

**Interviewee: Kenneth Firnstahl**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 2 December 2002**

**Location: living room of the Firnstahl home, Coon Rapids, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2002**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, March 2003**

Kenneth Firnstahl was born on 16 October 1924 in Long Prairie, Todd County, Minnesota, the sixth of seven children. His father owned a general store in Albany, Minnesota, and Ken spent the majority of his childhood there and in Burtrum, Minnesota. As a teenager his parents moved to Minneapolis, where he graduated from Marshall High School in 1943.

In June of 1943, immediately following high school, Ken was drafted into military service. He completed US Navy basic training in Farragut, Idaho, and additional training in San Diego, California, as a medical corpsman. In December 1943 Ken was posted to Aiea Heights Naval Hospital, Territory of Hawaii, where he served until January 1946 as a corpsman; duties varied, but often included dealing with seriously wounded military personnel from all over the Pacific Theater. Ken remained at Aiea Heights for several months after V-J Day in August 1945; at the beginning of 1946 he was then rotated back to the US and discharged with the rank of pharmacist's mate 2<sup>nd</sup> class.

Ken returned to Minneapolis after the Navy, and used GI Bill benefits to attend the University of Minnesota. He worked many years in the broadcasting business, in radio advertising, and lived in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. In private life, Ken was married in 1949 (wife Mary Haas), raised a family of five children, and over the years has written poetry on a number of themes, including his experiences and emotions as a hospital corpsman. At the time of this interview (December 2002) Ken lived with his wife Mary in Coon Rapids, Minnesota.

**Interview Key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**K = Ken Firnstahl**

**[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.**

T: Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2002 and this is our interview with Kenneth Firnstahl. First, on the record, Mr. Firnstahl, thanks very much for taking time today to speak with me.

K: You used the German pronunciation of Firnstahl, the English is Firnstahl. It's Firnstahl.

T: We've been talking for a little while here and what I've learned already is you were born in Long Prairie, Minnesota, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1924 and you were the sixth of seven children.

K: Correct.

T: Of a Roman Catholic family.

K: Yes.

T: Your parents were not immigrants, but your grandparents were--both sides from Germany. Your dad owned a little general store for a while.

K: That's right.

T: When you were a young person, you attended schools in Burtrum?

K: Burtrum.

T: And Albany as well?

K: Albany, Minnesota. I had grade school in a parochial school. Started out with the nuns where they twisted your ears and slapped you on the hand with a ruler.

T: And you finally graduated from high school, Marshall High School in Minneapolis, 1943. What was it that brought your folks from small towns to Minneapolis?

K: The small town grocery store began to be eliminated by the supermarkets that were going up, springing up here and there, and so my dad said, well I guess this is coming close to the end for us. So he sold the business and moved to Minneapolis

and then he worked for the highway department in the office division of St. Paul and finished out his days there. He died about sixty-two years of age.

T: He wasn't very old at all.

K: Heart disease. My mother struggled on to ninety-seven years of age.

T: She didn't die until recently did she?

K: No. 1984, wasn't it? She was lucid and clear of mind all the way to her last moments.

T: What do you remember about your childhood in small towns in Minnesota? What kind of memories do you have?

K: I have very pleasant memories. We had a loving family, loving parents who frowned on mediocrity and they blessed you in everything when you would excel and do things well. And they made you proud of being a Firnstahl. You would really be proud to be a Firnstahl. They instilled that in you. My dad was also a very, very pious man besides being a very scholarly person. Many times we would kneel around the living room during Lent and say the rosary in the evening.

T: Was religion an important part of your childhood?

**(1, A, 59)**

K: Absolutely. Religion, patriotism, discipline. I take that now as a shortcoming in life today. The fact is, it was Alexander Pope in the 1600s who predicted that this would be happening in our generations now. Even religion, the sacredness of religion, would be veiled and it would be secondary, put into a different category in peoples' lives and that the art and culture of life would be expiring. There would be very little good things even taught in universities.

T: So a cultural pessimist several centuries ago.

K: Expiration of culture is expressed a number of times, even by Dante, so then Jacques presumed in his (\*\*\*) book. The decadence again reiterates the fall of culture. I find it within our own Catholic church. We have dismissed all the great hymns that were the Catholic religion for centuries back. Mozart and Beethoven and Gabrielle, and Palestrina and all the great artists. They figure now we're too dumb. That we better have something a little simple, little hymns. And that would attract other people.

T: It certainly has changed our western religion.

K: I haven't lost my faith, but I am despaired by the fact that the loss of culture in the church because the Mass is still the same--the celebration of Mass.

T: When you were in high school you went to public high school?

K: Yes. Public high school.

T: You were also living in a big city going to high school too, which was a change for you.

K: When I first started high school was still in Burtrum.

T: So you switched. So it was really switched when you were quite an older...

K: I used to tell stories, you know what I mean. I'd come home from school and my folks would be moved. *(laughs)*

T: Your folks moved around a lot.

K: Not that much...

T: But you went to several different school districts.

K: Yes. In Albany and then in Burtrum and came back to Minneapolis.

T: You were a high school junior when the United States entered World War II. And specifically, the attack on Pearl Harbor the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1941. I'm wondering if you remember what you were doing when you first heard that news?

K: Yes, I can. In fact I marked it down because my memory is not... We were sitting around the dinner table, at the family home in southeast Minneapolis across from the tower on, what's the name of that park, right between Minneapolis and St. Paul? [Tower Hill Park] They said, a special flash came on the news, on our little round radios we had in those days, and they said Pearl Harbor has been attacked, presumably by the Japanese. It was a surprise attack with loss of life, and many ships have been blown up and sunk.

We were not sure where Pearl Harbor, what that was--who, where was that? In fact, they didn't say Hawaii, by the way. So my dad would say, Pearl Harbor? That's in the Pacific somewhere. Then it came out it was Hawaii, but that would show you the very minimum of communication we had in those days. There was very little going on. You had the radio. Once in a while you'd get a little news. The papers were scanty.

T: So the news came and the initial response sounds, if like I'm hearing you right, was puzzled about where that really was.

K: That's right.

T: As it began to sink in, I mean it was in the papers the next day obviously, what was the reaction of your folks, and of you and your brothers and sisters, as this began to become...

K: We were not accustomed to war, since World War I, all I remember as a kid was seeing pictures of World War I.

T: Was your dad a veteran?

K: No, but his brothers were. We may get drafted into service. That could very easily happen. My dad would talk to me and say, well, if that happens, you know to serve your country is an honor and something you have to do.

**(1, A, 139)**

K: I said, "I'll be ready Dad, whenever they should call." So in 1943, they did. I was skipping home from school, and whistling, and here was this letter. "Greetings."

T: Now were you the first of your brothers to go?

K: My brother Don and myself, we got it about the same time. We got the "greetings."

T: Was Don older than you?

K: Yes.

T: So both of you went in around the same time. Were you the only two brothers from your family?

K: No, a third one. Three brothers went in. I was the only one that went into the melee, more or less. Don stayed in the San Francisco area as a sonar man, and Bob came in toward the end of the war and went to Okinawa and did his work around there. I was there right in the midst of it. All the troops coming in all wounded and shot; arms off, legs off, everything.

T: Now before you got your draft notice, did you think much about what might happen to you, or the fact that you might be drafted? Was this something that was on your mind?

K: I think it was sort of in the back of my mind, yes, that probably I would be going into service before I do anything. So that happened. It was a period of... you accepted what came along. And there was patriotism. I think that's lacking today in many places.

So, okay, the draft notice came. All right, Don and I, boy, we hastened down to where the Navy induction could be made. You were supposed to be in a little better physical condition if you were Army. Not as skinny as I was...

T: So when the time came, you were keen to avoid the Army.

K: Yes. In a way, maybe in the back of my mind, we said there would be less chance of getting killed in the Navy, you know, because you would be on a ship and could take showers and could get nice clean food. The opposite happened.

T: You were better off joining the Navy, you thought.

K: Yes. And my third brother did, too.

T: How did your folks respond? I mean, it was all theoretical up to that point. When the draft notice came and you were leaving, how did your folks respond?

K: They were very mature about the thing. Very supportive. They didn't panic or that sort of thing. They said this is part of your experience of life and part of the thing that you have to do to keep our country. I don't know if my parents even went to the train depot when I was shipped out (*chuckles*). My sister Kay said, yes, your mother was there when you left from the train.

