

Interview with John Kuehne

March 28, 1989

Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection

St. Cloud State University Archives

Interviewed by David Overy

Overy: Mr. Kuehne, when and where were you born?

Kuehne: I was born in Long Prairie, Minnesota in 1921.

Overy: What were you doing when the war broke out?

Kuehne: I was out on the farm. I was working for a farmer up around Hoffman, Minnesota. He could have kept me out, so he went to hire a lawyer to keep me out of the service. I said, "No, I can't because all my friends are going and I would feel right." So I went.

Overy: You were drafted then?

Kuehne: Yeah.

Overy: Tell me about your training.

Kuehne: Training we had in Camp Walters, Texas. That's where we took our basic training. By the time we got through with our basic training we didn't have a man left in the outfit over twenty-eight years of age, because we had to crawl through culverts with our packs on and jump, climb and jump over high barricades and crawl through under barb wire, and go on long hikes. A lot of the older fellows had broken among down arches. From Camp Walters, Texas, they sent us to Camp Blanning, Florida. There we got the real rough training--we went on forty-five-mile

hikes with full field pack. Which was kind of interesting because we had a platoon sergeant that I'd say weighed about 220 pounds and when he'd call us out in the morning to go on a hike, he'd say, "Well, today we're going to pick out the men amongst the boys. He said, nobody falls out unless they fall out on their face." Lo and behold, after twelve miles he fell out on his face. That statement was never made again by--

Overy: Did he continue with the platoon?

Kuehne: Yeah, oh yeah, but he was very mild. One seventy-mile hike, what they did there was they walked thirty miles and then they rode on the back of a two and half ton truck for ten miles and then they walked back.

Overy: This was in Florida?

Kuehne: Yeah. The next day they'd--well, on the forty-five-mile hikes we'd leave like five o'clock in the morning and we'd get there like 2:30 --three o'clock in the next morning. We'd have what we called two jam sandwiches—they's give us some butter and jelly sandwiches and jam them together, that's why we called it a jam sandwich--and a canteen of water. That's what we were to live on until we ended a forty-five-mile hike. They'd have breakfast for us, or a supper at 2:30 in the morning. Then we'd drive back to camp and then when we got back to camp, they'd give us breakfast a couple hours later. Then we'd go to bed and at 10:30 or eleven o'clock something like that they'd wake us all up. They claim and there's probably some truth to it we had to do a ten-mile speed hike. They said if we didn't, we'd all get stiff. We'd stiffen up. So, they'd take us on a ten-mile speed hike. They said if we didn't, we'd all get stiff. So, they'd take us on a ten-mile speed hike and then we had to move right along, but of course, that was with a light pack. That was one time I remember blowing my stack at one of the sergeants. Sergeant

Nichols, at Georgia, and anybody that's gone on a parade or hike knows that the space in between and if you're toward the end of the line and they tell them to close up, why the guy at the end of the line he was to run to try to catch up. I was close toward the end of the line, they told them to close up and we were all beat from the forty-five mile hike the day before and he came over and slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Kuehne, close it up, close it up." I was pretty much on edge that time and I just turned around and said, "Sergeant, keep your goddamn hand off of me or else I'm going to hit you." and so there was no more of that. I had no more problem with that. That's when they took all the guys over twenty-eight years of age and they either put them in the medics or gave them a medical discharge.

Overy: They just couldn't take it?

Kuehne: No. Then orders came down from Washington that there would be no more of those forty-five-mile hikes with full field pack because they were getting as many wounded as they were in combat. So, they stopped it. Then we adopted the name of the—Colonel Edme's Ruptured Rangers. To give you an idea how rough it really was they--one day when they fell us out in the morning, they said they wanted volunteers for the paratroops, 90 percent of us volunteered for the paratroopers. Then they said they only needed six guys. They just picked six out of the group. There was a paratrooper outfit stationed right next to us and we could see that they were getting a lot easier training than we were getting.

Overy: Were you part of the Thirtieth Division then?

Kuehne: Yeah, in basic I wasn't but when I got down to Camp Blanning, Florida I joined the Thirtieth Division.

Overy: Was this the particular practice of your commanding general, to do this kind of thing?

Kuehne: Yep, they wanted toughness, I can see why--there was a lot of times where it really came in handy. If we hadn't been used to having it rough--even then we had some guys that cracked up. It just gets pretty strenuous.

Overy: When you had that really tough training was there lots of guys that wanted to quit or tried to quit?

Kuehne: Yeah, there were guys going AWOL. Then they'd pick them up and they were in the stockade down there. When I first got down there, they were still taking their basic so the first couple of weeks when I was there, I was put on prison chasing, I had to take these guys out that had gone AWOL and put them to work. I had a little incident there, after one evening when we finished out training--a paratrooper outfit was also prison chasing there with us so when I got to go back to my company here there was only one rifle left and it wasn't mine, so somebody had taken my rifle and left theirs.(So I reported it when I got back to the company and there was nothing said about--I was told I had to go find my rifle, I went to look for this paratrooper outfit, they had moved out, so they were gone. The captain said, "They were giving furloughs--if anybody's name isn't called come and see me." Of course, since I was one of the older guys in the outfit because I had my basic before I went there, I asked him how come my name wasn't called? He said, "Well, we don't know for sure if we can trust you because you lost your rifle." I said, "Captain, I told you what happened, if you really think that of me, you know what you can do shove that dang furlough you know where. I've been here nine months now without a furlough and I can go longer." A week later they called out furloughs again and mine was the first name called out for a furlough. It was really interesting, I asked for a transfer from G Company, that was a rifle company to H Company, that was heavy weapons. When we got aboard the ship to go over this than this Captain, Gagliano was his name, he come over to me

and said, "Why don't you come back to G Company and you can be my official runner."

"Captain," I said, "I'm a machine-gunner now, when we get in combat and you hear overhead fire, you'll know who's firing it. He turned around and walked off. It was rough, there's no way around it. To this day I can walk alongside of most anybody. The cute part was when I went into the service my mother said they would take me because I wear a size six shoe--got small feet--and also they had an ambulance follow us when we went on hikes, so if they had trouble with their feet they'd pick them up. I never was that lucky I never had any trouble, I just had to keep walking.

Overy: Did the Thirtieth Division have a particularly high morale?

Kuehne: I think so, once we got in combat we sure did. We thought the world of each other and we still do. I think the majority of us there was nothing we wouldn't do for our comrades.

Another thing, just for an example, this Dutch family that I was telling you about that practically adopted me after I'd carried that girl to safety, they--when we got ready to hit the Siegfried Line--they were very concerned about me, so the old man said, "Let me show you something," and he took me into this barn and he had a tunnel under the barn and he had stored some rye and wheat under the barn. He said, "We're afraid you're going to get killed. Why don't you stay here?" He even told me how much money he had in the bank. He said, "We'd like to have you stay, it isn't really all that bad, Holland is a good place to live." He gave me a big spiel. I looked at him and said, "Thanks for the offer, but you see those fellows up there? Do you really think I can sit in the basement of the barn while my buddies are out there getting killed? I can't do it." The whole family started crying so they said, "Well, we can understand, we can see why you'd feel that way." One thing I always liked about our outfit, it was a southern outfit, and southerners are noted for making fun of everything, I don't care what it is. I know that when we first got into

France and we crossed the Vire River, the German guns had zeroed in on a bridge that we had to go across. Just when we got to the bridge, they opened fire on us and so we all took cover and of course, some of us got hit. We managed to get across the bridge--there was a guy by the name of Johnny Carter from Georgia in my machine gun section and he was carrying the tripod and I was carrying the gun, he dropped the tripod so when we got across the bridge with the rest of the group and the company commander said, "Where's your gun?" I said, "I got the gun but"--he said, "I dropped that damn thing down there by the bridge when they shelled us." The captain said, "Your gun is no good unless you got the tripod for it, so you'll have to go back and get it." So, help me, he was sitting a good six feet from me and I could hear his heartbeat. I could hear his heart pounding. I looked at the captain and said, "I'll go get it, I know where he dropped it." Johnny Carter said, "No, I'm not yellow, I'll go." We both went and got the tripod. Once before that they started shelling and he took off--they thought he was going to run all the way back to the beach. About a week after that, on Sunday morning, it was real peaceful and quiet, sunny day--here Johnny Carter and two other guys were sitting on their haunches and they had their Coleman burner going, heating a cup of coffee. Here one lousy, shell come in and landed right on them, killed all three of them right on the spot, they never even got a chance to raise up. The first thing we thought of right away was look at all the times that he tried to run away from the shells and here he didn't even have a chance to stand up when the shell hit him. You really get the feeling that if your time is up, you're going to go and there isn't much you're going to do about it. You just kind of live by the grace of God.

