

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR RICHARD T. KENNEDY

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Interview of a 20th century Historian

For my speaker, I interviewed a man who fought in World War II. His name is Ambassador Richard T. Kennedy. Ambassador Kennedy is a well-respected and well liked man who remembers first-hand how it was to fight in such a grueling war. Here is my interview with Ambassador Kennedy.

Q: In which war did you fight?

KENNEDY: World War II.

Q: Did you believe in the cause? Were you behind the American efforts?

KENNEDY: Did I believe in it? I certainly did.

Q: Why was it that you went into battle?

KENNEDY: Why? Well, because we had been attacked by a foreign power, the Japanese, and in those days it was a matter of patriotic necessity. We all believed in the rightness of our cause, felt strongly about it and were willing to go out and fight for it. And, indeed I had just graduated from college the previous June, 1941, and had started on a modest young man's career. But when the war came, I left my job and very shortly thereafter, on March 13th of 1942, enlisted in the army as a private.

Q: Now, in comparison, I'm sure that it made you upset to see the reaction of the public regarding the Vietnam War.

KENNEDY: Yes, it certainly did.

Q: How did you feel going into battle?

KENNEDY: Feeling about going into battle? Well, I don't know...Well, you're so busy that you don't think about it. Everybody's got his job to do. By the time I actually went into battle I was a young lieutenant.

I went into the army in March, 1942, and went to Louisiana to learn how to be a soldier. Then, I went to a radio operations school, and became a communications sergeant. Then I went to Ft. Knox to learn how to be a radio mechanic, that is somebody who can not only operate them (radios) but take them apart and rebuild them. While I was there and completed that course, I was selected to go into the armored officer candidate school at Ft Knox and three months later I became a lieutenant. A short time after, a few months, I found myself in Casablanca and then moved to Oran, Algeria. I went to Oran and joined the first armored division which had been fighting in North Africa and had lost a great many people and needed a lot of new blood. I was one of them. We went from there to Italy. Our first real battles were in the region of Cassino where our (armored) regiment was supporting infantry trying to take all of the hills around Monte Cassino and finally Monte Cassino itself. We never did though. Instead we went to Anzio.

Now, one of your questions was “what do you think about?” Well, what you think about is your job...because in a combat organization, everybody’s got a job and everybody else’s job depends on him doing that job, you know? So, you think about doing your job. You don’t think about much of anything else. If you start thinking about other things, then you begin to worry about what’s happening around you and all that noise because it can be pretty heinous. But you don’t do that, you focus on what you’re supposed to do and do it the very best way can.

Q: Did you keep in touch with your family through all of this?

KENNEDY: Oh, sure, sure. We had little V-mails...ever hear of the V-mail?

Q: Yes, I think so.

KENNEDY: We didn’t have any high-priced electronic transmissions in those days, but they had oversized postcards that actually were little letters, self-sealing and all. You wrote inside and then sealed it up and they were smaller than regular letters but self-contained. (Pause) We corresponded regularly and family kept sending me things.

I remember one time (chuckle), we were in the vicinity of Cassino. We had just recently come from North Africa. An armored division has an enormous number of vehicles, just hundreds and hundreds of vehicles, and our regiment had three tank battalions. By that time, I was in the light tank battalion. In those days, a light tank battalion was light, very small. Each of us young new lieutenants was always getting dispatched for details like making sure the mess (hall) was clean. That’s what happens to young lieutenants. Three or four of us were sent down to establish a base camp near the port in Naples. As vehicles began to arrive on ships that were coming from all over the North African coast, we could collect the ones belonging to our battalions, put them together, and form convoys and get them up to our battalions, which we’d do every night. We wouldn’t move them until dark so that they couldn’t be seen by enemy air.

I remember once while we were there, it was getting toward Christmas. One day (chuckle) the young kid in his jeep who was the regimental sort of mail officer brought

this big sac of mail. The sac had my name on the identification tag...the whole sac was mine. What it was were little one pound boxes of Fanny Farmers Chocolates which my Mother, dear God, love her soul, would buy me every week with her ration coupon and mail. By that time, you see, I'd been moving from Casablanca to Oran, then from Oran to Naples, going up toward Cassino (chuckle) and finally all of this stuff began catching up with me. They had gathered it all up at some point in the Army postal system, stuck it in one bag and delivered it all at once. Now, what was I going to do with about twenty pounds of candy? Well, (chuckle) I had a little Christmas party for a bunch of little Italian kids who were in the neighborhood, said Merry Christmas (in Italian), and gave them each a box of candy (chuckle).

