

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Veteran's Name: Eldon Knuth

Interviewer: David Meyer (O'Shea)

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Transcriber: Carol Slezak

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Interviewer: This is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, of the 95th Infantry. Today is November 23, 2014. We're in the meeting room in the Ibis Hotel near the Cathedral in the city of Metz. I have the privilege of talking with, Could you say your name?

Eldon Knuth: Eldon Knuth, K-n-u-t-h.

Interviewer: Also in the room is Mrs. Knuth. And also, Kay Grosinske. Kay, could you spell your name?

Kay Grosinske: First name is Kay, K-a-y. Last name is Grosinske. G-r-o-s-i-n-s-k-e.

Interviewer: This is an interview for the Veterans History Project, Library of Congress. ... Eldon, what is your birth date?

Eldon Knuth: May 10, 1925.

Interviewer: And where were you born?

Eldon Knuth: Luana, L-u-a-n-a, Iowa.

Interviewer: And what branch of the service were you in?

Eldon Knuth: Infantry. ... Served in WWII.

What were your service dates?

Eldon Knuth: Joined August 1943. Discharged August 1945. To be more precise [pulls out his card, print too small to see].

Interviewer: Where did you get that card?

Eldon Knuth: A local department store offered this free in August of 1945 [microfiche].

Interviewer: What was your company?

Eldon Knuth: Company F, 379th Infantry Regiment, 95th Infantry Division.

Interviewer: And what was your main job in the war?

Eldon Knuth: I was with a mortar squad.

Interviewer: And what was your final or highest rank?

Eldon Knuth: PFC [Private First Class].

Interviewer: Did you have any nicknames?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Eldon Knuth: My adopted parents' names were Alvin (PH) Knuth and Amanda Knuth.

Interviewer: How old were you when you were adopted?

Eldon Knuth: A few days.

Interviewer: Do you have any siblings?

Eldon Knuth: Via my adopted family I have a brother, Donald Knuth, who has now passed away. A half-brother by the name of Eugene Koevenig, K-o-e-v-e-n-i-g, who is now passed away, and a half-brother by then name of Ronald Huff, H-u-f-f.

Interviewer: Where did you live growing up?

Eldon Knuth: In Iowa, Luana Iowa.

Interviewer: What did your adopted parents do for a living? He was a farmer.

Interviewer: What was your family like?

Eldon Knuth: German origin, Lutheran by faith, a farm family, a relatively conservative family.

Interviewer: Fairly religious?

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: What did you look like growing up?

Eldon Knuth: I was blond, slender, somewhat athletic.

Interviewer: What games did you like to play?

Eldon Knuth: Basketball, baseball. I was also fairly academic.

Interviewer: Did they have good schools in that part of Iowa?

Interviewer: What part of Iowa was that?

Eldon Knuth: Northeast corner. Near Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Kay Grosinske: What kind of primary school did you go to -- large, small?

[TIME 7:12]

Eldon Knuth: It was by present standards a small school. Twelve grades in one building. My graduating class was a class of 18.

Kay Grosinske: How did you get to school?

Eldon Knuth: It was by bus; in bad weather either a sled or buggy.

Interviewer: How far was the school from your farm?

Eldon Knuth: A mile-and-a-half.

Interviewer: Was it a dairy farm?

Eldon Knuth: Mixed farm. Dairy, pigs, chickens.

Interviewer: Did you like animals?

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: Did any other of your family members serve in the military?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: Do you remember where you were or what you were doing when you heard about the Pearl Harbor attack?

Eldon Knuth: I was helping harvest potatoes.

Interviewer: That's December in Iowa, that's pretty cold.

Eldon Knuth: It was pretty cold.

Interviewer: So you're born in 1925, so you're 16. What did you think when you heard about the attack?

Eldon Knuth: I remember being impressed, at it being a major event.

Interviewer: Did your father say anything to you about war, or you going, in 1941 when you were 16?

Eldon Knuth: My father was already passed away at that time. I was the oldest child.

Interviewer: So when you're in the field harvesting potatoes, are you in charge as the oldest?

Eldon Knuth: Well, my mother was present. And absent my father she had a lot of responsibilities.

Interviewer: So she's working out in the field too.

Eldon Knuth: She probably was.

Interviewer: And what were you doing in the days before you joined the service in August 1943?

Eldon Knuth: I was going to school at Iowa State college.

Interviewer: Was that close to home?

Eldon Knuth: No, it was the same state.

Interviewer: Who took over after you left for school?

Eldon Knuth: My brother stayed on the farm. We both graduated the same year.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Eldon Knuth: I was drafted [got the letter in the mail].

Interviewer: What did your mom say?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember what she said. I remember I was shocked.

Interviewer: Since you had so much responsibility, did you try to delay it for a while?

Eldon Knuth: I just went. I had already asked prior to going to college what would happen if I went to college, and they told me they would draft me. I went to college anyway.

Interviewer: And they drafted you.

Eldon Knuth: And they drafted me [laughs].

Interviewer: What were you studying in college?

Eldon Knuth: Engineering. I was headed for aeronautical engineering.

Interviewer: When they drafted you did they give you a choice of branch?

Eldon Knuth: I had choice. I chose the army because they promised me if I went to the army they would put me in the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program], and send me to college.

Interviewer: And did they?

Eldon Knuth: Yes -- for half a term [laughs]. They sent me to Carnegie Tech.

Kay Grosinske: So you were in the ASTP.

Eldon Knuth: All Safe 'Til Peace.

Interviewer: Ted Shakespeare sang a song one time. "There's a gold star in the window..." He was talking about some people thinking ASTP were gold bricks. He said, I'm not in the army, I'm in ASTP. ... Do you remember your service number?

