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Fall 2014

The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 24.03: Fall 2014

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Triezenberg, Julia; Reynolds, Geoffrey; and Markos, Alex, "The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 24.03: Fall 2014" (2014). *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Paper 91.

<http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/91>

Published in: *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 24, Issue 3, Fall October 1, 2014. Copyright © 2014 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

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The War as He Remembers It: George H. Kuiper's World War II Experience

By Julia Triezenberg

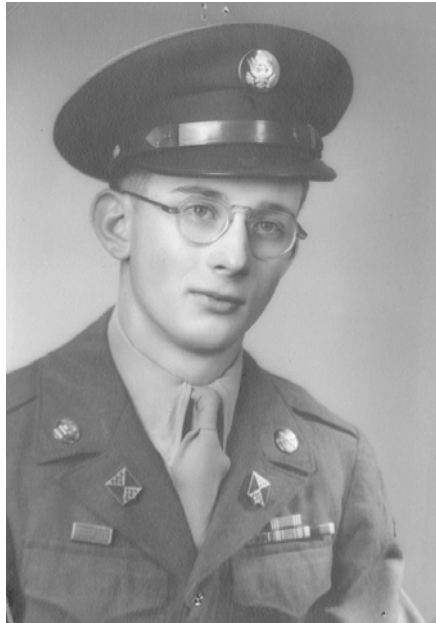
As a member of the Greatest Generation, George H. Kuiper was present for some of the most pivotal moments in American history, and his contributions to the United States' story is one that needed to be shared. Over the past few months, Kuiper has shared his knowledge with the Joint Archives in a memoir detailing his days serving in the Second World War titled, "World War II As I Remember It." From his early enlistment in July 1944 to his final days in Europe in June 1946, Kuiper's story is a vivid account of his journey through the war, encompassing the rewarding comradery and immense gratification of victory, as well as the brutal, bloody realities of war.

Kuiper's adventure began before he had even graduated high school, when he signed up for the selective service on his 18th birthday in February 1944. Following a pre-induction physical in May and his graduation in June, Kuiper was inducted and assigned to the Army, leaving for training the same month. After a stop in Chicago, Kuiper and his fellow soldiers arrived in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, where they received a slew of new supplies: a handbook, two pairs of wire glasses, dog tags with Army serial numbers, fatigues, work clothes, dress uniforms, khaki and olive drab, underwear, socks, and a pair of shoes. From Fort Sheridan it was off to Camp Roberts, California, where Kuiper spent his time training until November 1944.

Camp Roberts lies about halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles on Highway 101 and remains a functioning property of the California National Guard,

today. The camp was named after Corporal Howard W. Roberts, who served in World War I and was given the Medal of Honor for his acts of valor. While Kuiper was there, Camp Roberts covered approximately 50,000 acres of land and was essentially a city on its own, complete

with a hospital, a post office, barracks, theaters, chapels, and recreation halls. There, the 11th and 12th regiments were trained in a multitude of tasks, including cooking, wire radio communications, and firing 105 and 155 howitzers—a job that soon consumed most of Kuiper's time while serving in the war.



As Kuiper describes, a howitzer is a cannon characterized by a short barrel that throws its projectile by use of explosives at high trajectories. Kuiper's nine-men gun crew was able to fit completely inside the cannon, with armor surrounding them so as to defend all but their heads and shoulders. The crew worked with three

types of explosives: high explosive (HE), white phosphorous (WP), and posit.

The cannon was moved by a prime mover and usually travelled in batteries, consisting of four howitzers each. Each member of the gun crew had a role to play in firing. The gunner, who was a corporal, was the "#1 man" on sight and handled the breech, in which the shell and powder charge were put. A couple of men held the cradle in the breech while two others rammed the shell in the lands and grooves; after this, they put in the powder and locked the breech. The gunner then lined up the elevation and base deflection and gave the order to fire. With a lot

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



In this issue, you will have the pleasure of reading an article by Julia Triezenberg, our Black River Public School intern, concerning the World War II experiences and images from the George Kuiper archival collection. The second article comes from Alex Markos, a Hope College sophomore and student archival assistant. His article commemorates the 100th anniversary of the laying of the keel of a new missionary ship at Holland on the shores of Black Lake on June 24, 1864, and is based on a 1909 publication by the same name.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

George H. Kuiper (continued from page 1)

of practice, howitzer gun crews were extremely efficient in their work; Kuiper's group fired three rounds a minute while in combat.

