Telephone interview: Whately, Massachusettes

January 25, 2005, 1:20 p.m.

Interviewer: Michael Russert

M. Russert: Can you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please.

K. Feuerherm: Mr. Kurt Carl Feuerherm, born March 22, 1925 in Berlin, Germany.

M. Russert: When did your family immigrate to the United States?

K. Feuerherm: My father immigrated in 1927 and then he sent for my mother and II two years later. I immigrated in September of 1929.

M. Russert: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

K. Feuerherm: I graduated from xxxxxxxxxxPark High School, Buffalo, NY in 1943. Then I was drafted the following summer.

M. Russert: Do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

K. Feuerherm: Yes I remember it very distinctly. My neighborhood in Buffalo, NY was the Genesee Jefferson section and I grew up in a very ethnic neighborhood and I grew up with some Irish kids, Polish kids, German, Armenian and so forth and so on. We were playing touch football in the backyard when my best friend Jimmy Sherman's mother came out and said they just bombed Pearl Harbor and we all sort of were stunned for a minute and then we went right on playing touch football.

M. Russert: You were drafted. When were you drafted into the army?

K. Feuerherm: I was drafted in August of 1943.

M. Russert: Where did you go for your basic training?

K. Feuerherm: First I went to Ettank I think it is, in Long Island. Then I went to Camp Croft in South Carolina near Spartanburg South Carolina.

M. Russert: Now is this the first time you were ever away from home?

K. Feuerherm: No not really but any distance I would say yes.

M. Russert: Did you ever get home sick at all?

K. Feuerherm: Oh yeah I was very home sick.

M. Russert: How did you keep in contact with your parents?

K. Feuerherm: ?_____ phones daily.

M. Russert: Could you tell me a little about your basic training?

K. Feuerherm: Well my basic training was a 10 week infantry training. I think it was either 10 or 12 weeks I'm not sure. I know that we were ready to be shipped out, that would have been September, October, November and we went home on leave and then we were supposed to ship out at the end of December but I got sick and I was in the Army hospital for two weeks. Then I was shipped out two weeks later.

M. Russert: How did you go across to Europe?

K. Feuerherm: We went by convoy. We boarded a liberty ship in Newport News and then we went south. We started out with about 10 ships and by the time we got to the south of Florida we had about 125 ships. Which included some destroyer escorts and I think one light cruiser, something like that. Then we crossed Norburgh from Florida and e crossed over to the west coast of Africa and then moved up the west coast of Africa,

where the convoy split into two parts. Part of it went to England and part of it went to Naples. I was in the part that went to Naples.

M. Russert: Now you went over as replacements?

K. Feuerherm: I went over as a replacement, yes. We actually now know how the German's did it. They were right under us with U-boats when we went through the Straight of Gibraltar. That evening we were attacked by U-boats and fighter pilots before we landed in Naples. It seemed like they were not after the troop ships they were mostly after the oil tankers and it was one of the scariest nights in my life I'll tell you, being in the whole of a liberty ship. Then we all bolted and got on the deck.

M. Russert: Were any ships in the convoy hit?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah, I think we lost about 12 ships.

M. Russert: Were did you land in Italy?

K. Feuerherm: We landed in Naples.

M. Russert: Oh, o.k. you said that, yes.

K. Feuerherm: We landed; oh I'm trying to think of it. It would have been probably in January, 1944. It was such an eerie sight because they had all these sausage balloons up in the harbor to protect against straightening and so forth and so on, but that's where we landed.

M. Russert: Now did you go to a replacement center?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah. We went to Repple Depple, which is what they used to call it, outside of Capua, which was served by a political center of Italy at one time. They had a lot of big buildings, but we were out in the field and it was a huge repple depple. It had about five of them for sure but I'd say it had between 30 and 40 thousand troops.

M. Russert: How long were you there before you were assigned to a Unit.?

K. Feuerherm: Well like I said I think we arrived there in late January early February and I wasn't assigned until around May 11th and then I was assigned to the 85th division and the company that I was assigned had lost about half of it's men, when they started the offensive. The admitted they were stale mated at Cassino at that time and this is what they called the spring offensive to liberate their own.