T: That was St. Paul or Minneapolis?

K: Minneapolis. I was seated next to a fellow by the name of Gordie Nelson. Of Nelson Paints, Twin Cities.

T: So your memories of who was at the train station are not real clear.

K: No. I can't quite remember who all had seen me off.

T: And yet you remember the name of the person you sat next to on the train.

K: Yes. I introduced myself and we talked to each other on the way. Then we were going through Montana. We were going through all these places looking out the window. We'd never been away from home before.

T: That's one of the things I want to move on to next... Where was your Basic Training?

K: In Camp Scott, Farragut, Idaho.

T: Now, Idaho is a long way from Minneapolis.

K: Yes, end of the world.

T: Did it seem like that to you?

K: Oh, yes. You could see it right from there (*laughs*).

T: That wasn't quite it but close enough. Just to follow up on that one question, how did you adjust to being away from home?

K: What you did is—I told this reporter [from the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* newspaper] after thinking a bit on it—is that the young mind recalibrates for what you get into, and all of a sudden I'm gone from home and you adjust in your mind. Well, I'll be away. I'll be prepared to do this and this is the way it is and this is where I'm going to have to go through. It's a startling thing. In fact, all the young men with me were much the same.

T: How long did it take you to get to that point where you really were able to say, to consciously assess the situation and say, this is how I have to deal with it? Was there an adjustment to that?

**(1, A, 210)**

K: You adjusted sort of naturally. Kind of a natural process where you didn't even know what you were getting into when you went to Camp Scott, Idaho, and finally you got off the train and there you were in Idaho. Other enlistees would be there and they'd say, "Watch out! You're going to get the square needle! You're getting the square needle." They were shouting at us.

Then we got into our camp, the barracks where our company was assembled, and the instructors were extremely rude and rough. Then we found out later, after I was out of the service, that I had gone through the roughest boot camps ever known to the Navy. And that had been written up and there were a number of people that were in charge there that were dishonorably discharged.

They would make you dry fire on rifles all day without any pads under the elbows. The Marine Corps all had pads. And then they'd make us dry fire on wooden floors without pads. Then they'd have you live fire outside, and if your legs weren't quite far enough apart they would kick you with the boots and knock you. Some guys had their ankles broken. They were somewhat sadistic in that camp but you know, I thought that's the way everybody had it.

It was tough. I'd still slough off some days and sneak in the woods and have a cigarette. I was just starting to learn how to smoke. When I was a youngster, I was splitting wood, hauling ice, doing all those things before I went into service, so I went into this camp and I could climb the rope, jump over the wall and go through the whole thing. Do everything. Do all the knee bends, squats and everything else, and I came out with the highest ranked tests in all the company. The commander comes along. Now the commander wasn't a mean guy. It was the people under him. Our commander came up and he said, "Ken Firnstahl, step forward. You've won the highest strength test in the company. I want to give you some accolades on this,"

and so forth. So I step forward and he says, "No, it can't be you." Got this little skinny guy. It can't be him. And he said, "Is Firnstahl back in there?" And I said, "That's me." And he said, "Really?" And the other guys said, "Yes, that's him."

They could put me in the boxing ring with some of them and they'd have to stop the fight because I'd just almost demolish them. My dad would teach me determination and he said, "Now, if you ever have to get in a fight, Ken, take the first blow..." I mean, "Give him the first blow and drive your shoulder in behind your fist. The body follows through." My dad kept up and had read everything, so if my dad says so, I can whip anybody.

T: So you didn't find Basic Training all that difficult physically. It was tough but you managed it.

K: We had to go through a gas test. We went through a building and put on a gas mask. They had you get up early in the morning. It was still cold and you'd have to do calisthenics. Then they'd say the smoking lamp is not on. No one can smoke and so forth. Then the lamp would have to come on before you could smoke. Then they'd set you in marching. Drilling and marching, back and forth, throwing even the guns back and forth. I was a pretty good marcher. They had me on the outside.

**(1, A, 258)**

T: What was the hardest thing for you about boot camp?

K: I think it was mostly a little bit of loneliness. I had the fever one time. What did they call that? Where you had high fever and the light bulb looked like an orange. You just stayed in your bunk. That's it. Get me some water and guys would get me water. They'd bring me a little glass of water. I don't know if we even had aspirin. Finally you worked yourself out of that and be dressed again to go back out again.

T: How long did Basic Training last?

K: A couple of months, something like that. Yes. Six weeks of medical training. I remember that.

T: And the medical training came after Farragut, Idaho.

K: That's right. It was in San Diego.

T: Now, did you select this particular track you were headed for?

K: Yes. I kind of thought I would like to have been a doctor, so it wasn't that I was trying to get out of battle or anything. In fact, that never even was talked about. You would get in there and you would help manage guys and get their casts on, pull things out, give them shots. I thought, gee, that would be pretty good.



T: So you ended up in San Diego.

K: Yes.

T: What do you remember about the time there? Six weeks is not very long to sort of get everything under your belt.

K: Lived in a tent.

T: Ken, tell me, what can you learn in six weeks?

K: Nothing (*laughs*). But what we did is, we learned how to give shots. We first started out giving shots in oranges and things like that. Then we had to give shots to each other. Then they would teach you that a chest wound, you had to get that bandaged and covered up with fast, tight, good. Put Sulfa... Sulfa was about the only antibiotic. And cover it up good and get it tight so it won't bubble through. And then they don't give morphine on a head wound. That can kill them. You stay away from morphine on the head wounds. So you get all the basic things. Now if somebody can't breathe you can poke a hole into through here (*puts finger to throat*) and make a tracheotomy. They didn't show us how we could do that, but they said it was the spot right in here where you could do it. One of my friends did it on the battlefield and used his fountain pen. Stuck it in there and the guy lived and came through.

T: How did you feel when you were there? Did you feel overwhelmed or prepared or scared? How would you describe when you were learning this is what you're going to be doing and this is how much time you have to learn it?

K: You're so darned young in those days, I thought maybe that's all anybody went through for medical school (*laughs*). I said boy, these doctors sure learn a lot in six weeks!

*(brief pause in interview)*

T: You were talking about this time in San Diego before we took a break. I'm curious—it seems like six weeks... you must have felt just overwhelmed to get everything down that you're going to need.

K: Well, you were supposed to get plugged into blood plasma and all that stuff and you're saying, I don't know if I can really do it, you know. I don't know if I can handle all that stuff.

T: Did you find yourself feeling that way?

K: A little bit, because you don't feel that confident after six weeks. You know you'll find your way. You plug it in, but what happened with me was that it was a doctor that kind of hooked up with me, a Dr. Miller, and I was helping with

pneumothoraxes and collapsing lungs and helping with putting braces around the guys' heads...

T: In San Diego, still?

K: No, this was overseas.

**(1, A, 304)**

T: Did you actually work on real people when you were in San Diego or was it all just theoretical training and practice?

K: No. Training—"that's what you do if you get this." If you get somebody with a leg broken, you gotta put a split on it. Do the best you can so the bone won't protrude.

T: The definition of a crash course.

K: Yes. It was a crash course. You had to work all day long, and they'd instruct us and they'd teach you on analgesic centrifuges, antibiotics, and all the various things. APCs—I don't think we've got those anymore—Aspirin, potassium, caffeine. Today they have (\*\*). That's probably the same thing. That's done with Tylenol rather than aspirin.

T: Did you know at any time in San Diego where you were going to be going next? Was there this unknown?

K: Unknown feeling, and finally they said we're shipping you up to... First of all we graduated from the six week course, and the commander comes out. They were nicer people in the six week course. They weren't that mean like we had in Basic Training. The commander came out and addressed us early in the morning. We all stood at attention and he said, "What a fine looking group of young men before me. I'm in awe and inspired. I feel saddened that perhaps many of you won't come back." And my pants dropped down. I said, why would he say that?

T: So how did you internalize what that guy told you in San Diego? Was that the first time that the concept of mortality went through your mind?

K: A little bit. I remember that I finished with a cavalier attitude. Inside, though, I was a little frightened. Some other guys came up to me and said, "Ken, will you talk to me? You seem to be handling this so well. Would you talk to me about it?" I would sit down with them. "It's rare, it's the exception, the guy that was killed," I said. Which is true—we most all come back. The commander just felt... I think it was just a slip of the tongue. You just felt badly seeing us... and he knew already that was the highest mortality rate.