Overy: Did you get a lot of kidding because you were a Yankee in a rebel outfit?

Kuehne: No, I had no problem with that and I'll tell you why. I realized that I was not a Yankee, I was a mid-westerner. That went over real good I was treated real well. I was invited to some of

these southern homes for dinner. They gave me the real southern hospitality. We didn't always hit it off good with the French. The French are, for some reason or other, are kind of cold people, they have the impression that all Americans are rich and so one of their main objectives is to get all the money out of them they can. We'd want a quart of cognac--they'd charge us twenty dollars for it. So we had this strange feeling about the French and its really cute now, forty years later we went over stayed in France for a couple nights, so here for breakfast they had two French waiters, one of the guys from our outfit asked one of the waiters if he could have another cup of coffee--one waiter looked at the other one and frowned like it was asking for the world and here somebody at the other end of the room popped up, the French haven't changed a damn bit. It was really strange and we found it way different in Holland and Belgium and in Germany--in German cities that we occupied they always treated us the same as their own people. For example, on the day when they bombed Japan--Hiroshima. I was in a German barbershop getting a haircut, it cost me a whole ten cents. I was going to give him a dollar, "No that's what we charge our people that's what we charge you." We were always treated fairly.

Overy: The Thirtieth Division left in February of 1944?

Kuehne: We left on Washington's Birthday we landed on Lincoln's.

Overy: What was the trip over like?

Kuehne: I didn't mind it, they had told us before we got on the ship that we'd probably get seasick, they suggested that anytime we noticed our stomach get queasy we should eat a slice of dry bread. Which I did, there were some of them that got seasick. I felt woozy a few times but I never got so that I had to throw up or anything. The weirdest part about it was they kept playing this song. "Foggy Weather" you know in the daytime when it was foggy and then the radio

would announce nobody could go on the deck and light a cigarette because on a dark night that could be seen for twenty miles away. So, you were not only endangering you own ship you were endangering the whole convoy. They'd mention how many German U-boats were around in that area and they kept playing that song which made it all the more weird. We didn't have any problem. The next thing when we landed in England, Liverpool, of course, hear all the--that was right after the Germans had their blitz on Liverpool, they had bombed it for two solid weeks day and night expecting the people to succumb. I see now that if they had bombed another week they probably would have. They hadn't had any food or anything and the kids were walking around with just skin and bones, skinny leg and bones. We were throwing them our D-ration candy bars and stuff like that to eat. Some of them even picked up cigarette butts which kind of bothered me for a long time after, after I got out of the service and I was at home and we first started our family, it used to bother me--like we'd have pork chops and the kids would cut a little bit of fat off it—then after I thought it over for a while I thought: how could they know? How could they understand?

Overy: Did you spend a couple of months in England before you--

Kuehne: Yeah, we got there in February and from February till the ninth of June when we hit the beach we were in England.

Overy: What was that like?

Kuehne: It wasn't too bad at all, for one thing the Germans had quit their bombing--they still bombed once in a while but it was very little and the British had dances for us--they had girls that were in the service, they'd bring them over and we'd have a dance--sometimes they'd be this little bitty building. I remember one night, of course they didn't dare to have any lights inside

and here one night we just started dancing and we heard a bomb explode. So then we all had to leave. Here they decided the next day that a German plane was returning from his mission and he had to get rid of his bombs so he dropped them but he wasn't looking for any target. There was a twelve foot crater about a half mile from the building.

Overy: Did you notice any animosity between the British and the Americans?

Kuehne: Somewhat, not between soldiers as much as with some of these civilians. We went to a dance one night--this is kind of interesting because there were a lot of Canadian soldiers there, some British and Americans--so we were all dancing except for one GI who was sitting at the bar and the bartender thought that he was drunk so he started charging him double prices for his drinks. This guy finally got tired of it, he complained to the bartender and the bartender said, "If you're going to complain, we'll call the Bobbies to throw you out." There were three Canadians there and they jumped in and said, "We've been watching this, he's absolutely right. Because you think he's drunk you've been charging him double prices." So the Canadians jumped in with us and started to clean house and it was kind of cute because all us guys that were dancing when we noticed the fight start, we all just left our girls on the floor and all pitched in.

Overy: Was the fight between the soldiers and the locals?

Kuehne: Mostly, there were a few British soldiers. They called the Bobbies in then so we explained it all to them and they gave the bartender heck and refunded some of his money.

Overy: So, they acted very fairly about it.

Kuehne: Yeah. It was just individuals like that that—which I think you can find them all over the place. Generally, we got along pretty good. In fact, we were under General Montgomery's

command for quite a while. We kept switching between the First Army and Montgomery's Army. We had to fall out one morning about 4:30 in the morning, General Montgomery came around and shook each one of our hands. Told us how much he appreciated having us under his command. The British don't believe in continuous fighting so every time we'd be under Montgomery's command the first thing--Montgomery's order come down: these guys need a break, they're exhausted, they need to get off the front lines for a while. So, we'd get off the front, well then something's happening someplace, and they'd ship us over to the First Army and we'd go back on the attack again.

Overy: Tell me what you saw--I see you landed on Omaha Beach three days after the invasion.

Kuehne: I said six days, but I see that all of our reports said three days.

Overy: What did you see when you got off there?

Kuehne: Well, when we hit the beach--the first thing of course there was a lot of dead guys laying there so your stomach is kind of up in your throat. It doesn't take long, and the German shells kept coming and pretty soon you even take cover behind the dead bodies for protection. Another thing was that before we landed, we had to wade through the water to hit the beach and we heard these explosions and between ourselves we decided that it was our Ranger outfit blowing up mines along the coast. Lo and behold pretty soon the shells started landing close beside us and we realized that they were still German 88's coming in. They only had an eight-mile beach head they were still firing at the ships out there.

Overy: When did you first see combat, pretty quickly?

Kuehne: Actually, the day we landed was the first combat, but we weren't personally involved with it. We were more or less just taking cover. The first combat we hit was when we crossed the Vire River and that's where Carter dropped his machine gun tripod and stud. It doesn't take too long before you get--well, another example of it is when we, the first counterattack a German tank came at us and we had no tank support yet. There was a guy here from St. Cloud, a Leo Krebsbach, he and I were pretty close friends, a lot of times aboard ship he'd be praying his rosary and I had my New Testament praying and we had some of the guys who thought that that was pretty: oh, we don't go for that stuff. Anyway, when that first counter attack I was amazed at how many guys come running over to me and saying, "How do you pray!?! How do you pray!?! A German tank coming at us and we had no tank support. So, they said, "If I ask God to save me do you think he'll hear it? I said, "I'm sure he'll hear it. Then, lo and behold, here two P-51 fighter planes of ours came over and they looked like little toy planes they were so high, all of the sudden they dived down and dropped these 500-pound bombs--direct hit on the tank, knocked the tank right out. Everybody jumped out of their foxholes and: yeah—hurray!

Overy: They made believers out of them? So, you were fighting in the hedgerows then?

Kuehne: Yeah, that's where I was wounded the first time at St. Lo.

Overy: What was that like--the hedgerow fighting?

Kuehne: Weird because you get pretty close together, sometimes you'd be as close as--you could see the Germans stick their heads over the hedgerows and they could see us. Whoever stuck their head up the longest was the one who got shot at. There was constant fighting.

Overy: How did you manage to take any hedgerows away from them?

Kuehne: They just--artillery fire mostly. Just keep blowing at them with artillery fire until they move up in to the next hedgerow. We pulled some pretty good ones sometimes; I remember one time in particular we moved up to a hedgerow--I had dug myself a beautiful position right through the hedgerow.

Overy: Excuse me, this was a heavy machine gun?