M. Russert: Could you talk about that a little bit?

K. Feuerherm: Well it was late in the evening when I joined the group of GI's from the 85th division and I was in the second platoon in L Company and the 338 battalion of the 85th division. That night we were in reserve so we were up on a hill above a town called Gaeta and it was sort of a spectacular night because they were bombing Gaeta from the ocean, I mean Mediterranean. There were about five or six American ships that were bombing the city and we were quite calm, we were probably up about 3,000 feet off the coast and that's how I joined and like I say I was 18 years old and I don't know I was really scared. What else can I say?

M. Russert: What kind of weapon did you carry?

K. Feuerherm: Oh I was a B.A.R man and also well we took turns being a B.A.R man but right from the beginning I was a B.A.R man and we got into a skirmish the next night just north of Taratina. We had about five or six fire fights before we were close to Rome. Now I can't remember all the places. It's all so strange to me because Italy has done a lot of reforestations and what were really sort of baron hills are now forest and hills. So it's hard to sort of image exactly where you were you know. There certainly were places that I remember but it was not as distinct as I thought it was going to be, going back there.

M. Russert: What did you think of the B.A.R as a weapon?

K. Feuerherm: Well it was a good weapon and it was very accurate but it was slower than hell compared to German machine guns. The first time I heard a German machine gun I said "Oh my god I cant believe they have a weapon like that." What they called Burt guns. I also carried M1 too and I liked the M1. The M1 was a great rifle. The problem with the B.A.R was it was almost 30 pounds. It was a pretty heavy fire arm. Like I said it was an automatic weapon but not any where near as automatic as German machine guns.

M. Russert: Were you pretty well fed while you in the front line.

K. Feuerherm: What's that?

M. Russert: Were you fed pretty well? Did you keep well supplied while you were at the front?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah but I hardly ate. I lost a lot weight when I was over seas. The problem with K rations, you know we had one stet where it was 73 days we were in combat with out any kind of hot meals at all. We were just living off of K rations. A lot of the times, after 70 days you hardly get something to eat any way. I was 18 years old so it didn't matter that much to me.

M. Russert: How about your clothing? Were you well supplied with shoes and your clothing and so on?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah. They used to set up these shower camps in the river beds in Italy and then you would run through the shower and then throw all you clothing away and put a new set of clothing on, but I went 73 days with I never changed clothing.

M. Russert: Were you able to shower often or at all during the 73 days?

K. Feuerherm: No not at all. The only time you got a shower was when you were really in the reserve. Then you might get a hot meal. It was pretty rugged. Then we were way up in the Apennines. They had to bring most of the stuff in by mules. You couldn't get any kind of heavy equipment up in there.

M. Russert: Now do you think you were trained for that kind of fighting? Were you trained in mountain terrain at all?

K. Feuerherm: No. I had friends that were in the mountain division and they weren't any better trained really. I had high school buddies that I saw in Florence that were in the 10th mountain and we sort of compared stories. You know I don't know how well you could train any buddy for combat, it's so different. It's really all surreal in a lot of ways.

M. Russert: With you German background were you ever used as an interpreter.

K. Feuerherm: Constantly. I've got a lot of funny stories about that.

M. Russert: Well, why don't you tell us some?

K. Feuerherm: Well, I'm trying to keep it in chronological order. I'll tell you those. Those actually happened up in the Apennines, North of Florence. I was used as an interpreter usually. The biggest problem with being an interpreter is that even though you are fluent in the language you don't have a lot of the current terms that are being used, especially military terms. I wouldn't know the first thing about military terms. Do you understand what I mean?

M. Russert: Yes, yes.

K. Feuerherm: Because that was one of the things I found later on when I was used as an interpreter in the LXS. It was very hard for me to interrogate a German prisoner and get a lot of accurate information because of the fact I lacked a lot. I knew the American

Army but I didn't know anything about the German army. Even though we got read out and stuff like that we were sort of running around in the Alps after the war looking for Mark Boreman, well you know we never did find him. Well let's go back to where I was.

