# A Veterans Oral History

**Heritage Education Commission**
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**Moorhead, MN**

**Ray Kratzke**
**Narrator**

**Linda Jenson**
**Interviewer**

**LJ:** State your name?

**RK:** **Raymond Kratzke.**

**LJ:** And where were you born?

**RK:** **Dora Township at Vergus, Minnesota.**

**LJ:** What did your parents do?

**RK:** **They were farmers.**

**LJ:** What were their names?

**RK:** **Otto J. and Julia Kratzke.**

**LJ:** How many children in your family?

**RK:** **Eleven, I'm the seventh one.**

**LJ:** You were a busy family; busy working on the farm? Did you also have dairy?

**RK:** **Yes, a few, a little of everything … did a lot of handwork, my dad believed in handwork.**

**LJ:** Did you go to high school in Vergus?

**RK:** **No, I went through the eighth grade, grammar school, that's as far as I went.**

**LJ:** What did you do after you got done with the eighth grade?

**RK: I worked on a few farms and then I went into the service.**

**LJ:** Did you elect to go into the service or were you drafted?

**RK: No, I was drafted.**

**LJ:** How did you feel about that?

**RK: Oh, I knew it was coming, I guess. You heard it was coming.**

**LJ:** What branch of the service did you serve in?

**RK: We went into the U. S. Army and I had my basic training at Camp Adair, Oregon.**

**LJ:** And what was that like?

**RK: Well, it was quite strenuous, and the weather was awfully wet there … rained most of the time. On the clear days you could see Mount Hood; a nice, white, snowcapped mountain. We had a little ice; but most of the time, it was warmer than here. Each day we'd have training with the anti-tank guns. I was in an anti-tank company. And we would disassemble our anti-tank gun and work on it during the day; and when it came to evening, we'd have to take it out of action, put it together and take it away even.**

**This one evening we were all sitting around, and nobody seemed to want to move, and the lieutenant was really getting angry about it. We were all sitting there. I went and saluted him and asked him, "If I get several guys together; and we put this gun away, can we go to to the mess hall?" And he said, "You bet you can." So I did that. And the next morning he called me into his office; and he said, "How would you like to be a squad leader?" And I said, "Well I don't know if I can do that. I was drafted, I wasn't an enlisted man." "Well that doesn't make any difference," he said, "You're here." And another thing, too, "I only had eighth grade and some of the guys are college students." "That doesn't make any difference," he said. He said, "I've been watching you." He said, "You're a natural born leader."**

**LJ:** What a compliment.

**RK: So I said, "Well, I could try it." He said "But you do have to keep track of all the men's time, every hour, each man." We're 10 men in a squad. "You have to keep track of everyone, each hour, what they do." "Well," I said, "That's going to be a lot of work extra." But he said, "You won't have any**

**KP, and you'll have better weekend passes. And you'll get a raise. You'll eventually be a corporal." So I said, "Well I'll try it."**

**I'd been thinking about this, as we were out in the field choosing positions; and the way they were setting the guns up, I didn't like what they were doing. They were setting me in the middle of the road. When a tank would come, and you were to shoot that tank, he had armor on the front about six inches on sloping. You couldn't penetrate it. It'd just glance off. So what could you do, but you would be killed immediately, and you wouldn't even last two minutes. And I didn't agree to the way they were setting them. This way if I was a squad leader; I would have the say of where the gun's going to stand. And what our plans would be, so I did take the job. I did get to be a corporal, and it worked out all right. Oh, there's some more things I should tell you. We had what we called O'Grady drill.**

**LJ:** What's that?

**RK: That's when you'd receive a command, like you are doing close order drills, "to the rear march, to the rear left, to right flank march." If O'Grady didn't say it, you didn't do it. You'd holler, "O'Grady says, to the rear march," then you'd do it. If he didn't, he just said "to the rear march," you were not supposed to do that command. And if you missed, you had to drop out. So the first thing they said was, "Attention," you know, "Company attention." All those that jumped for attention were out, because O'Grady didn't say it. But then he said, "O'Grady says attention." Then we'd marched onward, so half of them were already gone. They kept this O'Grady drill going until I was the last man.**

