

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

**EDWIN D. KARN**

Combat Engineer, 36th Engineer Combat Group, Korean War.

1997

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**Karn, Edwin D.**, (1930-2001). Oral History Interview, 1997.

Approximate length: 1 hour, 5 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

Edwin D. Karn, a Manitowoc, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service with the Army as a combat engineer with the 74th Engineer Combat Battalion, 36th Combat Engineering Group.

Karn talks about trying to enlist in the Air Force, receiving his draft notice, and his awareness of submarine production in Manitowoc during World War II. After induction and testing at Fort Sheridan (Illinois), he mentions basic and combat engineer training with the 86th Recon Battalion at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri). Karn discusses qualifying for officer candidate school, teaching map reading courses, waiting to go overseas at Fort Lawton (Washington), and his trip overseas aboard a small transport ship. Assigned to the 36th Engineer Combat Group, he explains his unit's duty building and maintaining roads. After graduating first in his class from leadership school, Karn describes being sent to a construction foreman school in Japan. He discusses supervising a ROK Korean Service Corps unit, blowing up obstacles with tetryl explosives, and being made company carpenter. He explains the duties of company carpenter: building tables, mess halls, trailer frames, and tent frames. Karn addresses serving in a newly integrated unit and the easy race relations, saying there was "virtually no race friction" and that the unit was "color blind." He portrays typical days, duties as a combat engineer, and being away from base all day. He describes the equipment in his combat engineer outfit, difficulties digging while wearing a poncho and caring a rifle, having food brought in by truck, and working without supervision. Karn describes the dangers encountered while building tank emplacements and switchbacks at Sniper Ridge such as sniper fire and alarmingly accurate mortar attacks. He recalls seeing constant close air support from U.S. aircraft. He describes the minor wounds his unit sustained from mortar attacks, being sent to a MASH unit, and feeling upset after finding out the company commander only sent them to treatment to earn purple hearts and make himself look good. Karn touches on sharing cigarette rations with ROK troops, writing letters home, being paid in script, and being introduced to Black gospel music. He details difficulty getting along with his company commander, who tried to bust Karn for inefficiency. He mentions mosquito problems and taking chloroquine.

Karn comments on his homecoming and being impressed with the increased number of television sets in the United States. He speaks of attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison, being influenced by the number of girls there to not reenlist, and earning a PhD in history. He touches on working at Truax Field from 1963 to 1965 as a division historian for the 30th Air Division and teaching at the University of Wisconsin in Sheboygan and Manitowoc. Karn mentions using the GI Bill for education and a home improvement mortgage.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Karn (1930-2001) served in the Korean War with the 36th Combat Engineering Group as both a combat engineer and a carpenter. He was discharged in 1953, married Lois Engle in 1955, and attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Karn worked for the University of Wisconsin Center System for thirty-one years and eventually settled in Sheboygan (Wisconsin).

### **Archivists' Note:**

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

Transcribed by Michelle Kreidler, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2008.

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## **Interview Transcript:**

- Van Ells: Okay. Today's date is September the 10th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning over the telephone with Mr. Edwin D. Karn, originally of Manitowoc.
- Karn: Right.
- Van Ells: Presently Sheboygan, Wisconsin, a veteran of the Korean War. Good morning. Thanks for taking some time out of your day.
- Karn: Sure. Fine.
- Van Ells: I appreciate it. Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military.
- Karn: Okay. I was born and raised in Manitowoc, graduated from the high school there. I wanted to become a commercial artist, but I had no real resources. My family was really pretty poor, and so I got a job out of high school. Interesting thing to me was that eventually I decided to join the Air Force.
- Van Ells: Uh-huh. Why the Air Force?
- Karn: I was -- I decided I wanted to be a weatherman, and they had a meteorology school, and so I took some tests, and I, to all intents and purposes, enlisted in the Air Force. But in the winter of '51-'52, is that -- yeah, I guess that's right.
- Van Ells: Uh-huh.
- Karn: The Air Force got all jammed up at Lackland Field, and they had kind of a scandal there. Life magazine had a big spread. The inductees were marching around in their civilian clothes for two or three weeks, living in tents in the rain, and so they closed all enlistments, and they were going to open them up on a priority basis, but before my priority opened up, I got my draft physical notice, which took priority.
- Van Ells: Uh-huh.
- Karn: So that was the way I went.
- Van Ells: I'd like to backtrack. Just one thing.
- Karn: Sure.
- Van Ells: You are growing up in Manitowoc during the World War II years.

Karn: Right.

Van Ells: Now, I know they had the submarine program there. I'm just sort of interested to know if you had any particular recollections of that as [unintelligible; both speak] community. It was unusual.

Karn: Yeah, we thought it was pretty exciting. We were laughing about it not long ago. The first submarine, the -- I think it was the Peto, was -- would be officially a national event, but they wouldn't let the kids out of school to see it. And it was going to take place at noon. The junior high school kids who were in both cases-- two junior high schools were quite some distance--got out a few minutes before 12 and raced to try to get down there. I remember I got there and the boat was already in the water, just about righting itself. But the high school kids were not out, and the story was that they -- they opened the first floor windows and jumped out the windows of the school to get down for the launching. The community was very, very supportive, I think. The sailors for each sub were stationed in Manitowoc --

Van Ells: Right.

Karn: -- while they prepared the sub for release. And to best of my knowledge, there was, I think, surprisingly little friction. And, in fact, quite a lot of those people ended up living in Manitowoc. They have, you probably know, a fairly strong submariners organization there.

