he asked for. Ten, or five additional persons. The rest of you are getting nothing, and this is what is going to happen. The chaplain lost his clerk. He had too many clerks. The IG lost some. Which made those of us who know rather pleased. But the only one that got any additional help was from my report. It justified it. The statistics were there. The methods used to arrive at those statistics were there. And he picked it

up, and he could read, "I timed this person, this, this." And I got the additional men. But I did not pay for the contents of the buckets.

John: Well, Ken, you kind of started to add to this anyway. But, you were a young man. Your whole life was ahead of you. And, bang, you get dragged off to war. But then in your case, you come home from war and, bang, you get dragged off again. Any resentment about that?

Ken: Oh, no. No. It was my duty.

John: You know, that is what everybody says.

Ken: It was my duty. I had trained to be a teacher. How could I stand in front of a classroom and talk about the war, and the draft, and this, that, and the other thing if I did not fulfill it? Now I could have probably have gotten out of it. I don't know. I never even thought of getting out of the Korean War. By the way, I did not end up-- as you may have been able to figure out-- I did not end up as a lieutenant general's secretary. The judge wanted a legal clerk. So they contacted the general and said, if we get you a secretary in so many days, will you let us keep that legal clerk? And he said yeah. So he waited a couple of more days. He went through the record and reached in the case, and got somebody who knew shorthand. And sent him off by plane, they flew him to the Pacific. And that was the general's secretary. As I look back at that, and here, this is very close to us, and here is one of those wagons. These are more of the houses. How they dried various cereals. Ah, let's see. This was a Japanese camp at one time. A military camp. And this is their barracks. It was somewhat dangerous because the average Japanese weighed about, a soldier, would weigh about a hundred and twenty-five pounds. About a hundred and thirty-five. Whereas the average American soldier is a hundred and sixty-five, to a hundred and seventy, thereabouts. And you put the same number of people up on the floors that were built for a lighter weight, and you walk across the floor, and you could feel the wave under your feet. It was good duty. And frequently, it would be, "oh, I don't want to stay here. I'll go into Tokyo." And I would get on the bus and when I got on the bus, and there was an older gentleman, Japanese, spoke English, who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright in the construction of the Imperial Hotel. It was nice to look at but I couldn't walk through it, because the ceilings were too damned low. Of course, Frank Lloyd Wright was what, five-four?

John: He was very short.

Ken: He made up for it with his arrogance. Streetcar. We are still in Japan. There was a stop that the bus would make from the camp. An area of Tokyo called Ichibokuro. I beg the Japanese forgiveness for any mispronunciation. You could take the

street car for ten yen. In those days, three hundred and sixty yen to the dollar. So I got on the streetcar. It was the end of the line there. There was also a railroad station there as well as an elevated. So I got on the streetcar and as we went along a few blocks, the streetcar go to the point where it filled, and people were standing. There was this elderly Japanese woman standing and right by me, and I reached up and touched her. And I got up like this and offered her my seat. I received a round of applause. And of course so many of the Japanese men wouldn't get up. But I got up and I offered her my seat. It was worth it. The experience was-- well, as I recall it, and I remember how much it meant to me. That I was able to do it.

[End of Interview]