

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#273

RAYMOND THOMAS KROHELSKI

HICKAM AIR FIELD, HOSPITAL PATIENT

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 7, 1998
BY DANIEL MARTINEZ**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

JULY 2, 2001

Raymond Krohelski (RK): ...you know, we're getting right in that age group.

Daniel Martinez (DM): Yeah, it's a shame. That's why we're here, because we can't wait. We can't wait for you guys to come back to Hawaii. We came here to get your interviews, and boy. All right, I'm ready to start.

The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service, at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. It was taped at Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 7, 1998, at approximately 6:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is Raymond Krohelski, who was at Hickam Field on December 7, 1941. Ray, for the record, could you state your full name?

RK: Raymond Thomas Krohelski.

DM: And your place of birth?

RK: My place of birth was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

DM: And your date of birth?

RK: March 27, 1919.

DM: And in 1941, what town or city did you consider your hometown?

RK: Nineteen forty-one, I wasn't home.

DM: Okay, but if you said, if you met me on the street in '41, you'd say, "My hometown is...?"

RK: I don't quite understand what you're saying.

DM: Okay. All I want to know is would you consider your hometown where your parents were or was that, in 1941?

RK: Yes.

DM: Okay. And that town was?

RK: Milwaukee.

DM: Milwaukee. Okay. Now we got that tough question out of the way. How many was in your family, Ray?

RK: Nine.

DM: Nine kids. And where were you in that stack?

RK: Right in the middle.

DM: Right in the middle.

RK: I had four older than me and four younger than me.

DM: How many brothers and sisters?

RK: I had four brothers and four sisters.

DM: And this sounds to me like a Catholic family. Would I be accurate in that?

RK: You are.

DM: And what did your dad do for a living?

RK: Well, he worked in a tannery for forty-some years. I believe it was forty-two years.

DM: Right. And your mother, she raised the family?

RK: Yes, but my mother passed away when I was at the age of about six years old.

DM: Now that must have been very tough on the family.

RK: Well, my dad didn't marry up until two years later. I had a stepmother from there on in.

DM: How'd that go?

RK: Well, you know how stepmothers are.

DM: No, tell me. I've never had one.

RK: (Chuckles) Well, yeah, I guess it didn't go too good.

DM: Okay. Did the children resent her?

RK: Yes.

DM: And she was probably a little tougher on you than she needed to be?

RK: That's correct.

DM: So you went to grammar school in Milwaukee?

RK: I went to St. Casimir School, it was a parochial school...

DM: And...

RK: ...with a Polish-English. We had our English, Polish lessons in the morning and English in the afternoon.

DM: So you could speak Polish?

RK: I speak Polish fluently.

DM: And how would you say, "Good afternoon," in Polish?

RK: In Polish, good afternoon, Dobry-dzien.

DM: And good evening?

RK: Dobry-Wieczor.

DM: Well, we'll have you say that when we end this then. That's tough, raising a family in the depression that big.

RK: That's right. Yes, but my dad, he had a way of doing it, I'll say. I'll put it that way.

DM: Did some of the kids work to raise extra money?

RK: Well, no. You see, when my—the oldest one in the family, at the time, was about twelve years old. I had—my sister was the oldest in the family. And she was about twelve and then they ran down from there. And of course, like I say, my dad had his way of doing it. He used to make home brew and moonshine. And that's how—he sold to, oh, like weddings, small parties. He never went in too big.

DM: Okay. So he was a bootlegger?

RK: He was a bootlegger and that's the way we never had welfare. We never were on welfare and he worked. And that's the way he maintained...

DM: Because it was the Great Depression and Prohibition.

RK: That's right. And I'm not saying he never got caught. He got caught, was a hundred dollar fine, or whatever, he paid, well then he had to double up his production.

DM: (Chuckles) That's great. Now, you went to high school. Did you go to a Catholic high school as well?

RK: No, I didn't go to high school.

DM: You didn't go to high school?

RK: No sir.

DM: So...

RK: I went as far as grade school.

DM: And then you decided on what?

RK: Well, I was self-learned.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: I got my, where I got my education, I worked for a grocer when I was a kid and I owned a couple grocery stores, not big ones, but in those days, like in 1946, I went in the first one. I had five people working for me in that one. And my lease ran out and I had too much business so the landlord chased me out and then I went into another place, where we bought the building. And there was a high school right across the street with 1800 kids and right around the corner we had a grade school, up to six years, so I'm dealing with 2400 kids. And the principal came over at least once a year to congratulate me how we took good care of these kids. Some of them were pretty boisterous.