Van Ells: Yeah, uh-huh.

Karn: And one of the things that, again, that I thought was interesting is a fair number of Manitowoc young men volunteered for submarine service because of the fact that they had some familiarity with the submarines that were built there. It was a -- we were pretty proud of that whole operation.

Van Ells: Yeah. How did the town change as a result of the war? I know Manitowoc is an industrial city. I don't know how hard struck it was by the Depression. When the war came, there were probably a lot more jobs.

Karn: It was pretty boomy during the war because the aluminum goods was doing all kinds of stuff. Everything from canteens and canteen cups to wing tanks for airplanes. The goods was booming, the shipyards, the equipment work. I'm not quite sure about the Invincible Metal Furniture, but my guess is they were probably booming, too. Yeah, we were, I think, a pretty healthy community during the war.

Van Ells: Yeah. We can skip forward then to your actual induction. You were conscripted?

Karn: Right.

Van Ells: Do you recall the day you got the greeting from Selective Service and what was going through your mind?

Karn: Well, I was -- I was extremely fatalistic at the time. I sometimes think about that now. It never occurred to me that I would survive, so I really didn't worry about it. And I thought, "Well, I'm going into the Army. I'm going into the Army." And I tend to be otherwise a fairly optimistic person, and I thought, "Well, you do it a day at a time and make the best of it."

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: And I must admit, I did not have a bad time in the service. It was all right.

Van Ells: Yeah. Now, Korea wasn't like World War II where basically every young man who *could* eventually went off to the military. You know, a lot of guys weren't going.

Karn: That's right.

Van Ells: Did you feel -- what did you feel about that?

Karn: No, that didn't bother me. I guess I assumed that the system worked fairly, and I didn't feel picked on or particularly honored either, I guess, but I don't think I really thought about whether this was fair or a good idea or not, I just thought -- I have always been a kind of a rule-bound person, and that was the rule, and that was what I did.

Van Ells: Hmm. So why don't you just walk me through your induction into the military. You had to go off and take a physical and go to a training base and get your hair cut and the whole business. Just sort of walk me through the process as you experienced it.

Karn: Okay, sure. Well, I think it was February. A group of us went to Milwaukee by bus for a physical. Then we went back, and there was some period of time while we waited to get the results of the physical. And sometime in there you got a postcard that said what your classification was, and mine was, of course, 1A. I had gone with two friends, one of whom had a student deferment and the other who was 4F, so I was sort of the one. And we waited around then, just waited for induction orders. I had been saving up money to go back to school, and since I wasn't going to go back to school, I had a really very good time for several months there because I had sort of a pot full of money and not very much to do. I could just kind of live it up, and I did. I had a very good time. And then I was

inducted in -- let me look at my separation papers. I can't remember. Ninth of May. So it was quite a long time between the physical and the actual induction.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: And a group of us went from Manitowoc to Milwaukee for induction. Yeah, to Milwaukee for induction; I think that's the way it worked. It was interesting because on the same bus that took us for induction were the first three Air Force priority people. In fact, my position [laughs] was-- came up on that same day. We went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, for induction, and we were there for several days. Got shots, tests, and haircuts, and all that good stuff.

Van Ells: Uniforms?

Karn: Yeah, uniforms. And then we were -- and tests. My God, tests. Endlessly.

Van Ells: These are the aptitude tests and that sort of thing?

Karn: Yes, right. And it was really extensive; I think it must have taken about three days, and we were at it pretty much all day every day. I have always been very good at standardized type -- you know, multiple choice type tests, so I qualified for practically everything [laughs], including the math schools, even though I had never had high school algebra. What people forget is that if you can't do the problems, you just guess at the answers, and so if you guess pretty well, you will have more correct answers than the guys who are working the problems. So there's a fatal flaw in those tests. But I got -- I got assigned to Combat Engineers, and I did my engineer training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. We went there from Fort Sheridan and took the original six weeks of infantry basic. Later on they extended it to eight, but it was six when I went in. That was in the 86th Recon Battalion of the Sixth Army Division. The Regiment was called CCR, and I don't know what that stands for. After the six weeks of basic, then I had eight weeks of engineer -- combat engineer training, and I can't remember the number of the unit. Because I had high test scores, they wanted me to go to OCS, and so they sent me to a six-week leadership school, which is a very intensive school. I finished that and was assigned then -- I was on pipeline status for OCS, and I was reassigned, interestingly enough, to the same battalion, same company, same barracks that I took my basic training in as a cadreman: B Company of the 86th Recon. I got back just in time to go on bivouac with the trainees. We got back from -- while we were on bivouac, in fact, a young Second Lieutenant approached me and said, "Well, the Regiment is changing from battalion instruction to regimental instruction committees, and would I be interested in being on his instructional committee?" And I said, "Sure," so another PFC and I were assigned to the map reading and compass instruction for the CCR, and I did that then from the time I got out of leadership school until I got my final OCS orders. There were ways to jimmy these things. The theory was you could reject one set of OCS orders if you didn't want to go to that area.

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Karn: And so when I finally got my OCS orders, it was for the infantry school at Fort Benning, and I said, "I don't want to go there." At that point the life expectancy of infantry second lieutenants was very short.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: So I said, "I'm going to waive those orders." And they said, "Well, you can't." And I said, "Well, why not?" They said, "We've already waived a set for you, and so it's this or the party's command." And I said, "Okay, then it's the party's command." I figured I was better off in Korea as a PFC than I was as a Second Lieutenant.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: And they gave me a short delay en route. I was shipped out to Fort Lawton in Washington to wait for overseas shipment. They lost my orders someplace, and so I sat around in a holding company for about a month, which I rather enjoyed, actually. It was rather a pleasant situation. I had nothing to do except stand at formation in the morning, and the rest of the day was my own; I had a pretty good time. But then we shipped out finally on a tiny little troopship. In Manitowoc they were in the process of launching the largest lake freighter.

