Karl Klein was born in St. Peter, Minnesota, on 17 November 1910. He lived there through high school and then attended Gustavus Adolphus College, also located in St. Peter. After completing a degree in business, Karl went on to do some graduate work at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, before returning to work at his family’s mortuary business in St. Peter.

Karl enlisted in the US Navy after the war began, and served in the Pacific Theater as a gunnery commander on board a naval support vessel, the USS Crocker. When the war ended, Karl returned home to St. Peter and worked again in the family business; during the Korean War he served in the US Army. He was married to Delores Klein and had three children.

At the time of this interview (2001), Mr. Klein lived in St. Peter and enjoyed retired life.
Interview key:
K = Karl Klein
G = Rodney Grotte
M = Chad Miller
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

G: This is a tape for the oral history project at Concordia University, St. Paul. Rodney Grotte here.

M: ...and Chad Miller.

G: And we have Karl Klein here being interviewed about the era during World War II. Karl, 7 December, 1941, what were you doing when you heard the news?

K: The exact time, I think I was at home in St. Peter. Getting down to the detail of the exact hour, I don’t know if I can pinpoint just what I might have been doing at that particular time or not. I know it was shock, period. Because of the one main thing, the shock to me was, my brother who was an MD, orthopedic surgeon, got yanked out of Oklahoma City, he and a group were down in New Zealand six months before Pearl Harbor. They did not know what they were doing down there practically six months before Dec. 7th. And the question, knowing Bill was down there, I don’t mean to use an invective, “What the hell was going on?” And of course the shock of just the day before was two Japanese diplomats were talking to Roosevelt and the others and saying everything was copasetic and everything was clear and bingo. It was just a shattering shock, just like everyone else, I was no different than anybody else. Now that you coming down with it, I get to think about what was going on at the time. Just like everyone in America was shocked to their eyeballs, so to speak. If that answers your question, what was I doing at the time or what was I thinking.

G: That was what I was going to ask next, what was your reaction, you covered that very well. How you reacted when you heard about the attack.

K: Then of course on reflection in the next few days, what was going to happen with everything the way it was going. Of course the draft had been started I believe prior to that, but you never know where you will be going from there on. As time marched on with that deal, I figured I had a business and two small children, and my wife had been smashed up in an accident prior to us getting married, not the strongest gal in the world. I thought, what the devil am I going to do? I poured that over for quite a few months until I finally went Navy to beat the draft. I never did get drafted.

(laughter)
G: How was your life changed after 7 Dec 1941?

K: There were a lot of changes in the business world. At the time, we were involved in two different sides of the business. We had a pretty good sized operation with furniture and floor coverings, and a good sized funeral home operation. The first thing economically was the cutbacks on different materials, steel and rubber products. It got to be a little ridiculous actually, because they were going to cut the casket size to a maximum of about 5’ 11” overall size which got ridiculous. It was an asinine deal, period. It was just one of the things, how were you going to continue living with your business operations with the cutbacks and all. We were affected in a lot of ways, good carpenters, [?] and mattresses. We were in both sides, with two different worlds we were working in. The funeral service, and furniture and floor coverings. You got hit on all four sides and things got ridiculous with their cutbacks, because it was asinine when they cutback on metal and what not. Then of course there was the family wondering day to day what was going to happen to me or whether I could stay and outwit it, or go, or what are we going to do? I was a little above draft age, I wasn’t 18 or 19 years old. It was a worrisome time, not that you got depressed or anything. But, you just wondered from day to day how long you were going to keep on going. With the business, keeping the family together, or whether you were going to be drafted. So it was a kind of frustrating period, period.

G: Did any of the changes from America’s entry into the war stay with you, continue to affect you after the war?

K: After the War?

G: Yes.

(1, A, 61)

K: Oh, I don’t think in a big way. The things were on a fairly even keel, after we got back into production as far as the business world is concerned, things started coming back awful fast. Even cars, Detroit got going fairly fast. They were turned over, making tanks and every other cotton pickin’ thing, made some of the best damn engines that were ever made for airplanes and tanks, but everything got back in the hopper.

The wife was an RN nurse and had done some work, and I am trying to remember as far as so called income level. There wasn’t a big change as I remember, fast. Things were pretty much on an even scale. I was lucky I got out early because I had not had a leave while in the Navy, there was no place to go. I got out very early, shortly after V-J Day. In fact I came off of the Pacific and asked for release back to the Atlantic Fleet. I flew into New York City on the eve of V-J Day, if you can believe it or not. As far as an overall change, things came back fast. The economy of the country came from nothing to zip fast. It came up faster than they wore out inventories. When you talk about incomes and salaries being paid and the
economy as a whole, some of the fellers who were not gone too long got back into their respective areas fairly well. They were not hard-nosed about holding them up. Of course the prime number of people involved were kids, you now. I shouldn’t call them kids—they were 17, 18, 20 years old. The oldest kid I had in my gunnery division might have been 21, 22 years old; I was the old man. Well, there were ten years difference—makes a hell of a difference at that age. All good kids, nothing wrong with them. They came back and got assembled, got GI Bill and started going to school. We all came back and just eased back in. My dad passed away within three months after I got back home; he was just kind of hanging on until I could get back.