**LJ:** So who was O'Grady?

**RK: Well, it was just a test to sharpen up your wits.**

**LJ:** So it wasn't any specific person who said to be in action?

**RK: No, it's just when they hollered, "O'Grady says to the rear march," you did it. But if they were marching along; and they said "to the rear march," you just were supposed to keep right on a going … disregard the order unless O'Grady said it.**

**Another time we were working on these anti-tank guns. We disassembled them and worked on them. They had a contest for who could answer the most questions. And each time you lost a question, you had to drop out. Everybody that could answer the question stayed there, and I was the last man. And this case, the question was, "How many ounces of pressure does it**

**take to turn the wheel to the right?" And I told him three ounces. I was the last man. Then they said, "Do you care to ask any questions?" "Yeah, I'd like to ask the instructor a question. How many ounces does it take to turn it to the left?" He said, "Three." I said, "No, you're wrong. It's four."**

**LJ:** One ounce difference from each direction.

**RK: Yes and I was right. So that was quite interesting. That's about all I can remember about those things.**

**LJ:** And how long were you in Oregon for training?

**RK: We were there about six months. Then I had a furlough. There's one more thing I should go back and tell you on the rifle range. At 300 yards, we were firing rapid fire 16 shots and I fired. And they hollered, "Who's." There was a telephone there, "Who's fired on number 12?" And I was firing number 12. I did 15 in the bull's eye. And one they couldn't find. So they gave me credit for that, too. It was a 10-inch bull's eye, and the target was eight feet square, couldn't have missed one. Then we tent camped to Arizona; from there we went to Fort Carson, Colorado, Colorado Springs. I don't recall too much of what happened there. Then we went overseas. We went to New York. We shipped overseas on a small ship called the (USS) Christabel [sp?]. It was a Liberty ship … it was very small. We were double-loaded, so it bobbed around a lot on the ocean. I'd bought a box of Hershey candy bars. I ate one. I got seasick, didn't eat another one until we got overseas, over there. And they were all melted together. It got awful hot.**

**LJ:** Were most of the men seasick?

**RK: Oh, yes. I don't think anybody wasn't seasick.**

**LJ:** How long at sea?

**RK: Seven days in the middle of the ocean, where the worst was. It was so wavy. The water came over the top. We couldn't sleep on deck or in the lifeboats because of double-loaded. We had to sleep on the floor. I had a bed every other night.**

**LJ:** That's too bad.

**RK: That's the way it was.**

**LJ:** Before you go on, you said that you shipped out of New York.

**RK: Yes.**

**LJ:** So no doubt it was the first time you had ever seen New York?

**RK: Yes, it was.**

**LJ:** What did you think about it?

**RK: Well we went underground all the way in there in a tunnel. We came up near Times Square. I remember seeing that. And that's about, I don't remember much. We were only there a few hours.**

**LJ:** So where did you dock after . . .

**RK: We were headed for Antwerp. And we were supposed to land in the port, but the Germans had sunk a lot of ships in the port, and we couldn't go in there. They were still in force. The Germans were still in that town. So we went down the beach a ways to Utah Beach and we landed on beach craft there. We got in the staging area near Saint-Lô, and we spent some time there. I was in this big shed. Anyway we were waiting for our equipment to arrive.**

**There was one morning they all were going to go out to this pillbox to study the thing and look at the powder they had and things there. And I had to stay in the camp. There had to be someone there as a guard, in charge of quarters. So I was that day in charge of quarters alone. They went over to this pillbox and it exploded.**

**The commander came and picked me up and told me to come help identify bodies; but you couldn't identify anybody. This thing blew up. The walls were, I'd say, six feet thick, reinforced with rods and with solid concrete. And the thing was about 15 feet high. And there was a big gun in there that we could fire clear over into England with it. It had blown that [unclear] forward about six feet and the whole thing was blown up.**