Eldon Knuth: 37676730.

Interviewer: What did your mother say when you left for the service?

Eldon Knuth: She was concerned about my safety but I don't remember it being a traumatic event. ...

Interviewer: Did you go to basic training, or straight to ASTP?

Eldon Knuth: We went to training at Fort Benning, Georgia, in a training program that consisted entirely of ASTP candidates.

Interviewer: How many people were there?

Eldon Knuth: Hundreds, close to 1,000. [All about the same age as Mr. Knuth.]

Interviewer: What was that first night with the strangers like? Did you get along?

Eldon Knuth: With one exception we got along quite well.

[TIME 15:00]

Kay Grosinske: What was the one exception?

Eldon Knuth: He was already at Camp Dodge with me while we were waiting to go to Fort Benning, and we just didn't get along very well. But I don't remember that he was in the same company that I was at Fort Benning, but especially at Camp Dodge we had a little friction.

Kay Grosinske: Where is Camp Dodge and how long were you there?

Eldon Knuth: Des Moines, Iowa. I was there for a couple weeks while they were collecting people to send to Fort Benning.

Interviewer: So your basic was at Fort Benning. Any training at Camp Dodge?

Eldon Knuth: No. I learned how to wash dishes and peel potatoes [laughs]. ... Everybody there had KP while they were waiting.

Interviewer: How was basic training, adapting to the physical regiment, the training, the barracks, the food?

Eldon Knuth: As I recall it was pretty easy.

Interviewer: What was the food like?

Eldon Knuth: I remember writing home that it was pretty good. But there were some strange things there. They had something called hominy.

Interviewer: Yes, you came from the north to the south.

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: Did the southerners give you any attitude?

Eldon Knuth: No, but this was the first adaptation I had to segregation. There was no need for segregation in Iowa because there was only one black in the whole community.

Interviewer: What kind of examples did you see?

Eldon Knuth: Behavior in the street, the segregation in the theater.

Interviewer: Can you describe some of the people you trained with?

Eldon Knuth: I was impressed by the fact that an unusually large number of people there had similar background to me, namely German background. I remember noticing a large fraction of the names started with an "S" or "Sch."

Interviewer: Speaking of that, since we're going to war against Germany, did you have any feelings about that?

Eldon Knuth: Not particularly. About half the soldiers had a German background. So it was nothing unusual.

Interviewer: What was a typical day like in basic training?

Eldon Knuth: We had classes, which were oral lectures. We had physical exercise, we had hikes.

Interviewer: Did you have trouble getting used to the long hikes?

Eldon Knuth: Since I grew up on the farm and since I had been somewhat athletic, I think I adapted to the physical aspects of basic training better than the average.

[TIME 20:13]

Interviewer: And where did they send you after basic?

Eldon Knuth: After basic sent me to Carnegie.

Interviewer: So that's in the fall or early winter of 1943.

Eldon Knuth: That was January of '44.

Interviewer: And you thought you were going to be there for a while.

Eldon Knuth: Hoped to be there for years.

Interviewer: Were there rumors flying about your ASTP ending?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: Did you go to Carnegie with any other people from the 95th?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember anyone being from Carnegie. But there are others that were at Fort Benning. ... Paul Madden who is with us here now, he was at Fort Benning.

Interviewer: Did you recognize him at reunions?

Eldon Knuth: Sure. He and I go back to '43.

Interviewer: How many people were in your class at Carnegie?

Eldon Knuth: I suspect there were a couple hundred people there in the ASTP program. Probably a couple hundred that started at the same time.

Interviewer: Did you train while going to school?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember any military training, but there were physical education classes. ... We had a dormitory, I think it was Welsh (PH) Hall if I remember correctly.

Interviewer: Did you have semi-private rooms?

Eldon Knuth: It was a large building with many rooms in it. Brick building as I recall.

Interviewer: How did they tell you that ASTP was over?

Eldon Knuth: One day they called everybody into a large lecture room, a couple hundred students in there all at once, and they made the announcement. And to my complete surprise and dismay quite a few of the students cheered. Which I absolutely could not understand.

Kay Grosinske: Do you remember when that was?

Eldon Knuth: Probably February.

Kay Grosinske: So you were only there about a month?

Eldon Knuth: I got credit for half a term.

Interviewer: So you pack up your things. Do you know where you're going?

Eldon Knuth: I don't know what time I learned where I was going? ... I don't remember how much time [they gave us], I think it was fairly short.

Interviewer: Did you get on a train?

Eldon Knuth: Yes. To Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Interviewer: On your way to Indiantown Gap?

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: So you get to Indiantown Gap and there's the 95th waiting for you.

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: Paul Madden told me that when ASTP first got there some of the old-timers called you whizz kids and gave you a little hazing. Is that true?

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you remember about it?

Eldon Knuth: I think that the non-coms had a lot to do with the assignments that the new recruits got. And it turned out that there was a platoon sergeant that came from Iowa, and he picked me because I was from Iowa.

[TIME 25:25]

Interviewer: Who was the platoon sergeant?

Eldon Knuth: I forget at the moment. No, he was squad leader. ... I think his name probably was Santi, S-a-n-t-i.

Interviewer: What assignments were you given in those early days?

Eldon Knuth: I was assigned to a mortar squad, and we had training which included physical training, lectures involving relevant topics, involving mortars, involving chemicals. And we had hikes.

Interviewer: How big were the mortar shells?

Eldon Knuth: Sixty millimeters.

Interviewer: How big around is that?

Eldon Knuth: Maybe a couple inches. It's 2-½ centimeters per inch, and so that would have been maybe 2-½ inches. ... And the tube is 2 feet, maybe. Maybe slightly shorter. ... And it had a stand, and legs. ... There was an instrument that was used for setting elevation of the tube and the angular orientation.