DM: How did you take care of these kids?

RK: Well, let me put it this way. If we ever caught anybody stealing in the store, and if I caught 'em, I would hold 'em and raise his hand up and I told all the rest of the kids to watch this kid. I'd say, "He's a thief, so watch yourself when he's around."

And that brought down my problems, in one way.

DM: In one way, to humiliate that kid so he'd never steal again.

RK: That's right. That's right. He didn't do it again. And the others were leery about, you know...

DM: Being around a person like that.

RK: Let alone being around a person like that or trying to steal something from the store.

DM: I see.

RK: And it was just like I say it was, a ma and pa store. There was just my wife and I running this and...

DM: Oh, you were married at the time?

RK: Oh sure. Oh sure. I got married in 1945.

DM: Okay. So that was after the war?

RK: That was after the war, when we had the store.

DM: Okay. Okay. Take me to the time when you enlisted in the army. What year was that?

RK: That was in 1940. That was the latter part of December.

DM: Mm-hm.

RK: And...

DM: About a year before the attack, then.

RK: Yeah. I went—they sent me to New York, New Rochelle, and they sent us to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and got the ship. The ship's name was [*USAT*] *Hunter Liggett*. It was one of the ships they confiscated from World War I.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: And we, instead of going from the West Coast, we started for Hawaii from Brooklyn Navy Yard.

DM: Okay.

RK: So we went through the south and through Panama Canal and took us twenty-seven days to get to Hawaii.

DM: Now, prior to that, you had your boot camp or your training?

RK: No. I had no boot camp until I got to Hawaii. When we got to Hawaii, we went into Tent City.

DM: Okay.

RK: And there, at that time we were there, like from March, I landed, we landed in Hawaii on my birthday, on twenty-seventh of March of 1941. That's when we landed in Hawaii. And we went right over to Tent City and that's where I had all my boot training.

DM: Boy, that's a long way to go.

RK: That's right.

DM: What'd you think of Hawaii?

RK: Oh, I thought it was beautiful.

DM: Yeah.

RK: Because, not only did I like Hawaii, I almost stayed there, but my, at that time—I'm talking about after the war now.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: We went back for the twenty-fifth convention in 1966.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: And I met one of my supply officers, which happened to be an Oriental.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: His name was Mon Charn Wong. He was my supply officer and at that time he was in the Occidental Insurance.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: He had that all sewed up. He wanted me to stay there, but my wife was against it, so I never—he wanted me to work for him. And to this day, I regret it.

DM: To this day.

RK: That's right.

DM: And that was on the, what, 1966 was the twenty-fifth?

RK: That was 1966, for the twenty-fifth anniversary, yeah.

DM: All right. You went through boot camp, which lasted, what, ten weeks?

RK: I believe it was a little longer than that.

DM: A little longer than that.

RK: I think it was about twelve weeks, I think, before we got out of boot camp.

DM: Now, were you in that boot camp to be in the army air corps or could you have gone into regular army, or were you being trained to be part of the army air corps?

RK: Well, I don't think we were being trained for nothing at the time.

DM: Okay.

RK: And all we done was done a lot of calisthenics and, well, lot of military training—marching, what have you. Well, after that, they put us wherever they wanted to put us. And they put me in what they call the Thirteenth Truck Company [*13th Quartermaster Company Transportation*].

DM: Okay.

RK: That was in the quartermaster.

DM: All right.

RK: And from there...

DM: That was your job then?

RK: Yeah. Well, my job, my first job was there, I got to be a grease monkey.

DM: What's a grease monkey do?

RK: Well, we drained the oils out of the trucks and military cars and what have you, and greased them and took care of them. Well then, from there, I worked my way in and got myself into supplies. And when this, one fellow, I guess he got transferred or something, and I put in for the job and I got it.

DM: Did you like it?

RK: Oh yeah. I stayed in it all the time.

DM: Okay. And that kind of paved the way for what you would do in later life, a little, right? Having your own store and...

RK: No, I would reverse that. I think I got the supply side because for the work I done on the outside before I got there.

DM: Okay. On—as we headed towards December of 1941, you were working in army supply at Hickam Field.

RK: That's right.

DM: And the kind of supplies you guys would be getting in there is things to support the aircraft and the base, right?

RK: No, no. No, I was in the supplies for the men. I took care of their clothing, underclothing and shoes, and what have you.

DM: Okay.

RK: Things like that, you know.

DM: Those practical things.