T: Among corpsmen.

K: Yes. Corpsmen had the highest mortality rate. I was shipped up to Seattle, Washington, and worked there with some patients a little bit. There were some of them that were battle shocked and battle fatigued and various things. I was only there a short time and they said, okay, you've got your orders.

Then they took us and put us back on the train and we went to San Francisco and shipped me out from there because that's where I originally (\*\*\*)). I remember we stood outside for a whole afternoon with our duffel bags waiting to board the ship. That's the USS *Biloxi*, a cruiser. It had two catapult planes on it. Then they'd (*whistles*) and then you'd get on, but on the way guys were passing out right and left in the sun outside waiting hours in line, and then you had to climb up the ramp, besides, with your duffel bag. And here this little skinny guy, me, just went hopping up the ramp.

T: This was after all the training and all the practice. You're actually shipping out.

K: Shipping out and going overseas. And we thought that we were going to New Guinea.

T: But you didn't know where you were going.

K: No. New Guinea? And I think we found out about midway on the ship that we were going to end up in the Hawaiian Islands, and there we'd be shipped out again.

T: So really your understanding was, it sounds like, that you were going to be shipped out somewhere in the South Pacific.

K: That's right.

T: And Hawaii, I guess, was only a brief holding pattern.

K: If you wanted to really get yourself up on the speed of this you can read that book *Flags of our Fathers*, written by a corpsman's son. I think I knew that guy, Bradley, the father of the author. I think he was in that San Diego field. He said it was a tough training in San Diego. Six weeks. Tough. It was. And you had to get it down pat and get it quickly and get it done.

And then you were ready to get into battle from that. They called him "Doc." What you do is you gather experience as you go along. You pick it up and things flash back when you were schooling. Six weeks. So you see the different rooms and you say, this one is treated this way and that one is treated that way. Penicillin just came in when I was overseas. They'd give you like fifty units—milligrams at a time. And now they give thousands per shot. And we'd have to give the shots three or four times a day plus giving Sulfa—Sulfadiazene and Sulfanilamid.

T: I'm wondering, at this point when you shipped out from San Francisco, maybe even before that, you were aware then that you part of the war effort against Japan. You weren't going to Europe.

K: Right.

T: I'm wondering what the Navy did, or what images you had in your own mind, about the Japanese.

K: They didn't tell us that much about the Japanese other than being the enemy, because the Japanese had no problem using the Geneva Conference or anything like that. They just killed anybody. Put their heads on stakes. And they would look for corpsmen to kill. After we got overseas they said, "Now you go out, you're not to answer to corpsmen. They have to call you by your name." So I said, "What's going on here?" But see, when you're eighteen, nineteen years old, there's hardly any fear.

T: Is that true?

K: Yes. Pretty much so. I was kind of anxious to go. I was, let's get this thing over with. And I am very, what do you call it, I can't relax. Impatient! I was very impatient; always have been. Get it done.

T: When you were in Hawaii, did you begin to acquire an image of what the Japanese were like?

K: Oh, yes. I even had to guard Japanese wounded. They sent me through and I had some morphine and stuff, and they'd be moaning and...

T: So Japanese came through Hawaii too?

K: Yes. They were in a big tent on the side of the building there. They said, you have the duty; watch over the Japanese. I don't think they can hurt you. They're all pretty well wounded. So they would be moaning and then you would teach them to say F\_\_ Tojo, F\_\_ Tojo. (*chuckles*)

T: Was that a funny feeling for you dealing with these Japanese or not?

K: You went through so much--

### **End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 386**

K: You went through so many things already with so many wounded, so many died that we just (\*\*). I was never mean to any of them. I couldn't do it. I was just... My shift was over and that was that. I lived up on the mountain area in the barracks.

T: This was at Aiea Heights, in Hawaii.

K: Yes.

T: Did you observe other people being, shall we say, less than kind to these Japanese?

K: No. I didn't see anything like that. There may have been. I was not that kind where I told them F\_\_\_ Tojo.

T: As far as physical treatment.

K: Yes. They were taken care of. I think the Americans were always very good that way. The other group of people who were good that way were the German soldiers. They would treat American soldiers that were wounded, take care of them, give them shots and the Americans were so overwhelmed by (\*\*\*) . In one case an American like myself, a medic, got behind German lines and (\*\*\*) the ambulance. And the German commander came out and he was saying, "You're lost? I can sprechen zie keine English." He said, "We aren't going to shoot you because you're an American. We don't shoot you. You go around here, go down through there, head by the end of the woods and take a left down there and you're back to the American lines." And the kid couldn't believe it so then when he got back to the lines the GIs there filled the ambulance up with Chesterfield cigarettes and drove it back to the German lines and emptied it out in front of them.

T: And where did you hear this story?

K: It's in one of [historian and author] Steven Ambrose's books.

T: To stick on the subject of Hawaii, can you describe your job and your job responsibilities?

K: I eventually was assigned to just officers, taking care of officers. I don't know if that was a promotion or not. But first of all I had all these guys, all the legs, all off, and eventually I got into private officers and private rooms. Maybe sometimes two in one room.

T: Aiea Heights was a facility where people who had been wounded in battles in the Pacific...

K: Were shipped there.

T: So this is maybe the second or third hospital that these people had been in.

**(1, B, 444)**

K: Yes. Some of them came right over by helicopter. Others were ships that came in on the shore.

T: Was this a large facility? Were there a lot of beds?

K: Yes. Big place, yes. I've got some things around here...

T: So you were one of a number of people working in this facility.

K: Oh, yes. One of the first assignments was to get right up and to give a colonel a shot of morphine. I'd only been given oranges. I'm just fresh over there and, the fact is, I was still wet behind the ears. The colonel is in this room swearing and... you've got to get the air out of the thing, because with the air you get an embolism. Embolism will go right directly to the heart and kill him. So I went in there and I brushed his arm off with some alcohol, jabbed it in. Gave him the shot and said, "There you are," and I went out. I forgot to check the air (*chuckles*). So I waited outside his door. It takes them two minutes to die.

T: He was still alive two minutes later?

K: He was still going. It's very unusual that you get the vein which would go... I kind of knew that, but...

T: Some anxious moments nonetheless.

K: Yes. But I didn't do it all the way proper, like a German descendant would do (*laughs*).

T: Ken, it sounds like you had officers and enlisted men there at Aeia Heights. Did you also have different types of injuries here?

K: Amputees. Guys with their heads crushed. TB cases.

T: Any who were psychologically disturbed?

K: Oh, yes. I had one guy who if a fly came around he went crazy, so we had to get him in a special place and close him up. Any fly would bother him. It bothers my dog too (*laughs nervously*).

T: And your responsibilities, did you do a wide range of things, or did you have a pretty specific and narrow job that you did almost every day?

K: I would think it was fairly narrow as far as I was giving penicillin, giving shots, giving Atabrine for malaria. That was kind of a humorous thing there. I shouldn't be telling you, but it's too late now to sue me. There were two guys looked exactly the same, exactly, and they had the same robes on that you get. And one had malaria

and the other one didn't, but I'd give the guy with the malaria his Atabrine pill. And then I'd see the guy and, "Hey! Hey! You've got to get your Atabrine." And I'd give him the Atabrine, and I don't know how many times I gave the wrong Atabrine to him.

T: Is it potentially harmful?

K: No, they start turning a little yellow (*laughs*). I just wanted to tell you. That was something we laughed about. We laughed about it because they looked exactly the same. In fact, I was kidding with the guy, just something, a precaution in case, prophylactic in case you might have malaria. You can never tell.

T: Ken, did people tend to stay a long time in this facility?

K: They would be there a number of weeks, and most of the time they would be shipped home.

T: This facility is one of the stages further back.

K: So I would be taught to... open gaping wounds. I would be putting sterile Vaseline around the edge of it. Doing all of that stuff. You couldn't learn that in six weeks. So some doctor told me. I had the gloves on and do the whole thing. And one time Nimitz came in the room, Admiral Nimitz. He said, "Wait. Wait. Just keep doing what you're doing." I kept putting the sterile stuff in. Then I had to give this patient a big shot with a huge syringe. Gas gangrene. And I gave him that shot. And they took a picture of me with the Admiral. I never did see it.