Q: What was the high point of your experience?

KENNEDY: Oh, golly...I don't know. There were so many, Brian, I couldn't say.

Q: Really?

KENNEDY: I couldn't say...

Q: Did that leave any room for a low point then?

KENNEDY: A low point?

Q: Was there any time that you were down?

KENNEDY: Down? Everybody's down, you know? You probably aren't well adjusted if you don't get down sometimes. I don't remember...ah, yeah I can remember a couple of times being down. It didn't have anything to do with battle...

Q: Just being lonely?

KENNEDY: No, not really being lonely because we were always together. At one point in the final winter of the war we were high in the Apennine mountains overlooking Bologna. They dismounted us and made us infantry, which we weren't very good at (chuckle). But even then, you know, your buddy is close by and there's somebody to talk to. I don't remember getting lonely, I remember thinking sometimes about home and how everybody was but I don't think loneliness was the name of the game. I do remember, however, a particular low point and it was in the Spring of 1945 when we heard over the radio that President Roosevelt had died. Nobody knew what was going to happen and who President Truman was or how it was all going to work because President Roosevelt had been there so long, he was sort of a fixture in everybody's mind. I remember that. There was a lot of sort of feeling of 'what now' and a little disquiet.

I remember a couple of low points when people I knew were killed. Those were low points. I don't know how to explain it, it's just you have the sense of loss and you think about their families and wonder how all that's going to work out and how the families are

going to react. I do remember a case of a young man who was the 'all-American boy'. He looked like Jack Armstrong, you know, a big, tall, handsome young man from Oklahoma. He rode a horse as though he had been born on it and he was just one of those remarkable young fellas who, you know, everybody looks to...a leader. He had just been promoted to captain and took over his own company in our battalion. He was very, very close to the battalion commander who was only a couple, or three years older than I was, and this kid...I was on the radio when the commander of the tank immediately behind this young man's tank called in and said, "Our number one has been killed!" This shook up everybody and certainly shook up me.

Q: Did thoughts like, "That could happen to me" run through your head?

KENNEDY: I suppose for a minute. But, you know, as I said...I think maybe (chuckle) I just wasn't intelligent enough to know how dangerous it really was. I didn't think about that very much and I got lots of little assignments to do...I guess because people would recognize that I'd do it and I wouldn't exhibit fear about it. As a consequence I did do a lot of running around doing things that other people might not have quite as reliable. But that's just (chuckle)...

Q: Well, I'm sure it was a very appreciated quality.

KENNEDY: ... that's human relations, I don't know, I don't understand it. But ah, as high points? Well, I suppose a high point came at almost the very end...well, two high points, I remember one which really was a terribly frightening exercise. We had been in Anzio for over a month, living in holes in the ground, literally under the ground, because the Germans could see us and just periodically shoot artillery over the top of us. It could land anywhere. Indeed, at one point on the day we were breaking out, we had a round of artillery land within about a hundred yards or less right on the top of a mess tent. Fortunately there was nobody in it. By the time it hit, I had heard it and was flat on the ground and got covered up with dirt. But, you got used to that...more or less.

But coming out of Anzio, the day began with a bombing raid which went on for nearly an hour, maybe more...continuous flights of bombers and you could almost see the bombs themselves, I also watched them bomb Cassino and that was kind of frightening, not because it was going to hurt you but because it was so enormously powerful. At the same time all of that was going on, every piece of artillery, including all of the anti-aircraft artillery that was on the Anzio beachhead and that must have been hundreds and hundreds of guns...were firing at the same time. All this was to completely suppress the Germans who were on the hills outside the beachhead. Then finally we moved out of there. By the time we had moved up with our light tanks -- actually by this time we had slightly better tanks but not much -- by the time we moved up there I remember Colonel Gardner. He was the tank battalion commander of, I think it was the second battalion, which was one of the medium tank battalions. He came back to our command post -- we got ourselves a place in kind of beat up old shell-shocked building. He came down the road in his tank, was one other, and that was all that was left of his battalion. I remember that as being pretty dramatic, he had almost nothing left. They just attached him and what

he had left to our battalion.