RK: Right.

DM: That needed to be done at any base.

RK: That's right.

DM: Okay. On the weekend of December 7, did you have the duty on Saturday and Sunday?

RK: On the day of December 7, I was in the hospital.

DM: Now how did you end up there?

RK: Well, I end up there, I was complaining about my feet and they were examining my feet at the time. Well, at the time of the raid, I, like I say, I was in the hospital. And then after the raid, when they bringing in all the wounded and everything, then I had to work with these people here. It was amazing about these doctors. Some of those doctors didn't go to bed for two, three days.

DM: Well, before we get there, I want to know what was wrong with your feet.

RK: Well, the bottom of my feet were hurting and they found out I had flat feet. And...

DM: You had no arch?

RK: (Chuckles) Well, when they found out I had bad feet, I was staying around to get examined.

DM: Now, I thought that that, if you had flat feet, you couldn't get in the military.

RK: Well, I got in.

DM: And how did you get by ‘em?

RK: I just went in. That’s all. They took me in and they took the impression like on the board or whatever it was, and my feet—he says, “You’ve got flat feet.”

I says, “Okay, so I got flat feet.”

But...

DM: So they had you laid up in a hospital, that’s where you were on December 7?

RK: That’s right.

DM: Now, what—as detailed as you can, explain to me the events of December 7, beginning that morning. Did you wake up, have breakfast, what was going on?

RK: Well, yes. When I got up, they thought that it was an exercise, but we soon found out it wasn’t an exercise, when everything was getting blown up.

DM: Mm-hm.

RK: That’s when, well, we were in there, in the hospital, they didn’t touch the hospital. We never got hit.

DM: And I know exactly where the hospital was. Now, were you, did the bombs wake you up? Were you sleeping a little late or were you already...

RK: No, I was already up.

DM: Okay.

RK: I was already up. They were—what was it, five minutes to eight, I believe, was the correct time.

DM: Right.

RK: And then when they start bombing then, we knew what was going on, then they start bringing these people in, and you wouldn't believe the way they lined 'em up and the doctor would go through and the way—anybody, if this guy say he was almost gone, we took 'em to the rear.

DM: So you helped with the wounded?

RK: That's right.

DM: Had you ever seen...

RK: And the dead.

DM: Had you ever seen a dead person before that day?

RK: No. Well, in the casket, maybe, but not otherwise.

DM: Wasn't that rough to deal with.

RK: Oh god, you know, well, you know, we worked right into the operating room. And we had these bed sheets, they had bed sheets there, they were just full of blood. And we had put them in regular garbage cans. That was my job, to take 'em out. And I'd been throwing up, I think, for about three days. I couldn't take it. And this nurse came around—I'll never forget here, she really laid me out. And after that, I was fine. I just kept right on going.

DM: It was so appalling, all this blood and everything, that made you sick to your stomach.

RK: That's right.

DM: This nurse saw that.

RK: That's right.

DM: And she came over and said what to you?

RK: Well, she told me that what I'm experiencing is something that happens during a war, something in those words. And she says, "You have to put up with it." She says, "Somebody has to do it." She says, "You're here, you better do it."

DM: So you went...

RK: So I done it.

DM: ...from a patient.

RK: Yeah, little by little, I got to it. And after the wounded were there, you know, like these people, a lot of them that lost their leg or their arm, or something, we had to be there. I wasn't there alone, you know. I think there were about four or five of us guys there.

DM: And you were doing this while the raid was going on?

RK: That's right. And much after the raid, 'til I got out of there. And then, after that, they forgot about the flat feet and everything else, so I went back to my unit and went to work.

DM: When did you see how much damage had been done to Hickam Field?

RK: Oh, I would say about three days later.

DM: Could you believe it?

RK: No. I couldn't believe it. You know, even when we went back there in 1966, you could still see the...

DM: Bullet holes?

RK: ...fifty-fifty calibers that went...

DM: Yeah, they're still on that barracks building that was yours.

RK: That's right.

DM: Even to this day.

RK: That's right.

DM: As a reminder.

RK: That's right. And what the Japs used at the time, you know, they used these sixty-pounders, the incendiary bombs and dropping 'em and the fifty calibers. That's how most of them got killed.

DM: Now there was—you could even see twenty-millimeter cannon hits on the building.

RK: No, no. You could see them, yeah.

DM: Yeah, they were there. So you worked amidst all this carnage and everything and obviously some men were in great pain.

