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Creighton Kerr oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, January 25, 2009

Creighton Kerr (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: Okay. Your name is Creighton?

Creighton Kerr: Yes.

MH: C-r-e-i-g-h-t-o-n?

CK: Yes.

MH: Kerr, K-e-r-r.

CK: Yup.

MH: What's your address?

CK: ...

MH: And your phone number is.... And what's your date of birth?

CK: 10-17-23 [October 17, 1923].

MH: Okay. You were in the 84th Infantry Division, 333rd Regiment, Company D.

CK: Yes.

MH: Where were you before you went into the army?

CK: What was I doing?

MH: Yes.

CK: I was in the vending machine business.

MH: In where?

CK: Oakland County, right here in Pontiac [Michigan].

MH: Oh, okay. And were you drafted or did you enlist?

CK: Yes.

MH: And how old were you when you went in?

CK: Eighteen.

MH: Eighteen. Where'd they send you?

CK: I took basic training at Camp Roberts, California.

MH: And then, when did you join—did you go over as a replacement, or did you go over with the—?

CK: Oh, no. I went over with the division.

MH: When did they go over?

CK: Uh, I don't have that right with me.

MH: About? After D-Day?

CK: Oh, yes. Yup.

MH: Okay. So, you landed where, at Marseille?

CK: We went into—no, we went up to the Firth of Clyde in Scotland first, and then we went down into England and stayed at the town of Basingstoke. We went over to the continent afterwards. I don't have those dates.

MH: That's okay. And what was your first combat?

CK: Outside of the—right at the Siegfried Line in the town of Geilenkirchen.

MH: Okay. How long did that battle last?

CK: Well, we took the Siegfried Line, we took Geilenkirchen, which is a pretty good size industrial town, and then Süsserath and Würm, and then we just went on from there. I forget where we were at when—we got our R and R [rest and relaxation leave], went up to Maastricht, Holland, when the Bulge broke. They put us on our trucks and didn't tell us a damn thing. Come back down and started down at Marche [Marche-en-Famenne], Belgium; that's the town that we started our Battle of the Bulge fight. And then we continued all the way up, and we took a couple of other good-sized towns.

MH: What was your job?

CK: I was a machine gunner. I was in the first platoon, first squad—first platoon heavy weapons machine.

MH: So, this is a water-cooled machine gun?

CK: Yeah.

MH: A .30 caliber?

CK: Yup.

MH: Yeah. Tell me what happened from then on. Let me ask you this: at that point did you know anything about concentration camps, about the Holocaust?

CK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, I'd heard about them before. I heard about them when I was in England and so on and so forth.

MH: Okay. Did the Army officially talk about it, or was it just conversation?

CK: No, I think we had some communications. I don't really—I can't really swear to anything, except that I knew that there were concentration camps and I didn't know where, except that I did know that there were some.

MH: Okay. Was Salzwedel the first time you ran into anything like that?

CK: Yes.

MH: So, tell me about the day you're approaching Salzwedel. What's going on?

CK: Well, what we did, we took Hannover, and that's a big town.

MH: Right.

CK: That morning on—it was April 9, and it was a foggy, misty, rainy morning, just a nasty day. We started up on a highway, and there was a tank and a command car and then my jeep, and then the convoy behind us. And just as we started up, two guys came out of the ditch, waving white flags; one was a Russian prisoner of war and the other was a Polish prisoner of war. Of course, we stopped the convoy. They're talking half German, half Polish/Russian and so on and so forth.

The Russian went with the command car for probably—maybe half an hour, forty-five minutes, and he was picking out communication cables and locations that he knew about. Those two guys were working in the farms in the area. The day before we met them, they had escaped; they knew that we were coming soon and the Germans were leaving, so they just took off and spent the night in the field. But that's all he knew, that's all he had ever seen was just communication areas in that first—well, there's a massive railroad crossing in there. After we went across the railroad crossing, they sent him back to our jeep because he couldn't tell him any more about Hannover. In Hannover, we had very little fighting; there was a couple shots here and a couple shots there, but very little resistance.

In one corner—I remember I had a guy in the platoon by the name of Meyers, out of Pennsylvania. He could speak German, and he let me know that that was a meat market, so we went in. They weren't too happy, but we went in and got ourselves a case of eggs and some meat. Come back out, and the tank right in front of us, the guy's hollering. He says, "Is that eggs?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Get us some." So, we went in and got another case of eggs. The guy was holding the eggs on, trying to strap them on the back of his tank, as we moved out of that position.