**LJ:** How many men were killed?

**RK**: **I would think it was eight. I don't remember how it was, how many were burned, but before it exploded, it must have looked like a blow torch. The fire flew for about a hundred yards out and it burned everything white. And in there was bodies lying – they had – trying to run out.**

**LJ:** That must have been a very hard sight to see?

**RK:** **Well it was really – you couldn't identify … the bodies were in pieces some here and some were there. The canteens were all exploded. And the commander heard there was someone running down the road. He went to look for him and left me there, alone. I stayed there until evening. He came back about dusk and picked me up. I never did identify who it was that was killed, but there were a lot of them. And that's about all I remember about that place.**

**We got into combat then, on the Belgium and Holland border at Maastricht, Holland. That was the first town liberated in Holland. And they said that if we could stand 30 days in combat, then we'd get a rest.**

**They pulled us back after 30 days, and we got a shower that day. We went up to the side of a river, and they were pumping water out of the river, heating it and into shower stalls. We each had seven minutes to take a shower. And they threw us all new clothes. It was all washed-over clothes. Then we had only that much time as a shower. But before the night was over, we were back on the front line. And the reason the general didn't want us to get a day off was because he wanted to have a record amount of days of consecutive days of combat. And he was working for that. And he did get up to 195 consecutive days.**

**LJ:** Was that Patton?

**RK:** **Well, General [unclear] I think, was pushing this, but we got in with Patton a little later.**

**Then we had the Mark River crossing in Holland and there was one morning we crossed the river. We crossed the bridge there. They had just built the boat bridge. Took our trucks over there; and we stopped and a tank started shooting at us. The lieutenant got excited, had us all to go down this dike. There was a farmhouse beyond, oh, half a mile down. There was a grove there and we went down this dike fast as – oh, we were driving fast. Most of the tree limbs were shot off the night before, laying in the road.**

**There was this tank on the left side, we could see him standing there. And he was firing at us. And the truck behind us got hit. As the lieutenant went forward, he stopped in the grove. You're never allowed to go within a hundred yards of another vehicle, so we had to stop right in the open. Well, I told the driver, cut her down in the ditch. So he did that. He swung it down in the ditch; and then he could pull along. There was room enough for a truck to drive, so we went; and I knew they'd shell us then, so we went a hundred yards further up and stopped. But the Germans couldn't see us,**

**but they blasted that spot with mortars. If we'd have stayed there, why we would have been gone, because our truck had a lot of explosives on.**

**We had ten landmines and one landmine would blow up a tank. We had ten on the truck in the back. We had a hundred rounds of anti-tank ammunition; those were big shells, too – over two-inch bullets. And a lot of rifle ammunition, and you can imagine what would have happened if that would have exploded.**

**We pushed the gun up there after a while. We couldn't push it by hand up on the road. The Germans were retreating. We saw some going, and we saw a tank going, and we tried to push our gun up. We couldn't push it by hand, so we finally worked around and got the truck, backing it up on the side, sideways until we got it up. We got it up on there, but the tank was gone. And as we had this thing set in position, I knew if we fired, the gun would jump back for six feet, if it wouldn't be going in the ground.**

**I took the pick ax up there, and I was going to pick some cobblestones out of the road, so it could penetrate. And when I chopped into the road, the bullets went over my head so close that it felt like they were in my ear. I threw myself backwards and I slid off the road, come backwards down; and my gunner, Norris, said, "I thought you were killed," he said, "the way you came."**

**But we sat there and well some of the guys were watching around the side of a tree. They saw where the bullets came from. There was a straw pile bottom, so we riddled that with a machine gun. It got quiet then and towards the evening, here comes two guys getting out of the house up there, and came and surrendered. Yes, they could have shot us anytime; but I don't know, they were watching us, and they didn't. So then we went back and . . .**

