

2004

James Krantz

The 497th Bomb Group/ the 869th Bomb Squadron

This interview is being conducted on James Krantz.

Go ahead and state your full name and where and when you were born.

Mr. Krantz: James Krantz or better known as Jim. I was born January 20, 1922, in Montgomery County which is about three miles from where I am right now.

Is that at Gateway Hospital? Do they have that there?

Mr. Krantz: No, no there wasn't a hospital in Clarksville at that time.

What branch of the service did you serve in and what was your primary unit that you served in?

Mr. Krantz: I went in the U.S. Army and was transferred to the Army Air Corp. I was still in basic training. I trained in B-17's for a total of about six months. Then I was transferred in to the B-29 unit which they were developing at that time. Then I started training after that and went to another ____ school and wound up close to Mexico and formed a crew of eleven people on the 29. We flew in B-17's for the first three phases of our training and the 29's came out and we finished the last phase of our training with the B-29. We stayed in Herrington, Kansas until the Marines had secured Saipan. We got a runway to where we could land when we went over there. I was the fourth plane that landed in Saipan. We didn't have enough runways to take off. We were there for about six weeks before we could make our first runway landing on Japan. We made our first bombing raid on November 24th, 1944.

Let me slow you down a little bit. What were your parent's names and what were their occupations?

Mr. Krantz: My dad's name was James Anderson Frantz and my mom was Ora ____ Frantz. They were sharecroppers. After the war broke out my dad started _____. He had been doing some for over a year. He worked on a farm the rest of his life. He did that from the time he was fifteen to sixty-four.

Do you have any brother and sisters?

Mr. Krantz: I have two sisters; one older and one younger.

How long did you remain in school? Did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Krantz: I graduated from the 8th grade. I completed 22 Tech courses since I came out of school. I started a job and if I needed something I got a tech course.

To join the military did you need any type of....did they look for a high school diploma?

Mr. Krantz: You mean in the Air Corp?

Yeah when you joined the Air Corp.

Mr. Krantz: No. I was drafted right in to the Army. I was working at Curtis Wright Aircraft in St. Louis, Missouri when the war broke out. It was in 1941. I went to work out there in October. I was frozen on the job until December of 1942. I went in to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. I started my training there and was transferred into St. Petersburg, Florida and did my basic training and that is where I was transferred to the Army Air Corp.

You were drafted into the Army first and then you went into the Army Air Corp? Let's talk about the Great Depression. Do you have any recollection of the Great Depression?

Mr. Krantz: I lived through it.

How did it affect your family?

Mr. Krantz: We lived on a farm on the Cumberland River and we raised everything we ate. We raised tobacco although we didn't get anything out of it. We started fishing in 1932. We got a commercial fishing license and we fished from 1932 to 1936. That is when things began to break a little bit; we could get a job doing different things. We still farm. My dad did and hired out the other people on the farm. I worked for .50 cents a day when I was seventeen and eighteen. I worked from daylight to dark. I rode a bicycle for a mile and carried my lunch.

(tape skip from 6:03-6:30)

Mr. Krantz: I went to school down there for thirteen weeks at night for five nights a week. I was guaranteed a job at the time of finishing that school. After I finished that school I went to Baltimore, Maryland at Glen L. Martin for three months. Then I transferred from there to St. Louis because it was closer to home.

This was before you were in the military?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah. This was before the war broke out.

So what year was that?

Mr. Krantz: This was in the early '40's.

Before Pearl Harbor, how seriously did you take the threat to America from the Nazi's and the Japanese?

Mr. Krantz: Well we didn't know too much about it at that time. We barely knew what was happening except for what we seen in the papers or heard on the radio.

(7:26-7:34 tape skips)

Now you were living in St. Louis at the time?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah I got married to my wife. I got married in January of 1942. She came out there from here. We lived on the farm together. We had planned on getting married after the war started and I was frozen to the job but I got her to come up there. We lived up there until I went into the service. She came back here and after the war was over I came back here.

Living in the city did you read any newspapers or keep up with the news or the events between 1939 and 1941 or did it seem remote or did it touch your life directly?

Mr. Krantz: I read newspapers when I got them but we didn't have newspapers out in the country. I would get one if somebody threw it away sometimes.