T: For you personally, Ken, what was one of the more difficult things that you had to deal with?

**(1, B, 522)**

K: I would say you get used to it, and in another way, you don't get used to all these guys getting all shot to pieces, but you finally adjust to it and you go ahead and do your job. When the troops would come in heavy you'd work almost around the clock. Then you'd get a little rest and then you just... you seemed to adjust to it. You didn't go off in a corner and say, I can't take this anymore. I didn't notice anybody that gave up and couldn't do it anymore.

T: Would you say you grew calloused, then, after a while?

K: No. I grew a little numb from it. And you'd say, well, this is war and they're coming in. They're shot to pieces. We had to fix them up. Get them fixed up. Get them some plasma, get them some this. Do this. Get them some morphine. Check on this. Ask them how they're feeling, and how are you doing? I would always try to be cheerful.

T: If they had a leg wound or a chest wound, how long had it been from when they were wounded to when they hit your facility?

K: I wouldn't know exactly, but it might have been a day or hours.

T: So they got there pretty quickly.

K: Yes. We had one ward with everybody with their rear end shot off, one room all the legs shot off, one room with all the arms shot off.

T: So they separated people really by the types of injuries.

K: So you could work on it quicker and faster. All of the same kind of injury.

T: Right.

K: You could go right along the line, and we had some nurses with us. Regular nurses.

T: You shared one of your poems earlier, and one of the lines from that I wrote down was that "youth grows sober." I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the sentiment that you expressed with those words.

K: I think what it did is, it made a man out of you. I used to be eighteen, but suddenly you were forty years old. You were a man and you became a man pretty quick. You had to. You weren't sitting giggling and saying, I'm not going to do this or anything. You went ahead.

First of all you got colorful training at boot camp. Obey orders. If you didn't obey orders you could scrub the whole barracks with a toothbrush. That's the things they would do. They would put you under cold or hot showers. You learned that you had to take instructions and do it. That's about...

T: What about the experience in Hawaii sobered you up in a sense, then? To stick with that phrase.

K: Seeing all these men come in. I can remember being in boot camp and I saw somebody hauled out in a stretcher and I was one to faint away. I was not ready yet.

T: Yet months later you saw people on stretchers...

K: All over. Stinking, rotting flesh. Odor. I couldn't eat for a few days. About a week and a half [when I first got there]

T: Was that a shock; adjustment to what you were dealing with?



K: Oh, yes. Shocked at first. It really was a shock. There was always a bad feeling... this is war. This is it, and it's not going to be nice. You're not going to see people dancing around and having a lot of fun. But we would go up in the mountains and drink green beer. I was only like nineteen and (\*\*\*) drink in Hawaii. You were supposed to chug a lug them down and then you'd throw up. One of the men went down the mountain in a jeep and went over the side and killed him. (\*\*\*) He worked with us. Even that, this was just another guy.

T: How did you deal with this in off hours? Did people drink a lot?

K: Well, you didn't always have access to a bottle of booze. Once in a while somebody would get some beer. Come on, let's go up and we'll drink this beer, and so we would drink. I wasn't into great drinking. There were periods. Now I'm into some pretty heavy stuff.

After the war, I went to radio broadcasting. There was this tremendous stress. It was almost as much stress as you had over there. Unions threatening to kill you and everything. In those days the unions were really tough. Nowadays they've simmered down quite a bit and they wouldn't threaten your life and everything. We didn't have a union at our radio station because our people didn't want one. We gave them everything they wanted. Go on vacation. We gave them automobiles.

T: To stay with this theme about reacting, you mentioned a few moments ago that you were stationed in Hawaii, really with the belief that that was a stage to somewhere else.

K: It was a staging area.

T: How far back in your mind, or how far front in your mind, was this notion that, gee, I could be shipped out of here tomorrow?

K: That was it.

T: And how did that make you feel?

K: I was kind of anxious to get it done. Go. And a secondary feeling. I mean, so okay, I go. All right. I'll go.

**(1, B, 610)**

T: How do you square that with the fact that you knew the casualty rates of people who were shipped out?

K: That's what I said. You are a little bit insane at eighteen and nineteen and you... In fact, I read about the German Army, and they would use all eighteen year old boys and nineteen to charge. They had the most nerve and you could go ahead do it. The

Soviets would fill their young soldiers up with vodka and then they'd do their charging against the Germans. So they gave them extra courage. With vodka.

But see, there was an advantage using young men to do the forward battles and patrolling. I had one friend who was on patrol all the time and he said, "God, I've been on a lot of patrols. You know what, I never had anything happen." I came back and I'm going to try this rifle out. He tried it and it wouldn't fire (*laughs*). He'd laugh about that. He had a great sense of humor and he said, "Can you believe it? My rifle was jammed all the time."

T: Ken, could you have volunteered to be shipped out?

K: I wasn't that insane.

T: You obviously heard what was going on at Peleliu or Guam or Iwo Jima.

K: Yes. Oh, yes.

T: Were you at all thinking, that could be me?

K: That's right. I knew that they had the legs and arms piled up on the shore that they just amputated right there. They piled them up.

T: You heard the stories of what was going on.

K: Oh, yes. One of my friends did the tracheotomy. I told you that. Another one was out back in the island area and one of the Marines was shot through the chest and badly and the doctor said that there's no way. He's only going to live just a short period of time. He'll expire within the hour. So make him comfortable. Make him comfortable and get out of here because the Japs are coming. And so he pulled this guy into a clump of trees and things, covered him up with branches, put compresses on that chest wound, gave him blood plasma, got him some morphine and stayed there all night with this Marine soldier and the Japanese went by jiggling with their water jugs. They could hear them walking by. The next morning everything was clear. He took the guy, threw him on his shoulder and carried him three miles back to the front lines, to the lines where the Americans were and he lived. This guy, they said, could never express his thanks enough.

T: Yes.

K: He just said, I'll do anything for you. Anything.

**(1, B, 647)**

T: For you, did relationships with patients remain mostly impersonal, or did you actually get to know people on a closer basis?

K: Somewhat you did. I got this letter from another corpsman, who lives now in Princeton, Minnesota. You can read that or even take a copy of it and send it back. It almost is a little bit of a tear jerker. He said he had many men die in his arms. And he said, "I can relate to what you have, and I can relate to all the dying you must have had. I had the ones that would die occasionally, and I would hold them in my arms."

T: This is a guy who was shipped out to the front line.

K: Yes. He was my age, seventy-eight years old, and he was writing me this letter and he said, "I really, really was touched by your thing in the [*Star Tribune*] paper. It gave me closure. I felt my first closure. I would like to have some of your other poetry if you would send me some. My children are all reading your things you had in the paper."

T: Have you talked to that guy on the phone?

K: No, I haven't. I just got the letter yesterday. He said, "I want to get in contact with you maybe later and get some of your poetry." It was very sensitive... letter written in long hand like I do. Scratch it on (\*\*\*). So I want to get in touch with him. Answer him. I got a number of very fine replies from people and other corpsmen.

T: It's a very good article in the *Star Tribune*.

K: I never referred to my children as kids. I don't know how she put that. She had five children. She had five kids.

T: That's interesting. She changed that.

K: Maybe I said it. I don't know.

T: You bring up the subject of poetry. The article in the *Star Tribune* was really about you and your poetry. It's been an important way it seems for you to deal with, the express that.

K: Yes.

T: I'm wondering, had you written poetry before you were in the service? Had you written things down like that?

**(1, B, 674)**

K: No. I had the feelings in my mind and never expressed it. So now I'm overseas and I'm going to write to my girlfriend. Uff dah! I said, what the hell do I write? I said... I can remember everything from back then. I can't remember what I wrote yesterday.

Funny thing, a letter. You don't know how to start.  
Especially if you want your girl to know what's in your heart.  
Make it just a bit poetic if your girl is the type,  
Because you have to be romantic if the letter is to be right.  
Now add a bit of starlight and the color of the moon,  
How perfect things would be if we could share them soon.  
Now that's my kind of letter, every word of it is true.  
Just as God knows in heaven darling, I love you.

T: Very nice.

K: *(laughs)* That was my first poem.

T: So this is something that really began for you when you were overseas.

K: Yes.

T: What prompted you to actually put pen to paper?