Kuehne: Yes, I could shoot my machine gun, have traversing fire, just got it all done and [heavy, water-cooled machine gun] thought, boy, have I got an ideal place. Those hedgerows were four to five feet high and about three to four foot across all mounds of dirt with trees on them. Just got it all done--here the orders came through: withdraw. So we withdrew which we thought was absolutely nuts after we had worked so hard for the position, so we withdrew for the night and by jeepers, I guess they knew what they were doing--the next morning we went to the attack and I got back to my beautiful position a German 88 had hit it. It was all blown to smithereens. It was done deliberately; we did in the afternoon when the Germans were observing us while we were building it. Then they withdrew us and the Germans pounded the daylight out of it while we were gone. It was kind of a nice maneuver.

Overy: You said you were wounded at St. Lo? Tell me about that, what was going on?

Kuehne: There was so much machine gun fire and artillery fire and everything else--I got hit through the leg with a machine gun bullet. It was unbelievable--I've read stories now where they said that St. Lo was one of the major battles of the war. The Germans made a counterattack one time and we were sitting in a cut out, a gravel road that was cut out through the bank, this was really one of the first counter attacks we had gotten from the Germans. We were all green, we were all green troops. These German tanks were coming at us--this was one time that I noticed

the officers weren't any different than us--their eyes seemed like they were back there about four inches in the back of their head--everybody was scared to death. That wasn't the only thing but then we all crowded into this cut out in this gravel road. We had a whole company of men crowded between the two banks and it was just lucky that the Germans didn't lob a shell in there because it would have killed the whole--finally the orders came down that we should spread out and dig in, which we did. The sad part was we called it Pork Chop Hill because with those rocks you could only dig in about a foot deep. So the Germans pulled up a tank and shot 20-millimeter shells and just strafed the ground with them. There was another guy by the name of Fatau from Maine, he cracked up; jumped out of his foxhole and he run and screamed and Sergeant Nichols grabbed him and pulled him down in this slit trench and slapped his faced and tried to snap him out it and of course he didn't so they had to send him back. In the meantime, we did manage to hold the position till the next morning. The next morning our corps artillery observer, he's still in the hills to locate these tanks so he could order some artillery on these tanks, the Germans fired and our corps artillery observer got killed. Our own artillery took it for granted that we were withdrawing, so they withdrew their fire and the killed 1/6th of our company by our own artillery. That's where Teaken from California got killed there. The only reason I wasn't killed there that time was the platoon sergeant came up and said, "I need some volunteers to help me bring up the K-rations, there's a truck here but we couldn't get the neighbors down the hill to let the K-rations cross." He says, "Kuehne come with me, we'll go and get K-rations." A couple of us guys went to get the rations. During this time, we weren't gone twenty minutes, during this time is when our artillery killed 1/6th of our company on that hillside. We were on one side of the hill, the Germans were on the other. When they fired they lobbed them over us they couldn't hit us but our own artillery could just pound it right on to the side. That's where Leo Krebsbach from St.

Cloud got killed there too. It's a small world sometimes, a few years after I got out of the service, I was going to mail some Christmas cards at the Post Office here in St. Cloud, so the guy standing in line ahead of me when I looked, I said, "Gosh, are you a Krebsbach by any chance?" He said, "Yeah, how do you know?" I said, "Are you any relation to Leo?" He says, "Yeah, I'm his brother." I said, "I was in the service with Leo." He said, "He got killed." I said, "Yeah, I know. I was with him when he got killed." Not only that, then one of my daughters when she started going out said she had a date with a Krebsbach. I said, "When he comes to pick you up have him come into the house I'd like to have a talk with him." He came in and when I asked him if he was any relation to Leo he said he was his uncle. He said, "Did you know him?" I said, "Yeah, I have some pictures of him." Showed them to him and he said he'd have to tell his dad. I said, "What I've been wondering about, Leo, his dad wasn't living and he was very faithful he wrote to his mother every night and to his girlfriend, Mary, I don't know her last name. There were two letters that Leo had written, he wrote every night, I often wondered what happened to them." He said he'd ask his dad, next time he came over he said, "Dad says he don't want to talk about it." Kind of a small world sometimes.

Overy: When you were wounded what happened to you then?

Kuehne: They flew me back to England, which is really neat, one minute you're going nuts watching people get killed around you, we land in England about one and a half hours later on those troop carriers- C-16 or 18? Anyway, we landed in England and they took us to a hospital there and everything is peaceful, quiet, the birds singing, the flowers blooming all over the place, I made the comment: my gosh, it's just like jumping from hell into paradise. A couple weeks ago on the Channel two they had a program that interviewed guys from the U.S. from World War I, World War II, the Korean and the Vietnamese War, from both sides. There was a German flier

they were interviewing and they asked him what he thought of the war and he said, “Well, I just hope we don’t ever have to do it again, I’ll never forget, I’d go on a bombing mission--we’d see all those people getting killed, I’d land back on the base and it would just be like jumping into paradise. Everything would be peaceful and quiet. I thought, jeepers, quoting my every words. They asked the North Koreans what they thought of the Americans and they said, we don’t have anything against the Americans, but that’s what we were getting paid for--to shoot them.

Overy: Did you feel you had pretty good medical care?

Kuehne: I think so.

Overy: How long did it take from the time you were wounded until you got some help?

Kuehne: Immediately. I shouldn’t say that either, I shots some penicillin to keep it from getting infected. When I was in the hospital in England it just happened that they had just opened this hospital up so they had all these—they had one nurse, and one doctor, and a couple more guys--they weren’t set up to go yet. About twenty of us came in there, the first twenty to come into this hospital. The sixth day I was there then the doctor--the nurse came in and gave me a shot of penicillin every four hours and then the doctor came on the sixth day and they took off the field dressing. He looked at me, he slapped my leg and said, “Looking good, that’s healing up pretty good.”

Overy: Did it go all the way through?

Kuehne: Yeah. It never hit the bone, just went in here and out the back. What they called a million dollar wound, it just took us out of combat for one month. The second time I was

wounded I was hit in the back with a piece of 88 shrapnel. That just cuts the bone. In the shoulder blade. Same way there, I was out of combat for one month, then back in combat.

Overy: When you were in the hospital after being in a lot of combat did you think much about going back, the necessity of going back?

Kuehne: I hated to go back but still I really kept thinking of the other fellows. I just couldn't see myself not going and, in fact, I found out one thing that I didn't know at the time, maybe I would have been more tempted to try it if I would have known at the time. The first time I was wounded in England we were going to go to France and take a troop train to Brussels to catch up with my outfit. They gave me all my records to take along with me to go join my outfit and I could--[telephone interruption] --so, anyway I got to Brussels and I checked in to my outfit, I gave them the record that they gave me and I noticed there were one thousand GIs parading around out there and I asked him what was going on and they said, "Those are the guys that were supposed to report back to their outfit and they went AWOL instead. I said, "Gee, how could they go AWOL?" They said, "Well, you could have too, you had all your record with you, it would have taken us a long time to catch up with you." I said, "Gee, now you tell me after I"--so he said, "Well, too late now, you already checked in." I said, "I could have used a little vacation there." Then Mrs. Roosevelt said that time that anybody that had been in combat had to be re-civilized before they could let them go on pass so we couldn't even get a pass. When I was in the hospital in England it so happened that one of the guys working in there, one of the ward guys he was my size. I asked him if I could borrow a set of his ODs so he said, "Sure." He gave me a set of his ODs of course they had guards posted there. I crawled, even with my injured leg, I crawled seventy-five yards along the hedgerow past the MPs and went up town. I did this for one solid week, every day. Till one of the other guys that was a couple bunks over, he was kind of jealous,

he was a bigger guy--he couldn't find anybody the right size ODs for him. So, one day when the doctor came around to check on us then he popped up and said--Oh. Yeah, he said, "Major you now that some of these guys are sneaking out and going to town?" The major knew right away what he was talking about he said, "Oh yeah?" He said, "How come I can't go up town?" The major said, "Mrs. Roosevelt says you can't go up town you got to be re-civilized. He says, "Well, how come he can?" The doctor says, "Well, the old saying goes, it isn't what you do and get caught at, it's what you do and get away with that counts." So, he winked at me when he was telling me about it so he knew cock-eyed well it was me but he never did anything about it. So, I got a little chance to get a little vacation while I was in England.

Overy: Where was your outfit when you got back?

Kuehne: Up in Brussels, in Belgium.

Overy: When was this that you rejoined your unit?