M. Russert: O.k.

K. Feuerherm: Well then it must have been the early part of June we were stalled in front of Rome and they were negotiating the open city negotiation. Well I did not know that at the time but that's what we were waiting for and then when they finally got the German's to agree to have it as an open city we marched though the city. Then we marched about 30 to 35 miles that day marching through Rome. We started in Pousky, which is south of Rome and then we marched all the way up to Lake Ballsana.

M. Russert: How were you treated and accepted by the local people.

K. Feuerherm: It was wonderful. It was like we were real liberators. Every body was out on the streets. The biggest problem was that we couldn't stop we had to keep on going. It was a real liberation. I can't imagine of people being happier to see somebody then when we went through Rome. It was sort of one of the big highlights in my war experiences. Then we were in reserve for about two weeks. The German's retreated quite fast back to, I forgot the name of the line, but it's along the Arno. You know Italy is made for delayed tactics because every hill has a little town on it that's a fortress and you only need a handful of people to defend them and you know you got to go up there and get rid of them and usually the German's would slip out at night and wouldn't be there in the morning and they would delay you for a day or two. Then we had some really heavy fire fights south of Altera and I remember there was one little town that we

took, but I can't remember the town. Well not actually a town but a cluster of buildings and we launched 50 percent of my squad that day. We had three of them taken as prisoners and three of them killed. Then there were six of us that got out of that mess. Then you have to wait until you got some more replacements. According to what I've read I think my platoon was replaced four times during the war. There were only about 14 or 15 that had never been wounded. I was just very, very lucky.

Let's see what else I can tell you. There's so much. Let me go on then. Then we were on the stationary front along the Arno River. The German's were on one side of the Arno and we were on the other. We were around the area of Napole. Now the way it was sort of set up we were back about a quarter of a mile from the river and the German's were about the same distance and then we used to send out patrols to the river banks to see what was going on. There wasn't anything. It was sort of an eerie kind of truths and that lasted until early October. Now the Arno didn't have very much water in it that summer so we were able to cross it with one of the bridges that had been dynamited by the German's. When we got on the other side we started meeting resistance. There was a lot of damage to Florence, which was surprising to me but almost all the railroad area. Then I lived Florence for two years in 1996 and 1997 so I know the city pretty well. The most of the damage that I remember was along the railroad station and along the river. Why it was this damaged, I think it was just because that the line where the German's were on one side, we were on the other and I remember the Ponte Vecchio they had dynamite at both ends of the Ponte Vecchio and the center part was still standing. After we crossed the river then we went up to where the fitzy was. There was some pretty heavy fighting right in there, bullets flying all over the place. Then the German's retreated that night

and went north about 20 miles. Then we went up and we had some more battles up there. We had some pretty fierce battles up there during the middle of the night. The captain of my company said "I want you to get these German's to surrender." So I'm calling out in German "Come out with your hands up, your surrounded." There was definitely silence and all at once there was a laugh and the guy said in German, "No, I don't think were surrounded. I think you're surrounded." Then all at once every one started shooting. There were lots of prisoners taken during that time because the German's were starting to give up but they still held on. I felt we were running out of heavy support and artillery and so forth. I think they pulled a lot of the artillery out and sent it to southern France. We didn't have and I think we were probably under manned and under armed at that time. The front became stationary way up in the mountains about 5,000 feet. Boy was it cold up there. We just had a stationary line; we started digging trenches, doing kill boxes and all that kind of stuff.

M. Russert: Now were you equipped with the warmer gear, clothing and so on.

K. Feuerherm: Yeah. Some guys got frost bite but I think it was o.k. We were pretty warm. Then I contracted hepatitis so in the middle of winter they sent me back to Naples to go through a recovery time. They gave me three weeks off. After that my livers got down and I was reassigned back to the front.

M. Russert: Did you go back to your own Unit.?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah. I went back to my own unit and then we were pulled off for about a month. It must have been in January or February and then I can't remember exactly. We were probably in reserve for longer than that because we didn't push off again till April. Then we broke through to the Pope Valley and that was already late

May. Then in June the war was over. When the war ended we were in a town called Russia, which is in the northern part of Pope Valley.

M. Russert: How were you made aware that the war was over?

K. Feuerherm: They had radios and we knew that we were being negotiated. So we were basically trying not to get into any more skirmishes because we didn't want anyone dying the last minute. We had pretty good communication with what was going on but you know most of the stuff that I've learned I really read in Stars and Stripes or something like that. We didn't really know how the war was going.