Other aspects of Kuiper's training included basic calisthenics and combat training, from driving tanks to detecting landmines and bombs to learning how to deal with the effects of gas. Part of basic training was learning how to use a carbine rifle, the artillery man's other weapon at the time. The men were shown how to clean the rifle, take it apart, put it back together again, and shoot it with as much accuracy as possible. The soldiers would practice using targets 200 yards away, competing to see who could earn the highest score; the scores would determine whether a man earned the badge of marksman, sharpshooter, or expert. Kuiper trained on 30- and 50-caliber machine guns as well, earning a marksman badge while at Camp Roberts.

Early November 1944 saw Kuiper and his peers heading in separate directions: while some men went to Fort Ord, California, to take part in the Pacific War, others, like Kuiper, journeyed to Fort Meade, Maryland, where they would travel overseas to the war in Europe. Kuiper travelled on the *RMS Aquitania*, sister ship of the ever-famous *Lusitania* of WWI and the only 4-stack liner to ever serve in World War II. Incredibly, the *Aquitania* crossed the Atlantic 582 times, carried 1.2 million passengers, and steamed her way across three million miles of water in her 35-year career. Crossing the Atlantic during wartime meant that the *Aquitania* changed course every three minutes so as to deter any German submarines from tracking it, and Kuiper spent much of his time on the ship on guard duty, keeping watch for potential adversaries. The passage was rather uneventful despite the circuitous mode of travel, and within a week, the men could see the shorelines of Ireland and Scotland on either side of the Irish Sea.

The soldiers arrived in Glasgow, Scotland, where they boarded a train and were taken first to London, then to Southampton, across the English Channel, and finally to Le Havre, France, on the edge of the war itself. Kuiper and his comrades travelled down the streets of Le Havre, seeing nothing but rubble—a sight that would become all too common in the months to come. Eventually the men came to a railroad station and boarded a train to Paris, where they received their assignments at the Replacement Depot (called the “repple-depple”) and were given new carbine rifles. Kuiper officially became a member of General Patton's Third Army, 4th Armored Division, 191st Field Artillery Battalion, A Battery. The men of A Battery would soon become another family for Kuiper, and the experiences they shared together would shape the ways in which they viewed the world, from the height of fighting in the Battle of the Bulge to the months of reconstruction following the war's conclusion.



Kuiper's gun crew with their 155 howitzer, ca. 1944

Kuiper was put on the first gun crew under the direction of Sergeant Roy Mason as the #7 man in the group, whose job it was to handle the howitzer's powder charges. A good portion of his time in Europe was characterized by the bitter, relentless cold. While the soldiers had pup tents to sleep in, there were many occasions that this protection had to be left by the wayside because of the chance that it would have put them within sight of the Germans. The men often had to find their own ways of dealing with the elements. Kuiper wore copious layers of clothing—the same clothing, for three months—in an effort to keep warm: long woolen underwear, multiple pairs of wool pants, a wool shirt, wool sweater, a wool knit cap, and thick boots. Regardless of his attempts and huddling down between two double-over wool blankets, Kuiper came down with a terrible cold that remained for much of the winter, complete with stuffy nose, sore throat, diarrhea, and the shakes. He ended his time in Europe with more unwanted souvenirs: frostbite on his fingers, toes, and nose.

Each day felt like the next, and some aspects of the war are now blurred for Kuiper, but several moments from wartime Europe are still especially clear. The American line pushed back the Germans every couple of days with the battle's progression, meaning that the battery moved around more often than not. Relocating camp took a great amount of energy; moving the howitzer cannons in particular was no small feat. The amount of energy, time, and money expended throughout the course of the war in general was truly astronomical. For every soldier in the front line, there were about five men following behind, moving supplies, gas, ammunition, and other equipment to replace everything lost in combat.