Kuehne: Oh, well it would have been a month after the sixteenth of July. Around the twentieth of August.

Overy: What had happened to them in the meantime?

Kuehne: While I was gone the breakthrough had occurred and they had gone all the way up in Paris. Paris had been liberated. So, the second time I was wounded I was sent to a hospital in Paris. I got a chance to go to Paris too.

Overy: You were wounded shortly after you got back.

Kuehne: No. I got wounded in November, I was in Konigshofen, Germany when I was wounded the second time.

Overy: Artillery shell?

Kuehne: Yeah, an artillery shell. That was a weird incident because we had a schedule of K-rations and so since I was one of the few guys that could talk German, I was always told to go establish a command post and see people. The commander asked me to go along with him into Konigshofen to establish the CP. He sent me ahead, I went in first. He said the town has been taken so I got up into Konigshofen and I ran into a place that had two blocks under the stone was basement, a beautiful basement. The only thing wrong was that it had ten to a thousand-gallon beer barrels on it. Just terrible. I got in there and here was a guy in a German uniform--he was a Polish guy, he had had been taken prisoner by the Germans and so they had him wear one of their Wehrmacht uniforms and work on a farm in the town. As soon as he saw me come in, he came over and said, "Comrade, comrade, beer with me." I said, "Well" --he said, "Its primo beer, very best beer you can get." I said, "Well, you take one first and I'll have one with you." He had a pony of beer sitting there, he ran me a glass and he took a glassful, and I took a glassful. It was pretty good. I found out it was 6 percent; it was pretty good beer. So, I looked the place over and had about sixty civilians down there but I thought with that much room I couldn't see any reason why it wouldn't make a wonderful CP. I went back and told the captain I had found the ideal CP, it's all underground, it'd take some pretty heavy bombs to get us out of there. It's all in a basement. He said, "It sounds good." I said, "It's even better than that." We got up there and I said, I should tell you before we go in that there are ten 1,000-gallon barrels of beer in there. He said, "Can't have it." I said, "Jeepers wait till you look." We came down there and he says, "It's ideal if it wasn't for that doggone beer. You know what's going to happen the whole doggone bunch is going to get drunk." I said, "Gee, give them the command that they don't dare touch it. He said, "You know how much water that will hold. It's ideal, I think we'll chance it. Tell the

civilians they'll all have to move way back in the basement there and we'll take the rest." So, we did. We weren't down there an hour yet, they had straw on the floor where the people would lay with their sleeping bags, here those 1,000-gallon barrels and they couldn't get it shut off again. They flooded it, there was beer all over the basement floor. They tried to put their helmet up and it shot up in their faces. The faucet was about three inches in diameter you know. Then we really laid down the law and said they didn't dare to touch the beer anymore. Everything quieted down pretty nice and here the next morning I woke up and I heard some chickens cackling across the street--we hadn't had fresh eggs since we left home. A guy said, "Gee I wish we could get a hold of some of those fresh eggs we could fry some eggs down here." He said, "I've already been over there but they have a lock on the door." I said, "Do they have any windows in it?" He said, "Yeah, I'm too big to get through the windows." I said, "Do you think I can make it?" He says, "I think so." I went over there and crawled through the window and that helmet holds thirty-six eggs. I filled it up, rounded it full of eggs. Took it over there and boy we were frying eggs. After I got out of there, I had to wash my hands so, went up to the first floor to. I no more than got up on the first floor than here a German artillery shell came through. It hit on the street it went through the bay window, I heard it and I jumped into the bathroom, the bathroom had a little window in it. That piece of shrapnel came through that bay window, through that bathroom window and hit me in the back. It lodged in my back there. It was just a little tug. So I washed my hands and went down and started frying eggs. The captain came by and said, "What the heck did you do? I said, "Why?" He said, "There's blood on your jacket." I said, "Oh, I got a scratch, I'll put a piece of tape over it." He said take your jacket off, your shirts all bloody too. You get over to the aid station." I said, "Captain, I'm just getting some fresh eggs here." He said, "I gave you an order, go back to the aid station." I said, "Yes, sir." Ten minutes later he came by and I

was still sitting there frying eggs. He said, "I'm not going to tell you again, get back to the aid station." Ten minutes later he came back again and said, "John if you aren't out of here in a minute, I'm going to court martial you, you get back to the aid station." I went back to the aid station and they flew me back to Paris. I got to Paris and it was the first time, all the time I was in the service that somebody called me by the right name. The doctor said, "Mr. Kuehne sit down. I'm going to take that piece of shrapnel out of your back." I said, "How do you know how to pronounce my name, I've been called everything Koonie, Keenie everything under the sun." It really knocked me for a loop, he said, "Gee, one Jew should know another one." That was the first I ever heard I was Jew. He was telling me all kinds of stories while he was taking that piece of shrapnel out of my back. I knew he was trying to distract me from what he was doing. Finally, I noticed that it just touched the bone and I said, "I think you got it, doc." He said, "You're not supposed to be watching what I'm doing, I want you to pay attention to what I'm saying. That's a sharp piece, I even cut my rubber glove on it." It was a piece just a little bigger than a little fingernail. It was just sharp as a razor. After a month I was back with my outfit again.

Overy: Did you have a good time in Paris?

Kuehne: Yeah, I managed to get out. I had a lot of fun in Paris. I'd never been in Paris in my life and it was the easiest city in the world to get around in. I ducked out, we weren't supposed to go but I can't see that, sitting around there when you've got a chance to get out so I went to Paris. I was there for two hours and I looked the place over. They have the underground metro, street cars, so I looked it over and I looked at signs and it shows all the street car tracks and where they go--all the names were in French but as long as it shows where you're going. I got back to the hospital I got to talking to the guy a couple bunks over from me and he started talking about Paris and he said, "Gee, I got a sister that married a Frenchman after World War I and she lives

over here, I sure wish I could go see her.” I said, “What’s stopping you?” He said, “Paris. How-- that big, how would I find her?” I said, “I’ll take you there.” He said, “Oh you’ve been in Paris before?” I said, “Yeah I was there for two hours yesterday.” He said, “You can’t take me, two hours. Do you realize how big Paris is?” I said, “I know, but I’ll take you there.” He said, “You’re crazy.” I said, “You just come along with me, what have you got to lose? You want to come along I’ll take you.” He came along with me and we got on a streetcar and sure enough, he gave me the address and we found it and I said, “well, we have to get off here.” We got off and walked back and forth for about a block and couldn’t find the house and there was an old Frenchman about eighty years old walking around there, so I tapped him on the shoulder and show him the address, he said, “Oui, Oui,” and made some gestures. I took the guy up there and went inside and sure enough there was the house number, rang the doorbell and his sister comes to the door, boy, she like to have fainted. She said, “How in the world did you ever find me?” He said “Kuehne brought me here.” She said, “Oh you’ve been to Paris?” I said, “Yes, I was here two hours yesterday.” She said, “That’s crazy.” I said, “Crazy or not we’re here.” I find it the easiest city Ive ever seen to get around in. That was going along fine, then a couple days later another guy and I took off and went to Paris. He had been hit in the leg so he had to hobble; he couldn’t get around too good. All of the sudden I spotted a couple of our MPs and I said, “Lets hit the underground and get the heck out of here, those MPs are going to spot and ask for a pass and we don’t have a pass.” So, we took off and we could see them come into the Metro, so we said run into the café, so we did. Would you believe there was no back door out of that sucker? We got caught in the café, the MPs came in and wanted to see our passes. We don’t have such a thing. They asked where we were from, we told them from the hospital, they gave us three hours to get back. I said, “Gee, now we got a pass. Three hours to get back.” They said, “Be sure to

turn it in to your commanding officer when you get back.” When we got back to the hospital, I asked one of the guys, “Where do you have to turn these in?” “Oh, you go over to the CP huts and turn them in.” I got over there, here was a sergeant sitting at the desk and I said, “You know, I’ve never had one of these passes is this where you turn it in? He looked at it, “Yeah, you got the right place.” He tore it up and threw it in the wastebasket. So, that’s the way that went.

Overy: When did you get back to the unit again the second time?

Kuehne: I got into—oh, heck, where was it--oh, that was when we were getting ready to hit Aachen in Germany.

Overy: That was what, late 1944.