M. Russert: When President Roosevelt died do you remember how you heard of that and your reaction?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah, I do remember it very distinctly. I was riding on the back of a tank and we heard it over the tanks radio. It was a shock; he was really the only president that I knew. I was living in Buffalo when he was elected in 1932 and the thing that I remember about that was that Prohibition was over. That was one of the things that happened. It was a very sad time. I remember that I really felt sad about when Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. I just expected him to go on and on and on. I didn't even know that people hated him.

M. Russert: You mentioned in the form you filled out two soldiers under fire. Could you talk about that a little bit?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah that was south of Florence. That was when we were in that campaign around Baltera, Santa Mignon and Pontassieve and a whole bunch of those areas. What happened was that we were crossing the river and two guys were hit and we were hiding in the gold rushes. Somebody had to go out and help those guys and so I

went out and got one guy and I saw the other guy and I had to go back. Basically what I did was had him put his arms around my neck and then I carried him. There were bullets whizzing all around me but I didn't get hit and neither did he. Then I went back and got the other guy. That was one of those things I'm really proud of.

M. Russert: Now you received a bronze star. Was it for that action?

K. Feuerherm: Yeah, it was for that action.

M. Russert: Now when did you end up with the O.S.S?

K. Feuerherm: That was after the war. What happened was, well the war was over in June and in July they instigated this point system on how you could get discharged. None of us had enough points so we did not know what was going to happen to us. Whether we were going to be shipped to the pacific front or whether we were going to go back or what. Basically, one of the chores we were doing was returning German prisoners to Germany. They would put them into box cars and put the box cars through the Brenner pass then there was this little town of Rosenheim in Southern Germany where they were discharging these guys. They had to interrogate them first to make sure they were not any S.S people. What happened was there was a notice on the bulletin board one morning and it said they were looking for people who were fluent in German. I was assigned to this one unit that I think had about eight or 10 people in it and two of us were German interpreters. The rest of them were regular O.S.S. The guy that was the head of it was a guy by the name of Wild Bill Donovan. I think he was a Cornel, I'm not sure he might have been a Major. Major Donovan. It was like living in the Ritz because he had tons of beer, a beautiful Chalet up in Cortina de Epetzel., which was an Italian resort area. We had all these great meals because he had this great French cook. Every

day we would go out and here about some rumor and we would hop in the Jeep and go out and see what was going on and then in the meantime when we weren't doing that we were practicing these prisoners because Cortina was a German hospital town and it had all these hotels because it was a resort town. So all the hotels had become filled with German soldiers that had become wounded and those were the people that we were practicing and sending them back to Germany. That's what I was doing basically every day. I would go in there and get four or five German prisoner and ask them questions and then I would have to make some sort of judgment call on whether or not I thought they were Nazi's or not. How I would know is beyond me.

M. Russert: Now did you have much contact with Donovan himself?

K. Feuerherm: No. He was always pretty busy. I knew him but actually that job didn't last that long. It only lasted about six weeks. Then I went back to my unit and the next day there was a notice on the bulletin board that said if you wanted to fly back to the United States you could but you would only have four weeks leave and then you would have to be reassigned to the Pacific. I thought I would take a chance and i signed up and the next day my name was on a list for a flight to go down to Naples and to Casablanca. From Casablanca, to Bechar and Brazil that part of South America was the shortest distance. So they flew a lot. They could do that in one hop. Then I flew to Brazil and from Brazil to the British Viena and from there to Puerto Rico and to Miami. I was assigned to go back to the states, but I was not going to be discharged because I didn't have enough points. The guys that were on the plane that were being discharged were most of the North African campaign guys that were left because they had been in the Army almost two years longer. I think that's right. 1942 wasn't it? The aid army was

always a mixture. When it first started fighting in Italy it was the 34th division and the First Armour and all those divisions that were in North Africa.. Then they took them out and trained them in an amphibious landing and they landed in Southern France. Divisions that were left in Italy were really sort of new divisions. The 88th, 85th, and the 92nd. It was a real mixture. The Polish army, the French had an Army there, the Brazilians. They had Gourkas' and Seeks and everything. It was a real mixture of people. I remember we used to go to clubs in Florence, the International clubs and you would see everybody there. You would see the whole gammet of the war. The funniest thing was that it was like three different wars. I didn't realize it at the time but the most civilized war was the one that was going on in Western Europe. The Eastern Europe one was less, they didn't take any prisoners. You know how fatalistic the Pacific campaign was. That was really scary. It was scary enough to be in the war but boy I don't know.