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Karn: The -- was it the *Munson*? 666 feet and 6 inches. I crossed the Pacific on a ship that was 590 feet. I thought there was something wrong there, but at any rate --

Van Ells: How was the -- how was the voyage?

Karn: It was --

Van Ells: Bouncy?

Karn: No, it wasn't bad. It was terribly crowded on the boat. There was no place to sit because all the space was taken up by bunks, and so for sixteen days you sort of -- you sort of wandered around or tried to find a place on the deck to sit. You know, there wasn't a chair. I used to go to the church services every morning, both Protestant and Catholic, which they held in a large compartment, because they had chairs. And when the church services were over, then the movie started, and if you went to the church services, you could be sure you'd get a seat for the movie. So I would have -- half the morning would be taken up with that. But other than that you had really nothing to do. There were no organized activities. It was kind of a long two weeks.



Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: But the voyage itself was smooth. We had no rough weather. People got seasick the first day out going through Puget Sound, which was a little rough, but once we got clear into the Pacific, it really was pacific, and it was a very uneventful crossing. We arrived, I think, in Yokohama and immediately shipped out to Korea. I was assigned to the 36<sup>th</sup> Combat Group. Actually, it was the 36th Engineer Combat Group, which was right in the middle of the peninsula, just south of the mainland near Kumhwa Junction. The 76 -- the 36th was made up of a searchlight company, a bridge company, a heavy equipment company, a dump truck company, and I think three combat engineer battalions, and we were in support of Korean ROK troops who did not have engineer support.

Van Ells: So engineer support, in a combat sense--I mean, what is it specifically that you're doing?

Karn: Our primary thing was building and maintaining roads.

Van Ells: Um-hmm. Up to the combat zone?

Karn: Right.

Van Ells: So you could get troops and supplies up there?

Karn: Right. We were a matter of about, I guess, two, two and a half miles from the MLR. We were close enough to hear artillery. And we were -- I was in the 74th Engineer Combat Battalion—I think that's right. And we maintained a section of road, built some new road. They discovered that I had gone to leadership school, and so I became the token student for the unit. And so when the 36th group held a leadership school--I think it was about a three-week school--they sent me to that. Well, this was a joke almost for somebody who had been to the one I had been to in the States. I was the only, what you would say, experienced student, and so I had no trouble at all graduating first in my class; it was kind of like a vacation almost. And, well, this convinced the company hierarchy that I was a good prospect, and so later on they sent me to Japan to a construction foreman school for -- I really can't remember whether it was six or eight weeks. I think six weeks probably. Which got me a new -- an additional MOS for construction foreman. I already had combat construction foreman MOS, which was 1729. And, again, I was able to graduate first in my class, which was kind of -- it was kind of an advantage later on.

Van Ells: In what sense?

Karn: Well, I'll get to that in a minute.

Van Ells: Okay.

Karn: When I left Korea, this was one of those fortuitous circumstances, the day I left Korea for Japan, it had started to rain. It was the beginning of the rainy season. Building roads is no fun in the rain.

Van Ells: I bet. [laughs]

Karn: And I got to Japan on the last day of their rainy season, so I missed both Japan's and Korea's rainy seasons. When I got back to Korea after six weeks, my company was still scraping mud off of everything, but the rains had stopped. So I missed that whole business, for which I was duly grateful. They then put me in charge of directing a company of Korean Service Corps. These were conscripted laborers. They lived in their own units, they ate their own food, they had their own command structure, but they, in effect, were stoop labor for road work. And what I did was to go out on the road by myself and assign the company to the section of road I wanted them to work on, tell them what to do, and instead of standing around and see that they did it, I had no direct control over these guys. And I did that for about a month, I guess. Then they decided we were going to build a new road, and they wanted some kind of on-foot reconnaissance to see whether there were obstacles--you couldn't build a road across a rice paddy; it wouldn't stay.

Van Ells: It would sink in or something.

Karn: You had to stay on a side hill cut so there would be some support, and, of course, there were a lots of rocks, and so they would send me out every morning with a couple of sacks of Tetrytol to blow up rocks; it was the most fun I have ever had in my life, I think. I'd go out all by myself with a--it was like a small boy's dream, go out and blow things up. It was lots of fun. I did that for a while. And then we had a carpenter in the company who rotated back to the states, and they made me company carpenter, which involved all kinds of really weird stuff. I had to rebuild -- we had picnic tables in our--well, our carpenter had built a mess hall out of odd parts, corrugated iron and so forth, and so although we lived in tents, we actually had a hard roof mess hall. And he'd built picnic tables to eat on, but they were in very bad shape, so I had to rebuild all of those. I built frames for trailers, and the biggest job was framing out the tents. We got rid of the tent poles, put in a rafter type arrangement under the canvas and raised them up a little bit with wooden studding along the side, and then I closed it all in with scrap lumber. We could get artillery shell boxes and knock 'em apart and use those short boards --

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Karn: -- to, in effect, wall up the sides of these tents for winter, which took quite a while. That was what I did most of the time I was there. The winter was interesting, the winter of '52-'53.

Van Ells: In what sense?