G: Were you a member of the military? You mentioned that you were in the Navy. How did your service in the Navy change your life?

K: Well, it changed it so much. I loved the sea and the big percentage of the US Navy came from the Midwestern America, not the coasts. I don’t know what the specs are on that, but that has been an accepted fact. It was not the kids born out on the East or the West coasts. It was kind of funny--I always hunted and fooled around a lot with small arms and had a 22 [caliber] in my hands when I was 5 year old. I applied for PT boats [Patrol Torpedo boat] like President Kennedy was in. I thought that was about my speed. I would like that job. I could go hell for leather, not the big stuff. I was all assigned to it, orders cut, travel paid, checked in for PT boat work, and I got held up. I wondered what the hell was going on and nobody wanted to give me an answer. Finally I got a hold of an old gray bearded Chief. I said, “Chief, what the hell is going on?” I was standing around here twiddling my thumbs. I got my orders cut, I’m glad I got what I asked for training, and he finally shuffled around and said, “Sorry sir, you’re just too damn old; they cut it back.” I was too old, they wanted young punks 25 years old and no older for commanders of PT boats. They did not want them to think, with the same way with fighter pilots. They did not want any 30 year old fighter pilots. So they fiddled and farted around. They wanted to send me as athletic director at the Peter Smith or Vasser Women’s School. I thought, hell with that noise. So I finally got assigned to gunnery. Then I got assigned to Naval Gunnery training and that’s how I got assigned as a Naval Gunnery officer.

When you talk about how it affected me afterwards, I loved the Navy. If they would have given us credit for alternate sea duty with Annapolis [US Naval Academy] I would have stayed, but no way. We reserve [officers] outnumbered Annapolis about 1000:1 but that was beside the point. You know what I mean. I talked to my brother Bill, he was an orthopedic surgeon, we crossed paths in the Pacific several times with his outfit. He was a head man in charge of a mobile hospital like MASH, but this was Marines, not Army. He was an orthopedic bone surgeon. He would have stayed, but they would not give him equal status with regular Navy. He said, “Cully, if they don’t give you regular status tell them to stick it.” So we kicked it around.

I would have stayed because I was coming up with enough rank to pay. I could have sold the business and survived and kept on with it. I found the Navy life
suited me but they just said, “You’re reserve, period, and that’s the status you’re in.” The proof of the pudding was, there was an All Nav that was a composite of Navy publication, shows date of rank [system of determining seniority based on date entering service] of everybody across the board. In less than three years they knocked off about 2000 of us with the same date of rank which was the proof of the pudding that the military just wanted to get rid, well they didn’t want to get rid of the reserves, they had to have them. But they wouldn’t put you on equal footing. I wouldn’t say I regret it, but I’ve often wondered what it would have been like. As time marched on I got involved with the Army, but I discovered that the Navy was first love.

(1, A, 131)

G: What was your training like in the Navy?

K: It was brief and tough. They threw the book at you educationally speaking. They gave you a sampling of Annapolis, in three months time what those guys went through in four years. When you were assigned to that setup, damn old four star Admiral, old hard bitten bastard. He said, “Okay gentlemen, look to your right and look to your left. When this is all said and done only one of you are going to walk out of this area.” They threw the book at you, so that you had to pack a hell of a lot in. I can’t say that you learned a heck of a lot because it was all thrown at you at the same time. Navigation and maps, unless you were a mathematical nut or astronomical wizard. Celestial navigation, just to get a grasp of it, you had to pass. I didn’t want any part of that and communications. I stuck to the mechanical end of gunnery and that is where I ended up.

G: Did you put time in on the front in the Pacific?

K: At first we chased on the Atlantic a little bit with the submarine escort. At that time, the war started in ‘41, ‘42, and you got into ‘42 and German U-boats were just raising hell in the Atlantic. We got a little involved in a kind of a threshold checking and coastal, the Navy started with a half way destroyer escort deal and then the English would come halfway and escort convoys and I got exposed to that for a bit. They were sinking tankers off of Florida, you could see them from the beach at night, the flare ups. We were supposed to go and be back up for D-Day, for the crossing into France, but we got diverted halfway to the Panama Canal and spent the rest of the war in the Pacific. We were involved in a number of landings, down in New Guinea, Saipan, Tinian, Okinawa, and all over in those areas. We covered a lot of water. I look at map and I wonder what in the hell were we doing there. They were bypassing, leapfrogging all over and when you look at the map it looks crazy, but someone knew what they were doing.