Interviewer: Did you have a special position on the mortar?

Eldon Knuth: I think that my work label was ammunition bearer [laughs].

Interviewer: So you have mortar shells about how long?

Eldon Knuth: I dunno -- six or eight inches.

Interviewer: As an ammunition bearer, how much ammunition would you be carrying?

Eldon Knuth: Maybe half a dozen rounds.

Interviewer: Did someone else carry the tube and the stand?

Eldon Knuth: Somebody had to carry the tube, somebody carried the base, and somebody carried the legs. ... Same squad all the way through, including John Loomas (PH) who has attended some of the meetings here. Gallagher (PH) was platoon sergeant. And Santi was squad leader.

Interviewer: And there was a man with an Italian surname?

Eldon Knuth: Femino (PH).

Interviewer: Yes, was he in your squad?

[TIME 30:00]

Eldon Knuth: To the best of my recollection, yes.

Interviewer: Did you go to the West Virginia maneuvers up the mountain, how was that?

Eldon Knuth: Yes. That was fairly challenging. I remember in particular there was one hike that was particularly challenging. We carried a backpack, covered a prescribed distance, and not everybody finished. Those of us that finished made PFC.

Interviewer: Did you have to repel down a cliff?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember that I did, but I know that that was done during the maneuvers.

Interviewer: Back at Indiantown Gap, do you remember hearing about the June 6th invasion, D-Day?

Eldon Knuth: Yes, but it doesn't stick in my mind as being such a defining day as Pearl Harbor was, for example.

Interviewer: Any stories come back to you from those times at Indiantown Gap?

Eldon Knuth: We got leaves into town, would go up to Harrisburg.

Interviewer: What would you do?

Eldon Knuth: They had a YMCA with a swimming pool. I used the swimming pool. If I stayed overnight I stayed in the YMCA. I think the first night I became a little bit more streetwise. I hung my pants over the bedpost and the next morning my wallet was gone [laughs].

Interviewer: Did they have dance halls?

Eldon Knuth: Yes, the Catholic church had dances. Met a nice young lady named Helen [laughs].

Interviewer: Did you write to her throughout the war?

Eldon Knuth: Pretty much, yeah. ... But she wasn't as serious a girlfriend as Alice from Pittsburgh was [laughter].

Interviewer: Where did you meet Alice from Pittsburgh?

Eldon Knuth: At a dance sponsored by the Masonic Lodge (PH) in Pittsburgh.

Kay Grosinske: So when you went to Carnegie, you were literally there just about a month, right?

Eldon Knuth: Maybe 6-7 weeks.

Kay Grosinske: So were you just a student? Were you in civilian clothes or military clothes? Could you go to the movies, go bowling?

Eldon Knuth: I wasn't there long enough to go home. I remember we had drills. But I don't recall that being a major part of our activities.

Interviewer: But you had time enough in seven weeks to meet Alice at a dance. ... So you must have had a certain something about you to attract a girlfriend in such a short time. [Grosinske says he's blushing a little bit.] But I would say Mrs. Knuth is very elegant. ... So from Indiantown Gap they pack you on a train and take you to Camp Myles Standish, I think.

[TIME 35:55]

Eldon Knuth: That sounds familiar, yeah.

Interviewer: And then you disembarked and got on the boat to go across the Atlantic. Do you remember which boat you were on?

Kay Grosinske: I thought it was the West Point.

Eldon Knuth: West Point sounds familiar. ... It's my recollection that the West Point was quite a fast boat. It was fast enough so that we didn't need a convoy. ... We zigzagged, and a pretty good speed. ...

Interviewer: And you grew up in Iowa, so you'd probably never been on a big, fast-moving boat before.

Eldon Knuth: Boat? What was the boat? I'd never been on a ship before.

Interviewer: So how did your stomach take it?

Eldon Knuth: It went fine.

Interviewer: Where did you stay on the boat? Did you have hammocks, or hanging bunks?

Eldon Knuth: My recollection is there was a hanging bunk. ...

Interviewer: Did you avoid the room? Some people have said the room could be a little messy.

Eldon Knuth: I remember spending time on deck.

Kay Grosinske: How long did the journey take?

Eldon Knuth: Several days. I've got all this down on paper, the exact number of days. Don't have it with me.

Interviewer: That's okay. Some people carried letters from home, or locks of hair, or lucky charms. Did you carry anything?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: What was landing in England like?

Eldon Knuth: We landed in Liverpool. Dockhands came aboard, and I had my first encounter with a cockney accent.

Interviewer: What did he or she say?

Eldon Knuth: I didn't understand half of it. ... It was different.

Interviewer: I've been told that people liked to ask for gum. John Komp said someone said to him, Got any gum, chum? Komp responded, Not a stick, prick. [Mr. Knuth laughs.]

Kay Grosinske: Do you remember how you passed your time on the ship? Playing cards, for instance?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember. Some people played poker for money, but I didn't.

Interviewer: Was there dice on board too?

[TIME 40:00]

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember. I do remember that during part of the service I did learn to play bridge. And I still have the deck of cards that we used to play bridge.

Interviewer: Did you have regular partners?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah.

Interviewer: Who was your partner?

Eldon Knuth: I forget now.

Interviewer: So that's the sort of thing you do for relaxation?

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: Very civilized. I know my father would sometimes play poker. And he got caught in a game where they suckered him. Took him for everything. ... Did you go to Winchester, or Camp Barton Stacey?

Eldon Knuth: Barton Stacey.

Interviewer: How long were you there?

Eldon Knuth: Must have been about a month.

