Ralph W. Kauer—Life during WWII

By Ralph W. Kauer

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Oral Interview conducted by Theresa Talcott

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
TT: All through your mission he was in power?

RK: Oh yes all through my mission, I had to leave you know we never finished our mission. The war started. I can tell you a little more about that later if you want. This was just another, was experience that happened top me one day if you wanted to hear.

TT: Yeah, Yeah.

RK: One afternoon on my day off we went to the underground downtown were there was a theater for American soldiers. I went to the show and after the movie I went back to the underground. I started down the... got on to the platform of the elevator and was heading down, and when I got about halfway down the elevator jumped about, it stopped and jumped around and bounced and pretty soon it settled down, and I never had anymore trouble. I got on the underground and went back to Piccadilly or St. James area near the castle were we lived. All the boys or their the troops were all talking about the bomb that just hit, and so were I was on duty the next day, we drove our jeep out by there. It hit a girl’s dormitory. It had a lot of British girls living in it. A lot of those troops or this whole building was smashed flat. A lot of these British girls were killed in that bomb that day. We stood there beside the road we parked there for a little bit, and the British people were digging back in there and every once in a while they would bring out a body. So that was quite an experience I thought.

TT: And that was right next door to where you were?

RK: That was right... That’s what had happened to me the day before.

TT: In the elevator?

RK: This was right across the street from it.

TT: Oh my goodness.

RK: That’s how close that came. Well, we had a lot of experience in London driving past Big Ben and across the James River, through Piccadilly Circus, Trufelly Square, Hyde Park, St. James street to Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, the house of parliament, Fox Hill Bridge, Black Fryers Bridge all experiences that I had in the army over there. Then one day in January 1945 Colonel Bean was transferred out and our new battalion [leader] was Major Perry. He’d been our office assistant all the time. Assistant to the Colonel, the assistant battalion officer he was put in charge. It was interesting within a week or two when he got in, after he got in, he promoted me to first lieutenant. Maybe I shouldn’t be telling this, but that’s what happened. I never had gotten along too well with the other officer. He had a few problems. He liked his girlfriends, I didn’t appreciate his life. So I never got along with him if you want the truth.

TT: And that was Colonel Bean?
RK: And I got along with . . . When Major Thorton, I'd always liked . . . gotten along with him, he and I'd been good pals.

TT: So he promoted ya.

RK: Yeah, to first lieutenant and I was first lieutenant till I came back to the United States. And then finally I got my captain [promotion]. I became company commander and so forth; I finally got my bars before I came home so I became a captain in the Army. I went from a private to a captain in those four years that I was over there.

TT: So how does the ranking go? It goes . . .

RK: Well, you start out as a Private, 1st class Private, corporal, sergeant, staff sergeant, and then ah . . . There's the one in between, there's a two star sergeant or two stripe sergeant, then the 1st sergeant and then you go from there to . . . Well, that's as high as an enlisted man can go. Then you become an officer if you go to training for officers. Then you become an officer, then you become a 2nd lieutenant, 1st lieutenant, then a captain, major, Lieutenant Colonel, and a Colonel, then you go into a general, a 1st star general, 2 star general, 3 star general, 4 star general is the highest. So you can go a long ways up in the Army.

TT: I'd never understood that before so I . . .

RK: Well, I guess I should tell you as I got through, when we left England in 1945 we left England in the latter part of September—in June. Oh ya, the War ended on June 5th, no it was a little earlier. Anyway after the war ended the English soldiers started coming home. We transferred, started sending our American soldiers home. Before when we went over there the girls would come around and sing. They would sing a song that says “there will always be an England as long as there’s a use” because we always fight their battles. We help them, for years we’ve fought battles for them. When the war got over they saw the American soldiers while they were away… well it didn’t leave to go a feeling. And of course by the time we got ready to go home, with the war… well the war was pretty well over. They shipped us back to the US and told us that they would give us a 30 day leave, but then we would have to go to Japan. And I remember we got home and I took my 30 day leave and then they sent me to Fort Custer and when I got back to Custer they said . . . Didn’t we go to Fort Custer?