M: It worked.

G: What was it like on the front?
K: I wouldn’t use the term front. That is for the ground, the Army. We were strictly water, Navy and support, supply, landings and stuff, but damn few deepwater sailors put their feet on land. We were ship personnel, period. Which most of the time we were damn grateful for. You had a dry bed to sleep in and after we got the Japanese air calmed down we didn’t... that was our big whatchacallit with Japanese air. We weren’t too much involved with Japanese surface, it was air.

G: What ship were you on?

K: The USS Crockett. [The Crockett (APA-148) was a Haskell-class attack transport, for transporting troops to and from combat areas.] Deck transport. We had some heavy 5”s [size of guns], not a turret. Not a first line; it was a back up. If you want to go by degrees it was about a 3. The big B’s [battleships] were outboard, the cruisers inboard, the light cruisers in further than that, then destroyers, then us. At night we could see the shells going over our heads depending on the landings. A fourteen, sixteen inch shell, you could almost track it.


G: So you were not on a battle craft, you were back from a destroyer?
K: Sure it was smaller. They were an attack, we were not; we were an attack transport. We had a lot of guns, 20 mm and 2 15s and some pom poms [anti-aircraft guns], stuff like that. Primarily air, we didn’t want to get involved in any surface, we weren’t built for it, armor or otherwise... We saw a heck of a lot of water.

G: How was the combat experience in a craft like that?

K: Well, as I say, on landing we were on the offload areas of the landings. We weren’t right up in the thick of it. As far as Navy was concerned really in the thick of it, and the ones we used to think had the tough jobs were the small craft, the LST [landing crafts] and stuff like that, landing tanks. God damn it, I’m telling ya, I don’t want any part of that damn thing. You go up on the beach and these damn Japs, son of a bitches, come up out of their holes and it was open sesame. We were forward and could see it with the glasses.

G: How was it when you came home? What was your homecoming like?

K: You mean personal, like my family?

G: Yeah, specifically for you and your family.

K: Hell, everyone was as happy as a lark. Of course it was kind of sad, my Dad had gone down hill bad, and I think he just hung on until I could get back. He was starting to retire and was still active in the business, but before I left we were lucky to be able to get a guy to take my place who was older and not subject to the draft, and the other employees were still around, they were older people and all. I can’t remember any whoopee party, or any big bang bang, or get the band out. ... There wasn’t any whoopdy-do. I was just so glad to be back and out of it.

G: Were you married before 1941?

K: Yes I was married, it was either ’37 or ’38. My dear departed wife would shoot me for saying that. It was either ’37 or ’38.

G: Your marital status didn’t change during the war?

K: Oh, Lord, no. No. My wife’s name was Deloris; her nickname was Dill. You aren’t probably old enough to remember a cartoon character named Simple Dill?

G: No.

K: She was a girl without a real high IQ. She was quite a character, cartoon character. Of course the wife’s name was Deloris, and my kid sister and she were good friends, and she hung Dill on Deloris. My Dad and Mother thought that was terrible, because everyone was familiar with the cartoon character Simple Dill, and she was anything but simple. She was a graduate RN surgical from Northwest. A
hell of a gal, but her name was Dill. It was just, to be able to pick up and keep on
going. And time marched on and the reserves wouldn’t let me alone, kept badgering
me with report for this and report for that, got fed up. And then they were
reorganizing the 47th Division of the National Guard. They came in one day in to the
office, a Brigadier General and two bird Colonels and they wanted to know if I would
take over an artillery battery outfit. I said, “Gentlemen, you got the wrong man, I
don’t know anything about artillery. I’m Navy.” They smiled and pulled out their
briefcase and pulled out a copy of my Navy Yellow Jacket [service training record]
with them. They said, “We’d like to have you. We’ve gone over your area and we’d
like to have you consider it.” I thought, hell, I don’t know anything about Army.
That’s not my ball game, Army and artillery. Although, a lot of their guns were pop
guns for some of the stuff that I had handled, but anyway, to get out of the Navy
messing around, I’d take a ride. I took over the artillery outfit. It was kind of fun
while it lasted, because my whole damn cadre of non-commissioned officers were all
combat and so was my staff. They were all combat experienced younger fellows.
We had a hell of an outfit. As a matter of a fact we won the Second Eisenhower
Award in the United States for Efficiency; it was due to them, it wasn’t me. They
were just a hell of a top branch. Time marches on and there were three divisions in
the guard, and the reserves got yanked into the Korean routine and I got yanked in
at that time, then I got my butt out of there. I figured I had had enough.

G: During the war, you were at OTS [Officer Training School]. Was there any other
school they sent you to?

