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English 562 Oral History

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German Babies and the Trouble in Texas:

The Stories of U.S. Army Infantryman William Krucke

When I first met U.S. Army veteran William Krucke, I knew almost nothing about him. As a part of a composition workshop, Mr. Krucke (pronounced Kruck-ee) and I were paired together as a interviewee/interviewer duo whose task was to record Mr. Krucke's battle memories for the Library of Congress's Veterans' History Project. The only information I had about Mr. Krucke was his name. As we introduced ourselves, I tried to guess the conflict in which he fought. My bet was Vietnam—he was too young for Korea. I was wrong. Mr. Krucke is a World War II veteran, meaning that he is at least in his mid-eighties by now. For our first meeting, Mr. Krucke wore a cable-knit sweater, khakis, and loafers. He would have looked like my Ivy League-educated theory professor if not for Mr. Krucke's neck brace, a remnant from a recent accident, which was covered in zebra-print fabric. I didn't ask, but I got the impression that he was quite fond of the fabric. He was accompanied by his wife, Bruce, who also has the energy of someone half her age. As we chatted, she told me a bit about her travels, including a two-week trip to Africa she had planned for the following week. I wouldn't mind being her when I grow up.

As soon as we sat down, Mr. Krucke handed me a folder full of neat documents, all typed in a font that screams "typewriter," paperclipped together with a handful of photos. "This is your

homework,” he said with a grin on his face. They were his Army memories, recorded in narrative form less than a month after he returned from the war. He began to explain the photos, especially the image of a half-track vehicle similar to the one he operated in Germany. His demeanor was downright jolly. To me, this was unexpected. My grandfather served in the war as well, but I know almost nothing about his experiences. He never talked about it, and we never pushed him. I assumed the memories were too painful. So when Mr. Krucke handed me his typed memories, his well-preserved photographs, I was surprised. The conversation turned to other things, such as his life after the military. Though Mr. Krucke grew up in New York and New Jersey, he has lived in the Lowcountry for decades. He earned a bachelor’s degree in engineering in New York, but took 12 graduate English courses from The Citadel in the 1970s, simply for his enjoyment. I couldn’t believe my fortune. Two literature nerds paired together for an interview? This was a match made in heaven. After discussing our favorite authors for a bit, we returned to business and scheduled the interview for the following week, the day before Bruce’s Africa trip. I asked him if anything was off limits—too difficult for him to discuss. “Nope,” he said, again with a smile. I was expecting a yes. He did say that, although he served in the Korean War as well, his World War II days in Germany were the most relevant to the project. “Oh, and if we have time,” he said, “I’ll tell you about all the trouble I got into in Texas.”

In the week between our first meeting and the interview, I read Mr. Krucke’s narratives. These things need to be published. Seriously. A thousand fiction writers have tried to recapture these experiences, both in film and on the page, and they haven’t come close to the brief stories this man wrote at age 20. They all had dramatically simple names—“The Medic,” “Close Ones,” “Notes on Sensitivity.” The packet also included a list of every man in his squad—the first

squad of the 10th Armored Division's First Platoon—and what each man's fate was. One soldier was killed in battle, as was a medic. As detailed as the stories were, they left me with a hundred questions for our interview.

When I arrived at The Citadel, our interview location, five minutes before our start time, Mr. Krucke and Bruce were already there. I thought again of my grandfather, always the military man—if you're on time, you're late. Since our interview room was on the third floor of the library, I headed towards the elevator and asked the Kruckes to follow me. “Oh, we can take the stairs,” said Bill. I have no doubt they could have. After we got settled in the interview room, I gave Mr. Krucke a broad rundown of my plans for the hour-long session, then asked him if there was anything in particular he wanted to talk about on camera. “I do, if that's okay.” As he pulled a list of names out of his pocket, he told me how important it was to commemorate his military comrades in this Library of Congress project—to make sure his fellow soldiers got their due as well. I wondered how I was going to get through the interview without sobbing like a child. We took our seats, and I pushed the video camera's red button.

The interview could have lasted for days. We didn't even have time to scratch the surface. My first question was about his life before the military, and his first memories of service life. He recounted those days—days 60 years ago—with remarkable detail. He described the meal he had during a layover in Scotland, just before he arrived in Germany. It consisted of two pies, a sweet one with fruit and another filled with meat, the latter being a novel experience for him at the time. Then we got to the Germany memories, zooming in on particular moments of his war experience. Though I had read his narratives beforehand, listening to him tell the stories out loud was even more enlightening. For example, I hadn't grasped the significance that his family's cultural background played during his service. Since Bill's mother

and father were German and moved to the U.S. before he was born, Mr. Krucke speaks fluent German. As a result, he was the only soldier in his platoon who could speak to the Germans they encountered—surrendered soldiers and civilians alike. Because of this, Mr. Krucke found himself in the middle of a slew of extraordinary situations, which he recounts beautifully, including the birth of two German babies.

While I almost made a scene multiple times, Mr. Krucke only choked up once. He was talking about “The Medic,” a man whose name Mr. Krucke does not know, but who clearly holds a hero’s place in his heart. Simply put, the incident involved a medic who went above the call of duty, risking his life for another soldier, just before Mr. Krucke arrived in Germany. As a result, the medic was on recuperative leave for the first few weeks of Mr. Krucke’s experience, during which he encountered two other medics, one American and one German, who both apparently felt that putting themselves in harm’s way was too risky. When the first medic returned, however, he clearly understood the gravity of that risk, yet ran onto the battlefield anyway to help an injured soldier. During our interview, the story clearly punched Mr. Krucke in the gut, if only for a second, as he remembered the medic crumpling as a bullet hit him in the back. His voice broke. “I can still see him,” he said, staring at the floor. The medic lost his life, and the injured soldier recovered fully. In the interview room, Mr. Krucke cleared his throat and finished the story, then moved on to others, laughing and smiling when the mood struck him.

As he told me he would, Mr. Krucke also took care to remember those who were “good folks with good character,” the men who were “helpful.” Among these were the company commanders, whom Mr. Krucke says treated the soldiers like “human beings...like individuals.” He also remembers a Colonel Richardson, who rendered Mr. Krucke a tad starstruck when they first met in Germany. Mr. Krucke, who had never even seen a colonel at that point, was amazed

when the Colonel unexpectedly approached him while guarding German prisoners, rifle in hand. “How do you salute with a rifle in hand?” Mr. Krucke asked himself. “Son, don’t worry about it,” replied the Colonel. Colonel Richardson was known for visiting the action, while other men of his rank typically kept their distance. This proximity ultimately cost him his life, yet, as Mr. Krucke proudly told me, it earned him deep respect from his troops.

Most everything we discussed that day was impossibly heavy. Even the “light” memories—the potato pancakes, “The Whiner”—have the shadow of their context hanging over their humor. Yet I couldn’t help but notice a distinct air of peace in Mr. Krucke’s voice, even when he remembered things that obviously still hurt. To be frank, it baffles me. This man saw things I can’t even imagine, yet he is able to openly remember these experiences without drowning in the horror of them. His memories of the bad times are no more prominent than those of the good. But perhaps this shouldn’t be such a mystery to me. After all, the first thing Mr. Krucke handed me when we met was a folder full of his stories, and he enrolled in English graduate courses to enrich his life. This man knows stories. He knows their power—they tell, they immortalize, they heal. He gets it. It seems to me that he let his catharsis happen on the page, through his narrative. And now, as a man who still feels the sting of trauma but avoids its paralysis, he is able to give his stories the legs they deserve. I hate that we never got to the trouble in Texas.