

Kerr: John Kerr

Interviewer: Alright were you drafted into the service or did you enlist?

Kerr: I was drafted I was not very patriotic and I was still in college and deferred until I finished up and I finished up college and then the draft board came after me. My draft board was in Loudon County and the head of the draft board was a retired major general by the name of General Hugh Matthews. And he wasn't very sympathetic with people so I asked to appear before the board instead of just going on when they called me. And I went in to be interviewed by General Matthews, he was a very distinguished looking gentleman horn rimmed glasses. And he looks down over his glasses "son what's your problem?" And I said I just wanted to explain how important I was to the Aluminum Company of America and how I should be deferred. "Son you know what's happening in Russia?" No, I'm not very good on Russian history. "Well the women are working in factories and the men are fighting and that's where you're going."

Interviewer: So after I guess you didn't get approved for your deferment where did they send you?

Kerr: Sent me Fort Oberthorpe Georgia. Most people from this area went to Fort Oberthorpe Georgia and I could tell you some more about that or maybe I should wait for your questions.

Interviewer: No how long were you in Fort Oberthorpe?

Kerr: I was there for about four weeks which is an unusually long time. Most people were sent out within ten days. But one reason I was I was very impressed at that time with life with my degree in economics so I wanted to be in the finance core. And I would go over and talk to the classification sergeant and he said "you don't belong in the finance core you belong in the medics because you've had some practical experience." And I had I worked for the Aluminum Company of America as a first aid attendant. So needless to say the army won and I ended up in the medics.

Interviewer: From Fort Oberthorpe did they send you somewhere for more medical training or?

Kerr: I was then sent to Fort Rucker Alabama. And Fort Rucker if you don't know is in the southern part of Alabama. We got on a troop train one day in Fort Oberthorpe rode all day and all night and the next morning as daylight appeared. We looked out and here were people actually, now this is 1942 people were actually plowing the fields with oxen. And the little houses still had the old oil lamps that they were using. So I thought where in the world are we we're back in ancient times.

Interviewer: So I'd say south Alabama was pretty hot on those troop trains?

Kerr: Yeah very hot fortunately this was in early June so it wasn't as hot as it would have been later on.

Interviewer: Can you tell us some stories about your basic training experiences down in Fort Rucker?

Kerr: Well let me tell you one interesting story before we get to basic training. When we arrived and got off the train and were being ushered into the barracks we said what outfit is this? And we were told by the cadre this is the Wildcat division. Wow the Wildcat division and it was it was the 81st infantry division. As far as basic trainings concerned in the medics you don't get nearly as much basic training as

you do in the infantry. And we had about six weeks of basic training and then went to our regular assigned jobs.

Interviewer: And where did they assign you?

Kerr: Well that was an interesting thing I was very disappointed when then assignments were made because a good little buddy of mine ended up in headquarters because he was a good typist. I didn't type so I was assigned to the supply unit driving a truck. However it turned out to be a very good thing for me because there were openings in the supply line and I made good progress promotion wise.

Interviewer: What city was that in? Was that in Fort Rucker?

Kerr: Fort Rucker is near Dothan Alabama.

Interviewer: Okay

Kerr: Near Troy State College which you're probably familiar with.

Interviewer: Yeah my father went to Troy State.

Kerr: Did he really?

Interviewer: Yeah that's where he went to school. We hear a lot about with people overseas about their mail being edited you know and certain stuff being cut out. Was that a problem here with you stateside with your family?

Kerr: It wasn't really a problem stateside and mail is something people look forward to whether you're overseas or your stateside and mail call each day nobody ever missed that. (Tape skipped ahead) Well you know my experience was different than a lot of people. A lot of people talk about army food and how bad it was I really enjoyed army food perhaps it was better than I've had at home. But one interesting thing I had never drank coffee until I got in the army. So it was either coffee or water and I started out drinking water at that time in southern Alabama none of the dairy herds were approved for the army so we had no milk. And I got tired of drinking water for breakfast so I started drinking coffee. But no the food the food was very good.

Interviewer: We've heard stories about people overseas how they rode bicycles around to go to different places for entertainment. What did people do stateside for entertainment?

Kerr: Well of course we were fortunate we had we're gonna need to wipe this out and start over.

Interviewer: No that's fine we edit all of it afterwards.

Kerr: What was the I started to say the united the troops that came in to entertain.

Someone in the background: USO

Interviewer: USO

Kerr: USO United Service Organization is that right. Okay let's start that over.

Interviewer: A lot of times you hear about overseas people riding bicycles to taverns and stuff for entertainment what did people do stateside to entertain their self?

Kerr: Well we were more fortunate we had a local orchestra at one of the bases where I spent the most time. Good for dancing and that sort of things and as far as transportations concerned we had buses that would take us in town and we were never really deprived of anything as far as entertainment was concerned.