Karn: Because coming from Manitowoc in Wisconsin, it seemed really, really a pretty mild winter. I went around in combat boots and field pants and a field jacket with a woolen undershirt and leather – wool-lined leather gloves. A lot of our guys were from the south, and they were wearing long johns and parkas and insulated boots and freezing. This was an interesting company because a fair number of us were from Wisconsin, who thought it was really pretty mild, and a bunch of guys from the South, who thought it was unbelievably cold. The 74<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been a Black battalion, and at that point the Army was integrating.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: They were integrating by replacement. So, in effect, what happened is when replacements came in, they came in according to the established ratio of black and white.

Van Ells: Right.

Karn: So the battalion was getting progressively whiter. But when I was there, it was roughly half and half. And we also had a few ROK soldiers who were assigned right into our squads working with us, and I wasn't quite sure what the point of that was, but because they didn't take -- I thought, you know, if it was for training, they should pull them out and send them back, and they didn't, so [laughs] I don't know what that was all about.

Van Ells: So going to this race thing, that's kind of interesting because it sounds like an unusual sort of situation. How did everyone get along, basically?

Karn: Everybody got along absolutely great. I was -- Manitowoc was an all white community at that time, and when I was at Fort Leonard Wood, we were very much integrated; it was, I would guess, probably 60/30 White to Black. And there was, as far as I can recall, virtually no race friction, and there certainly wasn't in Korea. It was -- I think we -- it always sounds kind of dumb when you say it, but I think we were very largely color-blind. We were all doing the same thing. We were all wearing the same boots and putting on our pants the same way, living in the same tents, and it was pretty hard for you to see very much difference other than skin color, which didn't seem to account for very much.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: For me, it was a great experience because I had had really no personal experience with black people. My family had never traveled, so I really had not had any contact with anybody in Manitowoc County until I was grown up.

Van Ells: Uh-huh. I've got some general questions about military life.

Karn: Sure.

Van Ells: It's very different from civilian life in many ways, the discipline and that sort of thing. Did you have any trouble adjusting to any sort of aspects of military life?

Karn: No. As I say, I'm a very rule-bound person, and I had -- I had been in the Boy Scouts, and my Boy Scout troop did close order drill, and then I played in \_\_\_\_ [?] boys high school band, which was really very rigidly disciplined, both in terms of music but also in terms of marching. And so most of the things that gave a lot of the people trouble were no trouble at all for me.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: I already had experienced those things.

Van Ells: Yeah, that's in terms of the discipline and that sort of thing. What about your daily life? Like one thing, for example, that some vets will tell me about is they had to make adjustments to harsh language or extensive drinking, or things like that, some of those things soldiers are sort of famous for.

Karn: Yes, right. I had worked in a couple of factories before I went in, and so there weren't any words I hadn't heard.

Van Ells: I see.

Karn: Yeah, you're right, there were people who were -- there was a young kid from Green Bay whose name I have long since forgotten, who was just -- you know, sort of like his jaw hung down for about six weeks. He just couldn't believe he was hearing what he was hearing [both laugh].

Van Ells: He learned some new words probably too, huh?

Karn: Yeah, I think he probably learned -- he certainly learned new combinations of words that he hadn't heard before.

Van Ells: Right.

Karn: But, yeah, that was -- the transition for me was really very easy.

Van Ells: Yeah. So when you're overseas then, and your sort of daily routine, is it -- would it be possible to describe a typical day there?

Karn: Well, I would have to have a couple of typical days. When I was working on the road, we would get up really pretty early; I really don't know what time. We'd go to the mess hall, have breakfast, load up on two and a half ton trucks with shovels and picks. It was always a real problem because as a combat engineer outfit, we had M1 rifles, which don't sling very well, and so you had this clumsy rifle that you had to deal with while you were traveling and so forth. And because we were, again, a combat unit, we had ponchos. I don't know if you can picture trying to dig or shovel dirt in a poncho in a heavy rain. It's difficult. Now, if we had been in a different kind of unit, we would have had rain coats, but we didn't. We had ponchos, so that was -- but the day was not terribly burdensome. They would bring lunch out to us in trucks, and we would work until, I would guess, probably about four or so, and then they'd haul us back to the company area. We'd clean up a little bit and have dinner. The only evening duty you had was guard duty, and that came around, it seems to me, incredibly often. I was -- by this time I was a Corporal, and so I would be Corporal of the Guard, and the problem with that was that there weren't nearly enough Corporals to go around, and so you got guard duty fairly often. But we didn't have to do laundry. We had Korean what were called washie boys who did our laundry. We didn't have to do KP. We had kitchen helpers, Korean kitchen helpers. And so -- but working on the road, cutting out rocks, building bridges, building culverts, was hard work, but it wasn't terribly burdensome. If the weather was decent, it wasn't too bad. But when I was doing -- working with the KSC, I would get up in the morning, eat breakfast, stick my mess kit in the back of my shirt, and go out on the road. They would drop me off in the truck, and I would sort of wander around. Sometime around noon a truck would go by going out to where the guys were working, and they would drop off my meal for me. On the way back in the evening, they'd pick me up, but the rest of the time I was purely on my own and had a great deal of time just to sort of wander around and -- because, you know, you've assigned these guys to break up rocks on a, say, a three-hundred yard stretch of road, and you don't have to watch them swing the sledgehammers. So those days were fairly long; that was a fairly boring thing, and it was hot and very dusty. I used to tie a handkerchief, a wet handkerchief across my nose, and I would get a big black spot of dust that would settle on there. Other than that, it was a pretty easy job. When I was company carpenter, I would get up in the morning, I would spend all day with a coffee cup in my hand wandering from, you know, tent to tent, work for a while and have some coffee. I had really no supervision. Nobody much knew anything about what I was supposed to be doing except that I was supposed to -- what the end result was supposed to be. But there were no real expectations of how fast I should get it done, and I didn't really break my back. I stayed busy. The time goes too slow if you are standing around. But then that would be in the company area all day, and that was -- you had time to socialize a great deal with the cooks and the common men and the mail guy and that sort of thing --

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: -- the mechanics in the motor pool, and it was -- I have to say I did not have a bad time in Korea; I had a pretty good time. The only -- combat experience is just before -- well, sometime before I was supposed to rotate-- **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** -- see, part of my advantage was I knew that they had to let me out in two years.