So, then we went through Hannover—

MH: Why do I have the feeling that we're looking at a case of scrambled eggs very quickly?

CK: Oh, that's—I often wondered how many good eggs did he ever get of there.

MH: Yeah.

CK: But we just put ours in the trailer and lashed them down, and we had eggs for quite a while after that.

But anyway, then just outside of Hannover—not knowing this was a concentration camp or anything about Salzwedel, except that you knew that it was. This town of Salzwedel was cleaner than Hannover, and Hannover wasn't bad. There were stores that was open and people walking around in Hannover that we hadn't seen before. And I know that, when we got into Salzwedel, I didn't know what town that was.

We went through this compound, which ends up being the Salzwedel prisoner of war camp. We had a mental institution in Pontiac here, and it was laid out a lot like that. It was set back off the road, but they had good lawns, shrubbery around it. But they had it all fenced in, and a great big gate, the first gate that I could remember. And there was nobody there. When our jeep went by, there was nobody in sight anywhere in that compound. We went about probably a block, and there's another gate and a smaller gate and a walkway, and there's a guard post on both places. And there was nobody there: the Germans had left.

All of a sudden, we hear a commotion behind us, and we look and you could hear all these women screaming. We found out later on that—what I heard was that Captain Williams had shot the lock off that gate and that all these women—but I didn't see any in that compound until afterwards. Then they were running around screaming and dancing.

Two fellows, two GIs from the 106th [Infantry Division] come running down that sidewalk to the gate that we were at. They had been captured the first day of the Battle of the Bulge. Both those guys were buck sergeants, and both those guys were medics. The first thing one guys wants is a K ration, a breakfast K ration; the other guy wants my carbine, and I gave him a carbine. He turned around, and he never said a word. He said, "I want me a weapon," and I gave him my carbine and a couple of clips of ammunition. He went right back up into that compound. We could see the buildings back maybe 100 yards or so: quite a few big buildings. And the other guy, all he did was sit on a curb and open up breakfast K rations, nothing else, and he was telling me that they got captured on the first day of the Battle of the Bulge. They didn't know it was the Battle of the Bulge, but the first day when the tanks showed up, they captured them. They had been there working in the hospital in that compound, in Salzwedel.

And, other than that, I can remember one thing. When I looked about a block behind me, there was a gal stark naked, and she had a green pair of—one green shoe and one red shoe, and hats on top of her head as high as she could hold her hands together. She was out there in the street—well, they all were all dancing and singing. You could just

visualize at that point: that's all she dreamed about when she was a prisoner, was to get a new hat and a new pair of shoes.

We were there maybe half an hour at the most and left. The guy sitting on the corner was eating his K rations, or breakfast rations, and we pulled out. I didn't know anything about all those females. I didn't, really, at that time, until later on that night when we stopped and found out that they had to gather them back up and put them back in the compound. There was no place for them to go.

MH: Did you ever get your rifle back?

CK: No. No, I never saw either one of those two guys again.

MH: I thought—maybe World War II was different, but I thought you get busted if you lose your weapon?

CK: Well, I had my jeep blown up on Christmas Eve, and I lost every single thing I had, and that went with the jeep. That went with the jeep and the trailer, as far as the Army went.

MH: I see.

CK: But they—ours was a different war all together.

MH: Yeah. I mean, this has to be a sight that's completely, you know, out of anything you could have possibly have expected to see in war.

CK: Two things: The other—you're right there, that's number one. The second thing is when we were up on the Elbe River. We had this Russian and we had this Polish—both those guys were sergeants. The Russian—the Pollack, I never cared much about him, but the Russian was a good soldier. He was captured in the siege of Stalingrad, and he was also a machine gunner, so we had a lot in common. I took him under my wing, because he could speak a little bit of German and English. He was a good soldier, and interested in the war. The other guy, all he wanted to do was find women and eat and something to drink. But anyway—

MH: Not that there's anything wrong with that.

CK: Pardon?

MH: Not that there's anything wrong with that. (laughs)

CK: Oh, no, no, no, no. But, I mean, I just gave him to the other squad. I kept—we call one guy Big—both of them's name was Michael. I wish to hell that I had kept their addresses, but, you know, at that time you never think about it. He had a baby; he was married and had a little baby, and he wanted to go home and get his baby and come back and fight all the Japanese in the world. So, he knew we were at war with Japan.