SK: Fort Douglas.

RK: Well, I went to Fort Douglas. In fact, Fort Douglas is in Utah, but I went to . . . then I went back to Fort Custer Michigan. Then they started deactivating. Instead of sending us to Japan they said that the troops had been in so long that they start to deactivate them. And my company commander went home, and so I sent my troops home after that, pretty soon we had most of them transferred, then they transferred me to headquarters of the headquarters’ company of military police wasn’t it? Up at fort . . . I had finish-deactivating company A and was transferred to first prisoner of war camp at camp
McCoy. I was put in a… the commanding officer of the company that ran from about a 120 to 250 men, we had 1800 German prisoners. Shortly after I got there we sent 900 prisoners back to Germany. We worked the other 900 in small groups were ever we found work for them. I spent my time running the headquarters’ company to the prisoner camp to find the needs of the prisoners. I enjoyed a lot of good visits with the prisoners. A couple of them were barbers so we set up a barbers shop. We started an enlisted men’s club. See, I’d never heard of an enlisted men’s club before, in the Army officers clubs yes, but not enlisted men’s club so I started an enlisted men’s club for my troops. And we had open baric and people were going home so we set one of the barics aside, and we had 3 slot machines in there a nickel, a dime, and a quarter. We had soft drinks, we had sandwiches. We had a pool table, a ping-pong table, and all the things like that for the enlisted men. They quite enjoyed it ya know.

TT: I’m sure.

RK: But they played the slot machines with their extra money. And every week I’d have a colonel come and check me while I opened the slot machines, and took the money that the slot machines had made and we weren’t there very long before we had a 1000 dollars winnings that we took out of the back of the slot machines, and so we decided that the men [that] had put it in, well I would give it back to them. So everyday that they had a free day they could go and have all the sandwiches that they want and all the soft drinks is all I ever served and things like that. Ya know and they could play pool and ping-pong, and do all of the things on their time off of course. We had a barber shop. Two of our German prisoners come in and they were the barbers, we had… they were cooks. They took care of the cleaning all kinds of help with the German prisoners.

TT: So did we… I mean was this in the states?

RK: Yes, it was in the states, in Camp Perry, McCoy Wisconsin.

TT: It sounds like we were really nice to the German prisoners that we had.

RK: Sure we were good to their… we took them out, the first sergeant would sit by the phone and take orders down around town and around the country and they would call in, and they would want 10 German prisoners to come pick tomatoes, or the grocery store would come and have three or four come and clean the shelves or different things. We would send a guard out with each group, but we didn’t worry about them. They weren’t going to run away. I talked to them all the time I was very friendly with them. They cut down my jacket to form fit, and we had a little radio that had been dropped, it had a plastic cover on it, and I... It had been pasted back together, and I took it in to them, and said can you fix the handle. The little handle was gone in front, the turn on switch. And one of the fellow’s carved wood, and I asked him if he could fix it, and he said sure bring it in, and he kept it three or four days, and when [he] brought it back he had made a complete cover for my radio. For the whole outside, he had hand carved wood and put it together in little strips and hand carved it. You never saw anything so beautiful in all your life, for a cover for my little radio. They were very good, and we worked with them,
and never had any trouble at all, all the time that I was there. We made . . . or when I left
we had 2000 dollars in the kiddy, and we couldn’t spend it fast enough for our own
enlisted men, so [we] went to Sparta Wisconsin, to the orphanage. And we took all the
orphans and brought them a present and took them out for dinner. When I left, there was
still a 1000 dollars in the kiddy, and I left it with my corporal there, my clerk, the
company clerk and that turned it over to the new commanding officer that came into take
my place. Then the clerk use to write me all the time and he’d tell me that they’d given
the orphanage another big dinner and gave them all a present with the money. If you
didn’t spend it you had to turn it back to the government.

TT: So you spent it!

RK: I tried to spend it. I shouldn’t tell the world that, but that’s what we did. And the
things that we didn’t use we had to turn back over to the government.