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Karn: And because had I fooled around so long in the States on pipeline status, I couldn't get promoted. I was doing a Sergeant First Class job, but I was still a PFC because they couldn't promote me. But it meant that when I went to Korea, I didn't have a whole lot of time left. It was sort of like the old expression: "You can do that standing on your head because you can see the end of the tunnel." But we were assigned to build tank emplacements on a ridge overlooking Sniper's Ridge. There was a goofy thing. Now, I don't know if my information is terribly accurate because this is what we heard.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: But the story was that during the day the ROK troops could hold Sniper's Ridge because they had close air support from the Air Force, and that was *awesome* because I got to see that. Four jets'd come in, and they would -- they would take turns. One guy would fly top cover, three guys would make two passes each with napalm, and then the fourth guy'd come down and make his passes. Then they'd each make two passes with rockets, and then they'd each make two passes with 50 calibers, and then they would streak off for their carrier or wherever they were based, and before they were out of sight, there'd be four more. This went on all day long. They just pounded the *hell* out of that thing, and that kept the Chinese off. But when it was dark, the air cover was gone, and the Chinese would take it back, because there was no artillery support. The ground was -- the terrain was too rugged. Well, they decided if they could get tanks up to the top of this ridge that overlooked Sniper's Ridge, they could use their 90-millimeter rifles as artillery. In effect, they would become motorized artillery.

Van Ells: Right.

Karn: But there was no way to get them up, so what we had to do was build switchbacks up this ridge and tank emplacements so the tank would be, in effect, below the ground level but could fire over it. And they assigned our company to that. We worked, I think, seven days on that, and it was a 24-hour thing; we had literally no time off. We ate there, we didn't -- we never went to bed. We worked -- obviously, you can't work 24 hours, but nobody -- nobody got to lay down and sleep for a week. It was really -- it was a very -- burdensome.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: I was a squad leader, and so I had a squad of guys that I was directing, and eventually we came under -- we were all a little ticked because the Chinese snipers would snipe at us, and we weren't allowed to shoot back.

Van Ells: Why not?

Karn: Because we were supposed to be working.

Van Ells: Oh, I see.

Karn: It wasn't supposed to be our job. But the snipers weren't terribly -- we were really behind the ridge, so we weren't in any great danger.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: But again at night, the Chinese would come up on the back side of our ridge, and they had these little pocket mortars. It was nothing more than a metal tube that they stick in the ground, and there was no sighting, but they did it by ear. And they could hear our bulldozers working, and they would lob these mortar shells, which were very light, over the ridge and with considerable accuracy. In fact, once they landed one right on the seat of a bulldozer, but the shrapnel was so light that the guys who bailed out off the bulldozer had superficial little shrapnel wounds in their faces and in their hands and so forth; really a sort of Band-Aid stuff. Actually, we had Sergeant Korkory [phonetic] who looked like he had black measles. His face had tons of little dots of -- I don't know if it was powder or shrapnel, and they had to, you know, pick them out with a needle one at a time, and so there were all these little scabs on his face. I don't think he had a scar to show for it when he got done, and there was no serious damage. I had to take my squad down and get some diesel for a bulldozer, and we had no wrench to open the 55-gallon drum, so we were knocking the bung loose with a rock, which was -- that was perfectly typical, but they heard us bangin' on the thing and they started lobbing in mortar rounds, and several of us got superficial shrapnel wounds. But we got our diesel back up. After the emplacements were done, they winched the tanks up there, and they got into position, and the -- I think it was the Capital Division, ROK Capital Division, took the ridge and were able to hold it then. And we got to have -- they gave us a whole day off, except for the guys who had the shrapnel who were -- and this is one of the things that I really resented. Nobody told us what was going on, and we all had really what were, essentially, Band-Aid type wounds, nothing very serious. And the First Sergeant called us into the bunker, the CP bunker, and said, "You guys walk on down" -- it was about two miles -- "walk on down to the MASH hospital and have them look at these things." In our innocence, we said, "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." We would rather have gone to bed. These are mostly leg wounds, by the way, so

you can tell how serious they were. So we walked down to the MASH hospital, and we were -- they were very surly. We really couldn't understand these doctors who were putting on merthiolate and Band-Aids and were just really *nasty* to us. And we thought, "Well, what is this?" And when we -- when they got done, they said, "Now, okay, now go over there and fill out the papers." And we said, "Well, what papers?" And they said, "Well, for Purple Hearts." We said, you know, "Come on, be serious." It turns out that the regs say if you were treated by battalion or higher medics, you were qualified for a Purple Heart. And what the -- what the Company Commander was doing was making his unit look good by getting, I don't know, four or six Purple Hearts when nobody was hurt because MASH was higher than battalion medics.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: Which is why the doctors were really disgusted, and we felt terribly guilty. And then they made a big hoorah. They brought in some officer, I think it was a bird Colonel, in a helicopter to -- lined us up and pinned on these medals. It was a farce. All of us were furious because none of us were hurt, but the first anybody at home knew about any of this was they got -- all the local newspapers got press releases saying that Corporal Ed Karn was wounded in Korea and was awarded the Purple Heart. My parents got that before I had a chance to tell them that I wasn't hurt. And so you got these panicky letters, we all did, from our families saying, "What the hell is going on?" And so then we started saying, "Nothing happened, everything's okay, it's cool." But that was -- that was kind of a sour-tasting episode.