Do you recall where you were when you heard the news about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah, I worked that night at Curtis Wright Aircraft. I was rooming with a boy and we worked days. Every Sunday morning after we would get in from work we would have breakfast and go to church. After church we went across the street and seen a couple of _____. We went to the movie and at that time the news would come on before the picture started. That is when I first heard of it.

So it wasn't like September 11th where it was just spontaneous?

Mr. Krantz: No, Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor that morning I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was. Most people didn't know where Pearl Harbor was.

Did you listen to FDR's speech and "the day that shall live in infamy" the following day?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah, I heard the speech that morning before I went to work.

At that point did you feel that the war had reached American shores and how it was going to affect you?

Mr. Krantz: I went to work that night at midnight and we could hardly get into the plant. The Army had done took over the plant. They had guards everywhere. From that day on that is the way it was.

Did you approve of the way that FDR handled his office in the beginning of the war?

Mr. Krantz: Yes, very much so. We didn't have anything to fight with. The people banded together. The women went to work and the old men that couldn't go to war; they went into these factories and started turning out planes and ships and everything else.

So you saw immediate change in America with everything?

Mr. Krantz: The changes happened just about overnight. They came out with the rations program. Everything was rationed: gas, tires, shoes, food and you had to get food stamps to get anything you bought at stores; meat, cereal and coffee. The way it was set up was they issued you a stamp and it depended on how many you had in your family.

When did you realize that you had a draft date and did you have a preference for the branch of service?

Mr. Krantz: I wanted to go to the Navy at the time that it broke out. But the government or whoever had froze us to our jobs. I went in ___ plant and worked there until December. I had three deferments; six month deferments. I got two six month deferments and when the third one came up it was over the Christmas holidays and I didn't get a deferment until I went in the service. At that time I couldn't get into anything because all the branches were closed because of the Christmas holidays. So I went in the Army. I was drafted in the Army.

Did you have an idea of what you wanted to do; what kind of task: infantry, artillery or engineers?

Mr. Krantz: No, after I went in I just took what came my way. By working with aircraft, I was steered in that direction from day one.

What year did you draft or should I say enlist into the Army?

Mr. Krantz: December of 1942.

Did you go to an induction center and were you tested for skill and did you civilian job have something to do with the military?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah. I stayed at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri for a week. I got loaded off the troop train where we went to St. Petersburg, Florida for basic training and that is where we got our classifications. We went to different classes down there for classification.

What were your impressions on your fellow recruits? Were you all gung-ho and ready?

Mr. Krantz: We were all about the same. By coming the way we did from wherever that was that we both came from the aircraft factory and other guys that I was with. A lot of us wound up at the same schools all the way through. Some of wound up in Saipan together. In fact I still got one guy who is in Florida now that I flew with. I talked to him last week and he is about the only one I got left that I know of.

You had already moved to Baltimore from St. Louis so you were far from home at the time. But once you got up with your fellow recruits were they far from home or were these local boys.

Mr. Krantz: When I went in at St. Louis most of the people I went in with was from St. Louis. Of course I was living there to for a year. I didn't know anybody from this area at all. Most of the people that went in were from the aircraft factories. That is where most of the troops went in at the time that I went in. Most of them went in to the Air Corp after we went in the Army.

Did you participate in any of the maneuvers stateside?

Mr. Krantz: No. The only thing we had was _____ in Kansas. We didn't do any ground maneuvers all of our was flying. We flew all over the Midwest and Texas. We were training for _____ bombing.

So you went into the Army and then from the Army you were selected for the Air Corp. How good did you think your training was for that task?

Mr. Krantz: Well everything was guided toward the Pacific. I was classified as a gunner and electrician from the B-29. That picture there shows you the inside of my plane. We had a lot of electrical wires happening then. I loved my job on the plane as an electrician and a gunner. I was raised with guns being a kid on a farm. I had my first gun when I was eight years old that I went squirrel hunting and rabbit hunting with. That was all fairly easy for me.

So you felt very prepared to fight?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah.

How good were the living conditions in the camps?