TT: So did they have American soldiers in concentration camps and treat them terrible?
Did the Germans do that?

RK: The Germans didn’t treat our soldiers near as well as we treated theirs and the
Japanese were worse.

TT: Worse?

RK: You’ve heard some of that.

TT: I have read a…

RK: Read stories about?

TT: Oh my gosh, not feeding them for days and days then when they do feed them, all
they feed them is rice and that’s it and making them march and march… terrible, terrible.

RK: We were very good with the German prisoners. Just like Americans really. I should
tell you one more story about that and then I’ll go back to Germany if you want. While I
was there a lady from… do you remember where she was from? I’d have to look in here
to find out. Down south somewhere, anyway she came up to camp McCoy, and it was in
the middle of the week. And we had visitors days people that knew the prisoners or any
relatives or anything could come see them on the visitors days on the weekend, and we
made it know in the states that they could come and see the prisoners if they knew them
we could set it all up. But on [this] day this lady came in and she went over to the first
sergeant, and he said “it isn’t visitors’ day”, and she says “my brother is there.” She said,
“I left Germany 20 years ago when he was a little baby, and I haven’t seen him since. I
sure would sure like to see him because I understand that he is a prisoner in the camp.”
And the first sergeant said we can’t do it. Well, I was the commanding officer, and he
said that the commanding officer said we can’t so that he said you’ll have to talk to him.
So she came in to see me, and she told me what the first sergeant had said and I said,
Well I’m a soft hearted guy, so I said, “We’ll take care of it.” So I sent for him… for the German prisoner so he came in. They brought him over to the office, and she said, “Where can we visit.” And I said, “Right here in my office,” and I left the office and they visited in there for what… a couple of hours? The first time she had seen her brother in 20 years. And I thought it was interesting because she was so happy she told me, “Thanks,” and she left and we took the prisoner back to camp. About what… two weeks later we got a box. It was addressed to Captain Kauer, and so I opened it up and in it was a little doll, can you tell her about it?

SK: It was a little rubber doll and she had knit a bonnet, booties, soakers and a sweater, and said she hoped that his daughter would enjoy playing with that doll as much as she enjoyed seeing her brother.

RK: Do you want me to tell you a little more about Germany now?

TT: Ya, tell me some of the places. . .

RK: When I went to Germany in 1939, 38 it was July. I got there about the 23 of July and our ward or branch was going on a 24th of July outing over in Germany. I remember that I didn’t go with them. I couldn’t speak German or anything. I stayed at the headquarters, but that’s when I got there. Anyway as I was there I spent so [?] time. First, I was in Berlin… stationed in Berlin for about six week and then I was transferred to Laingsburg on dur Varta. That means the city in the Varta River. And in Laingsburg is where Hitler was prisoner in the 1st World War. He was a corporal in the First World War and got in trouble and was in prison there, and while he was in prison there he wrote his book, Mine Thoughts? (He says Mein Kampf in German)—while he was there in Laingsburg.

TT: What does it mean?

RK: I can’t think of the word right now... my thoughts or plans. And he wrote his plans and how he could do it. He planned it out, what he would do… it he was the dictator or if he was the German leader. See, he was an Austrian, and he wrote his book Mine . . . My fight! I’ve been trying to think of the German words. It’s My Fight; he wrote his book while he was there of course that was a long time before I was there. He was head of Germany while I was there in 1939. He became the dictator in 1933 or somewhere in there. And when I got there I went out to the town… when I was in London I went down the street to some of the places Unter dain Linden, to some of these places I knew about you know. At first there were big iron rails all along the front… all along the side iron railing in was about 19 feet high you couldn’t get it till you came to a gate and rang a bell and somebody would be upstairs watching ya, and if they wanted ya in the gate [it] would swing open and then you would have to ring the bell at the house because there were all these different houses there. But anyhow there were all these iron fences there. Hitler’s troops came there and took all these fences out. They dug them right out of the ground, and they loaded them in trucks and hauled them away. He looked like he was doing a good thing. He planted grass and fixed things up.