Interviewer: Did you make it into London at all?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: Did you see any signs of war there? Any sign of the buzz bombs? Did you hear anything?

Eldon Knuth: We had trenches. And when there was a buzz bomb warning we would go out and jump in the trenches. Also, I forget if it was a regular thing or rather was an occasional thing, but I remember pulling all the shades on the window [blackout shades].

Interviewer: Did you see British people, or were you mostly surrounded by army.

Eldon Knuth: Well, they had once a week, or whatever it was, a dance.

Kay Grosinske: So what was the name of the English girl you dated?

Eldon Knuth: Don't remember [laughing].

Kay Grosinske: Do you have memories of the food while you were in England?

Eldon Knuth: Oh yeah.

Kay Grosinske: What did you like, what didn't you like?

Eldon Knuth: That they had an exceptionally good season for Brussels sprouts. I think we had Brussels sprouts every day. ... I can tolerate them now, but I think I avoided them for quite a while. ...

Interviewer: How many men were in Barton Stacey?

Eldon Knuth: Probably thousands.

Kay Grosinske: What were your living conditions?

Eldon Knuth: There were barracks, and I recall bunks.

Interviewer: Did you have a mattress or did you sleep on straw?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember that detail.

Interviewer: Are you assigned to a company by this time?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah, I was assigned to a company at Indiantown Gap.

Interviewer: So you knew you were in Company F, and you knew your squad?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah, Company F, 379th, and I stayed with that company and squad until I left.

Interviewer: What's the difference between a PFC and a private in your responsibilities?

Eldon Knuth: I wasn't aware of any difference.

Interviewer: So if you made it through the West Virginia maneuvers, you became a PFC.

Eldon Knuth: I got a bit more money.

[TIME 45:00]

Interviewer: But the job was pretty much the same.

Eldon Knuth: The job stayed the same.

Interviewer: Now from Barton Stacey you go to the east coast of England, and then you get on a Liberty ship, I think.

Eldon Knuth: No. I believe we left from Southampton. And we left on a civilian channel boat. ... Somebody had probably contracted for a civilian boat.

Interviewer: How was the crossing? Was it rough?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember any particular problems with roughness, but it was not a real big boat.

Interviewer: Did you have to disembark to another boat?

Eldon Knuth: It's my recollection that we landed on some wreckage left over from the invasion. In other words, they had positioned some boats that were no longer being used, positioned them such that they sort of served as a dock.

Interviewer: So when you get to Omaha Beach, what did it look like? You're D-Day + 60-or-so days.

Eldon Knuth: Well there was debris left over from the invasion. It had been sort of rearranged so that what was usable was used for landing?

Interviewer: Where do you go after you land?

Eldon Knuth: We marched inland and set up tents.

Interviewer: Can you hear any shelling going on?

Eldon Knuth: No, no.

Interviewer: Did you set up tents in an apple orchard?

Eldon Knuth: It sounds familiar, yeah.

Kay Grosinske: Were you still near the beach, or far inland?

Eldon Knuth: Not very far inland.

Kay Grosinske: How long did you stay in that area, do you think?

Eldon Knuth: A couple weeks, perhaps. We had some training over there. ... I remember particularly somebody said that Patton wanted an aggressive run-and-drop approach.

Interviewer: So you would just run, drop?

Eldon Knuth: And be ready to fire. And I -- I forget if we had a shooting range there or not, that might have been at Barton Stacey.

Interviewer: Did you ever get hurt during all your training? Sprain an ankle?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: Is it rainy when you're in Normandy? Muddy?

Eldon Knuth: I remember rain, it could have been in Normandy. And I remember "don't touch the tent surface," from inside, that it drips through. As long as you don't touch the inside surface it's fairly water repellent.

Kay Grosinske: I learned the same thing, the hard way.

Interviewer: I guess everybody learns the hard way. [Mr. Knuth laughs.]

[TIME 50:04]

Did you have one-half of a tent, and someone else had one-half, and you put them together?

Eldon Knuth: That's my recollection.

Interviewer: But you don't take part in the Red Ball Express?

Eldon Knuth: No. I knew it was going on, and some of the fellows did take part, but I didn't.

Interviewer: So you're just waiting to find out what's going to happen next?

Eldon Knuth: Waiting for Patton to give orders [laughs].

Interviewer: Do you go out and practice with your mortar?

Eldon Knuth: I remember there was practice with mortar, but I'm hard pressed to say whether at a given location we did it or not. But of course we had practice with mortar.

Interviewer: Did you ride the 40-and-8 trains?

Eldon Knuth: The car I was in was not a 40-and-8 car. There may have been some in the train, but the one I was in was not. The one I was in was a very badly beat up coach car.

Interviewer: With seats?

Eldon Knuth: Seats, and broken windows, and shells, and bullet holes. And there was no way that you could move from one car to the other. ... One thing that stands out in my mind is that when we were put on the train they had a whole bunch of supplies in large containers. And each car was thrown several supplies.

And one of the supplies we had was orange marmalade. And I remember we had at least a full gallon can of it. And I got very tired of orange marmalade [laughs].

Interviewer: So Brussels sprouts and orange marmalade. ... Was there any other food that you ended up not liking?

Eldon Knuth: Those two stand out in my mind.

Kay Grosinske: Did you have any contact with the French population in the area?

Eldon Knuth: No. And it's my recollection that it took about 4 days to go from Omaha Beach to up somewhere near the Moselle River. We weren't able to go all the way, the last end of the trek we took by truck. ... But the travel was quite intermittent. We stood for a while some places and then we would move. And I remember going to Paris. ... At night. ... We saw [Paris Station]. ...

Interviewer: So you take the train, and then you take trucks. And then you come up toward the Moselle. Is that the front line?