Interviewer: The different places that you traveled while you were in the service.

Kerr: Well from Fort Oberthroe I told you I went to Fort Rucker. I was in Fort Rucker about six months and then I went out on the cadre to help form the new division. And this time it wasn't quite as an exotic division like Wildcat. It was merely the Acorn division the 87th division and this was in Camp McCain Mississippi. Camp McCain was a temporary cam about half way between Memphis and Jackson Mississippi. I was there about 11 months and then I was selected to go to Officers School. So I was one of those 90 day wonders and went to Officers School in Camp Barkley Texas and this is near Abilene. That colorful little town you heard about in the song. And there 90 days and from there I was assigned to the air force went down to MacDill Field in Tampa Florida. I was there a very short time and then I was assigned to the air force 3rd air force in Columbia South Carolina. There was a base across town from Fort Jackson that was very active during WWII. Triaging pilots to fly the B25s and that's where I home settled most of the war. I was there until about 6 months before I got out of the service in fact I helped close that base. And then went up to Suffers Field Michigan where this is up about 30, 40 miles north of Detroit. And I was a mess officer up there was my last assignment in the service enjoyed that I gained about 25 or 30 pounds.

Interviewer: The you know you said you were the 90 day wonder at the officer's school did you feel that prepared you at least a little bit for the job that you would be taking on?

Kerr: Yeah it did this training was very rigid very disciplined and well for example I got three demerits while I was there and I think it was ten that kicked you out of school. But I got one demerit for leaving one button on my shirt unbuttoned hanging in the closet. Now the other was a little more serious I went to sleep in class on day and I got two demerits for that. But no the training was very good very good and after you got out of that why you felt like you could lick the world.

Interviewer: Could you take us through what a typical day would be like during that training?

Kerr: Yeah up about 6 o'clock and by about 6:30 you would stand at inspection. An interesting thing there one morning we were standing inspection it came a little wind storm and blew sand around and one of the fellows in line got a demerit for having sand in his ear.

Interviewer: Wow so what came after inspection at 6:30 in the morning?

Kerr: I got off track.

Interviewer: No your fine.

Kerr: After inspection then we'd have breakfast at seven and at 8 o'clock we'd start classes. And classes would last until about four or five in the afternoon and then you would have a time for calisthenics or exercise and your day was over then you had all of your homework to do for classes the next day.

Interviewer: You mentioned about college before you were in the army. How would you compare the class at officer's school to your college classes?

Kerr: Everything was magnified you might say with the short period of time they had to cram in more. So it was a little more intense.

Interviewer: Alright arriving in Columbia what were your job responsibilities there?

Kerr: Well let me tell you one little interesting story about when we first got there. Two officers were sent there at the same time and when we went in to meet the coronel to find out what our assignments was he looked rather astonished and he said they sent me two I can only use one of you and I don't know anything about you one of you is just as good as the other so we'll flip a coin to see which one stays and which one goes over to it's a little hell hole called Congory and I wouldn't send anybody over there unless I had to. Well fortunately I won the flip of the coin and spent the rest of the war there. The other fellow ended up in the air transport command and was overseas in six weeks. So that's just the luck of the service.

Interviewer: Yeah the luck of the draw.

Kerr: And there was more to your question.

Interviewer: What were your job responsibilities?

Kerr: Okay my first job responsibility there was a convalescent training program which is a rather interesting program I'll show you a scotch and some information on it latter. This was the concept the air force came up with for wounded or soldiers who had been ill or in the hospital. And to heighten or shorten the length of time they were out of service by programs of exercise and all sorts of hobby things that they could do to keep busy and to begin to use their hands and arms again. And to try and get them back into service as soon as possible it was a very good program.

Interviewer: Yeah I'm sure that was pretty rewarding work too.

Kerr: It was it was

Interviewer: The last place that you were stationed up around Detroit what were your responsibilities up there?

Kerr: That's where I was a mess officer and where I gained 30 pounds. You had a daily routine something like this the service was always great for having a coffee break about 9 o'clock in the morning. So I was already in the mess hall since that was my job and I'd sit around and visit with all the people that came in and drank coffee while they were there. And then I had a very good dietician and about 10 or 11 o'clock she'd come around and want me to taste some of the things that they were cooking for lunch and I always enjoyed that. Well then after lunch by about 2 o'clock she'd say hey would you like a milkshake and oh that always sounded good so I had one and you could see why I gained all the weight.

Interviewer: Yeah around this time was there what year would it be 19

Kerr: 1946

Interviewer: So there was a (tape switches to Mr. Kerr showing a book). You have a certificate there for the aquatics school what was some of the training involved in that?