Mr. Krantz: It was better than average. I think the Air Force was better than average for the buildings that we were in. When we got overseas we had a building and a mess hall and if we got back we had a place to sleep. If we didn't get back we didn't have a place to sleep anyway. More than likely infantry might sleep in foxholes night after night. This brother-in-law of mine that I was telling you about that was in the Army, I could give you his name. He spent one whole winter in the Battle of the Bulge in Germany in the ice and the snow living in a pup tent in below zero weather for the whole winter. My condition was a lot better than his.

What kind of unit did you serve in immediately after your advanced training; after your training in Kansas what was your unit doing?

Mr. Krantz: I was still going to school for the B-17 _____ which was going to Germany. Most of my outfit at that time went to Germany. But in Seattle I was pulled off of that

probe and put on a B-29 probe. I was the only from my class at that time that was pulled off and went to the B-29.

So when you moved to the B-29 program, did you have a unit?

Mr. Krantz: No, I just started over again. I didn't get a unit until I got to _____, New Mexico. That is where I got in a unit, a crew and a unit and everything.

What was that unit called?

Mr. Krantz: It was the 497th Bomb group.

The 497th Bomb Group.

Mr. Krantz: In the 869th Bomb Squadron.

How long did you train in New Mexico for this with this unit?

Mr. Krantz: We didn't do anything. We just organized and then we went to Kansas. That is where we started our training at. It was Pratt, Kansas. We were there for about five months.

You were training with the B-29's?

Mr. Krantz: With the same guys as a crew and as a unit.

How were the camps in Kansas?

Mr. Krantz: I guess it was a typical Army camp. It was a building with blackboards and stuff on the outside.

What year was it about this time?

Mr. Krantz: This was 1943.

You were well into the war at this time. When did your unit travel to overseas?

Mr. Krantz: October of 1944.

Did you get orders to go in?

Mr. Krantz: That is when we got orders to go over. We went to Saipan when they had a runway for us to land on.

Did you think you would be fighting more in the European war?

Mr. Krantz: We knew where we were going by the way we trained. We were in a long range bomber and we knew that is what they would have had in the Pacific. We flew from Saipan to Japan which was 1500 miles. It was a 3000 mile round trip all over the water. That is what we trained for so we knew where we were going to be fighting at. We just didn't know where we were going to be going from.

So you flew out of Seattle?

Mr. Krantz: No when we flew over we flew from Kansas to San Diego to Hawaii to _____ Island and on to Saipan.

Was this whole travel process all flying? Did you take any troop ships?

Mr. Krantz: No, we flew over and back. We flew over as a crew and I flew back in a hospital ship. I got wounded on January 3rd, 1945.

So you landed in, from Hawaii you went to what was the name of the island?

Mr. Krantz: _____ Islands, Marshall Islands.

Were you housed in temporary or permanent barracks once you got there?

Mr. Krantz: On Saipan? It was a medal hut. It was new; it had just been built by the engineers. When the Marines went through there, there was nothing left behind. The whole thing was leveled out.

So that was your permanent place?

Mr. Krantz: That was my permanent place, yes.

Did you have civilian contacts? Did you have civilian contacts in the area?

Mr. Krantz: No.

Did you see combat soon after arriving or was there a prolonged training period?

Mr. Krantz: No, we didn't have a training period. We were just getting ready to go. We might have had a class or two. We were waiting for them to get a runway enough for us to take off. We were there about three weeks from the time we got there to the time we made our first mission.

At this time you are still with the same?

Mr. Krantz: Oh yeah, the same crew and everything.

Did you have officers and NCO's?

Mr. Krantz: We had five officers on the crew and six enlisted men.

What was your impression of these men?

Mr. Krantz: We were always like brothers. We trained together. We were family. We knew what everyone could do and what their abilities were and what we could depend on. That is what a crew is all about. We were a close knit crew. In our squadron we had ten planes that we all trained together on. In a combat flight we all covered one another in a real tight formation. The fighters couldn't come in from nowhere because all the gunners were protecting the whole squadron.

You are a gunner, is that the type of equipment that you trained with?

Mr. Krantz: It was the same gun, but we had a different system and on the 29 it was completely new. It was the largest airplane in the air at that time.

I have only seen several movies. Is it like the Memphis Belle?