K: You don't become a poet because you want to be one. You are one. And you have to express it. I would often feel as though I must just write the worst crap that ever was in the world. I used to write back to my folks, and I sent them a poem and said, "You'll find this in the back of these ten cent Western magazines. That's the stuff I kind of write." They kept those. That's how they got them.

T: Your folks kept those.

K: Yes. They kept all those old crumbled up letters. I'll say this is what I wrote about my daughter when she died, the one who's in the picture.

*(short gap in tape)*

T: Ken, how often did you find yourself writing things down, in Hawaii? Actually writing poetry.

K: For three years being there it probably wasn't that often, but I would have night duty, guard duty at night. I just was a medic. Can't do everything. I would sit there at that desk, and there was an old Underwood typewriter. I didn't really remember how to type, so I started typing anyway. I typed this stuff out and I'd mark out what I felt in my heart and I'd sent it out. That's what you see in those first few pages here [of my poetry album]. I never felt I was a poet or anything but I just would write that stuff out.

T: Did you feel different when you did write things down for yourself?

K: I think it helped me a little bit. Yes. You could express yourself. It was kind of like a catharsis. Here's one that my daughter found. So you'd say why wouldn't a person write--that's a letter I'd written overseas--why wouldn't a person write more about the war? Well, you couldn't write about the war because it would be all censored.

T: Did you share these with other people that you were stationed with? These poems. Or was this something you kept to yourself?

K: I hardly ever shared a one. Now the one, about  
I shall not think of her,  
I met a gal from Vassar,  
I said, this is what I've written about you. I said, when you left me with that commander, and she just broke down in tears and just cried and wept and said, "Ken, I wouldn't leave you. No. No. He asked me. I had to go out with him." I said it. I think I have a picture of her. So, anyway, she wanted to get... I was married when I was a little younger. I was better looking than her (*laughs*).

T: How important to you was your faith when you were overseas?

**(1, B, 718)**

K: Very much. All the time.

T: Did you attend chapel or attend church on a regular basis?

K: I would whenever I could. I would do that. Something that now is almost forgotten.

T: How would you describe this? How did your faith help you?

K: I felt serene and it was a peaceful feeling. I think the easiest thing in the world is to lose your faith. In fact, today, they lose it so easy it's unbelievable. We can't even have Christmas in school. The separation of church and state was the separation of George III from the English church. And Franklin and Jefferson and Madison, they said we will have separation of church and state, but not from any particular church. You can have all the churches you want, and every one expressed: Keep God in your life. Keep Christ in your life. And we must keep it everywhere. Government, everywhere. But no particular church. And now today what we are establishing is an atheistic state.

T: At this time, when you were in the service, did you feel equally strongly about the importance of faith? Of religion in your own life?

K: Oh, yes. See first of all, I went to a parochial school. I had to go to Mass every single morning. I'm going to send that along with you. This.

T: Oh, great.

K: 1932. And this is the thing I had written in my garage door up at the cabin. You may want to use that in your history class.

T: Maybe. How would you say your faith changed, or was changed, by your experiences overseas?

K: My faith actually grew throughout the years.

When I became manager of a radio station in Minneapolis, KTCR, I hooked up with a Frenchman who was exactly like Cyrano de Bergerac. He had the jaw that stuck out like this, and he would wind down his window and tell someone, "Get your hair cut! You animal!" And I'd always be on--[directed to interviewer] Your hair's fine. Now this is when they had it way down to there--I would always be on the side where the guy was. He'd wind the window on that side (*laughs*).

He would go to Mass every day. I went to Mass every day. For thirty years I went to Mass. And we had lunches almost every day too; there were some days when you just couldn't do it, we'd miss the Mass. The Masses were real short. Twenty minutes and you'd be out and you felt kind of refreshed from that. They had kind of a scholarly priests in those days that would come in and give a little short, two second or three minute talk. I remember one of them said, "You people who come to church today have come here because you're such good people. Come here during the week when you don't really have to or anything." But he said, "You came here to be with Christ. That's not true. Christ came with you." And he turned around. Holy crow, what a powerful thing to say. You didn't come to be with Christ, He came with you.

T: Do you feel that your faith made you better equipped to handle your job in the Pacific?

K: Oh, yes. Oh, sure.

T: How so?

K: It's a powerful weapon. Stability and comfort. Now you take so many of them like Nietzsche and a number of them that have no faith at all. They're all agnostics. Most of them... what's "gnostic"? Just plain short gnostic? Agnostic. That means you have to be shown. Show me the proof. Like from Missouri. They used the word in a short thing like G-N-O-S-T-I-C, which just means the same thing. There was a number of them in those early days, but the church was so corrupt and bad that a lot of them like Montaigne and Voltaire... Voltaire would always ask for a priest when he was ready to die. They would have very little faith because there was only that one church, the Catholic Church, and when you have power like that it corrupts. They would have a lot of bad Popes and a lot of bad... So anyway, I can go preaching. If you want me in class sometime...

T: Ken, let me shift gears here. Working in a hospital facility, did you come into contact with women in uniform? As nurses, [US Navy] WAVES.

**End of Tape 1, Side B. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T: Let me ask about women in uniform. You showed me a picture here. On tape now again. You saw WAVES. You came in to contact with nurses. From your observation, how were the relations between men and women in uniform in the service?

K: We were just elated to see them. You were just beside yourself. I am very much against women fighting in combat. I do not think it should be. I love women. They shouldn't be there as the politically correct thing. They can do so much behind the lines.

T: For example, you were behind the lines, so you did see women there.

K: Oh, yes.

T: What kind of things did you observe women doing at the facility that you were at?

K: They were nurses. Registered nurses.

T: You mentioned some women doing a number of different things. From your perspective, what problems were there having men and women working in the same facility?

K: It was quite well separated; except, the doctors and nurses, I think, had some fun. They would kind of intermingle a little bit. It was an era of very, very prudent relations between men and women. We were very reverent in [our] actions. You were not ready to copulate on a moment's notice. It was the furthest thing from your mind. You were very excited about getting a kiss. You'd hug and maybe snap a panty once in a while. That was it. The unusual ones were the ones that would become pregnant. They were not looked up to as real high individuals if they were to become pregnant.

T: Did things like that happen occasionally?

K: I didn't notice it any overseas. But we used to talk about the doctors and nurses maybe getting a little extra.

T: So it was rumored, or kind of surmised.

K: I had one young nurse that was always flirting with me. She became a patient and I had to take care of her a little bit. Her name was KP and mine was KP. And then I

was in the hospital with jungle rot. I had disability from that. Our whole hands would swell up so the heart would be bright red, bright red. So they had to soak all the skin off my hands and then pull it off with forceps.

**(2, A, 58)**

K: She used to come by and help me. Then there was a guy from Louisiana named Rosie something, and he was a hell of a nice young guy. He would always come and ask, "Can I help you in any way? Can I do anything for you?"

T: So you were laid up with this jungle rot for a while?

K: Yes. The doctor came in and said we're going to have to cut those hands off. I knew he was kidding though.

T: How did you get jungle rot?

K: It's a yeast spore that's in the more tropical areas. Quite a few people had jungle rot. I had it on the back of my heels. Some on my chest and on the hands. And the potassium permanganate that you soak your hands in for hours at a time, then when your skins starts soaking off, then they pulled it off with forceps. Then they put all kinds of Sulfamylamide, a white salve, all over your hands and wrap them.

T: So you were out of commission for a while with that.

K: Yes. I think it was about a week or something.

T: Was it painful?

K: Oh, yes. Hot and painful, and your hands steamed. I'm so modest about this *(laughs)*.

T: What about minorities where you were? For example, blacks in uniform.

K: I had a good friend who was a black. Yes.

T: Did you work with blacks, or have blacks working in your facility?

K: I think Mike, he worked more in the culinary section. He'd always want to borrow ten bucks or something. I said sure, I'll give you some. He always paid it right back on time. We were good friends. Shoot the breeze and talk. I never really noticed a difference in skin color that much. That wasn't that big a deal.

T: Did other people notice?



K: I think it's very evident today because there's so much press on it. They're being denied... and they're denied housing... they're denied this evidence...

T: So you think making people more aware of it, makes people more aware of it.

K: Oh, yes. And it makes the black, or whoever it is, or the Hispanic, much more angry and they say, "We are really put down." Did you read in the paper today, they couldn't get some loans? What the hell, I couldn't get a loan. A person has to have some money before you can get a loan.