**LJ:** Why do you think they didn't shoot when they had that chance?

**RK: I think they were left to guard the rear. As the others withdrew, they had somebody to hold and fire in case we were – I don't know why, but they did this. It happened another time, too, where they were left two behind and instead of going and leaving, they surrendered. They didn't want to fight with us.**

**We went up to Eschweiler/Weisweiler, that's industrial Germany. That one night it was dark and the flare was going bright out there, and there was a paratrooper coming down. And Norris picked up his – he had a burp gun he fired. You know, it should fire five up to eight shells, just "burp" and only one went. The gun jammed. And then it went out.**

**The paratrooper landed right in back of our house; and when the flare went out, we never did see him again. Then we got to Merken on the Roer River. That's the time of the Battle of the Bulge. There was a night attack, and they said they're coming from the back, and we tried to turn our gun around. We had been firing the night before and it froze in the ground, and we couldn't lift it out. We all lifted on the one side. The other side was exposed to small-arm fire. So I ran out there and took the hand spike and pried up on it. We jerked it loose, turned the gun around.**

**At the same time a shell landed behind me and something hit me in the back, and I went down. They had to help me into the house. We were living in the basement then. I couldn't walk for two days. I tried to call the lieutenant on our walkie-talkie. I said I had to go back, I was injured; and he said, "You … nope," he said, "The only way you go back is feet first from here. Nobody goes back from here," he said, "Forward's the only way."**

**We didn't move for a week out of there. We just stayed in that basement. They didn't attack across our spot. I mean we held there. And the back injury got better. I had the best job so, I had the nicest place to sit, and the other guys had to do the work. I bossed them. So I got along without having any problem anymore.**

**We went back then to Frenz for relief. Others took over where we were. There was a waterwheel and there was a lot of deep snow that time. We stayed in that for at least two weeks back there. We were on a course within the artillery range and mortar fire was always going either way over our head, forward and back, all the time. That place was so deep in the snow that the jeeps couldn't get through to bring us food. They went through over the fields, but our truck would drive through it. We had the six-wheel drive, all chains on our wheels. And we could plow snow deeper by far.**

**LJ:** Did you have tents to set up then in that snow or . . .

**RK: No, we were living in a basement at that time in Frenz and in Merken we stayed in the basement, also. The house had been hit many times. The roof was caved in.**

**LJ:** So was this house an abandoned house?

**RK: In Merken there was no people here anywhere. All the people were gone at Frenz, too. There were dead horses laying there, a lot of them bloated.**

**Then we went to Duren for the river crossing at Birkesdorf. That night we lost two men. They were Buncusky (sp?) and Weir (sp?). They were**

**crossing the river on boats when they were killed. We couldn't get across with the truck. I had to stay home with the truck on our side until the bridge was built. Once we got the bridge built – they built it with boats – then we went across and we stayed right near the bridge that night, and we were bombed. It was really – some were bleeding in their mouths from concussion. Then we went across an open field that morning, the lieutenant and I; we were looking for a place to get through with our trucks. Our forces had the next town already, but we didn't know they were all captured that night.**

**We went across that field – that open field with a lot of dead bodies in the trenches. We were up on the railroad tracks, and we were being shot at. We couldn't understand that, we thought all our troops were already there. And then we got back on the friendly side of the railroad track. And there were prisoners coming to us every little while. They were coming with white flags and they'd left their guns and ran to us, quite a few. We were there most of the day. A lot of mortar fire going both ways; and artillery shells, too. And towards evening here two guys get up out of a foxhole. They weren't 150 yards away. They'd been in that hole all day, watching us. So we just took them prisoner; we didn't fuss around. We just told them, "Leave your guns and any long knives here," and sent them to this command post. It was a white house. We told them, "You see that white house over there. Go over there." We didn't have any more to do with them.**

**But the one time that day, the shells were coming in. We could tell about where the shells were going to go. When you heard them start off, you could hear them screaming; and maybe they'd be over this way or it would be that way, and then we could hear them coming directly. And there were some German soldiers there. Why I could hear this one was coming in and we both dove for the hole and I got in. We both dove in this foxhole. I got in there first. This other guy was on top of me. After the shelling stopped, he got out and he laughed and I laughed.**