Mr. Krantz: It's bigger than the Memphis Belle. We had a tail gunner here and a gunner on each side and a gunner on the top.

How did the equipment operate in combat? Did you ever have a lot of problems?

Mr. Krantz: I didn't have any problems. We could actually work on the equipment in the air. We stayed below 10,000 feet we could tear a turret down and work on it before you got up above us. If you got above 10,000 feet you got to have oxygen in the pressurized cabin. We stayed below 10,000 feet and we were flying 7 hours without it ____ until we got to Japan.

Once you got to Japan what was your first experience in combat like and what kind of reaction did you and the others have in your unit?

Mr. Krantz: The first raid we made we were the 1st Squadron. I was in the 1st squadron of the third jet. There were ten of us in the squadron. We went in as sort of a surprise to them. The Tokyo radio was still on the air to them when we started dropping the bombs. So they didn't know we were there. We were flying from 30,000 feet. We didn't get much ____ but the squadron behind us that ran an opposition we woke them up and we came up to them. From then on out we made opposition from the time we got to the ____.

How did it feel to be shot at and to have to shoot back?

Mr. Krantz: It was one of those things you trained to do. You did what you had to do.

It was either kill or be killed. How would you describe the cohesion inside your unit or inside your plane; the brotherhood /

Mr. Krantz: Everybody was working on _____. They were taking care of one another. One crew was taking care of another crew. We had the area covered to keep the fighters away from us until we could get to the target and drop the bomb. After we dropped the bomb, we came off the target and came back to Saipan in single file. That is when we could really throttle down and get the most efficient out of the engines and everything. We were running close on gas supply. We were flying 3000 miles and coming back we would float in a lot of the time.

What did you do in your free time?

Mr. Krantz: We didn't have any free time. We had movies on the island at night; outside movies which they built up and they had sandbags to sit on. You had to fight the mosquitoes.

Did you write a lot of letters and receive mail from your wife?

Mr. Krantz: I wrote a letter just about every night if I wanted.

When you received mail was it delayed?

Mr. Krantz: Sometimes it would take maybe ten days to two weeks from the time that we wrote to the time we received it.

Did you play cards, read, or play sports to pass the time?

Mr. Krantz: We played cards; hearts was the main card game at that time. We did a lot of scuba diving all over the ivory coast of where we were at. There wasn't a beach there just shallow water running out. We could wade out.

How much time do you normally have between engagements?

Mr. Krantz: Our missions ran 15-17 hours. We were in the air that long. Most of the time we would take off at daylight and get back about 10 or 11 o'clock that night and the next day we would be getting to go the next day. From November 24th until January 3rd I made _____.

What was it like on the ships because you were on the ships for 17 hours? Did you eat on the ships?

Mr. Krantz: We took a lunch with us and had drinking water. Before we got to the target we would have two people at least in the back watching and advise us of ships.... (dvd messes up) when we got home most of the time we had a lot of stuff to do. The plane was shot up or this or that or the other so we had to take care of that. We had troubles. One time we lost an engine over the target. The engine burnt off. We lost that in a ditch in Tokyo Bay; we let the fire out and we coasted home on that one. You don't do

anything when you are up there and don't know whether you are going to get down or not. You're praying and doing everything else.

Did you feel sleep deprived and overworked on the planes?

Mr. Krantz: We were always worn out.

Were you promoted during your time and service?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah, _____. I was a Sergeant when we came out.

What did you come in as?

Mr. Krantz: A private.

How long were you in the service?

Mr. Krantz: Three years. I came out after the war was over. I was still in the hospital when the war was over and I came out the next month.

Did you feel your unit ___ recent recruits or was it pre-war Army, Navy?

Mr. Krantz: The airplane commander was the oldest one we had in there; in fact in the whole squadron. He had been in the rural Canadian Air Force before the war broke out. He was from Montana and he had gone to the Canadian Air Force ____ and then he transferred into the Army Air Corp after the war broke out. He had been in some time. I don't know how long.

So he had a lot of experience? Were you impressed with the qualities of the enemy: leadership, bravery, ability to withstand hardship?