Setting up camp, ca. 1944

Throughout these operations, the soldiers continued their guard duty schedule that they had formed during training and on their voyage aboard the *RMS Aquitania*: two hours of guard duty, four hours of sleep. While Kuiper was on guard duty, he would participate in “harassment and interdiction (H&I)” fire, which entailed firing a shell at the German army every ten minutes so as to intimidate the men across the line. Most of the time, these H&I procedures were carried out without a hitch; however, there was one occasion in which two members of C Battery forgot to load the actual shell after the powder charge, meaning that when the howitzer fired, the Germans saw a huge bout of flame that gave away the Americans’ position and allowed them to attack freely. While Kuiper does not remember anybody being hurt in this particular incident, it was still an intensely dangerous mistake to make.

Kuiper and his peers were often under fire from German counterattacks or fire missions, but even with heavy casualties, the Americans were able to hold down the territory they had gained. Commands came from the wiring crew that trailed the battery during these episodes with new base deflection orders in this style: “*Battery adjust, Shell: HE, Fuse: quick, Base deflection, Powder Charge, Battery A, Elevation.*” Oftentimes the German army would fire *Nebelwerfers*, better known by the men as “screaming meemies,” which were rocket launchers

that—thankfully—never did much damage to Kuiper and his fellow soldiers, but terrified them with their inescapable noise.

Although the screaming meemies themselves did not do much damage, Kuiper did see plenty of the effects of war while in Europe. On one particular occasion, he and several other soldiers were travelling through Belgium in a Jeep when they came upon an enormous pile of bodies, American and German alike. With between thirty to forty corpses stacked high and frozen stiff, Kuiper watched as the Graves Registration crew commenced their work. The Graves Registration crew was responsible for following the front line, identifying fallen soldiers, and notifying the next of kin, either by their dog tags or other characterizing possessions. Something that Kuiper has never forgotten is that there were plenty of other men who had been blown up or were accidentally lost under the snow—men who would be found only in pieces or in ruined versions of themselves.

Later, when crossing the Autobahn in Germany, there were even greater atrocities to be seen. Horses cut open with exposed innards; soldiers spilling out of flaming trucks; German and American men both burned and broken. The smell of the dead is something that Kuiper will never forget; indeed, it is hard to think of much else when the memories of those acts are revived.

Eventually the men moved out of the forests and into more populated regions, where Kuiper remembers citizens coming out of their homes to thank the American troops for driving the Germans away—memories that gratify the work that Kuiper and his peers performed during the war. The men made their way through Belgium, through the Ardennes Mountains and Bastogne, Trier, and Pforzheim. When moving through these regions, the gap between the German and American lines began to close, and the men had to travel quietly and efficiently by night. The soldiers followed three small red dots that glowed from the back of each American vehicle, and that was the only light they had to guide them through the darkness.

Using this method, the Army came to the outskirts of Worms, Germany, and began setting up artillery pieces by the Rhine River. Men were firing at enemies on the opposite side of the river as American engineers tried to build a pontoon bridge that would enable their forces to move across the swiftly flowing river. German Messerschmitt planes swooped down at the howitzers despite the cannons’ camouflage, and an African-American anti-aircraft section was instrumental in driving the German aircrafts away from the men on the ground. With the air filled with the sounds of shouting and artillery, eventually Kuiper was given orders to pack

supplies and be prepared to cross the Rhine aboard the makeshift pontoon bridge. In spite of landmines on the banks of the river and German tanks facing them on the defensive, Kuiper and his fellow soldiers broke through the German line and watched as their enemies came out of their foxholes in surrender. After their concession, the Germans walked to the back of the road and followed the American troops as prisoners of war, prevented from escaping by the POW “cages” formed by the carbines of American men.

In March 1945, Kuiper was transferred from the howitzer crew to the wire section, which was placed about 150 feet behind the howitzers and was connected to the cannons by a two foot long switchboard. Each howitzer had a switchboard that brought firing instructions, allowing the Headquarters Battery to give each cannon a specific target for which to aim. One man worked the switchboard in all hours of the day and night, connecting the batteries with orders from the commanding officers.