**LJ:** Too close of a call?

**RK: Yes, it was funny. He was without a weapon.**

**Then we went to Cologne. We went through a lot of small towns I won't mention, and I don't remember, but we went to Cologne. There were two cathedrals. We went right through the middle of Cologne. That was kind of quiet.**

**There was one place we found a brewery. There was no shooting and there was a big hole in the ground. It was all underground, probably 20 feet down.**

**And there was a wench up there with a big rope, and I got on that thing and they let me down in there, and it was pretty dark. Looked around down in there and I opened a valve on a big vat … the vats were probably 10 feet high. I could hear the beer running further over. And I followed that hose and got ahold of that thing and brought it out where it was light, filled a small keg there. A pony keg, I think it was, and corked it. Everything was there and the winch, you hooked it on, took their beer up and they carried it off, and then they took me out.** We **had beer one evening in Cologne.**

**There were a lot of people surrendering there. There were bulk troops, older men and older soldiers. One company came marching ... there was probably 30 marching with a white flag. A lot of them gave up in that town easily.**

**We stopped one place; we made pancakes on a bar. We had some things along in our truck and one of the Germans got in line. He was going to eat with us. Somebody told him, "You can't eat with us. We don't have enough to feed you."**

**LJ:** But you were able to make pancakes?

**RK: Well I don't remember what there was in the pancakes, but I know we had flour. I think it was pancake flour. We made it on a bar. We wiped all the glass off the bar and set our stove up, and we were in part of a building there.**

**Then we crossed the Rhine River. The bridges were blown, but one bridge was not blown. I think they had it prepared to blow up, but for some reason they didn't do it. And somebody went and pulled the fuse out, I guess, some soldier saved the bridge. But we crossed on a boat bridge, made up of boats.**

**Over there I recalled seeing an old man. He wanted me to shoot his pig. He said when Hitler was in power, they wouldn't let him butcher the pig. He wondered if I'd shoot it. He said now that you're here, I'm the butcher. Sure I'll shoot it. So I shot his pig for him. And that's all I remember about that.**

**And another place I came up to a man. He was mixing something in a trough. It looked like pig slop, pig food. It was grain and it was ground up. And I said, in German, "die Schweine gut essen heute" … the pigs eat good today. "No," he said, "Ich Brot backen" … I'm baking bread. He had a large oven that was probably five feet high and maybe four feet wide made of rock and he had a big fire in there. And he took all the coals out, had his bread made then in loaves, put on a kind of a paddle, looked like a long shovel; and he slid that way back in the oven. The rocks were blazing hot.**

**He said, "That'll bake the bread." And he said, "If you stay here, I'll give you a taste." But we had to move out before the bread was done.**

**Then about that time, we started spearheading, just striking off, going down the road, one tank in front, and our truck was next. And there wasn't much resistance. We had broken through the German line. And there wasn't much resistance there, so we kept going. We were on with Patton then. And we went most of the day and night, we were going. We tried to sleep as we were driving, too; and between towns it was hardly any resistance. We'd hit a little resistance at certain towns.**

**We surprised one bunch of people at a dance. Kicked the door in, they were all in there playing and dancing, and the one woman fainted, and they stopped playing. I said, "We're American soldiers and we're not going to hurt you." And I told them, "Don't be alarmed, we're not going to harm you," and "Play some more music." And they kept on. I asked them to play "Odelie Brauerstein."(sp?) That's an old German tune. So they did and then we left.**

**I took a Luger pistol from one fellow not long after that. We came and kicked the door in. There was a man in there, just reaching for his gun and I took that from him. That's here. He begged me to leave him keep the pistol. "He had to protect himself," he said, "and his family." I said, "We'll do that, protect him from here on out. You can't have a loaded gun."**