Eldon Knuth: The Americans had a beachhead on the other side of the Moselle River at Ponte Maison (PH). We walked across the Moselle on a bridge at Ponte Maison (PH).

[TIME 55:25]

Interviewer: What are you hearing now? Can you hear shells?

Eldon Knuth: No, I don't remember any shelling. I remember that they set up a smoke screen when we crossed the river. But the smoke screen wasn't very effective. They're rather finicky depending on the wind. And another division had been holding a beachhead on the other side of the Moselle, and they already had dug their foxholes, so we just occupied their foxholes. And we were in a vineyard. ... I had two foxholes that I didn't have to dig [laughs].

Interviewer: For those who don't know what a foxhole looks like, how deep was that foxhole?

Eldon Knuth: There's a lot of variety here. There are diggers, dig it deep enough so you feel reasonably safe, without exerting yourself too much. And then you want enough room so you can lay down comfortable and put a few supplies in with you.

Interviewer: Do you make a roof to cover it if you're going to be there for a while?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember about the one in Moselle, but the one later on, there was a roof over that one. I can describe that later.

Interviewer: Okay. So now you've taken over for another division, now you're in the foxholes, what's your job?

Eldon Knuth: Just holding. ... We slept, ate, didn't wash very much.

Interviewer: I heard Patton always made sure you had a change of socks.

Eldon Knuth: Somehow that really didn't get down to me.

Interviewer: So you're there, is it south of Metz?

Eldon Knuth: South of Metz. ... It wasn't at Nancy, but we could hear the shelling at Nancy. And we learned to count the time between the time we saw the flash and the time we heard the sound to determine how far away the shelling was.

Interviewer: For those who don't know, how far can mortar fire?

Eldon Knuth: It's my recollection that they had four tabs on the tail of the mortar, and you could fire them with 1, 2, 3, or 4 tabs. And the more tabs you had on, the greater the distance. ... [A tab is] paper form, but it's explosive. ... They were attached, but in such a way that you could pull them off if you wanted to. ...

Interviewer: Did you just drop it in, and it would explode and come out?

Eldon Knuth: You drop it in. I forget if there was a safety. It seems to me there was a safety pin or something that you had to remove before you dropped it in, in order for it -- I'm not sure about that now.

[TIME 1:00:10]

Kay Grosinske: How many men to carry one weapon-- was it three?

Eldon Knuth: We were a squad, but one man could fire it.

Kay Grosinske: How many did it take to carry one weapon?

Eldon Knuth: We had squads of about five men. They carried two -- base, legs, instrument, and ammunition.

Interviewer: So when's the first time you used a mortar against the Germans?

Eldon Knuth: That was at Metz. Oh, wait. Could be that we used at Ponte Maison (PH).

Interviewer: That's the first time you remember having direct contact with the Germans?

Eldon Knuth: I had no direct contact with Germans, because in mortar frequently you don't see your target.

Kay Grosinske: You're further back from the other soldiers, right?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah. Or you might be the same position in the line as riflemen, but somehow you would have an observer who would pick out a target for you, and also probably report back on need for adjustment.

Kay Grosinske: So what kind of distance could you get?

Eldon Knuth: I'm not sure, but several hundred yards. ... An eerie thing at Ponte Maison (PH) was there was a small village very close to us. Apparently completely evacuated, but the church bells rang all the time. That is, they rang when they were supposed to ring, but it was deserted. And some of the guys went into the village and brought back some wine. I don't remember getting any but [laughs].

Interviewer: Are you getting your food brought up or do they send guys out?

Eldon Knuth: They brought the food up. And usually they heated it. ...

Kay Grosinske: I saw today for the first time that they heated food for 80 men at a time. It was a big, huge pot with a really big burner underneath. Were you using something like that, or were you eating individual rations?

Eldon Knuth: I think it was a mixture. Sometimes it was prepared on a larger scale.

Interviewer: To jump around for a second, what's the first time you saw evidence of war, and what did you think?

Eldon Knuth: Evidence of war? Well we saw evidence of war already on the beach, and when we got on the train. Or at the Moselle River.

Interviewer: What did you think about it? My father had a certain prayer he would say if he felt at all ill at ease. It would calm him down. Did you have anything? Did you feel afraid?

Eldon Knuth: There was a certain amount of anxiety, but it was not particularly high. There weren't bullets flying around me or shells dropping around me.

[TIME 1:05:03]

Interviewer: Not even at Ponte Maison (PH).

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: From Ponte Maison (PH), where did you go from there?

Eldon Knuth: At Ponte Maison (PH), one night we had snow. And the snow would collect on the branches and drop, and some of the troops mistook this for enemy motion, and they would throw hand grenades at the sounds of the snow. That was probably one of the scarier parts of it. And we were taken into town one night. They had a special unit. You handed them the clothes, you went took a shower, then they would hand you back dry clothes. And in a large wine cellar I guess it was, they had some entertainment.

Interviewer: What sort of entertainment?

Eldon Knuth: A local girls sang, is my recollection.

Interviewer: Sang in French?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah. That's my recollection.

Interviewer: Was there any sort of accompaniment, like a guitar?

Eldon Knuth: No, I don't remember that.

Interviewer: Okay. So you're in Ponte Maison (PH), and there's snow. Do they move you up after the snow? Where do you go next?

Eldon Knuth: After several weeks they put us on a truck and took us up to Gravelotte.

Interviewer: Gravelotte. That's near where we are now. What do you do there?

Eldon Knuth: We were dropped off there and walked down Mance Ravine to -- I presume we were relieving the 5th Division. And I had a nicely built foxhole waiting for me [laughs], with a roof over it. The roof consisted of artillery shell cases which were fairly long, a couple feet long, filled with dirt, laid crosswise across the top of the foxhole.