Van Ells: Yeah. At the times where you weren't working, you had some free time at some point, I would imagine?

Karn: Well --

Van Ells: Like when you weren't building the roads, what were you doing? Were you able to write letters home, or did a USO show come or something like that?

Karn: We had days off here and there. I think we probably only worked six days a week. Actually, we worked seven days a week, but they gave us time off for church services. We did not work really long days, and we had -- we had some leisure time. Guys played cards. We drank a lot of 3.2 beer. It was hot and dusty that summer, and the -- we were in a combat zone, so there were no civilians of any kind. We had a PX ration so that we could buy cigarettes and beer and candy bars, and that was about it; toothbrush, toothpaste, things of that sort, soap. The ROK soldiers who were assigned in our -- I was a squad leader, and in my squad I had two--and they got paid in Korean money at the rate of their rank in the Korean Army, but they had to live in a GI milieu, so they had no -- they couldn't afford anything. They got paid like 75 cents a month. Both my Koreans were smokers; most people were, I guess. So we could buy cigarettes for I think it was



a dollar a carton, and so I and other guys in the squad kept them in cigarettes. I remember at Christmastime I had my mother send over two pairs of fur-lined gloves for these guys, and I got – you know, I think I could have written my own ticket if I had gone to their families, but they were really hard pressed because they really had no money. We couldn't spend our money. There was not enough money to -- not enough to spend money on. So if we were smart and didn't play cards, you could send money home.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: Except that was very difficult because we were paid in scrip, which had no value in the states.

Van Ells: Right.

Karn: And it was a court-martial offense to have US currency. In fact, I had a debt. When I left Fort Leonard Wood, it was a Platoon Sergeant from Sheboygan, as a matter of fact, who was a friend of mine, and I had lent the guy some money, and he hadn't paid me back, and this Platoon Sergeant was determined that this deadbeat was going to pay up. So after I was in Korea, I got a note from Riney [phonetic] with two \$10 bills in it, and I thought, "Oh, my God, what do I do now? I'm not allowed to have this money." So I immediately wrote a note to my mother, stuffed the two \$10 bills in the envelope, and mailed it back to the states. We had -- I guess we had enough leisure time. We had some time off. We didn't have any days off because we really did work around the week. Our church services were on Tuesday afternoon; we always used to laugh because Sunday was on Tuesday afternoon. We had a battalion Chaplain who traveled from unit to unit, and that was our day, and it was -- it was an interesting experience there, too. Because of the Black membership, I was introduced to gospel singing. In fact, in my company there was a gospel quartet that sang that typical Black gospel music at our church services, and I had never heard that before. That was really kind of an interesting experience.

Van Ells: When did you leave Korea then?

Karn: I left in spring of '53, just before the cease-fire.

Van Ells: So you must have had a terminal date then when you knew you were going to be going?

Karn: Oh, yes. I knew they had to get me out of there six weeks before separation, and I was due to get out in May of '53. So by the time I got to February and March, I was what is called a short-timer. I had had a lot of trouble with our Company Commander. He was a petroleum engineer, ROTC guy, who didn't know anything about civil engineering. He knew about drilling oil wells. And I had been assigned to him when he first arrived as a platoon leader to show him, you

know, how a dump truck works and what a bulldozer does. He really didn't know anything, and I think this made him a little uncomfortable with me. Then he became the Company Commander, and he was -- he tried three times to get me busted unsuccessfully. That's another weird story. The Battalion Commander which was -- the battalion headquarters was just down the highway -- there was a highway, right down the road from us, and he had seen the way I had framed our tents, and he thought that was pretty slick, so he got me assigned to battalion headquarters for a couple of weeks to -- and he got some Japanese plywood. He had a kitchen fly that was his tent, and he wanted me to frame out his tent. So I would--I would get on the truck, on the mail truck in the morning and go down to battalion headquarters and work on his tent. Well, in the afternoon -- his name was Colonel Johnson -- he would come back to his tent and he'd say, "Well, I'm going to take a nap this afternoon, so go over to the mess hall and come back in a couple of hours," which, you know, broke my heart. But we got to be really kind of friends. One day he said, "I see you looking at my chess board. Do you play chess?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Would you like to play?" So I used to play chess with him. I always figured what my company didn't know what I was doing down there, didn't know what I was doing, it was all right. But when this Captain would send down to battalion this order to have me reduced in rank for inefficiency, it went to Colonel Johnson for disposition, and Colonel Johnson thought I was a great guy, so he was just -- he would boot it out, and I guess I was lucky that I had been assigned to him, or I probably would have gotten busted.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: I never did quite figure out what it was I was doing wrong; the charges were never very specific. I think part of it was that I wasn't miserable enough to suit him. I was having too good a time. You know, that's one of the things you discover, especially in -- I worked some construction in the States too, and it's the kiss of death if you have a good time. You're not supposed to laugh, you're not supposed to have a good time; you're supposed to be miserable. Never mind how much work you do.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: But, at any rate, it was an interesting year.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: I was very glad that I didn't have longer than that.