**And there was light resistance as we went. We saw bulk troops here and there … older men and younger boys. In one town, three women brought a young soldier to us. He was in a cast. He was in the air corps and he had been shot down. He wanted to surrender, and those women hoped that he would stay with them. I asked him in German, if he was through with the war, and he said he was through with the war. I asked him, "Will du mehr dies Krieg?" You want more war? He said, "No. He wanted no more war." And I said to him, "Take your cap off." He had a cap and he had part of the uniform under the pants. And I told those women to take him home, [unclear].**

**LJ:** What does that mean?

**RK:** **I told them to take him home and see that he doesn't give us any more trouble with war. So they were happy about that. One of them grabbed me. They wanted us to stay there. But I said, "We can't stay, we have to keep going further." Each day "Jeden Tag muss gehen," I said, "we must go." And they said, "You'll be shot." Well we have to take that chance.**

**At [unclear] that's a very small town people mostly never heard of that, but we eventually got to a big pincher where we had many Germans surrounded, and they said we're going to have an awful battle here.**

**So we dug our gun in and I got the best position I could get. Sitting there was a slough in front of us, and there was a row of houses coming down from the left. And on the other side of the slough, a big bank so steep they couldn't climb with a tank. So we were planning to shoot right between those two places … between the slough and the bank and there was a row of houses.**

**The next morning they were coming at just daybreak. And they were shooting with a big tank and roaring. They weren't coming fast but they were sure shooting a lot. As they came past those houses, we shot him right between – fired just as he got across the slough. We had that planned. Stopped him right there; knocked him out. And it started to explode, and the tank starts burning, and there was soldiers coming. There were soldiers all over the place, down there, not right on our hill; and we started shooting with our rifles, and that time I emptied my gun twice. It was the M-1 rifle, automatic. Each clip held eight shells. I shot 16 as fast as I could shoot.**

**And we did away with all the troops that were there between them. We had 10 men there in our group. And we were alone. There was no one with us there. We got rid of all the soldiers and we had the tank burning and we stopped the whole counterattack.**

**That morning – well, that was pretty much the end of that day. That tank had shot a lot people. They'd hurt a lot of people in the town and blew up buildings as they were coming in with their 88, they were shooting. It was an 88-mm souped-up gun they had on their tank. We stopped the counterattack. We didn't know, at that time, how many people we had surrounded, but I looked in my book here later and I think it was 3,500 soldiers that we had surrounded. And we stopped their breakthrough.**

**Then we went on again, left the tank. The one tank got by us –the second tank another bazooka man got, but the third tank we never even could see. It went around that town. We saw the tail end of it going just over. We couldn't get a shot at it. But we followed that tank for two days and we finally caught up with it and got the crew. They were in bed and sleeping in the house when we caught them.**

**LJ:** How you were able to take them?

**RK:** **An antitank gun is a defensive weapon. It is not to attack with it. You have it trailing behind your truck. With a tank they can advance over a field,**

**shooting, but we had to wait until we stopped to turn the gun around and put it in action before we could shoot. So it's only a defensive weapon.**

**LJ:** So how many were there that you took?

**RK:** **The Germans? Well we didn't capture any of them. We shot everything that was alive. I don't know what happened after that. We were there not long that day and we got on our trucks and went further. We didn't know who was on our right or left.**

**This one group was always together, just the 10 guys. If they'd drop us off to cover a certain road, we were always alone – oh, there was foot troops sometimes in front of us and near us and sometimes we'd be amongst them. But when we were near them, then we'd draw a lot of fire; and they didn't like that when we came close. We'd draw artillery fire and mortars.**

**LJ:** Approximately what year was this?

**RK:** **Oh, let's see, it'd be about the spring of '44; I think this would have been '44 now.**

**Oh yes, that morning when I fired those 16 shells, I was firing pretty fast and I went to pick up my gun, and I mistakenly grabbed it by the muzzle, and it was so hot it burned my hand white right in here.**