RK: That's right. A lot of 'em were in great pain and not only that, you know when they found out, when they lost an arm or leg, that's when you had to be careful with 'em.

DM: Why is that?

RK: Well, they more or less go wild or whatever. You had to hold 'em down. You know, they go out of their head a little bit.

DM: How many patients were in there? Do you have any idea?

RK: Oh, gee, I don't know how many. It's hard to say how many. Quite a few! And then right outside, there was a big, like a pavilion. That's where they had all the dead. And we had to take those guys out too.

DM: So you were taking the dead out and placing them there?

RK: Putting them in the trucks, wherever they hauled 'em from there, I don't know.

DM: And obviously these dead were not taken care of in a usual way for dead.

RK: Oh, no, no, no. They surely weren't. They...

DM: How did you guys know who these people were? Were they tagged in any way?

RK: Oh yeah, tags or they had—if they had dentures, you know, like if they got—if you got a denture in the army, you know, you had your name, rank and serial number right in the dentures.

DM: No kidding. Now, these tags, did they go on the toes?

RK: No.

DM: Around the neck.

RK: Around, dog tags is what they called them.

DM: You guys had dog tags at that time?

RK: Oh sure. Oh sure.

DM: Would you have any idea how many dead were out there?

RK: I have no idea.

DM: Over hundred.

RK: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Several hundred. Several hundred. Well, what were the dead, the amount of dead during that time was, what, 2000-something.

DM: Almost 2400.

RK: Yeah,

DM: A thousand of which were on the *Arizona*, 1200 almost on the *Arizona* alone. That must have been a very tough thing for you.

RK: I think it was. Yeah, it was one of the toughest things in my life.

DM: Were you able to talk about this to your family after the war or is it something that you eventually talked about?

RK: Much, much later. And I don't think I've talked with my parents about it. Mostly maybe with my wife or maybe my brother. My brothers—there was five of us in the service.

DM: Mm-hm. Like the Sullivan brothers.

RK: Yeah. Only we came back. The Sullivans were all killed.

DM: Right.

RK: And all of us came back. We had four in the Pacific and one was in Europe. And we all came back. And my oldest brother—now I told you, we had nine in our family and there's only two of us left. I have a brother that's older than me.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: And myself. That's all that's—and he's the one that was in, he was in the Buna, Gona area, that—where in the heck is that—New Guinea.

DM: Tough fighting.

RK: Yeah. Yeah, he was in the infantry.

DM: After the Pearl Harbor attack was all over that day; did you think that there was going to be an invasion? There was a blackout, obviously.

RK: Well, we sure thought so. It could've been real easily too. If they had an invasion force, they could've taken that island right away. There was nothing to fight with. Nobody had anything.

DM: What was that night like? Or did you work into the night, there at the hospital as well?

RK: Oh sure. I worked around the clock!

DM: How long did that go on for? That day and the next day?

RK: Oh, I—vigorously, I would say, it went on about four or five days. And then after that, it was more moderate where they took care of the people.

DM: You got out, you said, about three days later. You got to see the damaged buildings, the destroyed airplanes and everything else.

RK: That's right.

DM: Did you realize at that point that this war was going to be a long, tough war and—or what was your feelings?

RK: Well...

DM: And were you mad or angry?

RK: Oh, you bet. Yes, I was mad. I was angry.

DM: Who were you mad at?

RK: Well, we seen some of the planes come down and I was mad at those guys, with the way they looked to me, with big teeth and mouth open, and smiling. They were that low, even around the hospital, just like I said, the hospital was never hit.

DM: But you could see the planes flying by and see the pilots.

RK: Oh yeah, you bet. You bet.

DM: They flew very low.

RK: Very low. Now I don't really know how many waves there were.

DM: Well, the historical fact...

RK: But there were at least [*two*] that I know of.

DM: That came over. Two main bodies came in and they attacked in different waves.

RK: Different waves, that's right.

DM: Right, I mean there was—when you look at the airfields and talk about that, they formed up and they came in and hit.

RK: That's right.

DM: And then another group formed up, came in and hit.

RK: That's right.

DM: Hickam got worked over pretty hard.

RK: That's right.

DM: And I guess that building had to shake 'cause there was a lot of explosions around you, but you might have been very busy. Did you feel those explosions at all? Sometimes, ground shaking?

RK: Oh sure. Even at the hospital, you felt it.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: Oh yes. You knew what was going on. You could see it, almost.

DM: Now, the big garrison flag was flying just outside the hospital.

RK: Yeah.