That's the way it went for about three days, night and day. We didn't sleep at all. If we slept, it was in our tanks until, finally, we had broken out and the beachhead was no longer contained by the Germans, and the Germans were in retreat I remember that. (pause) ...and I remember also the time that we had reached the Iano river and were getting ourselves organized for a task force to move north. We got a special messenger from the division commander with instructions that we were to assemble immediately. This was in the middle of the night. We were joined by two companies of armored infantry, a tank-destroyer company, and they put together a whole task force with our battalion of tanks. We were to proceed north toward the direction Como, Italy.

I remember that because I remember when we opened this thing, the battalion commander said, "We've got to go to Como. I said, "Como? That's the playground of kings." I remembered that from when I was a boy, reading. I loved to read all kinds of things like travel stories and I remembered Como as being one of the most beautiful spots in Europe, which indeed it is and was then.

We marched 96 miles that day, with those tanks and we came all the way to Como. The reason we were doing that is because we were chasing Mussolini. Mussolini was attempting to escape; he was going up through Como where he thought that he would be able to get to Switzerland. But the communist partisans got him instead. I remember that very well because I remember I'd arrived in Como. We formed the battalion up on the hills surrounding Como and then the task force and some infantry was sent down into the town. The (chuckle) battalion commander said, "Kennedy! I'm tired. Go down and find the best looking place you can where I get a good night's sleep. Also, if I could get something to eat, I'd like that too." I said, "Yes, sir." So, I went off in a jeep (chuckle), down into the town.

It was as quiet as a tomb. The infantry had already rounded up most of the people who were there; the Germans. This was a base headquarters, and the Germans there were not high-fighting troops -- they were just cooks and beggars (chuckle). They'd rounded them all up including a General named General Polmtson and they'd taken them all down to the soccer stadium in the city and kind of...put them to rest there. I went to a little hotel, which is probably still there today. I went down to the hotel and I went in and I said, "Who's the proprietor?" I could speak a little Italian in those days and he came and I said, "Sir, we would like a half-dozen rooms with fresh sheets and we would also like some milk, some coffee, and some kind of sandwiches." He said oh, he would be most pleased. He was so delighted to see us! I'm sure he was saying the same thing to the Germans two hours before, but in any case, I got my room and I found in the drawer of the dresser in the room, two beautiful officers' caps; I still have them. The Germans left so fast, they didn't even get to pick up his clothes (chuckle).

I remember that because it signaled almost the end of the war. But, just few days after that, what really signaled the end of the war was that we moved to the East, off in the direction of Milan. The Germans had a very, very large battalion which grew probably, to

division size, which was guarding the Swiss border. It was there trying to make sure that if Germans really had to decamp, they could go there or even stay in Berkestok. But this was an outfit that patrolled all those mountains. This is some of the most beautiful country in the whole world. It was a very large organization. It was probably at least division size and they had dogs, and everything. Most of the people or most of the soldiers and officers were people who had formerly been in Crete. Do you remember early in the war, the Germans had invaded Crete with airborne troops and many of them had been wounded. But, having been rehabilitated, instead of sending them back to the front they sent them to this organization as a guard against the frontier. They were a sort of last bastion against which the Americans and the others...the Canadians and the British would have to run up against.

Well, he wasn't about to surrender, this fellow, so we were ordered to march over there (chuckle)...this was a high point, or one of the things I remember: The battalion commander was absolutely delighted that he had gotten a Porsche. As we rounded up things in this town, Como, he was able to liberate a Porsche for himself. A beautiful, convertible, sedan...I'd never seen a Porsche, it was some car, let me tell you! So, he says, (chuckle) "Kennedy! I want you to go with my driver and look after this damn car (chuckle)!"

It was pouring rain as we were ordered to move over toward Milan. We came to this bridge, which of course had been blown out; the engineers had built a Bailey bridge across this river, and standing at the end of the bridge was the entire corps that we were part of, and you know a corps is probably something like 100,000 men. There was a huge bottleneck. Most of the 5th army was moving in the same direction and the corps commander was standing there with all his stars gleaming at the end of this bridge (chuckle) and here I come along in this Porsche...I looked straight ahead, saluted smartly and the guy said to the driver, "Keep moving" (chuckle).

Anyway, we got over there. The corps commander sent a white flag to the German General, and said, "Look, there's no sense in us carrying this forward. I want you to come down, I want you to see what's out here." So, the German General and the American General made a sort of parade. They drove around so that the American could show the German what was there. It was perfectly obvious that his situation was completely hopeless, there must have been a thousand artillery pieces and there were three armored divisions, four infantry divisions, all within a matter of ten or fifteen miles and all against his probably 50,000 men. So that was the end of the war as far as we were concerned. As a matter of fact the war did end just a few weeks after that in June.