**LJ:** Burns are very painful.

**RK:** **Yes, our machine gun – we had a 50-caliber machine gun, too. And if we fired it too long, it would actually be red hot; and then it would get white hot, the barrel and would sag down. We had big asbestos mittens up to our elbows; and you could take that red-hot barrel and unscrew it, throw it out and put another barrel in and you could fire again.**

**LJ:** Interesting.

**RK:** **Yes, then we went spearheading again. By spearheading we just kept driving forward. We went as high as 380 miles in a day; and each day, of course, we didn't stop for night either, because I recall going through some towns' real narrow streets, and we were probably going five miles an hour or so, and we had our black-out lights on. You couldn't turn your headlights on. The blackout lights are two little marks on each headlight that are white.**

**And on many times walked ahead of the truck because there were shell holes in the road and if there were mines, you had to be driving along watching for this stuff. And I'd have something white on my back for the driver to follow me.**

**LJ:** So you were constantly looking for landmines?

**RK: Yes, we were on foot. Mines were bad but another thing that was bad were teller mines would blow if a tank would hit them. Once in a while they'd stick them in a shell hole. And if you dropped into there, you wouldn't see it, and then they'd blow your truck.**

**Then we got into Leipzig area. We hit Leipzig and Bitterfeld, that's where we met the Russians. There was a bridge on the Elbe. It was out in the country. There was no town right there. That's where we were ordered to stay and wait for the Russians to come.**

**And the Germans were surrendering in this column of three or four and they'd come with trucks or different vehicles. They'd stop and get out, get into line and walk across the river. As far as we could see, the column was coming and they were going the other way as far as we could see, too. We just kept them moving. The vehicles on the opposite side of the river; only soldiers were accepted across.**

**Then the Russians arrived one day. They replaced a large artillery gun across the other side of the river, aiming right at us. And there was talk that we might have a war with them. One of those Russians came over and wanted to surrender already. We sent him over to the command post. We didn't know what to do with him. We sent that stuff all over to the commander. We called it the CP.**

**And we had an accordion on the truck, and I used to play it a little bit and the Russians saw that. They asked us to come over and play. They begged us to come over and play for a dance. So two other fellows and I went with the accordion over there. They had a granary there with some grain in the bin. And there was not too much space but there was probably about 25-30 people there, and I played for a while. They danced and they liked the awful fast music, like polkas. They were drinking quite a bit, one sat and he drank most of a bottle and he was laid out there. We took a little of their drink, but we didn't take much. And then one of the fellows wanted to play the accordion. They wanted to play real fast music, so I told them to go ahead and play it. So he did. He played, but he couldn't play very good. He jerked around on it for a while. They sang their national anthem; and we also sang, "God Bless America" and we went home.**

**LJ:** How many Russians were there in this flank?

**RK: I would think there was like 25 or 30, and there was women and men, and there were some soldiers and some were not soldiers and . . .**

**LJ:** But there were only three Americans?

**RK: Three.**

**LJ:** Didn't you have any fear at all?

**RK: Not at all. We had quite a few shots. I don't know why. We didn't have any fear of them at all that day. We just didn't think in fear.**

**LJ:** They were drinking and playing music, they didn't seem too dangerous?

**RK: Oh, yes, they were happy.**

**And then we had some to do with a bürgermeister in a small town. And a few days is all we were there.**

**We went back on a small train into France on what they called the 40 and 8 boxcar. It would hold 40 men or 8 horses and we all tried to lay down on that boxcar, but we couldn't. They all could, but one. He had to sit. He sat and hung his feet out the side. There was no room for him to lie down.**

**LJ:** How long were you on the train?

**RK: It seemed like two or three days. It went so slow and it stopped many times and seemed very slowly. It was a narrow-gauged railroad. And we went until Camp Lucky Strike and we went back on the [unclear] and the SS Erickson ship, which was a big, captured German ship. We were not double-loaded and we didn't get sick at all.**

**We were supposed to train to go to Tokyo Bay after we got back here. But the atomic bomb changed that, so then we didn't have to go. But the general did get us for 195 consecutive days in combat. That's pretty much what it was.**