Van Ells: I'd imagine. So your trip home, was it on a boat again, or did you fly back?

Karn: No. I came back on a boat. We were an experimental group. They used to give us chloroquine tablets once a week to keep us from coming down with the symptoms of malaria. The mosquitoes were incredible in Korea. You've

probably heard the jokes, you know, the mosquitoes -- two mosquitoes fly into the tent, and they pick up the guy's dog tags, see which blood type he is, and they say, "Well, should we eat him here or should we take him home?" And the other one says, "No, let's eat him here. If we take him outside, the big guys will get him." Which was not all that much of an exaggeration. They really were incredible. I can remember being bit by mosquitoes through Army blankets, which is a pretty remarkable thing in itself.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: Well at any rate, they had developed a cure. There had never been a cure, they could just suppress the symptoms for malaria, but it was a complicated regimen of tablets that you'd take over a period of about two weeks, and so they used the troopship where you had a captive audience. You couldn't miss a day. And so we got one white pill today and two red pills tomorrow and whatever on the way back. The trip back was kind of fun because we all knew we were getting out, and we came into San Francisco. It was a big thrill going under the Golden Gate Bridge. The big shock was when we left, television was still sort of a rarity, but when we came back, there were all these little bungalows and shacks along the waterfront in San Francisco and every one of them had a TV antenna. There were guys who said, you know, "What are those things on roofs?" But by the spring of '53, television was everywhere.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: We went from Camp Shuman [?] in San Francisco by train to Camp Carson-- gorgeous train trip through Royal Gorge and the whole bit to Camp Carson in Colorado, and we stayed at Camp Carson for several weeks. That was -- again, it was a kind of vacation time. You were waiting for orders, separation orders, and so you lived in a barracks. You got up in the morning and see if your name was on a processing list. If it wasn't, you were free until the next morning. And we had regular passes. There was a shuttle bus that went into Colorado Springs, which was then really very much of a resort town. Most of us had some money. Uniforms are very democratic; they can't tell who you are. And so we spent -- several of us spent several weeks cruising around Colorado Springs, eating in good restaurants and having a nice time. Took some USO trips. I remember I visited Canyon City Penitentiary just for the heck of it because there were some really cute girls who were going to be on the trip, so I thought, "Well, I don't care about the prison, but the company is nice." And you keep in mind that we had spent a year without seeing a female of any kind because, as I said, there were no civilians where we were.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: And so that was kind of nice.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: I got -- I was separated on a -- I think a Saturday morning. I flew back to Chicago and took a train to Milwaukee. My sister drove down to Milwaukee and picked me up, and that was that.

Van Ells: And you were home.

Karn: I was home.

Van Ells: Had you given any thought to reenlisting?

Karn: Yes. I -- they offered me a really -- what sounded to me like a really -- I enjoyed the construction foreman school, and they told me that if I would reenlist, they would bring me up to my MOS rank, which was Sergeant First Class; at the time that was the best rank in the Army. And they would send me to Fort Belvoir, the engineer school, for my assignment if I would re-up. And I gave that very serious consideration. They told me I had six months to make up my mind. I could -- and they also promised me a \$600 reenlistment bonus, and in 1953 \$600 was real money. And so I thought, "Well, I can try the GI Bill in the fall, and if it just doesn't look like a good idea, I can still re-up." Well, unfortunately, I went to Madison in the spring right after I got out. I drove down on a weekend and went out to the Union Terrace, and there were all these girls. You know how it is in the spring in Madison. There were girls in formals and girls in bathing suits and girls in shorts and sitting around on the terrace drinking beer, and I thought, "Why in the world would I want to go back in the Army?" [both laugh]

Van Ells: And so that made your decision, huh?

Karn: That made my decision, right.

Van Ells: And so you are out of the service then. In terms of getting your life, you know, the rest of your life on track, what were your priorities? You went to school, obviously.

Karn: I went to school, yeah. I worked out of the Manitowoc Building Trades Council office on a quarterly working card. I did construction that summer, went to Madison in the fall. I had hooked onto a permanent summer job at the end of that summer. They wanted me back the following summer, and so I would be in Madison in the school year, go back to Manitowoc and work summers for two years. At the end of my junior year -- or the end of my sophomore year, I got married, and then I didn't go back to Manitowoc again.

Van Ells: And what did you study?

Karn: American history.

Van Ells: And what were your career goals in mind?

Karn: Well, actually when I started at the university, I was going to be -- I started out as an English major, taking English education, but I watched the professors carrying those blue books around, and I decided that wasn't for me, so I switched to history. I had a graduate student friend who became sort of my mentor, and he seemed to think that I should go on and do graduate work and get a Ph.D. in history; this is what I did. When I got married, I wasn't sure about graduate school --

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Karn: -- about the finances, and I had to decide early on if I was going to get my degree in history education or just an academic history degree.

Van Ells: What did you decide to do?

Karn: And I -- the teaching certificate was the economic insurance, but I discovered that you could get a masters degree in teaching in one year if you had a straight academic degree.

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Karn: The place that I was looking at was Vanderbilt Peabody; essentially what they did is they crammed all those educational courses into one year, gave you a masters degree and a teaching certificate. And I said, "Well," to my wife, "no matter how bad things get, we can squeeze out one more year. If I have to do that, you know, if I can't cut it in graduate school, we can always do that," and so I bailed out of the school of education. The trouble was you had to have eighteen credits of education courses, which were going to come right out of the history courses. That's six history courses I couldn't take, and so I decided that I'd go into history and skip the education, and it worked out all right.