Kuehne: Yeah, that would have been in March--they were up in the Cologne plains in Germany. So, let’s see, then we got a break, we got sent back to what we called our hometown of Kohlstadt, Germany. There was a little incident there too. Since I was the only guy who knew how to talk German, I was always sent to make room and stuff. They told me to--one of the officers and I took off with the jeep and drove back to Kohlstadt to make room for our outfit. We called it our hometown because we had been there before. We came back there and I just went back to all the places where we had stayed before and asked them if it was alright if we came and occupied again. Everybody said sure, fine. They had a nice feather bed at my place, after I told the company commander to go back where they were before, I went and crawled into that feather bed. I went to sleep and here our troops came in at two o’ clock in the morning--there was only one mistake I had made--I forgot that we had got in twenty replacements. They didn’t have any place to sleep. So, everybody was looking for a place to sleep and these twenty guys didn’t have any place to sleep and nobody knew where I was except for one guy in our outfit he was from

Nashville Tennessee. He told the company commander, no he told the top sergeant where I was at, here about 2:30 -3:00 in the morning, somebody knocks on our bedroom door and here it was our top sergeant and he says, "Boy are you going to get court martialed." I said, "What did I do now?" He said, "You were supposed to find room for the troops. We got twenty guys out there with no place to sleep. I said, "Oh, my god, I forgot about the replacements. I'll get up right away and go find some place for them." I got up and got some places for the guys. The company commander told me to come over--he wanted to see me. I went over and talked to him and he said, "John, you're not allowed to fraternize with the Germans, from now on you're going to be just like the rest of us--you're going to sleep in a sleeping bag on the floor. Not only that but you're sleeping bag is going to lay right alongside my sleeping bag. You're going to see what it's like to sleep on the floor. So, I said, "All right, sir, I'll bring my sleeping bag over. When they went down for dinner I went over to this house and I told this gal, "Jeepers, I got to sleep on the floor like the rest of the guys." She asked if the captain slept pretty sound. I thought he did. She says, "Here's a key." So, for about a week, while we recuperated there, when the captain was asleep around midnight I got up and crawled into my featherbed every night. Four o'clock n in the morning I had the alarm set and I'd go back and crawl into my cotton-picking sack next to the captain. Never got caught and then one day the captain and the lieutenant they got dry--they wanted something to drink. They sent out four guys to find them something to drink they all came back empty-handed. Then he called me in and said, "John, you got this whole damn town sewed up, I sent four guys out to get us a bottle of wine and nobody's got any. I bet if I sent you out you could get some right away." I said, "But captain we're not allowed to talk to civilians so we sure as heck can't do business with them. It's against all rules and regulations." "Dammit," he said, "You've done it for some of the other guys, why won't you do it for us once?" I said,

“Remember, captain, you told me.” I walked across the street and came back with four bottles of wine. I set two in front of the captain and lieutenant and said, “Captain, if you need me you know where I’m at.” After that whenever they needed me the top sergeant came and rapped on the door, “Hey John, they’re looking for you.” So that went on for a week on our break. I had it pretty good there. These kids would come and sit on my lap when they found out I could talk German, they’d sing to me, “Little John solider goes in this world all by himself, cap and coat fit him good, and the whole song is a spiel,” they’d sing to me. This was kind of fun. One of the soldiers came and took the kid on his lap one time, so then one of the ladies, his mother tried to tell him, “Oh, he’s black, he’s schwarz--he’s dirty.” The kid he took his hand and said, “It don’t come off though.” We had a lot of fun too, sometimes.

Overy: I think I found this the most interesting, tell me about the experience you had because you did speak German.

Kuehne: I had all kind of experiences on that. When we got up into Warsaw after we left Aachen, well, I should tell one little thing that happened at Aachen. We had the town surrounded and waiting for the Germans to surrender. Which they wouldn’t but every time they tried to send some troops in for support, we could knock them out because we had tanks sitting right there. Here a German officer came up and the road and I had my machine gun closest to the CP and then another part of our section down further, and then they had one more along this road to Aachen. So, we got together because every once in a while somebody give up or quit, so we got together and we said well, whenever anybody gives up let them come up to my post and I’ll take them in. Here this German officer comes up so I got up to meet him, took him prisoner and took him in to the CP. Sergeant Miera told him to drop his side arms. The German said, “According to the Geneva Conventions you have to have someone with more rank than me to make me take off

my side arms.” The sergeant pulled his .45 out and he cocked it right in front of him and says, “Take them off. This has more rank than either you or I.” The officer said, “I’m sorry, I get aroused so easily.” He took off his side arms. He said, “Sergeant, are those your men out here?” The sergeant says, “Yeah.” “They aren’t worth a hill of beans. I walked past two outposts and they never saw me.” He couldn’t figure out how come the first ones didn’t take him prisoner. Another thing that happened at Aachen--I was sitting in this house--on the corner of an intersection--I’m sitting in this house a young kid from Pennsylvania and I, and I had my machine gun facing down the street and the other section had their machine gun facing down the other street. There were about nine civilians in the house, old women and men. I heard somebody hollering and I looked out--here was a German tank pulled up to the machine gun across the street and asking them to surrender. They said either they surrender or they shot point blank into the basement. They were going to surrender and they started up the steps. Here this German standing at the head of the steps and Lieutenant Darby--he was in the basement--he shot the German and he shot four guys like that, two of them fell down the basement, they wrapped them up, bandaged them up, and two of them were dead laying outside the house. I told this to Yarnell, “We got to let the officers at the CP know what’s going on. They probably don’t even know what’s going on here. He said, “We can’t get out.” The front door was facing the tank. I said, “Yarnell, they’re so preoccupied with those guys in the basement that I’ll take a chance. I’ll jump out of the door and I’ll run around the corner of the house and they can’t see me. That was about twenty feet and I did it and it worked. I got around. I got back to the CP here they were sitting there having coffee, feet up on table, relaxing, thinking everything was fine. I told them what was going on and then they got all shook up and then they gave the orders: one man to a house, because it was late in the afternoon, starting to get dark, they gave us some anti-tank grenades--

they didn't amount to a hill of beans. So, one man to a house until we get some support, more support in here. In the meantime, Lieutenant Daugherty had shot these guys so the Germans didn't have any more on their tank to send in to demand the surrender and they kept shooting point blank in there--one of the guys got his arm busted in a couple places by a flying brick. I got back and I got stuck with the house where I had my machine gun with these nine civilians. They brought the two wounded Germans over there too. One got shot in the stomach and the other in the leg. They brought them over and of course, the people in the house they re-banded them and they got them something to eat. They were laying, one was on a davenport and the other one on a cot a short distance from me. I'm sitting with my machine gun by the door sitting against the casing of the door, with my carbine sitting against the door frame. Around eleven, twelve o'clock at night, everything quiet, I thought I'd better rest my eyes a little so I shut my eyes and at first, none of these people knowing that I could understand German see, here this one German guy told the other one, "Why don't you crawl over and get his gun and shoot him, he's sound asleep." The other guy said, "I don't know, you go ahead. He said, if I wasn't shot in the stomach, I'd go. It would be an easy crawl over and take his gun and shoot him. The other guy said, "I haven't got the heart to do it, he's sleeping like an angel over there." Finally, the other one said, "I sure would give anything for a cigarette--my cigarettes were laying there with everything where I got shot across the street by the house." I reached into my pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes, flipped it over, "Help yourself." They both started crying. Started crying like babies. One said, "This is crazy. We're supposed to be enemies, we're supposed to shoot you, you're supposed to shoot us--you've never done us anything and we've never done you anything, now you even give us a cigarette when you know we want a cigarette, it's their damn war we'll let Hitler and Roosevelt fight it out." One of the guys that was in the other house