**LJ:** Can you tell us about some of the people that you fought with … any special buddies?

**RK: Well there's one, Charles Norris. He was a corporal. He was a gunner and he and I rode together all the way. I still get Christmas letters from him.**

**LJ:** Where does he live?

**RK: He lives in Newcastle, Pennsylvania.**

**LJ:** But you haven't seen him since?

**RK: No, I haven't seen him since at all.**

**LJ:** But you send Christmas cards to each other.

**RK: Oh, yes.**

**LJ:** Did you go to any of the reunions?

**RK: I went to one in Kansas City, I think it was.**

**LJ:** When was that?

**RK: Oh, it's probably 10 years ago now.**

**LJ:** What was that like?

**RK: There were a lot of them there; but I only knew probably three or four. We had a lot that were killed.**

**LJ:** When did you find out that you were able to go back home?

**RK: You mean from Germany?**

**LJ:** Yes.

**RK: I don't recall when we turned back from Bitterfeld there. We probably were, I don't know if we were there a week or so after the war. It wasn't very long and then we got on the train.**

**LJ:** That must have been a very happy day.

**RK: Yes.**

**LJ:** And the ship accommodations were much better going home than they were leaving?

**RK:** **Very much so.**

**LJ:** What did you do after you got home? What was the reunion like with your family?

**RK:** **Oh, I don't recall much of anything after I got home. I'd been home a few times on furlough before. It was something like coming home on any other furlough. But I do recall that I was very restless. I couldn't seem to stay in one place. I had to move around all the time. Go someplace and then I felt I had to go somewhere else and it was not easy for a while. I worked in a creamery in Vergus for a few months. Then I worked for a farmer down by Dent. And after that I bought my own farm.**

**LJ:** Grain and dairy?

**RK:** **Yeas, right.**

**LJ:** And how long did you farm?

**RK:** **For 10 years, but the injuries on my back were so that I couldn't ride that tractor. Just couldn't do it. The doctors were going to have surgery on my back and I went down to Minneapolis and they said, "Not on that. Not on that. It'll probably make you worse." So they said, "Find different work. Get off the farm." So I got into the post office. I got a permanent job there as temporary substitute clerk, but it was a career status.**

**Then in '60 I was offered the job of postmaster. I was called from Minneapolis – the postal inspector asked me, "Do you want that job?" I said, "I'll take it." I'd been training the other acting postmasters and they were getting the pay. "Well," he said, "I'll be there tomorrow morning and swear you in." He was there and swore me in but he said, "You do have to pass the test. So you had to take that test." Well I passed the four-hour test before on clerks. I went and took the six-hour test for postmaster and I passed that, too.**

**LJ:** Congratulations.

**RK:** **Thanks.**

**LJ:** How long were you in the post office?

**RK**: **A postmaster… well, it was started in '56 and I wound up in '78. I took the disability retirement. I was having a time with my back and my eyes were giving me trouble. Bifocal lenses, trifocals, and then they put the boxes six inches from the floor. You couldn't get your head down and there was no way you could see. So, I decided I'd just take the first retirement I could get, and I did. It worked out good.**

**LJ:** What have you been doing during your retirement?

**RK: I did buy some Volkswagen cars that were broke down and I took the motors out and disassembled them until there wasn't a bolt left and rebuilt them and I'd drive them for a while and sell them. I did that for probably about a dozen of those. Since then I bought a few other cars and have sold them, repaired them, did some bodywork on them. I got two out there now.**

**LJ:** Beautiful cars.

**RK: Thanks.**

**LJ:** Do you also have hobbies like fishing and …

**RK: Oh, yes. I do. I've got a fish house out there now. I've got one portable house and one standard house. It's only four by six but I have a wood stove in there and it's comfortable.**

**LJ:** Do you have any final thoughts about your military experience?

**RK: No, I can't say I have any final thoughts.**

**LJ:** How would you like to be remembered, Mr. Kratzke?

**RK: I don't know of any special way. I don't think I know of anything.**

**LJ:** Okay.