Q: Are you glad you did it?

KENNEDY: Yes, I certainly am. (pause) ...it was a sense of the world was against us and by gosh we're going to protect ourselves, and were going to save for ourselves and our future what we have built. It was a genuine patriotic sense; young fellows like me...you had to stand in line to get in the recruiting offices (pause). So, anyway (chuckle), would I do it again; of course I would, you bet I would. I would hope every young man of that

age would because that's what ultimately makes the difference, I think.

Q: What do you think made such a big difference between that and the Vietnam War?

KENNEDY: I don't think anyone understood what the Vietnam War was about. Then, I don't think that they comprehended...I'm not sure that the leadership was willing to prosecute the war to a conclusion. It was measured responses and this is just damn foolishness. I am among those who believe if you're going to fight a war, you've got to fight it to win it. You can't do otherwise, otherwise you won't win and if you don't win, you will be in trouble.

Q: Is there any experience that particularly sticks in your mind?

KENNEDY: Oh gee, Brian...! don't know (pause). It's a long, long time since then, 50 years? Well, there were a lot of experiences. You know, it was a great thrill to have someone pin your first second lieutenant bars on after beating your brains out for three months in the middle of the winter in Kentucky, and I mean beating your brains out (chuckle). Twenty mile hikes, half of which is running in combat boots with full combat gear and carrying your rifle and wearing your steel helmet. It's good for you, I guess. It didn't occur to me that it was at the time but actually it was, of course, because you learned (chuckle); you learned that you could survive. But, I guess I can't put my finger on any one experience during the war.

One great experience was immediately after the war was over. I had the chance to see Europe for a whole year. I could have come home. But you know, in those days, Brian, air travel had not arrived, it was just beginning to be thought about. So, if you went to Europe, you had to do it on a ship and most young people in those days couldn't even imagine a ship...being able to afford it you know. It would take you ten days to get over there and ten days to get back. Then, if you're going to be there for ten days, you're there for a month. Well, I couldn't afford that and I didn't think I would ever again get a chance to be in Europe. So I stayed. I had an opportunity to travel all over the continent.

Q: How devastated was Europe?

KENNEDY: Oh, absolutely devastated, everywhere was just catastrophic devastation. I served as a member of a General Court Martial which was established for a whole district and so every morning for a couple or three months I was billeted in Vestpat which was not damaged, it was beautiful. Primarily, I suppose because Vestpatin was designated to be the headquarters of the Air Force after the war and they didn't want it all beat up (chuckle). In any case, I had to take off with my driver very early each morning and drive down to Darmstadt which is where this court martial was convened every day. You'd drive into Darmstadt which was typical of many towns. Darmstadt had been firebombed. Buildings stood but all they were was walls, you could see right through them. You know, see through the windows on the one side, straight out through the windows of the other. Just absolutely total devastation. In Mr. Truman's documentary of the war, he mentions as he was flying into Berlin for the Conference of Potsdam, after the war. He

said he was absolutely stunned at the enormity of the devastation. It really was just absolutely awful.

Q: Did your going to war have a direct effect on your family?

KENNEDY: Oh, of course! But you know (chuckle) my Mother's brother had been in World War I. As a matter of fact, he had a great experience, he was a tentmate of Kiki Cuyler. I don't know whether you're a baseball fan. Well, Kiki Cuyler was a Chicago Cub in the pre-World War I and after World War I days. He was a tentmate of Kiki Cuyler who was a great baseball player in those days...he's in the Hall of Fame. My uncle got me a baseball with all the Chicago Cubs names on it. Anyway, my father and all of his brothers, four of them, all five of them were in World War I. Two of them were injured or two wounded, one of them gassed in France. So, you know that's the way it was; one expected that to be the case and there was hardly a family in which some young men, and some young women had not gone off to war. There were, I think, 11 million men in the Army. So, yeah sure, it affected the families and the families were constantly concerned and I'm sure said lots of prayers for all of their loved ones, but it was inevitable.

Q: How long, total, were you over there?

KENNEDY: I went in the early spring of 1943 and came home...the war ended then roughly two and a half years later, then I stayed for another year, so I came home in the summer of 1946.

Q: Well, I guess those are all of my questions...

KENNEDY: Just remember, Brian, that it was the whole idea of patriotism and unity that won the war for us.

End of interview