(1, A. 219)

K: No, I was strictly Navy. Queer thing how the Navy operated, I got called in for the
big gunnery school. They wanted me to report to the commandant’s office. And I
thought, oh jeez, I don’t think I had screwed up, because you were just a number,
you know. So I went in and reported and there was this old admiral sitting there.
He said, “Sit down, Red Eye.” I thought, this doesn’t sound too bad. And he said,
“You’re doing fine here, Klein. Just looking at your record; you played college
football.” I said, “Yes sir, small college.” “Yeah but you played college football.”
“Yeah.” He said, “How would you like to stay here?” I said, “Begging the Admiral’s
pardon, I’m not following at all.” He said “We got a hell of a football team here.” I
said “Oh”. He said, “You got good marks and you would make a damn good
instructor and you could stay here and play football.” They were playing the Iowa
Seahawks and New York, and guys like Bud Grant and all those All Americans for
cripes sakes were just in college. They were the ones. Hell, I was out of college for
ten years for God’s sake, and weighed wringing wet 190 pounds, so I got out of
there. I didn’t get chewed out or anything. He said, “We just want to let you know
we would like to have you.” But… you think of a lot of the screwy things that
happen, you forget the rough stuff. You think of all the crazy damn things you did.
Between the athletic director at Smith and trying to play football they would have
killed me, you know. (***) Two other guys did stay there were baseball players.
Hell, one was Jimmy, a pitcher and the other was Lou Brown from the St. Louis
Browns, they stayed; hell, I knew them and bunked them, American League pitchers. Brown led the first service team into Japan after the war. They made up a team of old pro baseball players, my old sidekick Brown was the head of that. You talk about things the way they happen... That was a different story, I was thinking of something else.

G: How did life in your community change as a result of the war?

K: That is a pretty farfetched question. I don’t know... I can’t conceive offhand, think of any big changes. The town is about 10,000, 12,000, a little smaller then. And, I can’t recall any big change. Getting back into areas like that, there were three kids from St. Peter who survived the Bataan Death March. None of them lived very long after they got back home. One of them shot himself, he was pretty well gone. You wouldn’t know it, but if you talked to him a little bit, I knew this kid real well. Like Brainard, [Minnesota] they kept that outfit together and they got decimated in the Philippine deal. They sent them over as a unit from Brainard. You talk about the community and change, I don’t know, just a big sigh of relief and get back to normal, business and family. Just glad to see you back. I was here and there in a good share of the world. I only ran into one guy that I knew, and that was a kid on an LST who came alongside for water one day. Here this kid was down, and I was up in the bridge and he was hollering and waving at me and I was waving back. Here was a kid from home. He was the only one I saw either in the Atlantic or the Pacific.

G: Did the war bring your community together? And if so, why do you think?

K: Oh, I don’t know. That is quite a question because it is relative to a fairly recent situation. You know we got hit by a tornado. Couple of years ago, and there has been a complete renaissance in St. Peter with the whole community coming together. I hadn’t thought about it until you asked, but now... I don’t think there was anything like this tornado. There was a sense of well being and you know... There was a softer, gentler cohesiveness. St. Peter has always been a lovely small town and just geographic location. We have a damn good college with the arts and music. Mankato State [University] has gone bonkers in size and we are just next door to the university. Like a suburb of Minneapolis, you got everything right there with out the big city problems. A long time ago when my day was young, the New York Opera would come to St. Peter instead of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and run trains down to St. Peter. And now that’s something. They’d have big ads in the paper with what they were showing. They wouldn’t run the whole opera but they had a pretty theater with the stage props and everything and they would run the special trains down and they would come early and have dinner and then they would hold the train to run back to St. Paul, Minneapolis. Good location, geographically.

G: Were you better or worse off financially during the war?

K: During the war?
G: Yes.

(1, A, 275)

K: I was probably lucky. A lot of these things I hadn’t thought of, but now that you mention it, we had a business, a good business. And I went in as an officer to start with and I had a fair... I wasn’t going in for 15 dollars a month. But you know with two kids... with the business and my father and the military pay, I can’t say it was too much of a hardship. I did get screwed in one respect, if I can use that word, I was only along a lot of others with the Social Security. A lot of us got in a pinch as far as the allowance charged towards the eventual payoff in Social Security. I didn’t know until I applied when I was going to retire and this friend of mine said, “Klein, you kinda got the gaff with a lot of other people, a lot of this Navy pay didn’t get credited,” (phone ringing and reply to it) it was X number of dollars, but that was in 1945, long time ago. Today that would add up several hundred dollars; the only way you could make them listen to it would be to file a class action suit against the Federal Government. It was just not in the cards. It wasn’t a hell of a lot of money. In answer to your question I can’t say that we suffered too much financially. Which I was lucky. There were some things probably the wife went without, and the kids, but she was a pretty smart gal, she got along.