Interviewer: They say those roofs can even take some mortar fire. Would you agree?

Eldon Knuth: This roof? Mortar fire? I think it would take it, yeah.

Interviewer: Did fire ever hit the roof?

Eldon Knuth: No. I was a fairly conservative soldier. And spent less time outside of the foxhole than some soldiers. ... I spent more time inside than the average soldier.

Interviewer: You're very young. You're 18 to 19.

Eldon Knuth: I was 19. ... My best recollection is we moved up there on November ... 4th [1944].

Interviewer: Had you heard of Metz at that point?

Eldon Knuth: Yep, we're told that there's going to be an attack on Metz.

Kay Grosinske: Had you ever even heard of Metz before?

[TIME 1:10:00]

Eldon Knuth: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Could you see any of Metz from Gravelotte? Could you see the cathedral spire or anything?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: Gravelotte is the site of a battle in the Franco-Prussian War.

Eldon Knuth: 1870s or something like that.

Interviewer: Did you know about that, talk about that then?

Eldon Knuth: We could see the crosses there. There are graves and crosses from the Franco-Prussian War, which is a bit eerie.

Interviewer: It is eerie, you're about to go into another war and you see that.

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Interviewer: Are any French around at all?

Eldon Knuth: No. ...

Interviewer: When you were traveling around today [at the reunion] through the little villages, did things look familiar at all?

Eldon Knuth: They looked similar. When we walked down [during the war] the ravine I saw a dead German soldier off to one side. And I went down and figured he didn't have any need for his pocket watch anymore, so I got the souvenir. But then my sergeant heard about this, or maybe I reported it -- I think I reported it, and he said, Go back and get half of his dog tag and bury him. So I got half his dog tag, but I didn't feel like burying him. So I threw rocks and dirt on top of him. Then I saw that there was a wire running from his belt to a nearby tree. And the hand grenade fastened to his belt.

Interviewer: So someone left their own comrade there and booby-trapped him.

Eldon Knuth: Yes.

Kay Grosinske: And you didn't move him so it didn't trigger.

Eldon Knuth: I didn't move him.

Interviewer: Did you stop burying him then?

Eldon Knuth: Well, I put rocks and dirt on top of him, but I didn't move him.

Interviewer: What do you do with the half of the dog tag?

Eldon Knuth: I turned it into someone in charge there.

Interviewer: Is it cold there now? What's the weather like?

Eldon Knuth: This is about the fourth of November. It was pretty chilly. ...

Interviewer: Are you close to the Moselle now?

Eldon Knuth: No. We're not within sight of it.

Interviewer: Are there vineyards around?

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember any vineyards.

Interviewer: So you're in your foxhole -- are you just waiting for your next orders?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah. Sometimes at night they would -- well, see we were only there 10 days before we attacked. So sometimes they would send out a night patrol to give the Germans a hard time. And sometimes somebody would observe motion on the part of the Germans, and they would give us a target to shoot at with the mortars. I never was aware of the fine details of the results of our shooting.

[TIME 1:15:00]

Interviewer: Is that where you start getting orders to shoot at the enemy?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you ever go on the night patrol?

Eldon Knuth: Yes, I remember night patrol.

Interviewer: Tell me about night patrol, what that was like.

Eldon Knuth: I'm not sure that I was aware of the objective. We did encounter some German fire. And a buddy of mine -- I was told the Germans hit his helmet but didn't hit him, but he died anyway.

Interviewer: No.

Eldon Knuth: Yeah.

Interviewer: A buddy of yours?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was his name?

Eldon Knuth: I don't recall.

Interviewer: So things are getting serious.

Eldon Knuth: Yes. ... Then one day it rained, and we got wet, some people got wetter than others did. Some fellows built a fire to dry off. And I was told that the round that fell was a short round from a German 88 that our troops had captured. And it was apparently a defective round. And it landed near the fire and killed a couple of those people and injured some others. But I was in my foxhole, and the round was close enough that it shook dirt off my ceiling onto me. The ceiling not only had those casings thrown on top of the roof, but also there was dirt thrown on top of them. And the dirt shook down on top of me.

Interviewer: Are you in there by yourself at the time?

Eldon Knuth: As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure I had a private foxhole. All to myself.

Interviewer: Since it's been raining and snowing, is the bottom of the foxhole wet?

Eldon Knuth: My foxhole was built on the side of a bank, so that the entrance to the foxhole was the same level as the floor. ... See, this was a ravine, and the ravine had banks on it [so it was steep].

Interviewer: How wide was the foxhole?

Eldon Knuth: Depends on where you are but typical width my answer would be maybe a couple of feet.

Interviewer: Have you been back to visit that?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah, I was able to get to a place where I could view it, but I wasn't able to walk through it. It's off limits.

Interviewer: With the military?

Eldon Knuth: I think it's private property now. I started once and somebody yelled at me.

Interviewer: So [changing topics], you talked at one time about going to the toilets. Having to go out and go to the toilets. Was that here?

Eldon Knuth: No, that was a little bit later. That was near Fort Jeanne D'arc.

[TIME 1:20:18]

Interviewer: Okay. So you're in Gravelotte, Mance Ravine for about 10 days?

Eldon Knuth: About 10 days.

Interviewer: And then you get the orders to do what?

Eldon Knuth: Tomorrow morning we're going to jump off at daylight. Go up out of the ravine up on this fairly level area next to the ravine, at daylight.

Interviewer: Are trucks going to pick you up, are you going to march, what are you going to do?