T: Now, were there blacks and Hispanics elsewhere in the facility that you worked?

K: I didn't see a lot of them. Evidently they were considered not, you know, like the white people, and they weren't put in positions--which is a sad commentary. But I didn't see many around.

T: How about the people that you treated? Did you treat people of all races too, as patients?

K: Whatever came in... like the Japanese. I didn't see many black soldiers wounded. I think that the blacks [were] really coming in very big in Vietnam and...

T: Later, after the military desegregated.

K: Yes. Early on there, they were going in there pretty strong. The forgotten war.

T: What I hear you saying is, really, that what was noticeable was the lack of minorities that you saw, either working with or as patients.

K: That's right.

T: Your hospital treated only Navy and Marines, is that right?

K: Right. The Army may have had more blacks. But that was a sad thing all the way through from the time of Lincoln and the time of Jefferson. They weren't hardly considered human beings. Then they came about where they felt so badly. Jefferson said, anybody is going to get into heaven, it's not going to be us, it's going to be the black people that get in. They were treating them terribly. He said, I've got slaves of my own. So Washington felt the same way. And they all were very much against slavery, even though they said we can't stop it. It's too big a deal.

T: Ken, when you were stationed in Hawaii, and you were there for a while, how easy was it to get news of how the war was going either in Europe or in the Pacific?

K: There would be news flashes on radio. You couldn't say much because they didn't want anybody to know what's going on. They didn't want to know big troop losses or anything.

T: Did you find it hard to keep up by reading the paper or listening to the radio?

K: We knew that the battle in Europe was going so-so and our war was taking a lot of casualties...

T: So you knew what was happening at Peleliu or Guam or Iwo Jima or Okinawa.

K: Yes. And I'd hear about all the legs and arms piled up on the beach from the amputations they did right there.

T: So in a sense, did your business increase too, as far as the number of people coming in during these battles?

K: Oh, yes. They had the big battles and a lot of them came in.

T: Did you get news from patients--because obviously these people were people who had been there? Did you talk a lot to patients, or people as you were treating them, kind of trying to figure out what was going on? Did they talk?

K: Yes. I even got letters after I was out of the service from patients that I treated and thanked me. One of them was Lieutenant Flagg--this is all in my memoirs...

T: So you did actually make acquaintances with people who were in the hospital. You definitely know people.

K: I know them a little bit, yes. Here's an original thing from that... see I was not a good typist...

T: You saved the original.

K: My sister did.

T: These are original copies of things that Mr. Firnstahl wrote. This is on the little typewriter over there in Hawaii that you saved. Now, when you brought these pages home, how long did they stay in a box unread?

K: My sister Kay kept that. She's the one that was kind of...

T: You sent these to your folks.

K: Yes. Send them in a letter.

T: And they saved them.

K: And my dad would say, "Here's another one."

T: A picture of a nurse. So it was possible to write things and send things.

K: You could send things home as long as you didn't give any information.

T: Did your folks know you were in Hawaii?

K: Yes they did, but the only address they could put on was: APO San Francisco.

T: But they knew you were in Hawaii?

K: Yes. My mother said, you better get a picture taken of yourself. So we had one, and that's the picture up there. And I had to get that out for the article in the *Star Tribune*.

T: It's an official Navy photograph. You went to get that picture taken or they just took it for you?

K: I went down to Honolulu and had the picture taken, by a little Japanese guy.

T: There it is (*looks at photo*). On a different subject, I'm wondering if you made lasting contacts during your time in the service--people that you worked with that you kept in touch with afterwards?

K: There's a Bob Dillmore, from Dillmore Funeral Homes. He was over there with me. And a number of old guys have already passed away, like Bob Dunn. There's pictures of me in with him somewhere around here. The three of us. Another one that had a filling station, and he died. We're dying, World War II veterans, at fifteen hundred per day.

T: Yes. Now, have you really kept in touch? Have you kept in touch with people really since the war ended?

K: Not too much. Once in a while I call Bob Dillmore. It's a generation that's gone.

T: In the '50s and '60s were you in contact with people then? Was it something that you sort of did...

K: We had a reunion at one time. Of the guys who were overseas with us. It was a fun deal.

**(2, A, 197)**

T: When was that?

K: I bet it was in the mid-'60s sometime. There's pictures of that around here too, someplace.

T: And you went to the reunion.

K: Yes.

T: What prompted you to go?

K: They said, "Ken, you've got to come to the reunion." So I said "Okay, let's go." My wife Mary went with me. The guys were all around having a few belts and talking it over.

T: Talking what over?

K: I said to Bob Dillmore, I said, "Bob, you know..." He said, "We had kind of a country club war." He was a mortician. Looking at bodies all the time. I don't know if he was in that much treating patients. Hawaii is a beautiful area. That's in that letter. Beautiful and amorous, the whole thing. And it's true, we didn't get to get killed and get out there. If we were called we had to go.

T: Yes, but you're right, that in a sense, your personal safety was never really an issue.

K: Not big jeopardy there, even though there were nine LSTs that blew up in the harbor and they think it was somebody welding down below on one of the ships that probably caused it. Bodies were all over. But I was on the USS *Biloxi* coming over here and they had a warning of a possible Japanese sub in the area, and the planes were catapulted off and they dropped all kinds of depth charges. It was just terrific, the sounds and everything.

Oh, I didn't tell you, that when there was no place for us to sleep on the *Biloxi*, we had to sleep on hatches. During the day we could sleep on the main seaman's bunks. At night we had to sleep on the floor, or wherever there was room. Over hatches. Every place.

T: How long was the trip over there?

K: I think it was about a week. We'd go through terrible storms. We would be walking on the bulkheads--which is walls. Then you'd come back over again, and so they said, don't go up top, no one go up. They'd get washed off. Settled down to a little bit.

T: Moving to another theme. You were in Hawaii when President Roosevelt died in April of 1945.

K: Yes.

T: I'm wondering how you reacted to that news.

K: I was saddened by that. I figured he was an old man. He was going to die. And he had a lot of problems with polio. I had polio when I was fifteen, but I didn't have any problems. Most of them don't.

T: When the war ended against Germany in May of '45 you were still in Hawaii.

K: Yes.

T: How much of an impact did that have on you?

K: That was a nice feeling, but there were no big celebrations. We had a big celebration when ours was over in the Pacific.

T: So the when the war against Germany ended, it didn't impact you that personally.

K: Not that much, no. But when the war ended in the Pacific, a flash came over the radio that it was all over. They were signing the treaties, and I grabbed a bugle off the wall—I was on night duty—and I started blowing the bugle right then in the middle of the night. It was, I think, towards morning. The guys, "What in the hell is going on? What's going on around here?" And I said, "The war is over." It was a celebration. Kind of a great feeling.

T: How would you describe how you felt? I mean in a sense, you had now spent the entire war in Hawaii.

K: You feel guilty. Yes.

T: Can you talk about that a bit?

**(2, A, 249)**

K: Well, I felt lucky, in a way, that I didn't have to go into any invasions, because a very high percentage got killed.

T: Were you slated to be part of the invasion of Japan?

K: I wouldn't have known that. They used the bomb and they didn't bother going in.

T: That's right.

K: I remember grabbing the bugle off the wall and blasting that thing. Yes, that was about it. We toasted each other if we could find a beer someplace.

T: How about the sense of guilt you mentioned a moment ago?

K: Well, there is a little bit, you know. So many guys were wounded and shot and killed and legs off and everything else, and there you are, healthy and taking care of them. At the same time you think, well, somebody has to be here to pick up and take care and do something for them. It was a different time in our history. A feeling of patriotism and of feeling you're in for your country. I think they're being taught now in schools not to even like America that much. And they say sixty percent of them come out and say they wouldn't fight for our country.

T: You said you felt a sense of patriotism. Did that mean at that time that you felt you should have done more than simply sat in Hawaii?

K: It was my duty. That's where I was assigned and I took it. If they said go someplace else, if they said bend over, I'd bend over.

T: So for you in a sense, did that make it easier to sort of accept the fact that you had not been exposed to much greater danger?

K: I knew that I could be drawn any time, but I was just missing it. That's all. Maybe tomorrow. You just kept doing your work and getting it done, and doing it and going from day to day.