G: Did your place of worship sponsor volunteer programs to aid in the war effort.

K: Well, maybe you could answer as well as I could. I don’t know, I guess that they did different stuff, I was never involved in it. Not personally. Speaking about the local?

G: Yeah.

K: I can’t recall anything at the time that I might have left, centered locally. I’m not aware of any outstanding effort. I suppose if there was a need or something like that, but not necessarily with any regards to... Yes, yes, there was some guy that got called into the service, in that area the churches were doing, helping out. I don’t mean hand outs. Standard subsistence. They are doing a hell of a lot more of that today on that. Jeepers Creepers. It’s amazing that in our community, I can’t believe that... the needy that just don’t have enough. Jeepers Creepers, its hard to understand that in our small community there are people that badly off, that need assistance.

G: Do you recall if the message at the church changed after 1941?

K: At the what?

G: At the church. If the church’s message during the services had changed.

K: Do you mean on a religious theme?
G: Yes.

K: Oh, I don't know. I think there was a broader acceptance of everybody's particular faith. I'm not talking strictly anti-black or anti-Jewish or anything like that. But, there was a certain amount of, shall I use the word cliques, with some groups were pretty centered. I'm referring to farther back than World War II times and growing up as kids. There were different church groups that would hardly talk to a group that belonged to another church. They might be interrelated and intermarried but they didn't associate. Not that they looked down their nose, that wasn't it, but they just didn't jibe. There was of course our family, and we weren't brought up that way, period. You could care less whether a guy belonged to this church, that church, or whether he was blue, green or pink. That was the way we were brought up. Course our family and the business dates back to 1854, four years before the state was admitted to the union. And my paternal grandfather and his brother came over as young punks out of Germany to get away from the draft in Germany.

I'll give you a damn good illustration of that, the way thing have changed. Here with that tornado, just wrecked everything, it wrecked our particular church, the church I belong to. We had to build another one, it was wrecked completely. And First Lutheran offered their service of their lovely church to our congregation to come and use it. We used it for a year and a half, we just got done building it. This would have never happened before the war. That is just a concrete example of... I guess that's what your question was aiming at.

G: Yeah. What was an average day like for you during the course of the war?

K: An average day?

G: An average day. I think I can visualize.

K: I'll tell ya an outlet on that a while ago. The guy that took my place on the ship, of course I didn't know the guy, but he wrote me several years ago. He got buggy and they released the transcripts off the ships now and the logs and everything else, they're not top secret anymore. He wrote me because my name was on, he took my place. He said, you might be interested, I got 6 to 8 months of the crock of when you were on and, if you would like a copy, I will send it to you. A day's log, a day-to-day log, of my whatchacallit. I say what it was like. You got to go to the routine and the paperwork. And if you're in a hot area you go, you're asking about an average day, well if you're in a hot area you got morning watch with everybody up and on their guns on full standby, from early morning breaks until it gets clear. Then it tapers off and if there's nothing doing, than you revert back to about your business, go to breakfast, etc. Eat well. Go about whatever your day's assignments are, are the guns ship-shape or whatever, then you have the sunset watch for darkening, kind of a repeat. The sunset watch if for air primarily because that... we were never to get into a knock down drag out fight with the big boys. We weren't worried about the
surface, submarines yes, but there weren't too many of those, the Japs didn't have many subs. They never bothered us. The air was different—the Kamikazes and all, the bastards. But anyways, that was just a kind of a workman’s day. Of course if you were in a hot area than you had to be on alert and standby for a lot more time, with one thing and another. There was always something doing. If you hadn’t got anything else doing you were chipping paint, and painting ship, and clean up, and make the beds ten times over and, if they weren’t tight, flip a fifty cent piece on them and make them do it again. That was a crock of bull.

G: My brother’s Navy and he told me some of those.

K: What he probably told you too--inspection. This god damned character came into our quarters and said, “Sorry to say, this looks pretty good.” And then the Captain goes up over the top of the sill with white gloves on and goes, ooh. Had to find something wrong. You can always find something. I got called on one other crazy thing, you talk about the white gloves. One pair of socks wasn’t rolled, the roll wasn’t straightened out. It wasn’t straight it was just turned under. (laughs) A lot of this stuff comes to mind. How stupid some of this stuff can get you. You didn’t like to have those damned check marks, most of them were so damned ridiculous. Some of the other horsing around and devil make care you would rather forget.

G: I am going to step back to something else I was interested in. You mentioned your business a number of times. After the war was your business able to continue in the same form that it was before?