Eldon Knuth: Oh, there were no trucks there. Then we had the heaviest bombardment I've ever experienced in my life. I'm not sure how effective it was, but artillery, may have even been bombs. They tried to soften up the German line. Our bombardment, but we're getting return fire from the Germans, particularly machine gun and rifle fire.

Interviewer: How far away are the Germans do you think?

Eldon Knuth: It could even be half a mile.

Interviewer: Was it very loud?

Eldon Knuth: Terribly loud during this bombardment.

Interviewer: Did you try to communicate with each other? Shouting or anything?

Eldon Knuth: No. I don't think there was much need to, and I don't think it was possible.

Interviewer: So with all this bombardment, where are you?

Eldon Knuth: We're on level ground, waiting for a signal to advance.

Interviewer: Are you in a building, or under a tree, protected?

Eldon Knuth: No. We were just lying on the ground. I was laying on the ground with the base of the mortar in front of me, between me and the German lines.

Interviewer: After the bombardment ends, what happens?

Eldon Knuth: We advance on foot. And it's chaos.

Interviewer: What's your experience? Just your squad?

Eldon Knuth: Well, our company was about 175 men, something like that.

Interviewer: And you're all advancing.

Eldon Knuth: All advancing.

Interviewer: Are you spaced out?

Eldon Knuth: [Laughs] It was chaos.

Kay Grosinske: What do you mean by chaos?

Eldon Knuth: Didn't know what anybody else was doing, didn't really know where the target was ... Just knew we were going [forward].

Interviewer: Were you doing marching fire at the time?

Eldon Knuth: Part way through I bumped into Bill Gallagher, and Bill said, Well, let's give them mortar fire. So we both went into a shell hole, and he acted as observer, and I fired the mortar. A short time later he got hit in the stomach. And he took his sulfa pill and water. Then he remembered if you get hit in the stomach you're not supposed to take water. But he'd already done it. So he said, Go on. But I looked up a medic and told him that Bill had gotten hit. The medic said, When the firing stops we'll take care of him.

[TIME 1:25:25]

And he said, You go on. So I put the bayonet on the end of his gun and stuck it in the ground as a sign that here's somebody that needs help. Then I moved on. And it turned out that our objective was to surround Fort Jeanne D'arc. Not to attack it, because the 5th Division had already learned that that doesn't work. So we met up with some other men from the company and we went just beyond the fort. There ahead of us was a wall, maybe a couple feet high. And now it was late in the day, so we grouped there, stopped, dug in. I dug the foxhole that I was looking for yesterday. ... [On the backside of the fort.] ... Didn't find the foxhole. We entered the property from the back gate. I don't know how you got in [interviewer had also visited fort during Metz reunion.]

Interviewer: We took a road, and then there was a mound of dirt in the road. That's where we stopped [couldn't drive through it].

Eldon Knuth: That's where we stopped. ...

[More talk of the paths they took to fort, with Mr. Knuth hoping to find his foxhole, but he didn't find it.]

Getting back to 1944 [or '45?], there were about 30 or 40 of us that collected, and we decided that we were going to dig in there, it was getting late in the day. And we dug our foxholes, and then it got dark, and another fellow, and I forget who it was, hadn't dug his foxhole. So I said, Okay, maybe mine's big enough for both of us. And that's the most uncomfortable night I've ever spent in my life.

Interviewer: How wide is your foxhole?

Eldon Knuth: [Less than 3 feet wide, and about 1-½ feet deep, and about six feet long. See, we just dug this with our little shovels, late in the day. But we survived.

...

[TIME 1:30:38]

Interviewer: So you're on top of each other.

Eldon Knuth: Almost. We were beside each other. But that means you couldn't move into a new position, couldn't turn over. But we survived the night.

Interviewer: Did you sleep at all?

Eldon Knuth: Probably not very much. Okay, we spent 5 nights there. But he dug his own hole the next day. ...

Interviewer: So who's in charge of your squad now?

Eldon Knuth: A strange part of the attack was that we lost a large part of our leaders all in one day. My squad leader, Dariel (PH) Santi, wasn't there. Bill Gallagher, the platoon sergeant, had gotten killed. And if I remember right, the lieutenant who was in charge of the company was killed, or at least injured. We lost, with the exception of Santi, these that are in leadership positions sort of feel they have to lead, so they wind up more often standing out than we do.

Kay Grosinske: You said with the exception of Santi.

Eldon Knuth: I don't know what happened to him. Well, somebody said that he lost the heel on his shoe and went back. But...

Interviewer: What did you think of your commanding officers?

Eldon Knuth: As far as I know they were fine.

Interviewer: So the leadership was pretty good?

Eldon Knuth: As far as I know, yeah. But it was very hectic there.

Interviewer: If your officers are getting wiped out, who's leading?

Eldon Knuth: I'm not sure anybody was leading there. It's a sort of a mob.

Interviewer: Is that where you had the incident with going to the latrine?

Eldon Knuth: Well, there are two incidents with the latrine, I'm not sure what one you're thinking of.

Interviewer: Well tell me both.

Eldon Knuth: Probably the next day, I needed to go to the bathroom. Two of us, Femino (PH) and I, were fairly modest so we crawled over the wall, did our thing on the other side of the wall, and he got shot and I came back. And we're going to visit him tomorrow.

Interviewer: When he got shot, did you bring him back?

Eldon Knuth: I came back immediately. We had a POW by that time. And he, assisted by another fellow, was able to bring Femino (PH) back over the wall. But Femino (PH) died a day or so later. He also got hit in the stomach I think.

Kay Grosinske: And his name was?

Eldon Knuth: Femino (PH).

[TIME 1:35:15]

Interviewer: So that's one incident with the latrine. You said there were two.