T: Because you really could have worried yourself sick about this, I suppose.

K: Oh, yes. I didn't worry about it. I'd see the guys coming back that were my buddies and they would be wounded. A number of them killed. They said, "Hey Ken, don't worry. You won't go. They're going to send me back out again because I got experience."

T: Is that what happened, too?

K: Yes, because I'd be green if I went out there and got into battle and stuff, starting to put in plasma and...

T: That seems almost like an unlucky turn of events. In one sense once you get sent out, you get sent out again because, unfortunately, now you're experienced.

K: Yes. That's right. And that would happen many times. They did whatever was the most efficient, and if a person had experience, they'd get them again. Even some soldiers that didn't get wounded that badly, get them out again.

T: Was there an organized celebration at the place you worked in Hawaii?

K: I think we got together in one of the halls and had some food and champagne and a few things. Got it together as best you could.

T: Ken, how soon did your thoughts turn to getting out of there and going back to the United States?

**(2, A, 291)**

K: When the war was over I wondered how long it was going to take before I was mustered out. I can remember now being in Hawaii, when I was first there, I'd go outside and I'd look up at the moon, and I'd say, now that same moon, I wonder if that's over my home? The time lapse difference is not going to make a big difference. I tried to make a connection that way between home and where I was.

T: Did you find yourself thinking about home more often once the war was over?

K: Yes. Somewhat. I would write the folks. I said, "When I get home I want you to have things ready. I'm going to drink a beer with you, Mother." The whole thing.

T: You were thinking more...

K: Yes. Yes. And I had the jungle rot and I was limping around a little bit. Very thin. I wasn't eating that much again. I got on the ship, the *Solace*, and was shipped back to San Francisco and I ran into my brother, Don. We went to the top of the Mark and we had dinner there, and I recited some of my poetry to him. "Holy shoot, Ken! I can't believe it. You wrote that?" I said, "Oh yes. And I do it for you from memory." Then we went into Chinatown. Had our picture taken in a comical picture.

T: This is by accident you ran into your brother?

K: No. Evidently I must have had a connection by phone, or some way I could get a hold of him. Then he met me.

T: Because he was stationed out there, wasn't he?

K: Yes. He was in Frisco. Around that area.

T: You weren't a person who considered a career in the service?

K: No.

T: When you started to think about life after the service, what did you think about?

K: You know what? You didn't know what the hell you were going to do.

T: Is that the honest truth?

K: True. And I think a great majority of young people don't know what they're going to do. But when I was in grade school...

T: You were born in 1924. You weren't even twenty-two years old yet.

K: Yes. When I was in grade school the teacher would ask us, what do you want to do when you grow up? And everybody would say fireman. They were going to be this... or a policeman. I said I'm going to be a radio broadcaster. That's what I said when I was just a little guy. There again, I become what I said I wanted to be.

T: Yes. Before you were out of the service, or even when you got out, what I hear you saying is, you really weren't sure what you were going to do?

K: No. I went to university for two years, and I said you know, I think I'll get into broadcasting school. Then I joined the Brown Institute.

T: Is that in Minneapolis too?

K: Yes. It's a big outfit. Computers and everything. I took radio broadcasting. I figured I always had a terrible voice, high voice. But I said, I want to make it.

**(2, A, 329)**

T: But it took you a while to come to the conclusion of what you wanted to do.

K: Yes.

T: But you did go to the University of Minnesota pretty soon after you were discharged.

K: Yes.

T: What prompted you to go to college?

K: I thought it was a good thing to be. Get a little education. People accept you a little better. I studied voice at McPhail.

T: About the same time or after that?

K: I was mixing that all together. I had my tonsils out and then I quit that.

T: How important was the GI Bill for you?



K: That took care of the university expenses. You see, when we were young people there wasn't any government help at all. I was mentioning that to my brother-in-law, Ted. He said, oh, yes, you had GI Bill. It's true. Sent us to school. After that there was nothing. I went to Richland Center, Wisconsin. It was one of my first radio jobs. That's the first radio job I had. My wife and I moved into a home with the floor slanted. And the furnace was bad. I got a call one time. The guy said you may not wake up some morning. The furnace. So I was doing my best to check that out. Then I would take the kindling and break it over my knee because I didn't have a hatchet. I couldn't afford one. And if you ever bought any beer you'd buy just a six-pack and have that.

T: So things were a little tight then, money-wise.

K: But you know what, you didn't think anything of it. I'd say to Mary, we've got to get some groceries. Where did we get them last time? So and so. We go to the other grocery store now. You could charge. You charge it and pay the first guy off. Get the groceries from the second one. I don't know why we did that. It seemed it was logical. Maybe we were behind a little bit.

T: You were married in 1948, is that right?

K: 1949.

T: When you first got out of the service, when you were discharged in early 1946, what was your initial reaction to being out of the military? Putting the uniform off and being a civilian again.

K: Just took it in stride. I worked in a munitions plant for a while. Filled bandoleers with bullets and things like that.

T: Here in the Twin Cities?

K: Yes. At New Brighton.

T: The New Brighton Arsenal.

K: Worked there for a while.

T: This was 1946 now?

K: Yes. I did such a good job the guy kept on promoting me. I said, "I want to put the ammunition out to the train, in the boxes." He said, "No, no, you're not strong enough for that." I said, "Oh, yes. I can do it." But he said, "I don't want you to do that. You could hurt yourself." "No, I'll do it." So I did that for about two weeks and finally left that job.

T: Were you living with your folks at this time?

K: Yes. And they would take your check and they'd spend it. They would give me two dollars. So they were hand to mouth also. That was shortly after the Depression. The Depression was still going.

T: Well, by 1946 your folks were doing better than before the war, I take it.

K: Yes.

T: So you were living at home in 1946 when you got out of the service, so you didn't have to try to find a place to live.

K: No. I lived there. I lived in a bedroom with my two sisters. They slept in a bed over here and I slept across... there was a carpet between. That's what you did. You put up what you had. You had to. Another thing, Tom, we never had counselors. In the war you would see all the killing and we were never sent in to see a counselor. There was no counselor.

T: On that subject, did you find yourself being bothered by images or memories from the war, or even afterwards?

K: Oh, not too bad. Not too bad. That's why I think that it's a lot of proliferation, whatever it is, with all these counselors in school. We need to get rid of a lot of that stuff. Learn more arithmetic, writing and reading, and history. People are missing out on history. Kids don't even know who Washington was. We have to get back to that. I know when I was in school, kids were dying or ran out and got killed. We said, "Oh, Frank died. Well, that's too bad." No counselor came along and said, well now you better sit down and we have to talk this over with a grief counselor.

T: So things have changed.

K: Yes.

T: But in a sense, how much had changed? Here you are living back with your folks again, in 1946. Twenty-two years old now. How was it being back in the house again?

K: I knew it was a temporary thing. I was going to go to school. Met Mary at St. Mary's Hospital. I was paying my way. I was working. You never stop working. We worked all the time. We had to work every day.

T: So while you were going to school, you were also working?

K: I got out of the ammunition plant and I worked in a plant where they put out the disinfectants to kill everything. Insecticides and stuff like that.

T: Since you got out of the service you were doing this?

K: I had to have a mask. You put a mask on and they said, use the mask or you will get very sick otherwise. You have to keep the mask on. I shoveled that into sacks and stuff. Then I quit that job and...

T: So you moved from job to job for a while after the service.

K: They were just little jobs you find here and there. You went along. All of a sudden I had my own place.

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 386**

T: You had your own place.

K: Then I went to radio school. So now I'm going toward an occupation for my lifetime.

T: You were in you mid-twenties by this time.

K: Yes. Now I can figure out what I'm going to do. And my folks said, "You shouldn't go into radio. "No. No," I said, "this is one time in life this is my own mind. I'm going to do it." "Okay." So I went to the broadcasting school, and when I got finished with the broadcasting school, they said they got me a job up at Richland Center, Wisconsin. I worked there a while. Then I went out to Iron River, Michigan.

T: Upper Peninsula?

K: I worked there at the radio station. Then I started doing broadcasting also. Classical music. From there I got a call to WDMY. They said, we'd like to have you down here to work in the Twin Cities. I moved to the Twin Cities.

T: You stayed in radio really since...

K: All my life. Yes.

T: Let me conclude here by sort of... a chance to be a philosopher here. You're a poet already. When you were in the service and the war was on, what did the war mean for you personally at that time? What was it all about?