Kuiper’s job was particularly frightening when the switchboard crew needed to lay down lines for each of the howitzers’ phones, which involved covering miles of land at a time under the weight and bulk of their equipment. It was not uncommon for a line to be cut in the middle of the night and for Kuiper and his crewmates—in many cases, his good friends Ed Mahalak and Henry Haefner—to venture out in the dark to splice the line back together.

As the war drew to a close, the soldiers progressed from Hof, Germany, to Czechoslovakia, where they received official word that the war had ended, as well as heard news of President Roosevelt’s death in April. The men travelled through countless bombed-out towns and cities, watching for German snipers still unaware that the war was over. Although there were occasionally former enemies to be dealt with, the 191st Field Artillery had indeed completed its last fire mission, and Kuiper and his peers soon received orders to begin heading northwest. While in Germany, the men moved from Eisenach to Unkeroda, from Unkeroda to Gerstungen, and from Gerstungen to Straubing, which lay in the Russian Occupation Zone. In Straubing, many units of the army were breaking up and combining with others. Some men were being sent home, while others stayed behind to continue helping those ravaged by the war. It was determined whether one could leave or stay by the number of “points” that one earned while serving in the army, based off of length of service, marital status, familial ties, and the like. Because Kuiper had not yet earned enough points to merit his journey home, he was sent to the 66th Armored Field Artillery in Langweid, Germany, after the 191st had broken up. As a member of

the 66th, Kuiper served as a jeep driver for officers and soldiers travelling through the country. Not long after that, the 66th was broken up, and Kuiper was made a member of the railroad military police (MP) in Karlsruhe, Germany.

Finally, after the better part of two years, Kuiper was told that he was going home. Heading back to the first place he saw evidence of the war, he and a few of his friends rode on a train back to Le Havre, France, where they boarded the *USAT George Washington*. The trip home could not have been more different from the journey to Europe: no watch duty for German submarines, no changing course to distract enemies—there was even ice cream, the first treat that Kuiper had had since leaving home. Kuiper distinctly remembers the moment that the ship pulled into New York Harbor and he saw the Statue of Liberty before him, welcoming him home.

A train took Kuiper from New York to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and from there he travelled to Camp Atterbury, Indiana. It was at Camp Atterbury that he received his official honorable discharge from the army and was able to really go home. With a stop in Chicago and a train ride on the Pere Marquette, Kuiper ended one chapter of his life and began another with his arrival in Holland early in the morning. It was June 1946.

Kuiper received a number of honors for his service: a unit citation awarded to the 4th Armed Division; the European, Africa, Middle East Theater; a World War II Victory Medal; an Army of Occupation, Germany Medal; a Good Conduct Medal; an Honorable Discharge Pin; and the French Fourragere, which was awarded to former members of the 191st after the war.

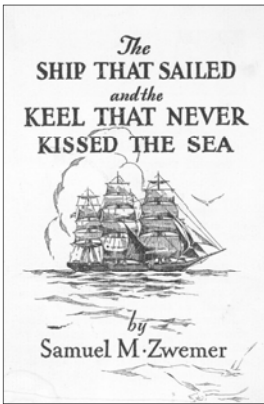


Even with all of these acknowledgements, Kuiper is first and foremost extremely grateful to have made it out the war nearly unscathed. He married Gladys Overbeek in 1948 and built a life with her until her death in

2009, but he continues to be surrounded by loving children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and dear friends. Kuiper still fits into the uniform that was issued to him in 1944, and he wears it every Memorial Day parade as a memento of his service. His story is a reminder of the sacrifices that so many made during World War II, and his experiences are those which will be preserved for years to come.