Mr. Krantz: The one big difference between them and us was they were told to die for their emperor. It was an honor for them to die for their emperor. It is pretty hard to fight somebody so to die is to win. That is the difference between us and them. We would die if we had to but we didn't do it just because somebody told us to. We were fighting to live and they were fighting for the emperor.

Did you come to respect the average enemy soldier? What would you use in your own words to describe your feelings?

Mr. Krantz: I felt like most of them were doing what they had to do and was taught to do; the same as we were. I think based on some of the people that were on the ground and fought hand-to-hand combat; they found some that were just like we were. Some of them even made friends. I had one guy from my squadron that was shot down in a prisoner-of-war camp and the war was over right out of Tokyo. He made friends with one of the

guards at the camp and he went back over there after the war was over several times and studied their culture through this guy that he made friends with.

So you realized that these people had family at home just like you did?

Mr. Krantz: That's right.

Were you part of any type of Occupation force among civilians after the war was over?

Mr. Krantz: No.

You came back to the states? Were you ever wounded and how good was the medical treatment that you received?

Mr. Krantz: I was wounded and I came out on disability.

How were you wounded?

Mr. Krantz: I got blown out of the side of a plane and blown outside for 15 minutes. I got froze and frostbite at 30,000 feet in 38 degrees below zero.

Could your crew not get to you? Could they not get you back in the plane?

Mr. Krantz: They got to me after they got off of the target. This happened over the target. We had 3 other pilots in the air against us plus all the enemy anti-aircraft. _____ You are only supposed to live at that altitude 15 seconds or less without oxygen. I was out fifteen minutes without oxygen. So they weren't worrying too much about me because I wasn't supposed to be alive anyway. After they got back away from the target they pulled me back inside and put an oxygen mask on me and I came to. From there back to Saipan which was 7 hours later, every time I would come to they would give me a shot of morphine to knock me out to keep me from going into shock. I stayed in the hospital there until after the war was over. This was in January; the war was over in August.

Did you receive any medals?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah I got the Purple Heart and the Air Medal and some of the basic theatre medals.

How did you earn your Purple Heart?

Mr. Krantz: By getting hurt.

Did you complete the mission even though you were hanging outside the plane?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah. We had dropped the bombs or were in the process of dropping the bombs when they got off the target and put me back in and several hours later we landed at Saipan. That was one of the days we stayed in the air over 17 hours on a 15 hour gas supply. That is one of them times they floated in. But after you drop the bomb the mission was complete. The plane might not get back but the mission was done.

Did you know a lot of other units or other planes that didn't make it back?

Mr. Krantz: Yeah, out of our original squadron of ten planes, less than 10 percent of us got back out of the original ten. I don't know what percentage they had but I knew a lot of crews that was lost completely. The mission that I got hurt on and the mission after I got hurt on there were two crews in my outfit that got shot at. Things started getting rough; they done found out where we were at and how high we were flying and all this kind of stuff. The mission got a little bit rougher. That is about all I can tell you as far as the missions are concerned. If you didn't knock a target out, next week you might go back to the same target but it would take you three or four days to find out. We had to send a reconnaissance to actually find out how much of the target you knocked out. We had reconnaissance planes going over there all the time taking pictures. It was the way we kept up with what our knockout rate was.

You were miles and miles away from where your targets were but did you guys ever receive any enemy fire on land?

Mr. Krantz: Oh yeah. The Japanese bombed Saipan four or five times before the Marines conquered Iwo Jima. They were flying out of Iwo Jima. After the Marines took Iwo Jima we didn't have any more problems from Saipan because they didn't have any planes that they could reach us with.

Were you guys on the base at that time when you were getting

Mr. Krantz: I was on the base a couple of times when they came in. the works raid they had on the island was on the day I was on a mission off of the island. They came in about noon time that day and they tore up every B-29 that was on the ground that day.

Did you ever have a sense of the big picture? Did you know the power that was involved in beating the access power?

Mr. Krantz: I didn't know too much about what was going on in Germany because I didn't have anything to do with it. We had a pretty good picture of what we had to do in the Pacific. When I was at Pearl Harbor we had to take back every island that they take. Five months after Pearl Harbor we had already started what we call, island hopping. We took island and then another. We had to have a base close enough to where we could fly to bomb Japan.

Were you involved in any of the famous landings in the war or battles?