K: You're quite young yet. My country. You feel patriotic. You want to defend your country, but you still have that kind of young naïve thinking about yourself. You're taking orders and doing your job. I felt a pride and I still do today. I feel pride that I've written... Randy, over at the Minneapolis paper, when I told him you gave an

old vet new pride. I had served this country. I feel that anyone should be ready to defend this country.

T: Now is this sense of pride something new to you, or is it something you've really always felt?

K: Always felt that for my country. Yes. I think that it's now being abandoned. We should get back to that. This is not the country that causes evil. We are not the aggressors. We will be written up as an arrogant country and get all that power, and therefore that's why they bombed the towers [in New York City in September 2001]. That isn't where we're at. Nothing to do with it. They are extremely jealous of our freedom and the great wealth of our country. How anybody can do that? Do anything they want if they make up their mind. Americans, women don't have to wear covers over their face. Just free. But in some way or other they being instilled with the idea that America, a lot of children are...

I got my two young nephews over here. They said well, America, (\*\*\*) . We are so powerful. People hate us for that. I said we've never taken over a country. When we fight, we liberate a country. Then build them back up again. Like Japan and Germany, and none of them have we ever taken over so we want to gain new land. We only on... their cause for freedom for other people. Got laws here. Took care of that. Protect the Islamic faith through that. So how they would teach such a thing I don't know. If you want me to lecture at your school... They'd probably throw me out.

T: Final question, Ken. What do you think is the most important way that the war changed your life?

K: I think the war made me a man quicker. "If it's to be done, let it be done quickly," as Shakespeare said. I became a man quite quickly. Going through the whole thing in the boot camp and the whole works. What was the latter part of your question?

T: What was the most important way that the war changed your life? I hear you saying, this change in maturing much faster.

K: Yes, and you realize the magnificence of this country. You realize there is no way to describe the magnificence of America.

**(2, B, 477)**

T: Did you realize that then, or only as an older...

K: Well, it matured you. But when you see how they live in other places, like even in Mexico... I was there for vacation a while ago. You see the poverty all over. Canada, they've got socialism going. And yet that's one of the better... And England there's problems. They don't even have air conditioning. The wealthier people don't even have air conditioning. They're crowded into places. They have very little of

anything. Medicine is way behind. Even though my son-in-law said they have come up with quite a few new drugs. This is not socialism yet, like [former US Senator Paul] Wellstone wanted us to have. Nice person, great guy, but he was misled there.

T: Let me ask you this, if you think about your own life path, did the war change your life path in any way? How might it have gone?

K: If I hadn't gone to war?

T: Yes.

K: Well, I had the idea I wanted to get into broadcasting when I was a little kid. I might have gone that route. I also was thinking about being a doctor. I wasn't smart enough. They were talking about Dr. MacCarthy [Aidan MacCarthy, Irish doctor of the Royal Air Force who was captured by the Japanese during WWII] overseas. He said he darned near didn't get to be a doctor because he was terrible at math. He had a special tutor. I probably would too. I think I could have been a good doctor.

T: But as far as career choice, you had thought about broadcasting, your ultimate career choice, even before you were in the service.

K: That's right.

T: The service was, in a sense a period, but you see a bridge over from before to after.

K: Yes.

T: You didn't change that much, you are saying.

K: Yes. I think, as I said in the first part of our conversation when you first got here, that whatever you make your mind up to do, you can do. I had wanted that place in the Creek and I got that. I wanted a place at the lake and I got that. I wanted to marry a beautiful woman. I got that. Everything I wanted. And I never was wealthy. I would get... I would steal... whatever it was... I would find some way to do it.

T: Did the war make you more determined, in a sense, or did it just simply distract you from something for a while?

K: It was a fairly severe distraction. And I thought in a way, that maybe some of the things I wanted to do would be held up because I've wasted a lot of time. Not wasted, but I was away for almost three years.

T: Yes.

K: I was not getting into college when you're nineteen. I would have to go when I was in my twenties.

T: When you did go to college, were there other veterans around there?

K: Oh, yes.

T: When you saw other veterans and you knew that guys were veterans, is the war experience something that people talked about frequently or...

K: It's an amazing thing. It was very seldom.

T: Really? You kind of knew but you didn't...

K: For fifty years I never mentioned the war. I never mentioned that I even wrote any poetry. I went along. They always knew I liked classical music. Everybody knew that. I could sit in the corner of my cabin with Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2, and be in tears today yet.

T: Why is it that you didn't talk about this? Was this something that you didn't think that people cared to hear about?

K: In a way. You just put it on the shelf. Put it away. Everybody seemed to be a vet anyway.

T: That's a good point.

K: Recently, about two years ago, I'm getting my eyes checked and I told the gal, "I'm an old World War II veteran." Now I'm having fun doing this. I said, "You know, you've gotta be careful with my eyes, checking them, because you're very beautiful." And she said, "If you really were a real warrior, you would have never mentioned that. Guys that go overseas don't talk." She told me that. I said, "Listen, I'm not taking you out to dinner." (*laughs*). She was just a young girl.

T: Curious she should say that though.

K: She said that nicely, but that's what she's heard, that men don't talk about, real men, don't talk about the war. Real men in World War I didn't talk about it. World War II. And I don't think it's because they decisively thought that (\*\*\*) , they just didn't think about doing it. Now I'm getting old, and my hair is gray, and I've become very philosophic, and I say, you know, when I feel pride that I served my country. I go tell somebody. "You know what? I was in World War II." "God bless you. Let me shake your hand." Wow!

T: Do you like the response you get from people?

K: I like that. Make me feel kind of good. So now I use it, sort of, with some chicanery. I had to get my air conditioning fixed in the car. See, I always had a brand new car every year. Now that I'm retired I got a '94 car. So the air conditioning is going out, and it takes \$300, \$260 another place, \$259 another place. So I went to my Mobil Station where they do all that type of work, and I said, "You know, I have to get my air conditioning. Do you know I'm an old World War II guy? Took four rounds in the left leg."

T: You didn't say that!

K: And I said, "You know, I don't know how much lifetime I have left, but I have to get my air conditioning fixed." And they said, you know it's going to be a high, pricey thing to do. "I just don't know." He looked at me and said, "My dad was at the same war with you. Just give me fifty dollars and I'll fix it." I said, "Really?" *(laughs)*

T: Were you shocked that he bought it?

K: Yes I was. I said, "You know what, I'll do business here the rest of my life and I'll have my children come here after I'm gone. Not only that, I'll put you in my will." And he went (\*\*\*)

T: A great salesman is born, and not made, it seems.

K: Right. One time I went into Bob's Produce and I asked for some chicken breast. I said, "That's not chicken breast." Ever been to Bob's Produce on University? It's just a stopover there--all first class. You know what I do. I come in here. She says "Can I help you?" I said, "No, I just come in here to look at the food."

T: Straight face you're saying this, now.

K: "It looks so good." I said, "I'm an old World War II guy. I don't know. I think I'd get a couple breasts and maybe a chicken leg, but it would be way too..." She said, "Well, let's fix you up with some." I said, "Well, how much is it?" She said, "Well to get a carton of it runs..." like seven, eight or nine dollars--I forget. And I said "You only get two breasts in that. I want all right breasts because I'm conservative." And she filled the thing with all kinds of breasts and chicken legs and everything plumb full to the top. "Here you are. Take that. You poor World War II guy. God bless you." A lot of people say: God bless you.

T: A salute. Have you noticed an increase, or a change, in peoples' response to you as a vet since what happened on September 11?

K: Yes. There's much more.

T: Pronounced.

K: Yes. It seems that they look at you with a certain sacredness.

T: In awe.

K: Yes. And they say, "Can I touch you?"

T: So there was an impact there. A kind of change in public mood.

K: Patriotism is coming back regardless, just because of what's happened. With a strong leader, we are reinventing patriotism again where people are thinking: Yes. My gosh, they blew the towers and thousands were killed.

T: It's interesting that you as a veteran of a by-gone era have also, in a sense, benefited from that kind of paradigm shift in patriotism in the last year and a half. Two years now.

K: Yes.

T: Very interesting.

K: I've got to talk to you now as a professor who I think of very highly.

T: Ken, thank you for your time here today.

**END OF INTERVIEW**