The Keel that Never Kissed the Sea

By Alex Markos



June 24, 1864 must have been an exciting moment in the small Dutch community of Holland. On this day, the townspeople had gathered by the Black Lake to witness the laying of the keel for their New Missionary Ship. Highlights from this joyous ceremony included an introductory speech by Holland's illustrious founder, Rev. A. C. Van Raalte, and the performance of an original Missionary Ode

written by Hope College's first president Rev. Phillip Phelps, Jr. and sung by the Hope Academy Choir. The grand purpose for this new ship, as stated by Samuel Zwemer, was "to carry missionaries and missionary supplies to all parts of the world." In 1907, for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of Zeeland (1847), Dr. Samuel M. Zwemer, a 1887 Hope grad and missionary to Arabia, delivered a speech entitled "The Ship that Sailed and the Keel that Never Kissed the Sea." Later, the Board of Domestic Missions asked Zwemer to write some more details, which he included in a brochure with that same title. In this brochure, he recalls the story of the keel as an example of the perseverance of the pioneers who left behind "a large legacy of high ideals and missionary vision."

Behind the New Missionary Ship lies the story of the ship that carried many of the missionaries who would lay the foundations of the Reformed Church's ministry in Holland. Zwemer recounts the voyage of the *Leyla*, which, in 1849, bore his parents as well 128 Hollanders, all from the island of Zeeland (including representatives of the Kotvis, De Pree, Moerdyk, Kolyn, and other families), across the Atlantic Ocean. The difficulties and hardships faced by these brave men and women can scarcely be imagined. The *Leyla's* voyage was plagued by thieves, leaks, threats of fire and sinking, and the lamentable deaths of seven little children. Zwemer's father remembered the poignant cries of mothers watching their children slip into the deep as "too pitiful for our ears." Indeed, the sufferings of our ancestors should not be forgotten, for we cannot help but be inspired by their incredible faith and courage. The trials endured by the passengers of *Leyla* were not much different from those of the *Mayflower*, whose pious crew we remember at the end of November.

In 1850, this newly-settled Dutch colony on the shores of the Black Lake purchased a sailboat called the *Knickerbocker*, which carried supplies from Chicago to

Holland. Zwemer excitedly remarks that this event stirred the people of Holland: "their missionary enthusiasm suggested the building of a ship to carry the Gospel beyond the seas!" Barely a year had passed before these inspired missionaries began to set aside 65% of church money for the foreign and domestic missions. It would take another 13 years before they would see a tangible marker of their efforts, the laying of the keel that early summer afternoon. Unfortunately, as Zwemer tells us, this celebrated object would never fulfill its purpose, but would be "left to lie and rot where it had been hewn from the forest giants."

In 1864, Mr. H. J. Slag had leased the ship yard to Rev. Phelps for the building of the New Missionary Ship. After the keel had been laid, Phelps was able to pay the rent in advance until 1871. However, as many Hollanders may remember, that very year a great fire raged through the city, which consumed the model of the ship. Since Phelps could no longer pay the rent for the ship yard, Mr. Slag sold the premise. The new owner repeatedly asked Phelps to remove the keel, but it would be another two years before the decaying keel would leave the site. In the spring of 1873, Phelps reluctantly sold what was left of the keel for \$15 to a carpenter named Mr. Anderson, who needed timber for repairing a ship. Appropriately, the money was set aside for the support of their missionaries Rev. Enne and Mrs. Aleida Heeren, who were Holland's first regularly commissioned missionaries, serving in India from 1872 to 1877. Today, a piece of the original keel is preserved in the Holland Museum.



Was this merely a melancholic conclusion to the ambitious efforts of zealous missionaries? Although that particular missionary ship would never sail, Zwemer kept a record of the missionaries who found ones that could ("The Ships that Sailed"). Since 1872, other ships have carried hundreds of Holland's missionaries, many of them Hope graduates like my great-grandfather Martin Hoeksema, around the world to India, Arabia, South Africa, China, and Japan. The story of the keel should be remembered not as a failure, but as an inspiring image of those early missionaries' obedience to God's call to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We should be reminded, as Zwemer was, of Longfellow's poem "The Building of the Ship":

"We know what Master laid thy keel/
What Workmen wrought those ribs of steel/
Who made each mast and sail and rope,
What anvils rang, what hammers beat,
In what a forge and what a heat/
Were shaped the anchors of thy hope."

The Joint Archives of Holland



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A tour group in Paris, October 1945; Kuiper kneels in front row, far right