across the street that got his arm busted by flying bricks. It was really interesting because we used to get in some real discussions because he was Russian nationality of course I was German nationality, and he was always talking about those damn Germans--they're inhuman and all this and that. He took a lot of interest in applying tourniquets and stuff and this is what saved him. He was able to apply one to his own arm to keep from bleeding to death. He brought the two prisoners over there and when he came in the house the German civilians in there they started screaming and crying, and they went and got him something to eat, they rewrapped his arm for him and he looked up he remembered what he had said so many times and he said, "John, I take back anything I ever said. Those people cried because I got hurt., he said, by gosh. Good Lord, I just couldn't believe it. They had feeling for me. They're supposed to be my enemies." I said, "That's what I've been telling you. There's good and bad in all of them. I don't care what nationality they are you'll find some good and some bad in all of them. From Aachen we went to Wurselen which is a little ways from there. We set up our Command post in Aachen in a hospital which is against rules and regulations but it was a good place to be because they had a big Red Cross sign painted on the roof of the hospital so it wouldn't get bombed. We put all the people in the basement in the long corridors and of course they didn't have any lights so they had candles down there. I got into Wurselen and I had my machine gun set up next to a house there and here I heard this lady and her daughter talking, the daughter was telling her mother that she wondered how her Aunt Annie was. The mother said that she didn't think the "Americans would putz around with sick people. They probably had shot her cut her head off." I'm listening to all this and all and finally I got tired of it and I went into the house and I says "what kind of animals do you think we are?" I told them that to prove how wrong they were and how far off base they were, I said I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. You said your sister is in the hospital in Aachen. I

said, you write a letter to your sister, and I says leave it open so I can read it. I'll take the letter to your sister in Aachen and I'll ask her to write back to you and I'll bring it back and give it to her. "You'd do that?" so she did, she wrote a letter to her sister I knew where the hospital was, I didn't know where the sister was but there was a warden there, a guy about in his sixties. So, I asked him he knew where Annie Schmitt was. He said she was in a little alcove right here. He called down the hall, it was all dark it was just crammed with bunks. He said, "There's an American soldier here to see you." I heard her say, "I don't know any Americans, I don't know any Americans." I told her I was there because her sister was concerned about her. Then he led me through all these people back there to Annie Schmitt. I gave her the letter and told her I would stop back in an hour to pick up her letter to her sister. She said, "Is that ever nice?" I told her some people had the wrong opinion of Americans. She wrote the letter and I took it back to her sister and they couldn't believe it. They said it was just unreal. I told them that anybody that makes a statement that we would either cut off the heads of women or shoot them I couldn't listen to that kind of crap. These are the kind of deals I kept running into. Every once in a while there was something like that.

Overy: Where are you during the Battle of the Bulge? Were you with Montgomery then?

Kuehne: No, we went with the First Army and we got involved in the Battle of the Bulge--we were the first ones across the GIs that were massacred there. That was around three hundred G.I.'s that had been massacred. We found their frozen bodies. There again we got there just in time to get the Germans stopped. We went from Kohlstadt--we were in Kohlstadt over Christmas. We were all set up for Christmas. We had a Christmas tree and decorated it. I think it was on December 16th, all of the sudden the orders came out: Move out, everybody pack up and we're going to move out. They had to black out the jeeps, everything; nobody was to know what

was going on. We drove like that two miles, riding in the jeeps, we had radio only and Axis Sally announced, "You guys from the Thirtieth Division, you had it so nice there in Kohlstadt--now you're going to go into Belgium and you're going to get killed there. The only other way is if you turn the jeeps around and surrender and you can be down on the French Riviera--you could really have it nice. It's sure going to wreck your Christmas now when you get up into the Battle of the Bulge." What we couldn't find out from our own troops Axis Sally told us what was going on. She knew about it than we did. When we got up there, we ran into these dead G.I.'s up there--there was a medic who ran into another case there where--I'd have done it different if I had been in charge, but I wasn't--I never really wanted to be in charge. I was offered a sergeant's ratings three different times. The last time I was threatened to be court martialed if I didn't take it. I said I couldn't see myself in charge and seeing a bunch of guys get killed. I can be concerned about myself but I don't want to be responsible for getting other people killed. We went through this forest in the Bulge and all a sudden we heard some tanks idling and we walked right on top of eight German tanks, standing in a circle, the people out of the tanks were sitting in the middle having their lunch. All of the turrets were open on the tanks. The first thing in my mind was gee we're practically on top of them all we have to do is throw a hand grenade in there and knock the tank out. About that time there was a Ranger outfit that came in from the other way and in order to keep the Germans from escaping they dynamited some trees across the road. Of course when that dynamite went off that woke these guys up, so they all jumped in their tanks. They gave us the orders to get the heck out of there. We ran up this hill in the thick woods, the Germans firing shells at us, branches flying around our ears. I don't know if anybody got killed, but our Third Battalion got captured. They had them in the town and we didn't know where they were at. This is just the day before Christmas so we're sitting right next to one of our 155 Howitzers. I could

hear what they were saying and this guy with the 155 howitzers said that they had called the Air Force in to bomb the town, the fog got so thick they couldn't see the town to bomb it at all, they flew over it but they didn't drop their bombs. Then we got orders to knock it out with the 155 howitzers, so this guy with the 155 said to just take one house at a time, just knock off one house at a time until they surrender. So, he was taking one house at a time, when he got to the Church and he said, "Skip the church." They skipped the church, they knocked off a couple more houses and pretty soon the Germans surrendered. Some of them had American uniforms on--when they had massacred these guys, they had taken their uniforms. This is how they were making their breakthrough in the Bulge by wearing the uniforms and all that kind of crap. They were getting awful desperate. Amway, when we came up to the town here out Third Battalion is sitting in the basement of this church. They said that if you had ever seen people pray, we prayed when the airplanes flew over, they thought that was it and then they told us what it was like sitting in that basement there. They were scared to death when they heard the Air Force coming over and they had nothing to eat. There was a pile of apples in one corner of the basement and so their commander from the Third Battalion told the German commander that he demanded that they give them something to eat. According to the Geneva Conventions you're required to feed us when you take us prisoners. The German officer said they were in the same boat as the Americans, we're surrounded, we can't get out. Eat apples. That's all we've got to eat, too. Then he said that they could at least get them water. So, he said that some of the G.I.'s could help and so the Germans and G.I.s carried water for the Americans. They said they were really scared as when that air force was going over. I said they were just lucky their time wasn't up.

Overy: This might seem like an all-encompassing question but, if you had to explain to someone what combat experience is like, what would you say?

Kuehne: I wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience I had but I wouldn't do it again for a million either. I never was, I suppose because of being German nationality, I never was scared of German people. I was scared of their guns. I didn't hesitate--like I say when I took those sixteen prisoners. I gave overhead firing, I never had no problems with the Germans. The best example of this--its outright crazy but I did it--when we got into Zeifendehl right in the main German lines, there was pretty heavy shelling going on because the Germans didn't want us to get it. The Germans even sent planes over to drop some bombs. A bunch of us went into this house and here was an old guy, he had two daughters--they were--three daughters and him and his wife, he was one of these big Germans, a guy in his sixties, his wife and girls look like they were in their twenties, thirties. They were all big strapping girls so when we come in and of course, they went in the basement and I smelled this food cooking so I came in the kitchen and they were just sitting down to have supper--I made the remark that it smelled just like home. The old lady said that they couldn't feed all of us, but she said that if they set a place for me would I join them? I said that they should set the place and see if I would join them. So they set the place and I sat down and joined them. They had beef vegetable soup it was the only place in Germany where they had light and dark bread and they had summer sausage. So I sat down and joined them and the oldest girl played as hostess and she came around with an apron on, and she squirted something in the soup and I kept right on eating and she said, "Well, then you do trust us." I said, "What do you mean?" She said that she could have been poisoning my soup. I said that I smelled that beef sauce when you took it out of the pocket. Then the old man he started rubbing it in, he said that he'd always heard that American soldiers aren't scared of a few eggs dropping down like that. I said if he thought it was so damn good, he should go out there. That's the way I always was. The same in the--forest when we got there. We came in these woods and

here there's a German command post, a barracks sitting there. We walked in the front door, this captain and I and the Germans were going out the back door. There they had a dark bread, a butcher knife sitting there they had a good big summer sausage. I said, "Gee, these guys are living like kings" and I walked up and lopped off a piece of that summer sausage, took a bite and the captain says, "Put that down, put that down." He looked at me, "It could be poisoned" he says. I said, "Well taste it." He says, "Cut me off a piece." So, I chopped him off a piece.

Overy: Tell me about the experience of your capturing those Germans. You talked about that before we started the tape.