(1, A, 354)

K: Oh yeah. We expanded. Well, Dad was of the old school, you didn’t do anything unless you had the money to pay for it, which is old school. And there were a lot of things that hadn’t been done. There were two sides of the business, the retail and the funeral home. There was still a lot of the horse and buggy routine left the way Dad was operating. Of course ever since I got out of school I’d been trying to do more and more about it, and we were getting things straightened out, but not fully the way I wanted. We were in the same quarters and just expanding, and it wasn’t good. After the war I just busted loose and stuck my neck out and borrowed money and revamped everything completely. And in the later years I bought property. Spent a lot of money on a brand new funeral home and sold the other side of the business and all. Everybody was doing the same thing you know. You’re old enough to know the old mom and pop grocery stores. A lot of that even in the big cities operating on the corner, and gradually the bigger stuff comes in with modern markets. There has been a big change along a lot of those areas. In clothing and one thing and another. Hardware stores now sell more Nike shoes, boots than the clothing stores do, and t-shirts. Look at the Mall of America. Every store sells t-shirts and Nike shoes.

G: How did the war change your life?
K: (pauses 5 seconds) Oh boy, that's a big question. (pauses 3 seconds) Oh probably in an awfully broad way. Probably more tolerant of others. I don't mean to wax poetical or philosophical, but more respect for your fellow man and, as I say, a close knit period.

(Grotte checks recorder)

K: Made you more aware. Made you appreciate your fellow man—one thing and another. Maybe I was blessed with a hell of good crew and a whole shipboard. I thought we had a topflight outfit, a real good. The same with the Army. I had a Cracker Jack outfit. They were a bunch of good boys. The caliber of the guys they were highly esteemed. Either way, in the Navy one of the lads who started with me at division headquarters as a staff sergeant ended up as a brigadier. My number one man was a first lieutenant when he was with me, he ended up a colonel. Another lad I went through the artillery school with at Fort Sill with they wanted him to go for lieutenant general, in the Guard. He was a god damned second lieutenant when I knew him down at Sill.

G: Yeah.

K: They were the kind of guys I was blessed to, accidentally just be with. We had a reunion. I got in with a bunch of Southerners at Sill, the artillery school. They had one word for me. I was a “Damn Yankee.” One word. They were all out of Mississippi. They were all graduates of Old Miss.

G: Old Miss.

K: Yeah. We got together, Old Miss played Notre Dame some years ago in the Cotton Bowl. This old bunch of characters were all there. One of ’em says, “Christ,” so-and so says, “If you’d stayed, we’d all be lickin’ your damn boots!” One of ’em, he retired some years ago... We were down in Phoenix, we go down in the winter time. I picked up the Phoenix papers and General Philip Blanchard was going to speak at a whatchacallit and I thought, “Holy balls on Friday, what the hell is he still doing?”...He was one of our old sidekicks. He was the chief liaison officer at the Pentagon for the National Guard. He was with our outfit. I was blessed with a bunch of damn good guys. I called him up and talked to his aid. I'll never forget it. He asked, “May I ask who’s calling?” I said I'm an old acquaintance of the General, we date back to Fort Sill before we shipped off to Korea. He started off, “Don’t tell me,” and he made a reference to some such and I said, “Yeah, that’s the bunch.” He said, “He’s still talking about you people. That was one of the craziest crowds he’s ever been with.” Kind of nice to know that some of the guys stayed and made top grade. I didn’t mean to digress.

G: No, what did you think of the war then?
K: Well... I don't know. It was such a mixed up damn thing. You hardly knew half of the time what you were doing or where you were going next. It was, you have to realize it was a tough damn situation, and I just had a feeling that we were some of the lucky ones in the Navy. The poor devils, in the land grunts, you couldn't help but feel that way. You just saw this landing after that landing and what the hell they were going through. As I said, my brother Bill was attached to the 3rd and 5th Marine division. He was on Guadalcanal... we crossed paths with him all the time. I knew where he was. They got the hell kicked out of those outfits, and Bill survived, it was rough. You got to be a fatalist; if it happens, it happens. And towards the latter part of the war, getting up along toward Iwo Jima, and Okinawa... before that in the Philippines, the kamikazes, that's rough, those crazy bastards. They don't give a damn; you had to shoot them out of the air if you could, because they were going to crash sure as hell.

When you ask what you think of the war, well you don't think, I wouldn't say you think about it, it's there. There isn't a hell of a lot you could do about it day to day. And I say you just get kind of nuts, the stuff the Japs pull trying to hold there on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Hell, they would ride logs out in the night and try to climb an anchor chain. I'm not kidding, just to raise hell, probably couldn't get up the chain, maybe get into the chain locker and get out and raise hell. They were just crazy, and the kamikazes, they were no god damned joke; I had seen kamikazes crash. We weren't first line, they were heading for the BB's [battleships] and carriers, and cruisers, the big stuff. Several of them crashed a quarter, half a mile away. Hit them with one thing or another. God I haven't thought of this for a long time. Who the hell was that... They tried to land on an airstrip. We could hear the Bettys [Japanese bomber], the Bettys had a particular sound. That twin Jap, you could tell them, and if you could hear that engine you knew what it is. They had a smokescreen going (?). They were going right down on top of us. And we were all carrying side arms at the time because you never knew what the hell was going to happen. I emptied my damn Smith & Wesson at one going over. They were so close that as if to land in that damn smoke screen was so damn thick. How much can you get of frustration, the damn thing was going to sit on top of you a few hundred feet up but that was all it was. They were trying to get on to the landing strip you know. Just, that is some of the crazy things that can happen you know.