M. Russert: Where were you and how did you feel when you heard about the atomic bombs being dropped?

K. Feuerherm: I was amazed! I didn't really understand it. I could see where the war going to end. Of course it wasn't in retrospect that easy but it seemed like it was really going to end. It was sort of hard for me to read revisionist history. When I go to see a show or something like that I don't think this was they way it was. I think it's difficult.

M. Russert: When were you discharged?

K. Feuerherm: I was discharged just before Christmas 1945.

M. Russert: Were your parents aware at all at what was happening inside Germany in the 1930's and so on?

K. Feuerherm: Oh yeah.

M. Russert: So you still had family there?

K. Feuerherm: I have to tell you this. My parents were very German. My father was a candy maker and we had a candy store in Buffalo, NY and I wanted to join the Boy Scouts and my mother and father said we will let you join the Boy Scouts but you got to join the German Boy Scouts. They had the same society that they belong to. I was about 13 years old when I joined the German Boy Scouts. I was in that outfit for two years and then my mother and father said well we better not have him go anymore because they were becoming much too political and they were. The guy who ran the boy scouts was a guy named Hermut Vonnusen and he later became a General Vonnusen in Germany on the Russian front. He was propagandizing us. They did it very subtlety When they drafted me they asked me if I ever belong to any submissive organization and I said no and the guy looked up and said" that for two years you were a member of the Boy Scouts, is that correct?" I said" oh yeah I guess I was." I was an enemy alien when I was drafted. Technically my mother, father and my self were aliens because we were born in Berlin and neither one of them had become citizens. I certainly wasn't a citizen. I was sworn in, in Spartans burgh, South Carolina at the end of my basic training. December 12th I was sworn in as an American citizen with about 300 other guys. About seven or eight years ago there was a special on Ellis Island and Henry Kissinger was on it. They were interviewing Henry Kissinger and they asked where he went for his basic training and he said to the country club of the south, Camp Croft, South Carolina. That's where he was sworn in on December 12th at the Spartanburgh court house and made a citizen. So he must have been in there in that room when I was being sworn in, but I never met him. It was sort of funny to realize that.

M. Russert: Did you make use of the GI bill at all?

K. Feuerherm: I never would have gone to college. Basically the GI bill made it possible for me to go College and get my Master's degree in Fine Arts. The other funny part about it was that I got dancing lessons under the GI bill. It was approved for Arthur Murray.

M. Russert: Did you ever us the 52/20 club?

K. Feuerherm: What's the 52/20 club?

M. Russert: It was 20 dollars a week for 52 weeks. It was like unemployment insurance.

K. Feuerherm: No. I remember it but I don't think so.

M. Russert: Did you join veteran's organizations at all?

K. Feuerherm: I was a member of the American Veterans of Foreign Lords for about two months and when they went through their initiation rights it was just to Mickey mouse for me. There was about five of us that just said we had enough of this.

M. Russert: Did you ever stay in contact with any one that was in service with you?

K. Feuerherm: No. Not really

M. Russert: How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

K. Feuerherm: Well, my therapist asked me that. He asked me what I used as a measure of your life. I told him that was an easy one, World War II. For me I can think of not a scarier kind of situation to be in. I cant imaging what it would be like to be Iraq. When you life is on the line like that it like your tense all the time. It's like a double

edges sword. Part of you says that you've had a very deep experience and you have. It makes you look at life a lot differently.

M. Russert: Of course you were forded the opportunity to go college so that did affect.

K. Feuerherm: You know I can't imagine how aggravated I can get when I go to the V.A and I have to go through all this red tape, but that what life is all about. Well not red tape but you have to be able to adjust to these situations.