Eldon Knuth: Well then we got in the habit of filling ammunition containers and sending them over the side of the foxhole. That worked pretty well with one small exception. Somebody threw a hand grenade and blew one of them up [laughs].

Kay Grosinske: How close was that to you?

Eldon Knuth: Not to me. It was somebody else. ... One of our men threw a hand grenade. And, with regard to those four days up there, or five days, at night there

were horses running loose up there, German horses, and they were sort of disturbing -- we didn't know what they were, and were there people with them... We got supplies with a little cub plane, an observer plane, but all I ever got out of the supplies was a couple of chocolate bars, K-rations. ... I was pretty hungry at the end of five days.

Interviewer: Were you cut off?

Eldon Knuth: Oh, yeah, we reached our objectives, and the troops on both sides of us did not, and the German lines closed up. ... We were back behind the German lines for five days.

Kay Grosinske: I'm thinking you stayed in your foxhole.

Eldon Knuth: Pretty much. And it snowed a little bit, and it rained a little bit, and I didn't have any dry socks, and it was pretty close to freezing, the temperature. And so at the end of five days the general situation had changed enough so that we now marched down to the barracks, or caserne as they call them ... The general situation had improved. We marched down.

Interviewer: Could you march? Because your feet were all messed up.

Eldon Knuth: They were messed up, but I walked down. I had two choices, sit there or walk down. So I walked down.

Kay Grosinske: And when you got to the caserne, what did you do?

Eldon Knuth: First I looked around a bit. Because we had just occupied the caserne, probably that day. Looked around a bit, partly out of curiosity and partly to make sure that it was clear. Then I complained about my feet and somebody said we'd better check into the first aid, which they were setting up. So I checked in, they looked at my feet, and they put me in an ambulance.

Interviewer: What did they say?

Eldon Knuth: Trench foot.

Interviewer: Were they red, or black?

Eldon Knuth: They were red.

Interviewer: Red, swollen, bleeding?

Eldon Knuth: No, they weren't bleeding, but they were red and swollen. They don't turn black until you freeze them.

Interviewer: Is that what took you out of the war?

Eldon Knuth: That took me out.

Kay Grosinske: I remember you said you were never warned about it.

Eldon Knuth: I don't remember being warned about it, yeah.

Kay Grosinske: I find that amazing.

[TIME 1:40:01]

Interviewer: Are there any friends you want to mention? You mentioned Bill Gallagher.

Eldon Knuth: And Femino (PH). Those two were both shot while I was with them.

Interviewer: Looking back, who was the most important person to you during the war? Or most important people?

Eldon Knuth: [Long pause.] I don't know.

Interviewer: Did you ever dream of it after you got back?

Eldon Knuth: I remember one incident in particular. During the middle of the night a car drove by and backfired, and I rolled out of bed on the floor in reaction to hearing the backfire. That's the most dramatic. ... I remember that there were a couple things that I experienced that I put out of my mind for a while and came back later. As a matter of fact, I didn't even mention it as I was going through here.

Interviewer: What?

Eldon Knuth: When we were in Mance on that day of utter chaos, I came upon a situation where there was a German soldier in the foxhole. He was cowering, and there were two Americans standing next to the foxhole ordering him to get up. And he didn't understand, I guess. And he didn't get up, and they shot him. That shook me up. Because if communications had been better he could have been POW instead of a casualty. He was a human. I spoke enough German that I could have helped, but they shot him before he even said a word.

Interviewer: So there are some things over time that you sort of block, and then they come into memory. Anything on this trip that you've seen so far that has come to mind?

Eldon Knuth: No, but this incident of this German who got shot due to lack of communications, that tends to go out of my mind and then come back again. And it came back again on this trip.

Interviewer: When you came home, you were in the hospital for a while?

Eldon Knuth: Hospital for nine months.

Interviewer: Were you in England?

Eldon Knuth: England until March, and then I went to the States and was in Camp Butner until August. ... Speaking of dates [looking at document of some sort he had brought], I was inducted the 19th of August, '43. And I was discharged on the 9th of August, '45. That's the best I can read here, yeah.

[TIME 1:45:22]

Interviewer: What medals or commendations did you get?

Eldon Knuth: I got the Combat Infantry badge, a couple of Bronze Stars. I was offered a Purple Heart once but I turned it down. In one of the mortar, I guess, firings by the Germans, I wound up with a small cut on my hand. And they said, Do you want a Purple Heart for that? I said, No.

Interviewer: Would you recommend military service to young people now?

Eldon Knuth: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Eldon Knuth: I realize somebody has to do it, but I think they have enough people without a friend of mine volunteering for it. But I also have the impression that the individuals in the service now are not a cross section of the public. And that it would be a difficult experience.

Interviewer: Speaking of difficult experiences, was readjusting to civilian life easy for you?

Eldon Knuth: That was easy for me. I got out in August, started school probably in September, and I was immersed in school.

Interviewer: And you became an engineer?

Eldon Knuth: Yeah.

Interviewer: If you had something to say to your great-great-granddaughter or grandson 100 years from now, about what's important to your life, or what you'd like them to remember, what would you like to say?

Eldon Knuth: I thought we did something useful. Something that needed to be done. And as far as I am personally concerned, the government then gave me an opportunity to do my schooling with a minimum of pain to me [laughs]. See, a wounded veteran gets a little better support than the GI Bill. And that came in very handy. It enabled me to finish quite quickly.

Interviewer: Do you have any words of wisdom you'd like to pass on to the future? What's important in your life?

Eldon Knuth: No more wars. Stay out of war. Develop a work ethic.

Interviewer: That's good. And this is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, and the 95th Infantry. It's time for the next event today. Thank you so much, Mr. Knuth, and Mrs. Knuth. And Kay. -end transcript-