G: What do you currently think about World War II? What are your current thoughts on that war?

K: Oh, I don't know. I'm lucky, I came through it. I feel thankful for that. But, ah... I can honestly say that I wouldn't have wanted to miss it. It sounds stupid but... with the experience of what we went through and to see what the other side was doing, I mean... It's hard to talk about it. It's like, you had to be there to realize it, but it's probably true. I was lucky there were millions of guys who went through a rougher deal than I ever got involved in. I was in the middle of it, but I mean... I got a piece of shrapnel from some of our own ack ack [anti-aircraft gun] that hit my gun helmet one night, but if I hadn't had that on it might have gone through me, but...
ack might have fallen on us but the helmet was big with earphones under it. I don't know if that answered your question or not.

G: The war itself, is it a war that you felt the United States needed to be in?

K: Knowing what had happened with the Japanese trying to expand all over and what they had done to China prior to getting in, focusing a little more right now... specifically, their culture and what they did in the so called rape of Nanking [city in China; scene of human rights abuses by occupying Japanese troops in 1937], where would they ever stop? They would make Hitler look like a cream puff maybe. And they probably would have gone faster, maybe, because there was no defenses in the South Pacific, for god’s sake. They could go anywhere, and would have gone.

When you get back into that pre-war, family wise, my brother-in-law, married to my kid sister, was one of the original Flying Tigers [American volunteers that flew for China before the US entered the war].

G: You're kidding.

K: No, I'm not kidding. He had quite a career flying off the old Lexington [US aircraft carrier]. Navy, they were all Navy flyers. Johnny Deno was his name. When they broke them up towards the end of the war, Claire Chenault [leader of the Flying Tigers] was a one hell of a guy, they were breaking them up and of course they got awfully snotty with them. They threatened to break them down to seaman first or whatever if they wouldn’t go Army Air Force. Johnny and several of them dodged the bullet and resigned to get back to the Navy. He was out of Calcutta, and they burned Calcutta, the Japs got in there and he volunteered to fly on a cargo ship. Up the trail up the (***), with a Chinese copilot, and they were lost over the Himalayas. He never got home. He sent a bunch of stuff home that my sister got from (***), that he sent before they confiscated it. Johnny had quite a time. I ran into Pappy Boyington [US Marine pilot during WWII (Pacific)], he was assigned to that outfit just as they were breaking up.

G: I didn't know that.

K: He was affiliated with that Confederate Air Force [US group which restores and flies classic war planes]. A number of years ago, we wintered in (***), he said, “My God, how the hell did you ever get into a fighter plane?” He had put on a lot of weight. So I asked him if he had by any chance known John. And we sat and visited, hell, he had me come in and sit down, and said, “Oh God, this is good.” I told him he was my brother-in-law. He said that he was assigned just as they were breaking up and there was hardly anyone left of the old bunch. And he said they were all getting sledded out. I chewed the fat with him for about a half an hour.

G: That was a hell of an outfit.
K: Yeah. Chenault was, tactically, he developed that three plane deal with two side men. Johnny when he went in the Navy, he was flying off the old Lexington, that got sunk you know. But he went early with the Flying Tigers. He was a hell bent. He was one of those kids, you get some natural pilots.

G: Your neighborhood, during the war. Did it change a lot during the war or did it stay the same small town it was?

K: Pretty much, it has grown slowly. But, it’s a small town, of course the college has grown. You know Gustavus Adolphus. It’s a lovely community and it has grown, physically, emotionally, intellectually. Just a damn nice small town to be in. How it’s changed... of course (**). Most of my old friends, I'm the only one left. We had a beautiful gang of married couples, 12 of us, and the wives, which is saying something, all got along beautifully. That’s a little exceptional, fellas, hell we can get along with anybody. You guys know that as well as I do. But when it comes to wives and getting to know the other gals. A lot of them had the same background. We were all more or less professionals--doctors, lawyers, attorneys. Several of the gals had gone to school and college together. The only mistake I ever made (***) went to a university reunion, I was the only one of how many hundreds and I couldn’t find a soul I knew. And then they sent me to go on the regents Alumni board. I and another guy known for our particular area. We went to one meeting, the committee was 35 to 40 people. How are you supposed to get anything done with 35-40 people? You don’t know anybody and they were all younger than we were. We told them, “You’d better get somebody else.”