Van Ells: And so how far did you get?

Karn: I got a Ph.D.

Van Ells: At UW?

Karn: Yeah.

Van Ells: What did you study?

Karn: I was a frontier historian.

Van Ells: I see. And so what did you do after you finished?

Karn: Well, I was in ABD for a long time. When I left to graduate school, my last year that I was there I worked half-time as an assistant university archivist with Jess Bell [?] in the University Archives, and then I -- I was hired by Eau Claire for a new position, but that was the famous 1963 year with no budget, and the president called me and said, "Have you got any other job offers? Because people who are on the payroll will get paid, but this is a new position, and it may not get funded, so if you've got another job, you'd probably better take it." Well, at that point the Air Force approached me to work at Truax Field as a division historian for the 30th Air Division. It was a lot of money, relatively speaking, compared to teaching, and I could stay in Madison to work on my degree, I figured, and so I took that. I stayed there for two years. My major professor told me, "If you go to work for the government," he said, "you'll work there for two years or the rest of your life." I said, "Well, how do you figure that?" And he said, "Well, by the end of the second year, you'll know if you want to do this or not. And if you stay longer than that, you won't be able to afford to go back to teaching." And he was right. After two years I really didn't want to do this anymore. As it was, I had to take about a \$1,500 pay cut to go back to teaching, but I did. I went to work for the Center System, and I stayed there then for thirty-one years.

Van Ells: In Sheboygan or Manitowoc?

Karn: Well, I started out divided between Manitowoc and Sheboygan, and I lived in Manitowoc the first four years. Then they established UW-GB and broke up that part of the Center System. I came to Sheboygan, worked in Sheboygan. I taught one year in Sheboygan, split with West Bend, but that was the deal. If I would do that for one year, they would get me permanently off the road, and then I taught full-time at Sheboygan from -- I guess it would have been 1970 on.

Van Ells: So the GI Bill worked out well for you?

Karn: Oh, yes. It was --

Van Ells: Do you think you would have gone to school had it not been for the GI Bill?

Karn: I think probably not, if I hadn't had the, what seemed to me like four years of college free--I was the poor kid in my gang in high school, and all my friends went off to college, and I just didn't have that kind of money, and nobody knows - - they talk about scholarships and working your way. We had terrible advising. Nobody told you that there were scholarships available and things like that. And if you weren't really aggressive, you just assumed you couldn't go to school. I did work a year, went to art school for a year, decided that that wasn't going to be the answer either. And then I worked another year before I got drafted. If it hadn't been for the GI Bill, I probably would have re-upped and stayed in the Engineers. I really did -- I must admit, I really did enjoy that construction engineer stuff,

bridge formulas, and we learned how to build railroads, and it was a fascinating course.

Van Ells: Just a couple more things real quickly.

Karn: Sure.

Van Ells: We talked about the GI Bill. Were there other veterans' benefits that you utilized at all, say, a home loan, something like that?

Karn: Yeah. Eventually I got a GI home improvement mortgage.

Van Ells: With the state or federal, do you remember?

Karn: I think that was state. Hang on just a minute. [Pause in tape] Yeah, we got good advice there, too, because the guy said, "Hang onto this one, don't pay this one off because it's the lowest interest rate you're ever gonna get."

Van Ells: Now in terms of veterans organizations. It says you were in the American Legion briefly.

Karn: Yeah, my dad was a big American Legion promoter.

Van Ells: He was a World War I vet?

Karn: World War I vet, yeah. And he signed me up. I've never been a joiner, and I just thought the whole thing was kind of boring. Besides, I was off at school and I just let it lapse and I never really joined up again.

Van Ells: So you were just sort of on paper?

Karn: Yeah.

Van Ells: And didn't attend any functions or anything. Well, that's pretty much it for all of my questions, actually.

Karn: Okay.

Van Ells: Anything you'd like to add, or anything you think we've skipped over or anything?

Karn: No, I think you pretty well did the whole shot. [laughs] I have to say that having been out of high school for a while and having been in the service gave me an enormous advantage at the university.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Karn: I was much more mature. I didn't think about it in quite those terms, but all these eighteen year olds are just finding out that they have to get their laundry done and arrange for meals and things. I was well acclimated for that. I had much better study habits, and whenever you were in a class where the competition was traditional 18 year olds, you had an enormous advantage.

Van Ells: Where there many other vets on campus? **[End of tape 1, side B]**

Karn: Oh, yeah.

Van Ells: The World War II vets, for example, the whole campus, the undergraduate schools were all filled with vets, but in Korea there were fewer Korean War veterans.

Karn: Right. But we had a lot of guys in Public Law 550. You had to get your little chit signed every month by your instructors if you were in a class, and when you went over to the Veteran's Office, there would always be a line, so I don't know what proportion. I lived my first two years in the dorm and there were a half a dozen guys in my dorm that were Korean era vets. They weren't all Korean vets; lots of them had been in Germany or someplace else. But there were a fair number of vets around. There was nothing very active in terms of student veterans organizations; there were some, but they were not aggressive and they were easy to ignore.

Van Ells: Yeah. I suppose most guys just wanted to leave the military stuff and—

Karn: I think that was about it, yeah.

Van Ells: Well, thanks.

Karn: Well, that's fine.

Van Ells: Thanks for taking some time out of your day.

Karn: Sure.

**[End of Interview]**