Kuehne: I took them prisoner and we couldn't find the lieutenant so I got them all lined up outside and one of them asked me if I was going to take their guns, I said, "No I better not." About that time the lieutenant will pop up and court martial me for trying to take your guns all by myself. I said they should just keep their hands up and I would walk them back to battalion. So, I goose-stepped them back to battalion. The executive officers see me coming with these sixteen guys, well there was two wounded ones in the basement. They saw me coming, they stood there with their mouth open, then I asked for a medic, I said there were two wounded ones back in the basement, they'd have to have a medic. So, the medic went along back, and I helped to get those guys on stretchers and took them out. Here this lieutenant popped up and said, "Hey John." I went back to the house with this officer, the captain, and we went down in the basement and sure enough, there was some loose dirt and we dug, and we found a Luger, so he picked it and looked at me and said John you'd better take this because I was the one that took them prisoner. I said that the captain should keep it I ran across them pretty regular, so he should just keep it. He kept it. He must have been the one that reported it because about six weeks later they found me out and awarded me the bronze star for capturing these guys.

Overy: Did they put up much resistance?

Kuehne: No, none. After I once had then prisoner. It got funny like I say when I told them to line up while I went looking for the lieutenant and he was not there and I come back and they still had their hands up and if they had given a kick I would have gone down these basement steps. So I looked around and I sort of laughed and I said the hell with the lieutenant, go out and wait until I get the rest of them. They went outside and waited and after I got them back to battalion one of them says, “Oh, can we go back, we left our Sunday caps over there in a house, we don’t want to go to America with these steel helmets on.”

Overy: Did you have much conversation with prisoners?

Kuehne: Quite often. I got a chance to talk to them.

Overy: What kinds of things did you talk about?

Kuehne: Some was probably what they didn’t like to hear. We had, I don’t know if you ever heard about, but we had twenty of our men captured one time by the Germans and this German officer that was in charge of this concentration camp he used them for an experiment, to see how long they’d live on potato peelings and water and that was actually what they were getting. It just so happened that when I was wounded the second time I got to Paris they brought they guys to the hospital in Paris. They had German prisoners of war there at the hospital that carried these guys in and we stool there to see them unloaded. I knew what it was all about and I looked at these German soldiers that were carrying these guys and I said, “How would you guys like it if we treated you like that when we take you prisoner?” This German soldier said we shouldn’t judge all of them by that commander, he was crazy. “There were guys that had weighed 230 pounds that were down to 100 pounds, some them even less than 100 pounds, just skin and

bones. I talked to those guys after they were in the hospital for a few days and starting to move around a little bit, I asked them what went on and they had the names of two American officers that were prisoners with them and they said when they got back to the United States, they were going to look them up and shoot them. They had cooperated fully with the Germans, with this German officer. When they got Red Cross packages or anything, they gave them to these two American officers. They never got any of their Red Cross packages and they said they were allowed to go up town, they were treated just like they were German soldiers, they said they had their names and when they got back, they were going to kill them. You couldn't blame them for that. I found this pretty much true, we had a guy in E Company from the Thirtieth Division who, you know towards the end of the war we started taking a lot of prisoners, they gave him twelve German prisoners he was supposed to take back to the Battalion HQ and he walked them a little ways and made them get down on their knees and he'd shoot them in the back of the head. He shot all of them. Somebody saw him and asked him what he was doing; he said they sunk a ship that two of his brothers were on. He had so much hatred that even after these guys were disarmed he still shot them instead. That's why I say we had fanatics on either side.

Overy: Did anything ever happen to him?

Kuehne: I never found out. We also took a German SS guy prisoner, which were some of the worst, young guy, cocky, about twenty-two, picture of health, really a fanatic. We took him prisoner and two guys had to take him back. When they took him through a town all he'd look for an alley anything where he could escape, he was just a fanatic. He reminded me of a young colt, snorting and looking all the time. They got him back to Battalion HQ and turned him over to CIC, which interrogated the guys. I happen to be there when they took him in there, they were questioning him, what unit he was with and all that and he refused to talk so one of the guys,

officers in the CIC, put brass knucks on and hit the guy and broke his jaw. They still didn't get him to talk. The other officer asked how he was going to report that. The other guy said, didn't you see him, he just fell down the stairs. That's what they put on the report. You get some vicious guys on either side. I had a personal experience, we got into--Hausen in Germany, which happens to be within 5 kilometers from where my dad came from, but I never got to the town where my dad lived. We got into this town and as we were marching through the town, it had been taken already, here was some German civilians standing on the street and I heard one of them say that we were North Americans and the other guy asked how he could tell, the other guy said that we were red like the Indians. It's easy to tell North Americans. They were talking amongst each other there and somehow or other the rumor came around that there was a guy by the name of Miller who had shot five American fliers after he had taken them prisoner. We were looking for Miller, one of the guys standing in the street there, they made him mayor of the town and his name was Kuehne, he was a relative, I didn't know that at first. So, I saw a sign Kuehne's Radio Shop so I stopped in to talk to him and he said, "Oh, now it all makes sense, now I know how come I was picked for mayor of the town." I said that I had nothing to do with it. He said I was trying to be polite. He was sure that I was the one that got him appointed. Anyway, they had these five American prisoners with their hands wired together, in back of them, they had them on a truck and they came into the town and they stopped there and while they stopped there this Miller spit on them and Karl Kuehne, my dad's second cousin, saw this and he made the remark, "How would you like it if they did that to you if you were captured? Let's not forget that they had prisoners of ours too. How'd you like it if they did that to us?" Because of that remark he got put in prison. He sat in jail and he was detailed to go out and dig anti-tank ditches and he was in his sixties. This was all on record in the courthouse and when we took the town over they

checked the courthouse records, well here's the guy we got to make mayor because he had made comments against the German army. So that's why he got to be mayor. They heard these guys got shot and they went and sure enough they were buried in the graveyard there. They still had their hands wired together in back of them. They said this Miller had shot them. We had a lieutenant there, we called him "chin" because he had a big chin. he thought he was the CIC himself, thought he was going to set the world a fire, so he said we were going to find this Miller if it kills me, and lo and behold, he asked some people and they told him there was a Miller living over there and he says we're going to get this Miller. Here's a guy that's in his seventies and don't look like he ever hurt a fly in his life. He tried to make him confess that he shot these American soldiers. This Miller is going crazy, denying, he said no he had nothing to do with it. This lieutenant he took a chair and he busted it and he took the leg of the chair and he tapped this guy on the head and he tried to get him to talk. Finally, the guy had a slight heart attack, so then he got scared because he had no business interrogating the guy in the first place. I kept telling him the guy said he was a religious man; he's been praying to god to get us to understand that he had nothing to do with it. The old man had nothing to do with it and when he had the slight heart attack then the lieutenant got scared. So, he said, John, tell him that we'll keep him here over night and fix him up in a nice bed and I'll go get him something to eat. Go tell his wife, and so I had to go explain to his wife that he was going to stay there overnight. I didn't tell the guy what happened. I said he'd be back in the morning. I told this guy that it was okay and it was too bad that he didn't realize earlier that he didn't have nothing to do with it but he had made a mistake. The next morning, he took him back to his home and about three to four days later, some German civilian comes in and he says that the Miller that shot those guys had just come into town. He was a young guy, had evidently taken off from a German reserve unit, he was in

civilian clothes. Somebody had gone and picked him up, I was just going to talk to my cousin about that time, my dad's cousin, and here somebody come running and said, "John, you better get over to the CP right away because the lieutenants got that Miller over there and he said you know what that's like. I said ok. I ran over there and here he had some English woman, from England, that could talk German interrogating this guy. And chin is sitting there with this raggedy chair tapping this guy on the head and this woman is scared to death. I just walked in told the lady, you're excused, I'll take over. She left so then we kept questioning this guy, he didn't want to talk, he looked guilty enough. Couldn't get anything out of him. Finally chin pulled out his .45 and cocked it right in front of his eyes and said, "I'll give you one minute to start listing the names of who was all involved in this killing." Jeepers the guy's eyes bugged out and he started writing. He wrote about twenty names down, the guys who were all involved with it. He had a card in billfold that the C-I-C had given to him, that gave him permission to move around. I was aboard the ship coming home when I heard that they had finally caught this Colonel Miller they didn't say the way they caught him. It was the guy then. I sure felt sorry for that old fellow. Sure got the--beat out of him for nothing.

Overy: Tell me about the episodes that connected you with the Dutch family that you go back to see.