But, anyway, to see the Russians come on that levee on the Elbe River was something else.

MH: Tell me about it.

CK: Well, we were there about three days before the Russians. We went across the river twice. Ed Hunt and I and a couple other guys in the platoon took oar boats, flat bottom scows, across, and we brought prisoners of war back and so on and so forth. Then [Dwight D.] Eisenhower said, "No, no more." They had a series of flares, different colored flares telling you the Russians are twenty miles away, ten miles away, whatever it was; I don't remember all the sequences.

But the number of Germans that drowned in that river to get away from the Russians would be just astronomical, because they knew what was going to happen. And when those Russians came—you've never seen—if you had had a video camera and seen their horses and their sabers and their actions up on that river, you'd talk about a slaughter. They didn't have—we had good equipment; theirs was all plow horses. They just rode up and down that levee just slaughtering anybody in their way. I mean, it was really something to see. That lasted maybe a half a day, and it was all over with. They got them back off the river and so on and so forth.

The Russian, he had a—I don't know how you pronounce it, octatina? [concertina]—one of those little accordions. And he knew that they were coming; of course, we let him know what's going on all the time, anyway. But he was playing a tune the first time he saw a Russian soldier over there, and he was doing that squatting dance and so on and so forth. I have no idea what the Polish soldier said, but he dropped that thing and he hit

him, and he'd have killed him. He had him right by the throat. If we hadn't pulled him off—and I never did understand what he said, but he made a derogatory remark to that Russian Army, and that was the end of him. I mean, we got those two guys out of there right now. It was the next day that we turned all our prisoners in.

MH: These were the two guys that you had found?

CK: Yeah, that we got out of Hannover.

MH: Right.

CK: But I never understood what he said, because it was probably Russian or Polish or German. Well, he just made a smart remark, and man, that was it.

MH: To go back to Salzwedel for a second, in the camp: when you saw the women, there was another—other Americans had gotten there before you and were already inside?

CK: No, no. We were the—as far as I know, we were the first tank and tank battalion and command officer, and our jeep was the first one. But by the first gate, we never stopped. There was nothing there; there wasn't a guard, there was nothing. There was a great big wide gate where you'd take a vehicle. Then we went about a block, which was in—it reminded me of this institution up here. About a block away was another guard outpost and a fence gate, but it was a walking gate; it was one that had a walk going up through the lawns up to the building. And that wasn't locked, it wasn't nothing. There was nobody there, and then all of a sudden these two GIs come running down. And that was it.

MH: What was your rank at that point?

CK: I was a sergeant.

MH: Okay. All right.

CK: Did you get any information about our reunion in Buffalo?

MH: Uh, no.

CK: Or in Albany, rather. In Albany, New York, when we had a reunion there?

MH: No, I didn't.

CK: Well, when we were there, there was a girl—a lady showed up. Her name was Helen—I'm pretty sure I've got it right—T-r-a-m-i-e-l.

MH: Okay.

CK: And I have a picture of her, if you want that. It's got her and her husband and her daughter. Jack Griffin and I were together at our 84th Infantry reunion in Albany, New York. She was a prisoner in Salzwedel, and she saw in the newspaper that we were going to be there, and she came and she spoke at that reunion.

MH: Where does she live?

CK: I don't have her address. Maybe the headquarters of the 84th might have her address, or somebody from the newspaper would have it, but I didn't get it. There was so much—so many people talking, so I'm lucky that I got a picture of her.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

CK: Oh, I've got quite a few. I've got one with her and Jack Griffin and I and her husband.

MH: But I mean from World War II, from back in forty-five [1945]?

CK: Oh, yeah.

MH: Could you send me a copy of that, of one of your pictures from World War II and the picture of the two of you with this woman?

CK: Yeah. Yeah, I'll mail it to you.

MH: Okay. Do you have an email address?

CK: No, I don't even have a cell phone. I have a thing. I don't have email, I don't have this—in fact, I don't even have dandruff.

MH: Well, that's—you know, what can I say? Why don't I—you want me to send you an envelope?

CK: No, I'll just mail you these pictures. No, I just—

MH: All right. Let me give you my address.

CK: Okay, and that's....

MH: You got it.

CK: Yeah, I've got that flyer.

MH: Okay, great.

CK: ...

MH: That's me.

CK: Yup.

MH: Okay. I appreciate it, and thank you for calling.

End of interview