DM: Did you ever look out and see that flag and wonder if that flag was going to be flying the next day?

RK: Well, everybody had their thoughts, but you didn't know.

DM: Were you scared at any time during this whole thing?

RK: I was scared all the time. I was scared for a month later, I was scared.

DM: Have you—this is a hard question and you can answer if you want, but did you have, would you feel like a post-traumatic feeling about what had happened? Did it take a while to get over this and does it still bother you a little?

RK: No, it don't bother me now. But it did, you know, for a while, for maybe six months to a year, who knows, that it bothered. But after that, it didn't.

DM: After Pearl Harbor and the months that followed, did you stay at Hickam and how did your military career go? Did you stay there throughout the war?

RK: Yeah. Yeah, I stayed at Hickam most of the time.

DM: And you rose to what rank?

RK: Staff sergeant.

DM: You went all the way to staff sergeant. That's quite an accomplishment.

RK: Well, that's, the supply sergeant, that's what it called for. It called for staff sergeant so that's what I made. After they knew I could do the job, they gave me the rank.

DM: And then after the war was over, you went home?

RK: I went home. Yeah.

DM: And you started your own...

RK: Well, no, after the war, when I came back in 1944 of December and then they sent me to Geneva, Nebraska, which was the Second Air Force.

DM: Okay.

RK: And I was there until September of '45, then they shipped me to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin and there is where I was discharged.

DM: And after the war was over, you started your own business?

RK: Well, I went to work first.

DM: Yeah.

RK: And then, see, when I was a kid, I worked in this store and the fellow that owned it, why, you know, during the war, he got himself, I guess what you might call, hot water. You know, a lot of people got mad at him because he wouldn't give 'em sugar or they wouldn't give 'em any canned food and his business just wasn't that good. So he told me, "Why don't you take it?"

I says, "Heck, I ain't got that kind of money."

He says, "You don't need no money."

I said, "I don't need no money? You're going to give me the place?"

And he made a deal with me. I gave him twenty-five dollars down and he says, "You can give me whatever you can and pay me as you go."

Okay, that's how I got in business. My dad loaned me some money and we went in there and got the bill. We were in there about three years. I got the business going. I had five people working for me in there.

DM: And that's when you had those schools around you and all that?

RK: That's right. Well, no, that was before the schools. This one, I'm talking about. That was the first store we went into.

DM: Uh-huh.

RK: And when we got in there, the landlord got hungry and my lease ran out. I only had a three-year business.

DM: Saw it was a successful business and...

RK: That's right.

DM: ...took advantage of that.

RK: And she wouldn't give me another lease, so I had to get out. So from there, I went to work again. And then after that, I got this other store.

DM: You joined the Pearl Harbor Survivors how many years ago?

RK: Fifty—well, let's see, in 1940, that would be what? Forty, fifty, that'd be fifty-eight years ago. Well, fifty-seven, really.

DM: Yeah, so you were one of the first members?

RK: Oh yeah. I understand now, I don't know if this is true, but what I was told, that we were the second oldest outfit overseas. The first one, I believe, was in New Zealand somewhere. Now I don't, like I say, don't quote me on that, but that's what I was told.

DM: The Pearl Harbor Survivors meet annually. Do you come to these meetings on a regular basis?

RK: I used to. Yeah, when we were in Pearl Harbor Survivors, this thing was going downhill. And in 1963, we had a national convention in Wisconsin. There was a guy by the name of Charles Blazek. I don't know if anybody ever told you about him. Him and Gene Lindsey was from Missouri and when they had this convention, they reelected Gene Lindsey as president and Charles Blazek as vice president. Charles Blazek rewrote the constitution and all the by-laws for the Pearl Harbor Survivors, and he got the Wisconsin thing going. There was five of us. I was the first president of the chapter of

Wisconsin. And I was the president for seven years. I was the state chairman. And secretary, treasurer.

DM: You did a lot of the duties.

RK: Yeah.

DM: So this organization...

RK: And I went to school for eight years.

DM: So this organization means a great deal to you.

RK: Oh, you bet. Oh, you bet.

DM: Well, the survivors, I know it's of concern that more and more survivors are passing away, but as you know, their memory of the survivors are really important to many people to make sure that their stories stay alive and I want to thank you for doing this interview with us.

RK: And I thank you for having me. And one more thing, I would just like to say, you know there was an incident, I don't know if you ever heard about it.

DM: Well, I'll tell you what, we're running out of tape. We're going to stop tape and we'll put a new tape in so you can tell...

END OF INTERVIEW