Kuehne: We came up to the Siegfried Line late in the afternoon in Holland. Waubach was the name of the little town, right next to Heerlan. Some men in the jeeps, some walking. This guy comes out and he hollered in Dutch that we should, "Stop, stop, stop—the roads mined." Nobody paid any attention to him so I finally hollered at the captain that the guy said that the road was mined. He figured we were going to get blown up. He asked if I could understand him, I said, "I sure could understand that." He asked why I didn't say so right away? We stopped, that's why

we sat there for about two weeks before we moved into the Siegfried Line. That's how come I had my machine gun set up right behind their barn, overlooking the Siegfried line. Then our tank--there's a Jannsen in Sauk Centre that, years later, when I worked in the VA Hospital, he came in there and we got to talking about Second world war II and he was with an anti-tank group and he said he "never forgot when we were in Holland and we could have fired into the Siegfried Line and we told him that if we fired the Germans were going to fire and they would probably hit the house. Sure enough they hit the house and this GI was carrying this girl across the street."--I said, "Good, god, you're never going to believe this." He says, "What?" I said I was the GI that carried her across the street. I said I'd bring you a picture to show you. He could hardly believe it.

Overy: So, tell me that story

Kuehne: So anyway, they had fired at a German tank in the Siegfried line and they had warned the people in the house that if the Germans fired back they would probably hit their house and they could get killed so they better go in the basement. There were a couple of use GIs in the basement with these people and when I told them about what was going to happen, sure enough this German armor piercing shell hit the house--the first round his the middle wall, exploded and blew half of the house away. You couldn't see for dust and stuff in the basement. I told the people they had to get out of there if another shell hits they would all get killed. There was a big brick factory across the street so we started out of the house and I grabbed some suitcases and I was going to help carry some the suitcases over there and I just got outside the house and another German shell came over and went over us but one of the girls fainted so I dropped the suitcase and I picked her up carried her over to this brick factory, took a canteen of water and sprinkled it in her face and she came too. The people, they couldn't believe that somebody could do that

under shell fire so they practically adopted me as one of their family so we were there for quite a while and then--five years ago we went back over there and I had never written to any of these people until I found out that our outfit was going over, so my wife said I should write to some of these people and see if they were still living. They had given me their address so I wrote to them, they all wrote back, they all came and picked me up at the hotel and took me to their homes. They took me up to the Siegfried Line where we had crossed the Siegfried Line. I'm still in contact with them, I still get letters from them. That reminds me, our outfit just went over again, they were over there just this last month again. I got a letter from this gal; in January she wrote already because her husband helps make arrangements for these things. She said, "do you know your outfit was coming over again and if you're coming along bring your wife along and don't make any hotel reservations—we got plenty of room".

Overy: Where was this?

Kuehne: Kirkrof. Oh, yeah, I just got a card from one of the guys in the outfit--I figure he's kind of rubbing it in--he sent a card from France, he said; "Having a wonderful time, miss you, tomorrow we're going to St—. The last time we were there they gave us a six-course meal. He said, we'll be eating dinner there for 3 hours." They were from Illinois.

Overy: Let me ask you a personal question. When you went into the army were you a pretty religious man?

Kuehne: Not as religious as when I came out. I'd had my instructions and everything. I'll have to say one thing, the folks were very strict with us, so before I left for overseas my dad had me talk to my grandpa on my mother's side, that side was from Germany and my grandpa gave me some bible verses to think of and also my dad had me talk to our pastor, which was a strange

thing, these things stick with you. I was pretty young, only twenty years old. I know the pastor told me I was going to find a very different world but he wanted me to know that I would find out that there were prostitutes and all kinds of people in this world, he said stay away from them for your own good, they cause you a lot of trouble. It was a strange thing, but when my buddy and I went to Paris he suggested one day--the prostitutes in Paris they come right in the restaurants and beer joints and they take their bras off right in front of you and all kinds of stuff like that--my buddy said hey John lets take a couple of them out” We had had something to drink and I was seriously thinking about it, I got up to our hotel room and I took one look at her and the first thing that entered my mind was what the pastor had said then I couldn't do it. She was mad and she said you're losing lots of money you're no good. I got a big charge out of that. I had already given her the money and I said you give me the money back I'll leave. You lose lots of money, it was a strange thing, it just popped up at a time like that.

Overy: Did you have any contact with church people while you were there? Did you go to church?

Kuehne: Yeah, I went to church quite regularly in the service. Just a few years ago I found out a strange coincidence which I didn't know and this is forty-two years later I went to a relative's funeral in the military. I got down there and a cousin of mine, his wife, came over to me and said, "John, Donald Hedeem, he lived down by Swanville, would like to see you." I asked, "What for?" She said that it's on a count of you that he goes to church. I said, "What?" She said he was telling everybody that; that you're the one that got him started going to church. I said I couldn't imagine what I had done. So, I stopped in there, he lived in Long Prairie, I stopped in there before I came back to St. Cloud. He came to the door and said, "Jeepers, John come on in; boy am I glad to see you. I've been telling everybody how you got me going to church." I said, "Donald, I

took it for granted that you belonged to that Swedish Lutheran Church in Pillsbury.” He said that every Sunday when I went to church I was always saying, Lets go to church Don,” and you always took me along. He said, “Three years ago if it hadn’t been for you, John, I don’t know what I would have done after I lost my wife. If it wouldn’t have been for my faith I don’t know what I would have done. Now I’m even on of the elders in the church.” So, he was very happy about it. I never realized it, I had always taken it for granted that he went to church. Strange how things happen sometimes.

Overy: What kinds of things frustrated you most in your military experiences? The most frustrating for you as a soldier.

Kuehne: Ones that and they kind of overdo it. As a general rule I didn’t have too many complaints. I always seemed to get along pretty well with the other guys. Never had any real problems. We pulled some jokes sometimes on one and another. In fact, this Donald Hedeem that I was just telling about, when we were down in Texas, we’d go to the USO on Saturday nights to dance there. One time he wanted to go along with him, and I didn’t go. The next day he was telling me all about the fun he had and how he had met some gal there. The next Saturday night when I was going, he didn’t want to go. So, when I got down there I thought, I’m going to play a trick on him, I wrote a postcard to him, I signed it AD very short, just, “Missed you here at the USO dance.” He gets this card and I happened to be there when he got it--I had told another guy about it too--he’s reading it and says, “Hey, John, look here--this gal, Alice Dickerson” --he found a name for her too, “She’s, my girl. Saturday we got to go.” Krebsbach says, “My gosh you’re killed if he ever finds out that it was you.” I said that I better tell him now. So, I told him now. He said, “John, when we get back home don’t you ever tell anybody about this.”

Overy: Do you think that your experience in the war had any real lasting effect on you? If so, in what way?

Kuehne: No, there's been some things I've mentioned that I've been very thankful for. When I hear about guys dreaming about combat--that never happened to me. I never dreamt of war. I feel very fortunate about that. Even though I was wounded twice I get no disability, never have gotten a disability. I get what they call 0 percent disability. But I don't complain because I've been able to work. I've been able to stay active and the only incident that I've had related to combat what when I first got out of the service and this happened in my home town of Long Prairie, I went to a movie, *Back to Bataan*, I got so involved in it, sitting there and here's a bunch of Japs sitting behind a machine gun waiting for these GIs coming up the hill, just waiting for them to get up there so they could shoot them. I got so involved that I hollered out, "For God's sakes, hit the ground." Then it dawned on me sitting in a theatre. I could have crawled out of there on my hands and knees. So embarrassed. That's the only incident.

Overy: Do you think your war experience had positive effects on you?

Kuehne: One thing that I know is that a human being can take a lot more punishment than ninety percent of people realize they can. It is unreal what a human being can take. I know it varies, some can take less. I had the privilege--I'm sure you hear about that--when they had that Bataan death march, they had one of the guys was a patient here at the Veterans Hospital when I was working there. He was getting real sick and he need a blood transfusion and lo and behold I had the same type, so I donate blood for him twice, he was from Bemidji. I was amazed, I was talking to one of the doctors later that day and I asked how Colonel Miller was doing and he said he was fine now. I said I had just donated blood in the morning and he said you'd be amazed

how that could really perk them up. The second time was a little delayed. I can't even imagine when I hear people talking about having nightmares--I'm thankful that I don't ever had that problem.