Kerr: This was a very good school it was at Rawlins College in Florida. And I was elected I guess you would say to go to this school even though I'm a very poor swimmer because the physical education officer who normally would have gone couldn't get away because his pressing duty. Well I got there and found all sorts of demanding things they were doing. One of the good features of this school was teaching soldiers how to survive in burning oil on the water they would teach you to start doing the swirl go down come up get a breath and repeat this routine and hopefully get out of it in time to live. Well I told the sergeant who was in charge I said I can barely swim so I'm not going to do those things and he said well that's alright we'll find something for you to do over here. But when we got to jumping off 20 foot boards with full field equipment he took that as a challenge to see that he got me through that. Reluctantly I finally jumped off of the 20 foot board with full field equipment but invisioned this steel helmet just being filled water and pulling my head off with it but it didn't.

Interviewer: Tell us what the attitude was around the country with while the war was going on.

Kerr: When I would get home on leave or furlough the people I had contact with were very serious about doing their part. They accepted the rationing of sugar, meats, and things like that. This is just part of what we have to do to get through this war. And I remember once I was in on furlough and people would give you their gas rations so you could move around a little which was very nice I thought it would just limit those people from doing even more. But people knew that we were in a very serious situation and everybody took it seriously. It was so much different than the Vietnam War because there was never a whole hearted commitment there. There was in WWII and people took it seriously were willing to do whatever they could to help the war effort. They bought bonds and they did all of the things they were asked to do to help the war effort.

Interviewer: Is it kind of comparable the only thing I've ever experienced would be the 9/11 that kind of serge of patriotism?

Kerr: Yes I think it was a very definite similarity there. In our country I think we've seen a heightening of patriotism and people who are willing to do more and do whatever it takes to make our country safer this is good 9/11 wasn't good but it wakened us up. And I think we are taking things seriously.

Interviewer: Could you tell was there a difference in the American public and the way they view the two enemies? Like they viewed Japan in one light and Germany in another or did they look at them both kind of the same?

Kerr: The I think the view of the Japanese the feeling was they were always much more devious. The sneak attack on Pearl Harbor was such a shock to everybody it was a lot like 9/11. And for that reason this was a great shock to everybody. But Germany and as we knew how many people they put in concentration camps and how many people they killed through gas chambers and so forth so both of them I don't know that you could say one was worse than the other.

Interviewer: What was going on did people know of the horrors that were going on in the concentration camps or did come up more afterwards?

Kerr: Toward the end of the war I think they did. Perhaps it had been going on for some time before the public knew very much about it. But when people did begin to find out about it and toward the end of the war impractically when our military units were going into those places to free living people were left I think the country as a whole was just devastated by it.

Interviewer: You said in the beginning that you weren't real eager to go to the military what about when you were getting out did your view change at all?

Kerr: Yes I did feel I guess you would say entirely different. In the first place I had obtained the rank of captain. At the end of WWII things were still a little shaky we didn't know what we might have to fight Russia next. And so I elected to stay in the reserve and in fact I stayed in the reserve another 30 years after the end of WWII. The reserve training was not nearly as demanding as regular army of course but the usual schedule was we would train on weekends once a month Saturday and Sunday. And then go to camp at some military base for a couple of weeks during the summer and had a lot of interesting experiences there. But I didn't want to start over as a private in case there was another war so I stayed in and was fortunate enough to obtain the rank of lieutenant colonel by the time I retired.

Interviewer: You had 30 years of service in the reserves I'm sure you saw a lot of changes in the military as far as technology and the way they did things.

Kerr: Yes we did see a lot of change. Of course during WWII it was a huge buildup of that during the next 30 years we saw a great reduction in the number of people over all but concentrating on better equipment better planes better spy equipment better kill that I'm trying to.

Interviewer: Thirty years of reserve training were your employers helpful in the with your commitments?

Kerr: I think some were and some weren't one example I'll let you know how my employer felt our unit was alerted to go to Vietnam and I told my boss about it who went to our local manager to see if he could get me deferred. And the manager asked if I had to stay in the reserve or if I stayed on my own. He said I believe he stayed on his own he said well let him go then. (Tape goes to Mr. Kerr showing a book) this is I spoke of the insignia of the 81st division which was the Wildcat division and that is the insignia. This is what we called a T Model Corporal that was the first promotion I got to T Model Corporal. This is the Acorn division the 87th and by this time I was a staff sergeant. This is the 3rd air force insignia one of the interesting things I would when I got in the air force and got to Columbia was the noise level. Because in training pilots it went on day and night and those B25s were taking off and landing and all of that. Well the first few nights I thought how in the world do you sleep with all of this going on. Within a couple of weeks you didn't even notice it. This is the bombardier or nonflying job on the plane and his pilot was killed and the copilot was disabled and he had to fly the plane never having flown a plane before.

Interviewer: I guess he made it out alright

Kerr: Yeah (Tape ended)