G: Where were you when President Roosevelt died on April 12th, 1945?

K: Oh yeah, that is a story. I could tell you right down to the nitty gritty, of the night. We got the word at night. We were going in on a landing someplace. I forget where in the hell it was. I and a couple of guys, it was about 2 o’clock in the morning. We knew it was a landing, we were going in on a landing. It was a two bit deal and we weren’t too much worried about anything because we were all knocking around and drinking lousy coffee. The reaction... we heard that Roosevelt had died, and they mentioned Truman. Six of us sitting around and we all looked at each other and said, “Who the hell is Truman?” I’m practically quoting. We all looked at one another and none of us could come up with the answer, and then some smart ass said, “Is he the vice president?” Not that we were that stupid, but you know it just struck us. And I can remember that as though it was yesterday. Who the hell is Truman? And, by God, he was alright. And those of us that were involved in the Korean mess, thank God he kicked [General Douglas] MacArthur’s ass, and made him stand to. MacArthur is damn lucky that someone didn’t shoot him in the back or face forward. But, I don’t know. That’s something I can relate to because it’s like it happened yesterday.
G: Do you remember V-E and V-J Day and how the people that were with you reacted?

K: V-J Day very vivid. I had come off the Pacific and we knew damn well that the war was going to be over because we had been through Okinawa and we had been issued Japanese-American currency invasion currency for Japan. In fact I saved a couple small bills. And we knew damn well it was just a matter of time. I thought, oh Jesus, if this thing’s over I don’t want to get stuck mopping up and sitting out in the Pacific on some two bit island. Closing it up, you know, or on standby, or maneuvering around, so I tried to get back on the Atlantic fleet, and by God, they listened and we rotated back to the States, and I was relieved from the ship and ordered back to New York City, 3rd Navy department. I flew into New York City the night of VJ Day. Oh God, what a night. I tangled with a bunch of Australians back from Europe. If you ever saw a wild eyed outfit, man, I saw some wild stuff with sailors, United States sailors, but Christ, we aren’t in the same ball park as the crazy Australians. They had been through hell, that damn Australian outfit, and man, were they celebrating. And I’m telling you... I got in there late, it was still light by the time we landed; we had to circle for a while because every damn plane from forty countries was trying to get into New York City that night. And I got in and we were taking the cab to the bus to get back to our assignment, and they were boarding up all over downtown New York. Boards and blankets and crowds in the street just prevent class. Man oh man. It was wild, Time Square... I had always said that if this thing ever ends it would be fun to be in New York City when this damn thing is over and here I am, I’m there. How nuts can you get. Half way all over the world here and then... Jesus. I ran into a couple of guys I knew at the, the Navy took over Henriet’s Motel, that’s where we were quartered all the time when we were in there. And these damn fools put on whites to go out at night. You should have seen them the next morning...

G: Drunk?

K: Lipstick! On their rear ends, on their butts down on their pants... I’m not kidding... When we saw them going out we said, “Hey you guys.” “It’s a celebration. God damn it,” they said, “Haven’t had whites on for two years for God’s sake, been to sea and all.” Hell the only time I wore formal whites was... what the hell... somewhere... the nurses had a dance and we happened to be in our whites, that’s the only time I ever wore my damn whites. And here he’s going out in New York City with whites on. Stood out like a bunch of grooms at the circus picking up manure, for cripes sake. One guy said, “I will never dry clean this jacket; it’s going to be hung in my closet. I’ll never...” And his pants and the rear end had lipstick all over the place.

G: How about V-E Day. Were you in the Pacific when that happened?

K: Yeah, I’m trying to remember where the hell we were on V-E Day. Damn it. It was no big deal because we had been expecting it to end. We were probably sitting on
our butts some place; we weren’t in any hot area. Let’s see, V-E Day was early summer, spring, what the hell was it?

M: I think it was May 8.

K: Two or four months before... we all figured it was going to be done earlier, we were wondering what the hell, it could get done out there. They should have put that damn bomb out there a little bit quicker than they did. I don’t recall anything specific but... VJ Day, Christ I can never forget that. My God, it was part and parcel... in the States for Christ sake, of all places. My bother Bill had been rotated out of the Pacific, and he was headed... they had kicked him up... he had gotten back about six, eight months earlier and headed of orthopedic at the Navy hospital in Seattle.

G: I think we have covered everything I had. (toward Mr. Miller) Chad, did you have some stuff you wanted to follow up with?

M: Not that I can think of.

G: No?

M: No, nothing.

K: Well I hope I haven’t digressed or reminisced too much.

G: You couldn’t have done it too much. I don’t think I have had this enjoyable of a time in ages.

K: So nice to have known you.

G: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW