

**Louis Charles Gerken**  
**Colonel, United States Army/Retired**  
**286<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Army**  
**European Theater of Operations in World War II**  
**Participated in final advance into Germany in 1944-45 at the end of WW II**  
**Served in various assignments in the Cold War**  
**1945-1985**

**Entrepreneur, consultant, author in electronics systems for the Air Force and Navy**

Interviewed in Mr. Gerken's home in Chula Vista, California  
by Rick Appleton on April 2, 2012

Appleton: This is a conversation with Louis Gerken, and I'm Rick Appleton. Today is Monday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012, and this conversation is taking place in Mr. Gerken's home in Chula Vista, California as part of the Oral History Program of the Veterans Museum and Memorial Center of San Diego, and the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress in Washington.



*Colonel Louis Gerken in 1985*

So, why don't you start out by just stating your name and the year you were born, and a little bit about your background and where you came from.

Gerken: My name is Louis Gerken and I was born in Lakewood, New Jersey in 1925.



*Louis Gerken during the interview in April 2012*

Appleton:                    You grew up there in . . . ?

Gerken:                    I grew up a small town in New Jersey called Waretown.  
W-a-r-e-t-o-w-n. It is a small country town on the eastern shore of New Jersey, and we  
went to a grade school in Waretown, New Jersey that had two rooms. The first room had  
grades 1 through 3, one teacher, Mrs. Miller. And the second room had grades 4 through  
8 with a second teacher, Mrs. Brown.



*Louis in Atlantic City in 1932*



*This artist's drawing of the 'Little Red Schoolhouse' depicts the two room school where Louis went to elementary school, grades 1 through 8. One room was grades 1 through 3, the other grades 4 through 8. The school was rebuilt and renovated on a lot nearby in the 1890s and now is part of the Waretown Historical Society.<sup>1</sup>*

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And those teachers did an admirable job because the point is that they had to control the boys and the girls and take care of all the problems.

Appleton: (Laughing) I'm sure.

Gerken: And be able to teach something in the meantime.

Appleton: Right. How many kids were in these classes?

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<sup>1</sup> (From the website of the Waretown Historical Society) The **Waretown Historical Society** was formed in February 1968. After a long hiatus, it re-formed in 1997. Since then, the society has played an active role in the life of the community. It sponsors regular slide and lecture programs on genealogical and/or historical topics at the Waretown Library, as well as organized tours of sites all over the state of New Jersey.

The Society's mission is to preserve historical and genealogical information for future generations. They are also committed to the restoration and preservation of older buildings, antiques and artifacts. The Society's museum is a replica of The old Red Schoolhouse that was used from the mid 1800's to 1958, when it was torn down to make way for a First Aid Squad.

Gerken: Well, each class had maybe four or five children in it, boys and girls.

Appleton: You had fifteen or so?

Gerken: There was one advantage in going to a school with that kind of a system. As the teacher goes from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade instruction on the blackboard, most of the other children are really reading a little bit themselves, but they're also listening, so they got a free jump on some of the classes.

Appleton: (Laughing) Yes, I can understand that. Alright, did you go to the school there then all the way through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade?

Gerken: I went through the grade school.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Grades 1 through 8 in Waretown. Grades 9 through 12, we bussed down to a city below Waretown called Barnegat.

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: So I was in Barnegat High School until 1943 when I graduated.

*Louis Gerken, Jr.  
at Barnegat High School in 1940.  
(Below) Louis in his senior class photo  
in the high school yearbook in 1943.*



## S E N I O R S

LOUIS CHARLES GERKEN

*"Low"*

Waretown, N. J.

Hall Patrol, 3; Glee Club, 1, 2, 3, 4; *Lighthouse* Staff, 4;  
Annual Staff, 4; Operetta, 2, 4; Junior Play, 3; All School Play 4.  
Ambition: College Professor.

## Ideal Girl

## Ideal Boy

### of Barnegat High School

Martha Bahr's.....	Personality.....	King Bonnell's
Janice Sprague's.....	Hair.....	Bud Jones'
Bessie Simon's.....	Humor.....	Joe Prosser's
Lillian Hammarström's.....	Complexion.....	Bod Dodd's
Elinor Bradford's.....	Ambition.....	Louis Gerken's
Ruth Penn's.....	Eyes.....	Stan Scull's
Kay Parker's.....	Lips.....	Bert Jones'
Estelle Myers'.....	Teeth.....	Bill Stratton's
Ruth Penn's.....	Nails.....	Bob Dodd's
Open for Discussion.....	Form.....	King Bonnell's
Janice Predmore's.....	Speech.....	Bill Marvin's
Margaret Parker's.....	Sportsmanship.....	Halsey Camburn's
Ruth Kucher's.....	Dress.....	Kent Carlton's
Marjorie Sprague's.....	Manners.....	Bob Dodd's
Mildred Haines'.....	Good Sense.....	Louis Gerken's
Janice Sprague's.....	Tact.....	Irv. Peterson's
Bessie Simon's.....	Courage.....	Bill Marvin's
Lillian Hammarström's.....	Leadership.....	Bill Stratton's
Elinor Bradford's.....	Dignity.....	Louis Gerken's
Estelle Myers'.....	Quietness.....	LeRoy Deppen's
Martha Bahr's.....	Helpfulness.....	Bert Jones'
Ruth Kucher's.....	Frankness.....	Bill Stratton's
Marjorie Sprague's.....	Loyalty.....	Irv. Peterson's
Ruth Penn's.....	Neatness.....	LeRoy Deppen's

*In "The Lighthouse" (school yearbook) Louis was honored as the "Ideal Boy" of "Ambition," an apt prediction considering his later military and business career.*

## FACULTY

MR. WILLIAM B. MARVIN, LITT. B.  
*Supervising Principal*  
Princeton University.

*W.B. Marvin*

MRS. ROBERT WHALON, A.B.  
*English*  
New Jersey College for Women.

MR. HAROLD S. BARR, B.S. IN ED.  
*Business Education*  
Indiana State Teachers' College.

*H.S. Barr*

MISS MILDRED SCHLOSSER, B.S. IN H. EC.  
*Home Economics*  
Drexel Institute of Technology.

*Mildred P. Schlosser*

MR. HARRY ALLAN  
*Manual Training*  
Rutgers University.

MISS MARY R. PLAUKA, A.B.  
*English, French, Latin*  
New Jersey College for Women.

MRS. MAUDE GASKILL MILLER, A.B.  
*Mathematics, History*  
Montclair State Teachers' College.

MISS HARRIET M. MILLER, B.S. IN ED.  
*Business Education*  
State Teachers' College, Trenton.

*Maude G. Miller*

MISS HARRIET GROSS, B.S. IN PHY. ED.  
*Physical Education*  
East Stroudsburg Teachers' College.

MISS ETHEL EASTER, M.A.  
*Music*  
Columbia University.

*Not pictured*  
MRS. MARY MARVIN, A.B.  
*English, Algebra*  
New Jersey College for Women.

*Mary C. Marvin*

*The Lighthouse*



*The faculty of Barnegat High School in the 1943 yearbook, "The Lighthouse."*

Appleton: Okay.

Gerken: In a scientific-mathematics kind of a program.

Appleton: Yes. Okay. That's good. How about your family? Did your father have work there in that area, and what did he do?

Gerken: My father came from Europe. In Germany specifically. And the Gerken family name comes from 19 . . . or 18 . . .



*Louis Gerken, Sr. in Bremen,  
Germany, in 1924*

Appleton: Okay.

Gerken: 1544 . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: . . . and Gerken was mayor of the City of Lübeck in Northern Germany in 1544.

Appleton: So that goes back

Gerken: There are several Gerken families spread through Netherlands and Northern Germany. My father emigrated from Germany about 1900 to 1910. He missed World War I in Europe. He didn't serve in their army, but he was in business in New York City in Wall Street. He was an investment banker and he delfved in real estate.

Appleton: Yes. Okay.

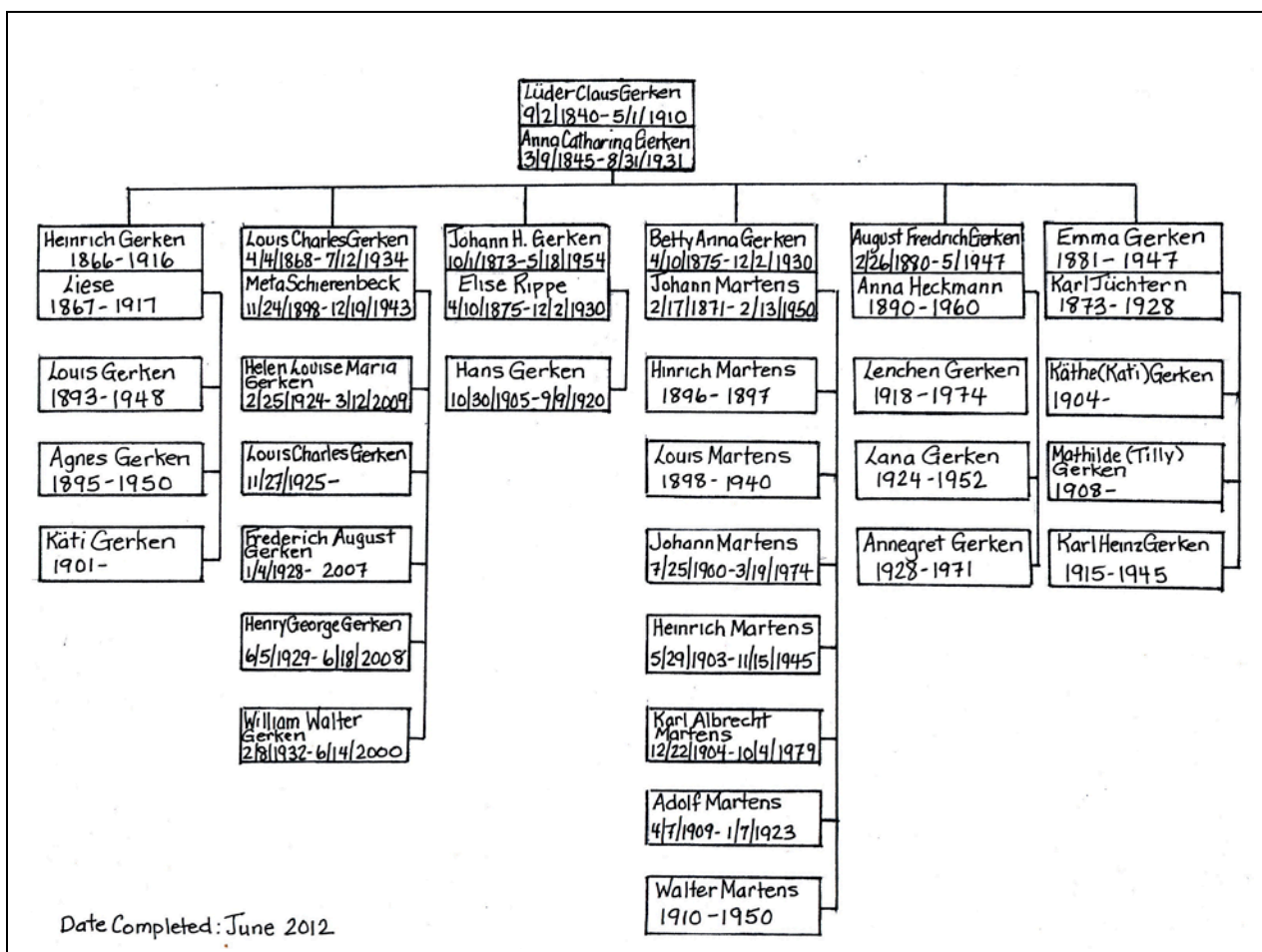




*In 1874 near Bremen, Germany, Catherine and Luder Gerken (Louis's grandparents) pose for this formal family portrait with sons Louis (right) and Johann (left). Louis is Louis Jr.'s father.*



*Wedding of Emma Gerken and Karl Juchtern, circa 1904, Loxstedt, Germany. Emma is the daughter of Luder Gerken and his wife Anne Catherina (both seated). Louis Gerken Sr. is likely in the back in row, second from the left with his brother Johan to his right. Another brother, August Friederich is in uniform behind the groom.*



*The Gerken family tree*

Gerken: He was married to a lady that had a business in New York. She had a RCA gramophone, which is a Victrola factory, and she ran that with workers. And for a while my father, of course, was interested in that, and he married this woman. That was his first wife, Anna,

The first wife lived with the father, Louis, Sr., in a place in Staten Island, New York called Eltingville. They lived there for a few years, and the first wife apparently had some medical problems, and he took her to Europe about 1922 or '23 to a hospital that was expert in cancer treatments. I believe that's what she had. And she did die when she was there.

Strange as it may seem, there was a nurse in that hospital who became my mother!

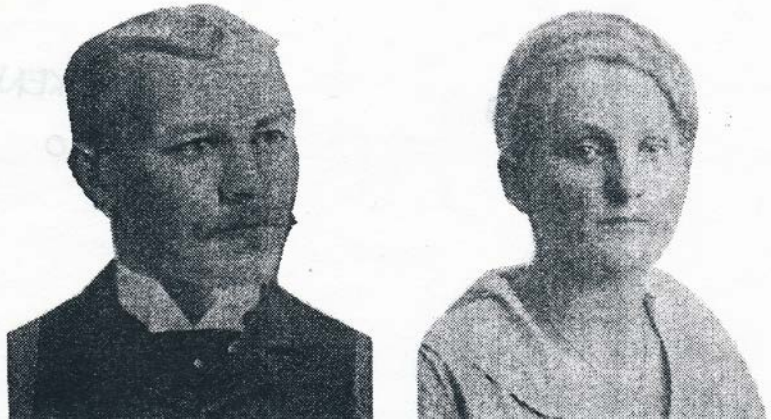
Appleton: Ohhh!

Gerken: A year passed. So the mother was a Meta Schierenbeck. Her family was from Bremen. It's a seaport town.



*Meta Schierenbeck-Gerken in 1925 in Bremen, Germany*

My father, Louis Gerken Sr., was born in Loxstedt, Germany, a country town about 40 km north of Bremen in 1868. He immigrated to the U.S.A. in the late 1880's and became a citizen in 1889 at the age of 21. My mother, Meta Schierenbeck, was born in Bremen, Germany and became a citizen in 1927. Father died in 1934; Mother, in 1943. See Fig. 1.1 and Fig 1.2 for their pictures.



*Louis Gerken, Sr. and his wife Meta in 1920*

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: It's called a Hansestadt, which is a seaport town like Rotterdam or Hamburg or even Lübeck in North Germany. The father moved from his Staten Island home. He bought a home in Waretown, New Jersey. He delved in real estate, and he was well-versed in finance to where he bought a home which was on the main road between New York City and Atlantic City. And the house that he bought happened to be a place where there was a different house for people in their cars that came from New York to Atlantic City to join the crowds on the steel pier, would stop and have tea in these houses. So actually our house . . . which there is a picture here in the hall you can look at a little later . . .

Appleton: Good.

Gerken: . . . that house is known with its big porches and screens as a 'tea house' to service the customers from the New York traffic going to Atlantic City.



*An artist's rendering of the  
Gerken family home in  
Waretown, New Jersey*



*A photograph taken in 1927 of that same home*

Appleton: On their way to Atlantic City. How about that! So do they run a tea house?

Gerken: So his wife joined her husband in Waretown, New Jersey, and the oldest child was Helen born in 1924. I followed being born in 1925 in Lakewood, New Jersey in the hospital.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. So Lakewood is nearby then.

Gerken: Lakewood is where I was born . . . in that hospital, but we lived, of course, in Waretown.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: My mother stayed a week maybe in Lakewood Hospital, and then my father brought her back to Waretown.

Appleton: Did you have other brothers and sisters besides Helen?

Gerken: Yes. There are three other brothers and sisters. Fred is the next younger boy. And then below that is Henry, and the youngest boy is William.

*A Gerken family photo, circa 1931: (left to right) Fred, Helen, mother Meta holding son Henry, Louis Sr. and Louis Jr.*



Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: The last three of those were all born in the home in Waretown, and that was very common in country towns because even though there were doctors in some of the local towns, they didn't always come to homes. But in this case my father had the doctor come to the home and deliver the three younger ones.

Appleton: Oh, that's nice.

Gerken: His name was Dr. Hilliard and he practiced in a town called Manahawkin, which is south even of Barnegat, New Jersey, where I went to the high school.

Appleton: Okay. Well, you had a pretty good sized family then.

Gerken: Yes. There were five children.

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: Even though my father was married twice. His first wife passed away. They had no children, and he was actually much older than my mother. The mother was perhaps 17, 18 years old when he first met her as a nurse when his wife passed away, and then she came to the United States, and they had the five children.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: He was probably in his 50s to the 60s when he had the children. And his wife was only in her 20s.

Appleton: Did he and his wife speak German at home? Or did they . . . ?

Gerken: Yes, they generally spoke German at the home. But their children weren't expected to be brought up in it, but we did pick up a lot of the language in that being around the mother and father all day and all evenings, why you picked up a lot of it.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: Most of it which I don't remember now, but even if I hear a German program on the television even, I can more or less understand what they're saying.

Appleton: You recognize some of what's said. How nice.

Gerken: Father had heart problems. We had a big house and there was a big hedge around it which, during weekends and so forth, he would actually try to cut the hedge. And in cutting the hedge he would have to sit down and rest every few minutes because of his heart problems.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: He was taking medications from Dr. Hilliard, the doctor in Manahawkin, but this was something that he was trying to groom me even to help him a bit because I'd wind up cutting the hedge instead of the father which was good for me, I guess.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: And the other boys were kept busy. They were younger . . . with their school work, and I was expected to do the man's work around the house because I was the oldest one. So I cut the lawn. I mowed the grass, trimmed the hedge, and brought in the coal from the coal pile, and shoveled it into the basement heater. We did have a steam heater in the home.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: In the 1920s and '30s steam in a small town like that was very rare. Most people just shoveled a little wood which they cut in the forest into their stove, and that's how they cooked and heated the house. But we heated the house with steam and luckily through the Depression my father was able to take care of the family.

Appleton: Yes. I was gonna ask about that. His business was . . . ?

Gerken: He was well enough to do, and he had some investments from New York businesses where he had investments. And he kept a ledger book, and he bought stocks and bonds, and he had mortgages out to people around the towns in New Jersey, which kept him going. Even in the Depression times every other family in Waretown was living on \$5 a week relief money.

Appleton: Wow.

Gerken: We luckily went down every week to Barnegat to the grocery stores to buy butter and bread and meats, and so forth. And my mother was a pretty good cook, and she took care of the family.

Appleton: Well, that's good. So you had food on the table.

Gerken: We had food on the table continually. We never had any problem. Father took good care of us.

Appleton: That's great. That's wonderful. Did you have a lot of hand-me-down clothes anyway even though you were the oldest boy?

Gerken: I was the oldest, yes. And some of those clothes were, of course, handed down.

Appleton: Yes.

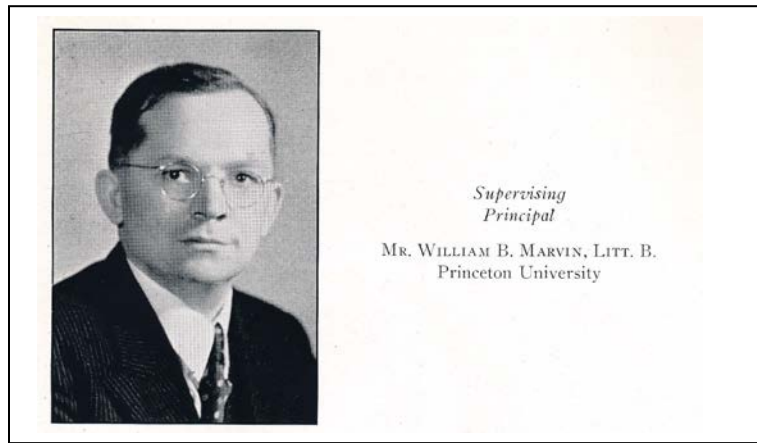
Gerken: But generally we went to Atlantic City maybe once a month or so to look at the steel pier which is about 40 miles away, and the family generally took us to some of the stores there and bought us odds and ends of clothes, enough to keep us going.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: Always a little bit something to take care of . . . even the hand-me-downs were darned and passed on to the younger ones.

Appleton: Right, right. Yes. Darning socks is not usually done much anymore. (Laughing) When you were in school, in high school, did you and your history classes talk about the wars that were developing in Europe and Asia?

Gerken: In high school which was from '43 to '46, no '39 to '43 there was generally a very progressive attitude to let the students know what was happening in the world. The principal of that school was a William Marvin. He was a graduate of Princeton University.

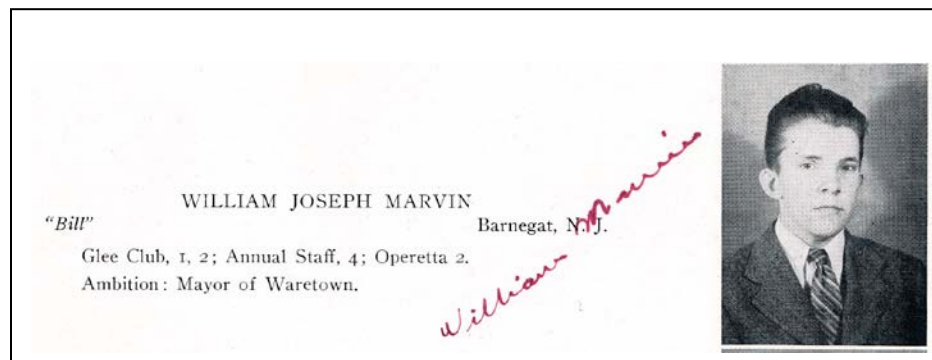


Appleton: Hmm.

Gerken: He was a good teacher and a good principal.

Appleton: Yes!

Gerken: In fact his son and myself went to join the Air Force and Navy pilot school together.



*William (Bill) Marvin in his high school graduation photo, class of 1943 and son of the school principal, was Louis's good friend and together they were inducted into the US Army in 1943.*

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: He was an excellent teacher as well as administrator and principal. And every two weeks he put on the bulletin board for the students to pass by and read the events in the world, including the war in Japan, the war in Europe, and so forth.

Appleton: Really.

Gerken: And I was always very interested in passing that bulletin board and seeing what was new.

Appleton: Yes. Well that's the first I've ever heard of that, but what a good idea!

Gerken: It was either a state . . . he didn't publish it himself. He got it from the State Department of Education, I think, maybe passed down from Washington, D.C.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: But I remember that this thing had a lot of good pictures and a lot of good information.

Appleton: And you were kept up to date in what was going on.

Gerken: We were kept up to date. Not only that . . . but we had excellent teachers throughout. For most part they were all outstanding.

Appleton: Well, that's good to hear.

Gerken: The real estate man in the town had a daughter, Mrs. Kelly-Whalon (*at right*), and she wound up to be the English teacher for that Barnegat High School for William Marvin who was the principal. She had a good program for all the students. We were expected to listen, shape up, and give a lecture maybe once every month of something of our own doing.

Appleton: Oh! Yes! Good.

Gerken: And she suggested for those students that needed it, you could go to the library maybe and use the *Readers Digest* and pick a subject yourself. And some of the students . . . even the families bought the *Readers Digest*. It didn't cost too much then. But the families, even though they were on relief, they somehow got a *Readers Digest* every year. I didn't buy a *Readers Digest*. Neither did I go to my father and say: "I need a *Readers Digest*." I went to the library at that high school . . .

Appleton: Sure.



Gerken: . . . and they had very good magazines. *Mechanics Illustrated*.



*Mrs. Maude Gaskill Miller (AB Montclair State Teachers College, mathematics and history) was another of Louis's inspirational teachers.*

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: *Life* magazine . . . and there were all kinds of articles that were not in the *Readers Digest*, which I had picked, and I gave that article for that month, and I always got A's from that teacher . . .

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: . . . 'cause she knew this guy was innovative and he didn't have to read a *Readers Digest*. He could find out what he wanted to talk about, and he did it himself.

Appleton: How nice.

Gerken: I didn't have to go to father and say, "Give me \$2 for a *Readers Digest* subscription."

Appleton: (Laughing) Well, that probably got your interest in things mechanical that you were doing later.

Gerken: Oh, yes. Another good teacher was in manual training, Mr. Harry Allen. Manual training is woodwork, metalwork and so forth. The high school which was actually built in 1925, built of brick, stone, very well put together and it cost the county I think at that time \$125,000 to build a high school in 1925 money. And he couldn't have built it ten years later for less than a million dollars.

*Mr. Harry Allen (Rutgers University, woodwork and mechanics,) Manual Training teacher at Barnegat High School guided Louis in building a set of stacked tables and a chest of drawers, the beginning of the inspiration to apply his mechanical and technical knowledge in his later military and entrepreneurial career. Louis built model B-24 bomber models in Mr. Allen's class.*



*Barnegat High School in  
1943 yearbook  
photograph*

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: But that manual training teacher was very innovative. He had the lathes there and the tools, and he more or less depended on the students to do a little bit of his own work, and find out what he wanted to do. So he left it up to some of the students. They maybe just read magazines, the *Readers Digest*. And others like me, I looked at the lathe and I'd look at the tables and I said, "Well, I'm gonna make this table." And there's some woman that is allied to a church in Waretown even asked me to make a little set of three tables, a big one, a small one, and the smallest. It fit together, tea tables. She was an English woman, the wife of an Episcopal minister who was a minister in Waretown for the Episcopal Church, which we belonged to for some years.

Appleton: Well that sounds like you had a wonderful high school experience.

Gerken: This particular manual training teacher . . . he said to me one lesson . . . he said, "Louis, we have something from the government they would like you to do."

And I said, "What is that?"

He said, "Here's a model of an airplane, and we want you to build several of these, and they're gonna be donated to the Army Air Corps in their Aircraft Identification, and for the watchers along the coast and cities, to look for aircraft that might be approaching. So I built a B-24 aircraft in 1940, and that was the time they were just built.

Appleton: Just being built. Right. Right here in San Diego.

Gerken: It was the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Consolidated (Aircraft) Company in San Diego, and others built these things, thousands of 'em.

Appleton: Yes! Well that's interesting. And then they were used by spotters along the shore to spot . . .

Gerken: But they would get training like in the classrooms. They would hang up a B-17, a B-25 . . . here's a P-38 and here's a . . . so on and so forth.

Appleton: Right! So they'll recognize your own planes.

Gerken: So it was aircraft recognition for spotters along the shore even.

Appleton: What a smart move!

Gerken: And if we were close to New York, about 80 miles away, it was important to have spotters prepared, particularly along the shores where the planes were coming out.

Appleton: Of course. Yes. Well, that's the first time I've ever heard of training spotters and having high school students build the models!

Gerken: Yes, a student in a high school manual training class.

Appleton: With a good program like that.

Gerken: They were made of balsa.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Actually you had a little plan that he gave us, and I'd put these things together, glue them, and he even got the insignias put on 'em.

Appleton: That's interesting.

Gerken: And I got A's in that class.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: 'Cause he said, "This guy is . . ."

Appleton: You liked doing it, didn't you? (Laughing) Wonderful! Well then, as you graduated from high school in about '43 did you say?

Gerken: '43. Summer of '43.

Appleton: And so you joined the service at that time?

Gerken: Before that happened though I want to throw in a little bit of . . .

Appleton: Okay. Go ahead.

Gerken: . . . innuendo here, which will give you some background.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Waretown and Barnegat and Manahawkin, and those cities of New York, and Philadelphia, they're along the shore, and it wasn't long after Japan attacked the United States, Pearl Harbor, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, that Hitler decided he was going to declare war against the United States since he had an alliance with Japan, said that if one gets attacked, the other one is gonna join in.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: So for that reason actually Germany declared war against the United States. Japan actually declared war, but they got it mixed up in a diplomatic jungle in Washington, and the official notice never got to Roosevelt in time. It actually was gonna say their Ambassador was supposed to have delivered the note to the proper place.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: But during the time that the Germans were aware that the Americans, since 1941 . . . even the '40s . . . 1939 . . . the U.S. Franklin Delano Roosevelt specifically, was finding a way to assist the British and the other nations in Europe. And that was to somehow get us involved in the war.

Appleton: Yes. That was the Lend-Lease Program, right.

Gerken: Lend-Lease . . . he was sending over fighters and bombers, and all kinds of food stuffs, and ammunition. 1939, '40, '41. '41 when the war came out. Of course, we could do it officially.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: But during all this time the Germans were well aware of what was going on, because they had German submarines in the Atlantic.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: They were seeing these ships coming through . . . United States ships going into Liverpool in Southampton.

Appleton: Was there any of the protest against the United States getting into the war that you were aware of?

Gerken: Yes. Very aware of it, because we had a little radio at home which we all listened to, and every day you'd hear that Lindbergh was having a big free rally in Brooklyn, or Manhattan, and it was well received. So there was a very strong sentiment not to get us into the war.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And that's understandable because most people don't want to get into a war.

Appleton: Well, and they remembered World War I only twenty years earlier.

Gerken: That's right. There were enough people that fought in that war to know that it's bad . . . we didn't lose too many people . . . maybe fifty to a hundred thousand people in World War I.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: And even World War II, really U.S lost less than four hundred thousand troops.

Appleton: Right. And other countries lost millions. Right.

Gerken: Other countries . . . it was millions.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: The Russians lost eight or ten, fifteen million. It would have been nothing for Russia.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Germany lost seven million.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: During this time the Germans, with the U-boats, they were building a lot of 'em up in Bremen, Hamburg and Germany. The U-boats were coming along the Jersey shore every night practically you could hear in the background from way out in the ocean, which was two miles away from us at home.

Appleton: Sure. Yes.

Gerken: Ka-whoomp! Ka-whoomp!

Appleton: Really?

Gerken: And then in the morning you'd go out and you'd see the stern or bow of a tanker or a cargo ship along the Jersey shore, anywhere from December the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup>, right on through the finish of the war.

Appleton: So the German U-boats were attacking shipping . . .

Gerken: The German U-boats were attacking.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And they had a right to do so at that time. And it was a free-for-all.

Appleton: It definitely was.

Gerken: Before that there were small instances where U-boats might have caused some trouble with a U.S. Coast Guard ships in the Atlantic. It was actually sort of watching for submarines, but they . . . there were small engines . . . this is where the U-boats were cautioning the Coast Guard and U.S. Navy not to get too involved. It might even have ended with a torpedo or two launched unbeknownst to anybody.

Appleton: Yes. Oh, my! Well, those were difficult times. And there was a lot of dissension, a lot of disagreement, or at least some disagreement as to whether the U.S should get into the war. Until Pearl Harbor, and then . . .

Gerken: Well, Pearl Harbor. That was it.

Appleton: Then that was just it.

Gerken: Sure.

Appleton: Can you remember the day you heard about Pearl Harbor, December 7<sup>th</sup>?

Gerken: Yes. Roosevelt got on the radio about 'The Day of Infamy.'

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Yes, we heard him.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: The principal of the school . . . he was a Democrat . . . most of our family were Republicans . . . but the Democrat . . . he was great for Roosevelt, and he wanted to be sure that all the students heard about Roosevelt's Day of Infamy. So we did hear that.

Appleton: Well, it occurred on a Sunday. Do you remember when you first heard about it?

Gerken: Well, it might have been . . . we actually were listening in the home . . . would leave the radio on during the day just to listen to the news, and we were picking up on it.

Appleton: Of course, you would have been, what, in high school at that time, probably?

Gerken: In high school, but during the time in high school even, because our father had passed away in 1934.

Appleton: Oh, okay. Yes.

Gerken: I should really interject this because it shows . . . sets the stage for a little bit of our difficulties in the family, even after he passed away. He had an interest in real estate, which I've mentioned before, and he had actually bought many acres of real estate along the Jersey shore. His intent was to build homes for people from New York, from Philadelphia, or going into Atlantic City, city homes that could be used throughout the year even.

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: And he did actually hire people to put in roads, build a few houses, and he sold those houses to people even in the Depression! 1929 . . .

Appleton: Really?

Gerken: . . . '30 and '31 and '32.

Appleton: Hmmm. Yes. Well, some people had money.

Gerken: He knew from the business sense that there was still something that could be done. He didn't sell dozens of homes. No. But he sold one or two, enough to give a sample to the tourists who were coming by.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: Put a big sign up, "This is Indianola. Buy a lot here. Very cheap. Build your home," and so forth. It was called Indianola because actually there were Indian tribes in there years ago. Indianola.

Appleton: Indianola.

Gerken: Nola of Indian tribes.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: There might have been even arrowheads in the property somewhere that I never dug up, but they probably were there.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: Indianola was his pet. He would take me down there even on the weekends where he'd have men building the roads, and clearing the brush out, and so forth. He built a little beach house along the beach, a small one or two bedroom place. Sort of like a beach house where you stored an outboard motor for his mobile trailer in a mahogany little boat that he could put the outboard motor on to go out in the bay. There was a bay there between Waretown and Barnegat Light, which was the lighthouse, about 4 miles distant.

He had built this property up figuring: well, this is something. It could go on . . . and of course he passed away in '34 before World War II even started. So he was aware though that in 1929 things were bad. He was in the stock market some, but he got enough out of it to know that it is not possible that he's going to lose everything because he's in a lot of stocks.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: 'Cause the worst thing to do in '27, '28 and '29 years was to be in the stock market. Most Americans were. But in '29 when the crash happened he happened to have phased out 'cause he knew what was gonna happen.

Appleton: Yes. He was obviously following it very closely.

Gerken: And there were people leaping out of skyscrapers in New York City when this happened.

Gerken: But he'd invested a lot of his money in this Indianola real estate venture, so he figured that was gonna pay off ultimately. And it enabled us to have something to fall back on 'cause he'd passed away about four years after he bought the property.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Yes. Yes.

Gerken: And if business hadn't broken in the Depression in '29, chances are it could have been well developed on into the '30s.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: But 1929 was the big crash.

Appleton: Right. Right.

Gerken: But we still had enough money coming in to help put food on the table every week. Every week we went to the grocery store and I got the food, and mother cooked it, and we got by.

Appleton: Well, that's good. That's good.

Gerken: 1939 . . . or '34 was when he passed away. About July it was. Summer school was . . . recess was out. He had me go down with him in the car to this Indianola, which was about 2 miles away from our home. I drove down there with him as I often did because he asked me to go with him. He had a sign out in front of his property, in addition to the big advertising sign, "Lots for Rent." This small sign said, "No berry pickers. No huckleberry pickers."

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: Because he had some huckleberries when he brought that property, he was gonna conserve those for when they were ripe, he would pick a few and take 'em home. But anyway, I went down with him this July day in 1934, in the car. It was Willys-Knight car. I don't know . . . most people do not know of a Willys-Knight, but in the 1920s and '30s it was a very popular car.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Willys actually became one of the makers of the Army jeep later on.

Appleton: Yes. Uh-hmm.

Gerken: It was the first jeep that was built, built by Willy's Overland

Company. But Willys-Knight was a big . . . almost like a Buick or Packard touring car, fancy seats, and so forth . . . went down . . . he had me in the car and he had observed that there was somebody picking berries where he knew the berry patches were. So he said to me, "Louis, we're going to Barnegat which is right next door. Get the Justice of the Peace because I've asked these guys . . . ." They were sort of like Hippies . . . people living on relief or nothing . . . stealing . . . to get the Justice of the Peace to come up. He brought 'em up in the car, and he saw these guys, and they were just leaving to take off for a little town about two miles over into the brush. So he and the Justice of the Peace followed them in this Willys-Knight car, about 60, 65 miles an hour, which was dangerous, but not in his car. The guys with a little 1926 Model A, I think they had. He caught them and the Justice of the Peace said: "You're gonna follow us in. We're gonna ticket you."

So he would have taken them to court and so forth or fine them a little bit. But the problem was as we were coming back into the Justice of the Peace home . . . this was in Barnegat . . . my father was driving . . . the Justice of the Peace was up here. I was sitting in the back. He turned into this driveway to the Justice of the Peace home, and the car tipped over. Not completely over. It was like on a ditch. My father had a heart attack, and he died.

Appleton: Oh, my. Right there.

Gerken: And all of this was too much on his heart. And, of course, he should have known it. And those people stealing . . . they should have known better, too. But nothing was ever done to those guys. (Voice very emotional) . . . was their fault.

Appleton: Yes. That's difficult especially when you were right there.

Gerken: So the justice of the peace drove me home in the family car. I went to mother and said, "Father is dead." (crying softly)

Appleton: Yes. That's . . .

Gerken: "*Papa ist tot.*" That means he's dead.

Appleton: *Papa ist tot.* Yes. And you were at that time what?

Gerken: Eight years old.

Appleton: Yes, about eight years old. That [must have been] very difficult.

Gerken: In grade three in school.

Appleton: Makes a big impression. It's very difficult.

Gerken: (Very emotional) Even today this breaks me up. Poor mother . . .

having to fend with five children. (crying softly)

Appleton: And she . . . yes.

Gerken: But anyway, a few days later they took me and said, "Let's go down to the mortuary and see Papa for the last time. (very emotional) And they buried him in Barnegat Cemetery.

Appleton: Well, this had to be difficult. I can understand that. Especially to have to be right there and to watch it all happen.

Gerken: My father had quite a few friends in New York and in Philadelphia that he used to do business with in finance and real estate. And some of those people would often come down, on the weekends particularly, and visit us in the summer . . . like it was July and August when my father died even. And a lot of those people would come in, and in a way it sort of aggravated me because there might be six and eight, and ten of 'em all sitting around the dining table, which my mother had to cook for, and the children weren't even eating until those people had eaten and were on their way.

Appleton: Oh, dear.

Gerken: So that made it a little difficult that mother had to work through all that.

Appleton: Yes! Kinda like they were in the way.

Gerken: That's right.

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gerken: But that's the way it is in life.

Appleton: Yes. Yes. Well, that's certainly a very difficult [experience].

Gerken: My mother was not one to be able to navigate by herself in the financial or the household living every day. When my father took the family down to buy groceries, he would wind up to buy most of those groceries. She would maybe contribute to the list that was made up, and he actually was buying the groceries. He didn't give her like an allotment every week . . . \$8.00 to buy this and that even for herself because the money was really tight.

Appleton: Sure. Yes. That's difficult.

Gerken: So she in a way was always depressed. When he died, there was a trust fund that he had set up in the bank in Toms River whereby he had enough mortgage money coming in; and people that he had sold property to, and so forth, to get by. But I

don't think she was living on more than \$80 a month, and that had to pay the rent for the house and properties, the clothing for the children, and keep the thing going. So progressively she tended to get to where it was pretty much for her.

And there was a German lady in town that had married a GI . . . an American soldier in Europe in World War I, 1917 or '18. He came back and he set up in Waretown. He had a couple of children, and my mother, of course, spoke German, and she knew this woman in town. She spoke German. So she invited her in to rent one of the houses that my father owned behind our family home, and she lived there for a while with her two children. She was living on a pension that she got every month from the government because her husband had been gassed in World War I. Maybe \$50 a month is what she got.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: So my mother rented her this house. The rent for it was maybe only \$7 or \$8 a month which in those days of the Depression that was still enough of proper rent. She was able to pay that and keep her family going.

And ultimately as my mother tended to get a bit worse in her ability to reason and do things, take care of the children and family, she relied on this lady. Her name was Lucy. Lucy was actually from Heidelberg in Germany, and I guess he met her down in the southern part of Germany in 1918 when the war ended. She was a war bride, but she took and moved in our house which is the big house that was on the corner, that had four bedrooms and a spare. It actually had a bathroom, and it had steam heating, and so forth. So she moved out of the rented house. We rented it to somebody else, and she wound up to be sort of like our mother.

Appleton: Really helped your mom out.

Gerken: Because during the years my mother had progressively gotten to where she was letting things go. Money and property . . . she was never properly trained in it. And it got the better of her, and she had to be put in a care center.

Appleton: Oh, my. Yes. Well, you've had a lot of things to deal with then. Yes.

Gerken: Father died early, and mother wasn't able to cope with it. The children . . . we were waifs. Waif is one of the stray children who are forlorn. So anyway, after that happened . . .

Appleton: But you had Lucy that helped. Is that right?

Gerken: Lucy helped for a while. Actually there was an Episcopalian minister in Waretown, Colin Campbell Walker was his name. He was a Scotch Englishman. He opened a little garage door operation for a church. He was nothing but a

man who had opened up a garage business with blocks. It was just half as big as this room right here. And that was an Episcopal Church. So they got children from around town, which his daughter happened to live with the Episcopal minister's wife and their daughter. She would kind of bring in these children from off the main stream, you might say. And we became Episcopal children. I was brought up in a family . . . on the Lutheran side, baptized Lutheran . . . and later on Episcopal was the church that we attended. The Lutheran Church was maybe 30 miles away to the north in Lakewood, and that wasn't appropriate for us to try to attend that certainly.

Appleton: Too far away.

Gerken: There was a Methodist Church in town, too, and a Universalist Church which had closed, I think, in 1921, and it was an old building torn down later. But there was churches . . . I even went to the Methodist Church once in a while, even when we were in grade school and even after the father and the mother had gone . . . was still attended a little bit to that.

Well anyway the Episcopal church since it was well run and managed, and the minister's daughter happened to be the organist. She was great in getting a little choir together, so it kept us a little bit interested in things like that for the World War II years.

Appleton: Yes. Well tell about how you happened to get into the military. You said you were drafted but then you joined.

Gerken: 1943 when I finished the Barnegat High School. We tried to get into the Navy and Air Corps Pilot Training. That wasn't available, so we were drafted into the Army. I say 'we' because the principal of the Barnegat High School, his son was Marvin, same as his father's, the principal. Marvin and I went into the Army together to the Induction Center in Camden, New Jersey in January of 1944.

We were shipped immediately by train to 286<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers Battalion in Camp Carson, Colorado. Camp Carson incidentally still exists as Fort Carson, or maybe Camp Carson in Colorado. It's still a base today. There were engineers trained there because during the time of '43 and '44, U.S. Army had a great need for engineers. They even needed engineers more than they needed pilots. Otherwise we would have been shot down by some kamikaze in the Pacific if we'd become a pilot in 1944.

But anyway, the training started right away. And I think it was possibly three or four months of training, basic training, in the field, out pitching tents over night, bivouacs, mine fields, building bridges, wooden trestle bridges, building Bailey Bridges, clearing mines, planting mines, taking apart machine guns, 50 caliber, 30 calibers, and M1 Garand Rifle, all kinds of weapons, in other words, to get training enough to be shipped off to Europe.

Appleton: Well, so you had a pretty thorough training then.

Gerken: I went in, of course, as a buck private which is no rank. And we were in a two story barracks, which was very common during World War II, built bases. Everything was two story, and there would be a platoon or two platoons in each building, meaning a platoon normally is about forty people, forty men.

Appleton: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Where was your basic training?

Gerken: Basic training was in the camp itself, some of it where you disassemble the machine gun. There was an instructor who maybe was in the prior class, was extended on this tour, where he could be teaching new students instead of being sent to Japan or to the Atlantic Front. So most of our cadre, which are the people that were doing the instruction, were from other units where they had even seen some action themselves, or a few of them were tasked to teach the new students.

And I went in as a buck private, which means you had no rank, and when a squad marches . . . a squad has eleven or twelve people in it . . . the buck private . . . I wound up in the *end* of the squad. The end of the squad was in a way appropriate for me because the platoon sergeant, or the lieutenant in charge of the platoon knew that the guys were straggling. So the guy on the rear happened to be what's called the assistant squad leader, a corporal. He was to keep everybody in line, the stragglers. The sergeant in charge of the squad of eleven people was up in the front.

But anyway I did a good tour and they made a corporal out of me pretty quick 'cause they figured I was pretty good in watching the squads.

Appleton: Good.

Gerken: When they put us out in the field to do mock exercises, the squad leader was supposed to know . . . he was the guy from Minneapolis . . . buck sergeant . . . he was supposed to know how to read a map and how to do a back azimuth. Turn around and go back from where you came. Back azimuth is 180° out. He didn't have enough training in school or anything where he could handle it. So in the squad I was always the guy to go up to help him . . . tell him which way we're going now. So he even remembered that after he was out of the Service. I think he still lives in Minnesota.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: But anyway the battalion, 286<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion . . . they had a commanding officer who was a lieutenant colonel. And I think his name at that time was Johnson. But every week we had a parade, maybe Friday afternoon, and I was designated to be the point man for when this company pivots, they have to point me and has to stand in position to where the company comes around it and goes off in another direction. And strange as it might seem, I happened to be the point man designated to stand there in place while the company goes around us.

That afternoon after the formation the messenger came over from the commander

and said he wanted to know the name of this guy, the corporal, that was the point man because that was the company that did it properly. Everybody else they couldn't turn around that corner. They all straggled. So I was commended verbally, not in written form, but that made me feel a little good at least.

Appleton: Sure!

Gerken: But in all this I was still doing KP with the rest of the people when we had to . . . kitchen police.

Appleton: Oh, yes.

Gerken: We ate pretty well and got by. From there, after the training, we did get a weekend or so day off. Like Sunday, we'd go to Colorado Springs. Colorado Springs is a resort town south of Denver, Colorado. And during the year 1944 the U.S Army had taken many of the German tanks and equipment, and antiaircraft guns out of Africa. They put it on ships and put it around some of the bases where they could show the soldiers, this is the kind of materials the enemy has and he uses it, so we used to go in the weekend and maybe look at those things.

Appleton: Yes!

Gerken: Look at these personnel carriers, German tanks, and so forth. But that was kind of interesting. From there they moved into what's called an advanced training position. You get onto a train, pack up your gear and you're two days on the train to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. That's an advanced training place where we did more specialized training in mines and the Bailey Bridges.

We were there maybe a month or so. We did visit St. Louis on a weekend and go to the USO. The USO was always very good about having a few shows there and people with a piano where they could play or whatever. And I happened to run across . . . I went into the USO there at St. Louis to have a cup of coffee or a coke, and I noticed a guy playing the piano. So I went over to him after he stopped and said, "Don't I know you?"

And he said, "Yes. I was in the class before you in Barnegat High School."

So I met one of my classmates.

Appleton: (Laughing) How about that!

Gerken: So after that we went to what's called the port of embarkation, POE.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: That's where our unit 286<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was the

Hoboken, New Jersey port of embarkation. But to get there we had to go first to Camp Kilmer, which is part of that POE [port of embarkation], but Camp Kilmer is about in the middle of the state near McGuire Air Force Base and near Fort Dix today where they get you ready and outfitted to go to the port of embarkation where there should be a ship waiting for you.

So that took a couple of days to get over there. I'm sure we had all the shots and so forth needed. We were ready to go.

Appleton: When did you actually then go over to Europe?

Gerken: 1944.

Appleton: '44. Okay.

Gerken: February . . . let's see . . . March, let's say March-April of '44 . . . after the training in the U.S, we loaded aboard an Italian liner called the Mussolini's pride and joy, the [MS] *Saturnia*.

Appleton: *Saturnia*. Yes.

Gerken: *Saturnia* for Italian means Saturn, which is one of the planets. That was one of the Mussolini's pride-and-joy ships that used to run tourists between New York City, other places including Mediterranean . . .

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: . . . Rome and so forth. It's very strange. Mussolini did actually lose a few ships. He knew when Hitler was gonna declare war against Japan and the U.S, that there would be a problem with any of your ships in an enemy port, if there was a war declared, they are prone to be confiscated. So Mussolini lost a few ships, including the [MS] *Saturnia*.

The case of Adolph Hitler . . . he was smart enough and his Navy knew enough to where all the German ships like the *Europa*, and the *Bremen* . . . those ships that they were sending in for tourists, were in European ports.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: Safe.

Appleton: Right. So you went in luxury? Or where you packed in?  
(Laughing)

Gerken: No. Luxury was [for] the officers.

Appleton: Oh!

Gerken: Officers. If they could be two in a stateroom they were lucky. They would be on the upper decks. We were below in the lower decks. Maybe one, two, three, four stacks . . . tight as you could get them, like in a sardine can.

Appleton: (Laughing) Oh, my. Oh, my.

Gerken: We had to suffer ten days of this. You could go out and look outside and see the waves during the middle of the winter season, and see the waves there, and the destroyers . . . look across and see a destroyer . . . a US destroyer guarding us from the submarines.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: He'd be pitching in the deck, the water coming over its bow.

Appleton: It was a rough . . .

Gerken: We were steaming along in pretty good shape because we were 25 to 30,000 tons . . . the *Saturnia* . . . we did okay.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: As far as food and housekeeping . . . it's terrible there. We did get a bunk to live in and a blanket or two. Not even a mattress cover, I don't think.

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gerken: But we got by. The food was not too good. The food . . . apparently we did have left-overs from Mussolini. They were figs and dates. Of course, Italy is prone to bring along these dates from Ethiopia particularly then 'cause they had some farms down there

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: So they loaded these ships of theirs . . . plenty of fruits of this kind. But dates . . . we had plenty of dates 'cause the cooks on the ship tore out the dates and figs out of the lockers, and that's what we had. In the morning it might be a hard-boiled egg and a little plate of dates, a cup of coffee.

But we did get into Southampton after about ten days. Didn't see any submarines, but in that time, Admiral Doenitz, the German submarine commander, had found that in the middle of the Atlantic when the troops were going across in these heavily guarded convoys, it wasn't a good place to be 'cause they had all the good pickings earlier, months before. So the Germans were sent down around Africa and even in the Indian Ocean with their submarines to sink allied ships that were there carrying cargo for Europe and

England.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Yes. So in Southampton you were . . .

Gerken: Taken immediately . . .

Appleton: . . . taken in . . .

Gerken: . . . in the trains, taken on a day-and-a-half train ride to a place near Manchester. It's called Delamere, D-e-l-a-m-e-r-e, Delamere Camp. It's an old Quonset point place, a British soldier base for their training, which the US took over. So we were there for a few weeks, living in Quonset huts.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Had a little potbelly stove in the middle of the hut. We went down and got a little charcoal and put it in, enough to keep warm. So that was busy. Occasionally a weekend come up, we might get a pass if we were good troops. And I went into Manchester and even into Liverpool, just to look-see. I heard about them.

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: And even got into London for an overnight pass.

Appleton: And you'd go by train? When you went around you'd go by train in England?

Gerken: And we were still training during the week. Six days a week it was training. One day you might get off for a pass if you were a good trainer. But during this time we would be in this Delamere Quonset hut. Some nights I'd hear PUTT, PUTT, PUTT, PUTT, PUTT, PUTT, PUTT, PUTT, Putt, Putt, Putt, Putt, Putt . . . BOOM! That was a German V-2 rocket.

Appleton: Yes. Yes. Right.

Gerken: Oh! A V-1. A V-1 was a little putt, putt machine. The V-2 was the big one.

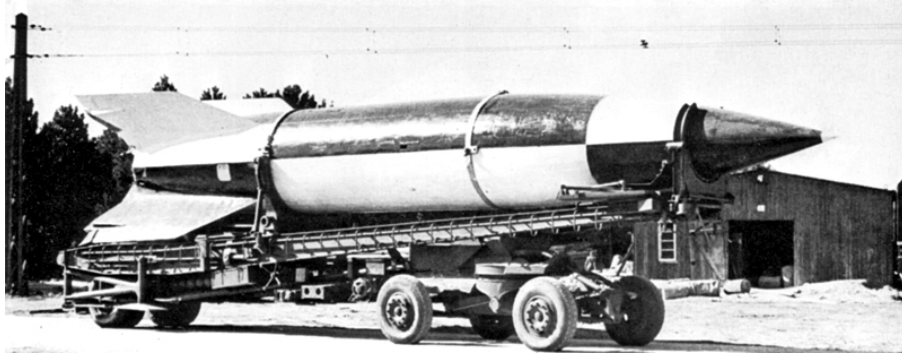
Appleton: Yes. Right.

Gerken: Some of those came across, and then they weren't aimed too good, but if you aimed it somewhere near Manchester, you hoped that the Germans were getting it into place that were doing some good.

Appleton: Yes. Did any ever land in your area.

Gerken: None, none that landed. They were always far enough away. But

later on as you went in past through the cities, you could see where this block was . . . in London this particular block was hit by a V-1 even, and the building was blown up.



*A German V-2 rocket on its trailer ready to move to the launch site*

*Photograph from Wikimedia from UK Government Archives*

Appleton: Yes. Oh, my.

Gerken: They carried maybe a couple of hundred pounds of TNT.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: The V-2 carried possibly 7 – 800 pounds.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And it didn't have big wings. It was more or less a rocket.

Appleton: A rocket.

Gerken: It wasn't a flying machine.

Appleton: More than a flying . . . yes. Well then how long did you stay in England before you were deployed over to the Continent?

Gerken: Not too long. We were told one day to get your gear together. Your vehicles are going down to Southampton. We're gonna put you all on ships to take you over to Le Havre in France.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

Gerken: That was at that time occupied by U.S troops.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: So we didn't go into D-Day. We missed D-Day.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

Gerken: However, the ship we went over on was a Polish ship, again confiscated by the Brits in 1939 when Poland was invaded. That ship might have been in Southampton and the British took it over.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: It was about a 15,000-toner. Not a bad ship, but it took us maybe a day or so to get across from Southampton. But even there, there was a lot of concern because the Germans still had U-boats around, and they had E-boats which were speeding boats with torpedoes on them that could sink ships.

Appleton: You called those T-boats?

Gerken: E-boats.

Appleton: Oh, E-boats. Yes. Right.

Gerken: An E-boat is sort of like a torpedo boat. It has a torpedo explosive which would be an explosive boat. We had the same things. We called them PT boats.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: President Kennedy, when he was a lieutenant in the U.S Navy, he was a skipper on one of those PT boats in the Pacific.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: World War II.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: In Le Havre you could see the place was pretty well . . . had been blown up by the Germans when they left. It's nothing but rubble. So there's not even a place you could put a pup tent there and bivouac over night. So we marched out of town, three or four miles, and to an open field and said, "Troops, get your pup tents out. This is two shelter halves and your sticks and your pins and put your pup tent up. You're gonna sleep out here in the snow in March of 1944."

Appleton: Yes. So that would have been spring of '44?

Gerken: The U.S at that point was getting almost to where Hitler was ready to launch the battle across the Ardennes.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And so we were luckily in France in a quiescent condition when all of that went on.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: We were not called to move as infantry immediately up to the Battle of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne in Bastogne.

Appleton: In Bastogne, the Battle of the Bulge. Yes.

Gerken: We were called for that, although we were afraid that we were gonna be shipped there, but we missed out.

Appleton: So you missed out on Normandy. You came after the Normandy invasion.

Gerken: We hadn't seen any real combat yet. We'd seen some POWs, and enemy troops marching back to the . . . being taken back to the States.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: They shipped German POWs from Africa to Texas, to Louisiana, Arizona.

Appleton: Right. Okay. So you were . . . let me review.

Gerken: 40 and 8 boxcars we were transported in. We had K-ration, which was a cardboard wax-covered, packed with biscuits and cheese, or C-ration which was on little cans which you could open up . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: . . . biscuits and a little bit of meat. Once in a while if you were lucky you got a little bit of hamburgers or a little bit of hot dogs in the meat.

Appleton: So you were moving around in the boxcars in the 40 & 8 (40 homes and 8 chevaux) [40 men and 8 horses] out of Le Havre, and where did you finally end up?



*C-rations and K-rations typically used by the US military in World War II*

*Photographs from Wikimedia by the US Army in the public domain*

Gerken: We wound up in a city near . . . it was in the French Maginot Line.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: I guess the U.S. . . . General Eisenhower figured well, you're gonna have to have additional troops down there too to reinforce in case this diversionary force which the Germans actually had a small Battle of the Bulge down around Strasbourg and Colmar, two cities.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And during that time even though the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was in Bastogne trying to fend off the German invasion there, but Eisenhower was aware that somebody could also come in in another direction.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: So we were part of a diversionary reserve force.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And it turned quickly into where our trucks had caught up to us as we got out of Le Havre in France, and out of the 48 & 8 boxcars. And some of our own vehicles, 2 ½ ton trucks, jeeps, three-quarter ton trucks, air compressor trucks, that type of vehicle. They were all becoming available to us. So we did see some of those, and we moved in to cities like Strasbourg and Colmar, but primarily it was on the outskirts to a

French Maginot Line.

*U.S. soldiers sometimes  
were transported in 40 & 8  
boxcars in and out of the  
war zone in World War II.*

*Photograph from the  
Veterans Museum and  
Memorial Center archives*



Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Maginot Line was what the French constructed in the '20s and '30s to prevent the Germans from invading France again in the southern and middle sections of the country. The Germans also built the Siegfried Line which was across the Rhine River, which they wanted to protect against the French invading Germany. So we occupied part of the French Maginot Line. In a way it was at least out of the cold and you could put up a little stove with a few briquettes and a little bit of coal and heat the place up. You could actually get a hot meal through the cooks having set up a regular cooking operation out of our 2 ½ ton truck, or sometimes right in a cooking area in the Maginot Line.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. So this was still summer or fall?

Gerken: This isn't much action yet. Getting in and out of the . . . here . . . we're taken out of the Maginot Line since we had a few trucks now, and we could move ourselves or march . . . we were told to go up to the front, join the infantry. The Germans are in Colmar and we're gonna plan on taking Colmar, which is a city of maybe 40,000 people in Southeast France.

So we traveled by night in the trucks, got off of the trucks. It was still at night. We were marching through woods, and essentially jungle, almost because there were a lot of trees there. In France and in Germany it's common to have trees lining common streets as decoration, but we were placed in a position where we were going through areas where there had been action recently. For example, dead German soldiers literally on the streets or next to the houses. So we were just marching through them, figuring when are we gonna be approaching the enemy.

Luckily we stayed back enough to where the infantry ahead of us could clear up what there was. Some of us were covered with 88mm artillery fire from the Germans in the city. They had set up 88s and as we, the engineers and infantry were going in to pick up mines, or to help the infantry walk through the mines, or blow up the mines. We were

expected to push and aid the infantry in getting through, but we were getting shelled during some of this by the German artillery. Nobody was killed at that point in my particular platoon, but there were many platoons. In a company there are three platoons. The company winds up to be about 200 men, and the whole combat engineer battalion would be 200 x 4 . . . again it's about 7 to 800 men.

Appleton: Sure. Well now were you in combat? Or where you in support, keeping vehicles moving across bridges?

Gerken: They issued us the rifles and said, "If you see a German pop up, shoot 'em in the foxhole, you shoot him before he shoots you."

Appleton: (Laughing) Okay.

Gerken: So we were actually in there as we went through. I don't know that I killed anybody right then and there at that point, because I was coming along. As a squad leader I was at the back of the squad. The squad leader might have been the one doing most of the shooting.

Anyway we took over that town, and even the next morning our company and our platoon were able to get into a French factory on the edge of town. It was an old factory that built I think carpets or some kind of furnishings for housewares. And even in there it was very dangerous because across the street there were German sub-machine guns firing, people coming out of second story floors, shooting at any American soldiers that were in the streets. We luckily still were in this factory behind a block wall, but there were infantry soldiers being shot right out in the streets. And we were waiting to be called by the infantry to go out and remove the mines that were still up ahead on the street a little further away.

Appleton: So that was one of your jobs to remove mines.

Gerken: To remove the mines for the infantry when they said: "There are mines up here. You go out and take 'em up. Blow them up or take 'em out so we can get through there with the vehicles."

Appleton: How did you find a mine?

Gerken: We had mine detectors. Every squad had a mine detector which was an electronic box. You'd fasten it on and you'd sweep it like this . . . and it gives you an audible sound . . . Beep . . . if there's a mine there. And part of our training even in the U.S was finding mines with these things.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Even when you find it though, you normally don't want to try and mess with it because it might be what's called a 'Bouncing Betty'. It might be a mine

even in a grass field with a little spur sticking up. These are the antennas for this mine. If you're walking there and you hit one of these spurs, this container shoots up in the air, maybe ten feet, and it'll explode with ball bearings that wipe you out, either that or a whole squad.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. My, my.

Gerken: We did run across some of those that we had to be concerned with.

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gerken: Luckily I didn't get any of the ball bearings in me, but some of the other fellows did.

Appleton: So you were actually physically getting the mines.

Gerken: At one point the squad leader . . . he came back down to see me . . . or the sergeant . . . platoon sergeant, which is a staff sergeant . . . he came in and said, "I need you for a runner."

I said, "Well, okay. I'll be a runner. What do you want?"

"Oh, I want you to pass a message to the lieutenant, platoon commander, who's in the second or third house up."



*Street fighting and running messages under enemy fire was extremely dangerous. This photograph was taken by a combat photographer in Germany in April 1945.*

*Photograph from the Combat History of the  
Second Infantry Division in World War II*

Well, we had been in this place . . . infantry is being shot out by snipers . . . enemy snipers from the second story, and I was a little bit skeptical of going out in the street. So I devised a way to stay behind some fences to get to this lieutenant's house and give him a message that I was supposed to give him. But even when you're just in the engineers, you're supposed to contact . . . to be a messenger, too, which is infantry work.

Appleton: That was smart on your part. Yes. Well now this was in the town or near the town of Colmar?

Gerken: Colmar, C-o-l-m-a-r, still an existing town.

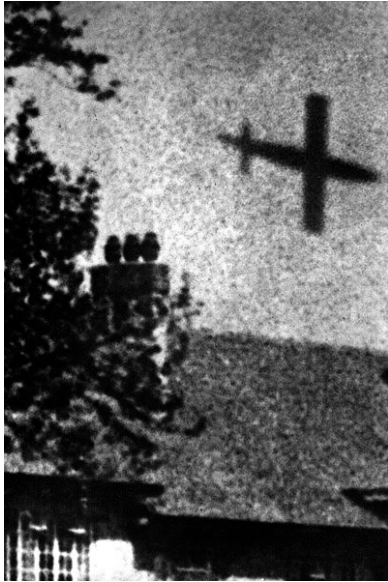
Appleton: Yes, I know where it is.

Gerken: The next morning we stayed overnight, RON, in a school house. The Germans were very kind to the French, as well as to themselves by not trying to blow up school houses with artillery or bombs. So generally it was fortunate for U.S troops to locate schools that were not blown up. If they weren't, we would just go in and stay in this school, well-built, and you could put a whole half a company in a school house. It was a school house in Colmar on a city street that we had gone in to this school house the night before from our warehouse factory.

And the building across the street was sort of like a communication center. It might have been a telephone center for this city. And the Signal Corps, which is in the Army, is the communicator types, they are the ones that normally look for or try to locate in a communication center because it saves them a lot of trouble in landing and laying land mines out on the streets. And there was a company of Signal Corps people in that building, trying to set it up as an operation center, and in the afternoon of that day, the building blew up.

Appleton: Oh, my!

Gerken: We were right across the street from it. And we got shrapnel and things hit into the school area, but it didn't destroy the school. But the Germans had either planned a time-fuse bomb in the building, or they had launched something like a V-1 or even a good mortar round, and it blew up the building. So many of our troops that day . . . we were looking for parts of the bodies of Signal Corps company troops that were pulled out of this building.



*A German V-1 rocket in flight just before landing and exploding*

*Photograph from Wikimedia, in the National Archives and Records Administration in the public domain*

Appleton: Oh, my. Now, were you part of General Patton's Army? The overall command? Was he in . . . ?

Gerken: No. We were a part of . . . at that time part of the Corps troops, 7<sup>th</sup> Army.

Appleton: 7<sup>th</sup> Army. Okay.

Gerken: Patton was 3<sup>rd</sup> Army.

Appleton: Yes. Right.

Gerken: Patton was actually in the lower area in France at the time of the Bulge. And Eisenhower directed . . . he said, "Get in these trucks and march as quick as you can. Beat back the Germans in the Battle of Bastogne."

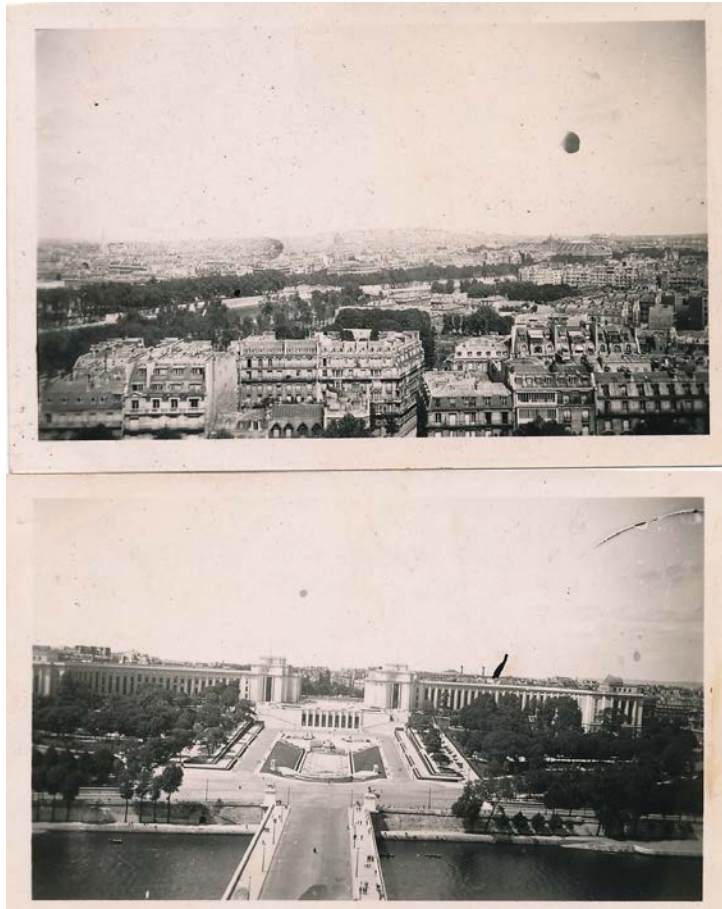
Appleton: Yes. I knew that he came up but I just wasn't sure if you got involved in that or not.

Gerken: And actually I'd run across troops of Patton's Army as we moved on into Germany. And even have run across one . . . General Eisenhower is one. As we were in the Colmar area with the 286<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion, the battalion got possibility of two or three spaces for an officer and enlisted man to go to Paris. There was no fighting in Paris, so that was still a safe place. The Germans, when they left, didn't destroy Paris. They left it pretty much as it was. There was a little sniping but it was a good city.

So as we were in . . . it might have been in the French Maginot Line . . . I was told by the lieutenant, "You've been selected to go to Paris."

*Two views of Paris on a three day leave with headquarters commander in January 1945. Louis Gerken's commander was Captain Hardin D. Dawson, Company C commanding officer when in Paris. Just by chance they saw General Eisenhower leaving a staff car going into a meeting.*

*Louis Gerken's personal photograph*



Appleton: (Laughing) How nice!

Gerken: And in the morning real early we piled in a three quarter ton truck. The captain . . . the company commander was driving, and myself and one other person in the back were the other two people on that trip to Paris. It was peacetime in Paris, of course. The captain . . . he was the company commander . . . he knew how to drive, and he's a good map reader. He had it laid out to where he drove completely straight in, and we got in and stayed in the best hotel. I think it was the Metropol.

And the next morning as I was going out with some friend of mine, or it might have been the company commander, I said, "Look over there! There's a big staff car and that's General Eisenhower!"

So there he was getting into the hotel. Maybe having a staff meeting or something with some of the free French and other people . . .

Appleton:; How about that!

Gerken: . . . reporting about France.

Appleton: Right. And you were right there. How good.

Gerken: And then later on in years at Naval Air Station North Island where I was working for the Navy as a civilian, I happened to run across Eisenhower in his car. I didn't get to say hello, but he drove by and I said hello.

Appleton: (Laughing) He drove by and waved. (Laughing)

Gerken: So that's when he was President, of course.

Appleton: Yes. Well I remember when Eisenhower was President, and [saw him when] he drove by [and waved].

Gerken: Somebody must have thought I was doing a good job as a lowly corporal or sergeant or whatever, in an Army unit because I was able to stay away from the Purple Heart, and do a reasonably good job and satisfy the lieutenant. And he selected me to go to Paris. We were there for two days!

Appleton: That's great!

Gerken: And they had us set up where we saw the Follies Bergere.

Appleton: Oh, my heavens! (Laughing) Yes, you were well treated!

Gerken: The dancing girls.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Then you, of course, had to go back to your unit.

Gerken: After those two days though . . . go right back to join the troops.

Appleton: So what did your unit do next?

Gerken: Ready to do work on laying bridges across the Ruhr River, and the Rhine is after that. And various other small rivers on the French side of the Rhine River. So we were building Bailey Bridges in front of enemy fire. Some of it snipers, and others . . . artillery and mortar fire and laying mines, mostly picking up mines and exploding booby traps and so forth. We were always aware of booby traps. Wherever you went, even into a billet somewhere where you were gonna stay in some little factory, there might be a booby trap that you run across. And this could be a little wire across a walkway, and it could blow you up. Always a fear of this.

Appleton: Yes. I can understand that. So what was the name of the river before you got to the Rhine?

Gerken: To the Rhine we went over in a city called Worms. W-o-r-m-s.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Worms is a city where a big floating bridge was put across. We had previously been putting in Bailey Bridges, foot bridges, which was walking bridges with handrails, and sometimes pontoon bridges. Sometimes trying to repair bridges that were existing. Other times you're clearing roads to try to help the infantry to get by so they could march up to the front.

*Pontoon bridge at Remagen,  
the type of bridge which  
Louis Gerken's unit  
constructed for the Allied  
Forces advancing into  
Germany.*

*Photograph from the  
Veterans Museum archives*



APRIL 1945 CO.C  
ENGINEERS CROSS  
MAIN RIVER AT  
WURZBURG

*The Main River at Wurzburg.*

*The Danube River bridge at  
Ingolstadt, Germany*

*Photographs from Louis Gerken's  
personal collection*



DANUBE RIVER  
BRIDGE BLOWN BY  
GERMANS

So as we got into Germany the fighting there was intermittent. Every town you went into . . . we were mostly supporting infantry in bridges and in the mines, and clearing roads for them. The fighting was not terrific in our area. The enemy was not . . . after the Battle of the Bulge the Germans had watered down their efforts considerably, and even in the south there wasn't much there except finally Patton got to come down south, closer to the 7<sup>th</sup> Army. So he joined the 7<sup>th</sup>, and we advanced on into Munich and some of those other lower German cities . . . wound up against Czechoslovakia. And it went through some of those prisoner of war camps. But that was just an in and out pass through we'd see what's there and see the condition of 'em.

Appleton: Did you actually go in to any of those camps?

Gerken: No, we didn't relieve any of the infantry as they passed through. The Germans pretty well deserted those camps.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: The guys . . . they were not feeding the troops there too much anyway. They were displaced persons and so forth. And they were in no condition really to cause anybody any trouble. Other than the U.S Army that had the responsibility was to try to feed them and house them and get them in a proper condition where they could return back to some kind of life.

Appleton: So most of the action you saw was before you got across the Rhine. Is that what you're saying?

Gerken: Right.

Appleton: Around Colmar?

Gerken: Strasbourg, Colmar.

Appleton: And Strasbourg, yes. Yes.

Gerken: Building some of the bridges, and some of the action including getting mortars and artillery fire, sometimes sniper fire from the enemy when you were trying to do your work. And clearing mines for the U.S troops. They can rest assured that you have to do your job before they could start moving through.

Appleton: So they could through safely, yes.

Gerken: So we had people . . . sometimes even medics got the Purple Heart. In our outfit there were some medics that got Purple Hearts, and others. One sergeant, a friend of mine, whose name was Sgt. Colson. He transferred to a different company, but he was in his jeep in Southern France, near Colmar, doing reconnaissance as the most intelligent sergeants did reconnaissance in jeeps, and they ran across a mine. It flipped it

over and they put him out of commission for several months of the war. So things like that happened all the time.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: You might have had a 2 ½ ton truck run across a mine and it blows the front end of the truck off, but even if there were troops in the back end of it, most of those guys survived.

Appleton: Yes. Oh, my.

Gerken: I had in Germany sometimes there were places that were a bit dangerous so as we moved into towns sometimes we would displace civilians that were living in their homes and use that for billets ourselves, a place to get in out of the cold or out of the weather. That would frequently happen . . . displace the civilians.

Appleton: How did the civilians deal with that?

Gerken: Well, they were told by the military government officers, "You have to move out and move in with your friends down the street who maybe have a barn that you could stay in. The Americans don't want to stay in a barn. They want to stay in your house."

Appleton: Wow!

Gerken: So that's pudding for the course. With the French we didn't do that too much. But we did. Some were the Germans, and, of course, the Germans would have done that with the Russians then on the Russian front.

Appleton: (Laughing) Yes, I'm sure they did. Well, so then the war came to an end at what point . . . where were you at that time?

Gerken: At the end I was working with a company . . . it wasn't even the same 286<sup>th</sup> engineers that I was with. It was putting across a new steel pile bridge across the Rhine River. And it was somewhere near Worms, but the war had about ceased at that point. The Germans had blown up some of the main Rhine River bridges. They were made of stone, and they were destroyed. It would take two or three years to rebuild. But the Army bought material . . . Army engineers bought steel pipe in Belgium and it was shipped on the rail, French rail cars and Belgium cars, to the Rhine River where these bridges were built. And they were built by pile drivers, piles driven into the riverbed, and with sledge hammers, steam driven and all that. And I was involved in charge of . . . believe it or not at this point, some platoons of German submarine mechanics . . . the German submariners had ceased operating their submarines, and the U.S needed skilled POWs, prisoner of war, so they shipped companies of these guys down to the Rhine River to help rebuild bridges, temporary bridges, until their regular bridges could be rebuilt. And there would be submarine mechanics and there were a lot

of diesel mechanics even on the diesel machinery that would use air compressors. They were very useful in maintaining some of that stuff.



*Building a Rhine River bridge at  
Mainz, Germany in February 1946  
(both photographs)*



Appleton: Really.

Gerken: So they were put to good use, and bridges were completed. In some cases the U.S Army engineers at this point weren't skilled at some of this building bridge across the Rhine River in that boat. However, one Army captain . . . engineer . . . he was unhappy with the Army troop that was handling a particular crane that had a pile driving pneumatic machine with it. So he was gonna show this soldier how to operate it, so he got in and he wasn't on it but a couple of minutes but the tip tipped into the river.

Appleton: Uhhmm.

Gerken: He was Captain Young, I think was his name. But he was meaning to do well and tried to show this soldier how to do it, but he didn't unfortunately have any training for how to run the cranes.

Appleton: How to run it, yes. So you were then in Southern Germany at war's end, or what is now the Czech Republic.

Gerken: The war ended . . . it was in Berchtesgaden in Southern Germany.

Appleton: Oh, you were in Berchtesgaden!

Gerken: That's right across from the Czechs in Czechoslovakia . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: . . . and actually got into Northern Italy in some of the reconnaissance work that we did. Reconnaissance meaning just doing regular intelligence recon, checking the area for any stragglers or POWs that hadn't been captured.

Appleton: Did you go up to Hitler's Eagle's Nest, or whatever it was called up there?

Gerken: Berchtesgaden.

Appleton: Yes, Berchtesgaden.

Gerken: It was still in pretty good shape. In fact, even today I think there's an Army rest camp for European or other soldiers wherever they are in the world to go into that rest camp. You could go over today and . . .

Appleton: I mean Hitler had that big chateau, or that house, up on top of the mountain, and just out of Berchtesgaden up the hill. Did you go up there and visit that, too?

Gerken: Yes. In the building itself.

Appleton:; Yes.

Gerken: There was his private palace up there.

Appleton: Right. Private quarters. Yes. And I guess he had one down in the town, too. But I've seen pictures of . . .

Gerken: Like in Nuremberg there was a big building that the Germans used for propaganda purposes, and the Army engineers were told to blow up that swastika, which is a thimble up on top of the . . .

Appleton: Yes!

Gerken: . . . of the Nuremberg building.

Appleton: Yes, there are pictures of that . . . that big cross or swastika that is being blown up on the top of that building. Yes. Well so you stayed in Europe. You hadn't been there very long compared to some people. You didn't have enough points to leave right away. How long did you stay?

Gerken: I didn't have enough points. I had maybe less than 50 points.

Appleton:; How long did you have to stay then before . . . ?

Gerken: Well, probably I had to stay a few months, and then I could go get shipped back. But I was working on things like this Rhine River temporary bridge we put up, which was after the war ended.

Appleton: Oh, after the war ended even. I see.

Gerken: Because the German POWs were helping build that.

Appleton: Okay. So you actually were involved in some engineering projects after the war was over.

Gerken: And I moved into several other engineer companies. One was near Marburg, and they had a big military hospital up there that the Germans had used in World War II itself. And it was kind of a resort city. Small cities near there . . . our particular Army unit would take and occupy some several families' homes on the street. And then one of the buildings, like the garage, could be set up as a mess hall, and it was set up as an operating base. And we had Army trucks. These were used in various construction purposes, repairing roads, and clearing other obstacles that were involved in highways. So we were always gainfully employed with these trucks to move around and go to different bases.



*This Rhine River  
bridge destroyed at  
Mainz-Kassel in  
February 1945*



*Rhine River bridge reconstruction on the Kassel side of the river in February 1946*



*French headquarters in Mainz, Germany as it appeared in February 1946. The French were in the Rhineland and President Truman told them to leave. The French had mostly Moroccan troops who were very dangerous. They stole and raised havoc with the local population.*

Sometimes we were tasked to go guard around a POW camp where there might be 10,000 POWs there, some enemy officers even. Some were Luftwaffe officers, pilots. And I remember some of those people they would sometimes would near a fence and we'd tell them, "You better stay on your side of the fence there."

Appleton: Were the German POWs fairly cooperative though at that point?

Gerken: Yes, well at that point the war was over, and they weren't even getting enough food because it's hard enough for the Army to take of their own and feed it and have to take care of thousands of DPs (displaced persons) . . .

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: . . . as well as enemy troops, and get them established.

Appleton: Yes. That was a big problem. People were moving all over the place.



*At the Rhine River bridge German civilians are subjected to an ID check by Free French soldiers in February 1946.*

Gerken: And actually at one point the Army Engineer Battalion, which is the higher battalion and the brigade commanders. I had gotten to be promoted to technical sergeant, made a few extra stripes during all this. And I still had a little time to go before I could get on a ship in France and go back to the United States. Go back to join a . . .



*In May of 1945 Louis's engineering unit stopped for this photo in Marseille, France. The 286<sup>th</sup> Engineers C Battalion changed its name to the 257<sup>th</sup> Engineers C Battalion when it traveled from Germany to Marseille for trans-shipment to Japan.*

*The beach on the French Riviera in 1945 after the war ended*



Appleton: So you advanced in rank to tech sergeant?

Gerken: I was a tech sergeant at that point. However they told me, "We need your expertise because you've been working with these POWs, even repairing Rhine River bridges, and you've got some levels of smarts here."

So they offered me a government service job, like a GS-7 or something like that, and I was moved to an Army based at Hanau, H-a-n-a-u, which is down near Frankfurt, to the east. And there was a base set up there with an Army Colonel Frisby in charge, and he had all kind of high level engineering equipment, bulldozers and scrapers, and air compressions, and repair shops. So they were rebuilding some of this engineer base that the Germans had set up there for their Army engineers. Their Army engineers were called 'Pioneers,' and the Pioneer base was this city of Hanau. In fact, when we went into that base I remember just turning into the base, and to the right was a knocked out German tank. It sat there for many months until somebody decided somebody could sell this for scrap and turn it into utensils or something.

*In May 1945 this knocked out  
German Tiger tank is left where  
it was disabled near Frankfurt  
just like the one near Hanau.*



Appleton: (Laughing) Turn it in to pots and pans.

Gerken: While there we managed a lot of depots where there were hundreds and hundreds of prisoners of war still working for pay in this case, for the United States Army to rebuild streets, in some cases bases for U.S Army use and others. So I was in there for a few months in that program and when there I was able to get on leave on weekends to Luxembourg, into Belgium . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: . . . [through] some of the cities that we by-passed going into the war area. We could see that Brussels, Belgium for example was pretty well salvaged. There wasn't too much damage there. Luxembourg, being their own country and not really in the war, they were not hurt at all, and they had good facilities there, housing and everything else.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Yes. So when did you finally get back to the United States then?

Gerken: In a few months I had applied to Purdue University in Indiana to take an engineering course.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: I knew a bit of engineering already myself with all this practical work.

Appleton: Well sure. (Chuckling)

Gerken: And so I went back on the *USS Goethals* out of Bremerhaven, West Germany.

Appleton: It sounds like a German name.

Gerken: Goethals. G-o-e-t-h-a-l-s. Goethals was the Army engineer . . .

Appleton: Okay;

Gerken” . . . who did most of the design work on the Panama Canal for the U.S Army.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Goethals. G-o-e-t-h-a-l-s. That was the name of the ship, and it was a U.S Army transport, about 20-25,000 ton. And I was still categorized as a government civil service worker so we got a reasonable place to stay. And the food was very good, got into Hoboken and discharged out. I went back down to Waretown for a couple of days to talk to my sister to see if she was still there.

Appleton: Well what was homecoming like? Did you see your family? Your brothers and your mom?

Gerken: Well my brother had been in the Merchant Marines . . . the younger brother.

Appleton: Okay.

Gerken: The younger one next to him went into the U.S Navy, and then the younger one . . . ultimately he wound up in the Air Force after he got a PhD in nuclear business.

Appleton: So you were all in the military then.

Gerken: Oh, yes.

Appleton: The whole family.

Gerken: Merchant Marines is sort of like military.

Appleton: Yes. They had some tough service. They did.

Gerken: Well anyway, I went to Purdue, and by the time I got there they were over-occupied with troops as students. It was to me like a place where there's nobody running this ship, nobody running this outfit, and you were thrown in the middle of something. They had no control over the students. In fact they didn't even want them.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: So I went on over to Indiana Tech, at Fort Wayne, Indiana for a while on my engineering work. So I pretty well graduated with enough smarts out of there, with essentially it was B.S.E.E. [Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering]. Then as a sideline I went down to Port Arthur College in Port Arthur, Texas after that. And that was a communications center for teaching communicators in the B-24 radio operator, for example, he has to tap the key. So I picked up some of that knowledge.

And then I graduated out of that college, which was some months. I got very good grades there and the dean recommended me to Pan American World Airways.

Appleton: Oh, really! Yes.

Gerken: Pan American World Airways is . . . if you're old enough you know that that was America's premiere airline.

Appleton: Oh, I do! I know about that.

Gerken: Including flying clippers across the Pacific and the Atlantic in World War II and before.

Appleton: Yes. That was first class travel.

Gerken: So I worked for a year or two in the communications department, kept their communications working for the aircraft and the various stations around the world. And I went into Brownsville, Texas, initially into that station, but then I was transferred over to San Juan, Puerto Rico. And Puerto Rico happens to be where my wife is from.



*In 1950 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Louis Gerken and Carmen Rios were married and posed for this informal wedding photo.*

Appleton: Oh! Okay.

Gerken: So after several years, of course, I married a Puerto Rican woman, a Spanish woman.

Appleton: Yes. Well, how nice!

Gerken: As you know, Cuba and Puerto Rico . . . those islands were established by the Spanish Empire years ago.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: I flew some with Pan Am. I flew as an observer and a technician and engineer to check their communication circuits out, and their capability of how to tie into the networks. And during these times I was asked by the Army to attend the meetings of their Army Reserve units in Puerto Rico

Appleton: Uh-hmm. You're still in the military?

Gerken: I'm still in the control group at that point because if I was in college, in a university or moving around from one place to another, like with Pan Am, I was never set up enough to where I could join the unit and say, "Okay. I'll hold some classes for you. Or I'll contribute to you," or whatever.

But anyway I was asked to join a 448<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion in Puerto Rico, in San Juan. And at that point I was still a tech sergeant because that is not a master sergeant yet. However, I was with them for one summer camp, which I taught their officers how to construct and do the work on mines and Bailey Bridges.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: And as a result of that they promoted me immediately to master sergeant, senior class.

Appleton: Good! Wonderful!

Gerken: So in that whole process the colonel in the Army in Antilles, which was the southern command in Puerto Rico. The southern command was actually based then down in Panama. They decided that they were going to appoint me a second lieutenant. So when I was still attending meetings there in San Juan with the 448<sup>th</sup>, I had joined up with the Army Signal Corps . . . or Army Engineers at this point . . . to take courses . . . Series 20, 30, 40, 50 in the engineers that would qualify me completely as an officer.



*Two views at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico in 1951. Louis is on the left.*

↑ LOUIS III BORN DURING CAMP. HE WAS  
NAMED "BABY BAILEY" BY OFFICERS.  
↓ FT. BUCHANAN ARMY WAREHOUSE  
CONSTRUCTION.



And I had a meeting to attend in San Juan where there was a colonel who interviewed me for 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant. He said, "Yes, you're eminently qualified. We'll make you a lieutenant."

So I got a direct commission from enlisted to . . . they used the war time services to direct commission.

*In 1951 Lt. Gerken oversees Bailey Bridge construction at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico using his World War II engineering experience.*



Appleton: Wonderful.

Gerken: Some infantry people, if their lieutenant was shot out from under them, they might take the sergeant and appoint him a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant right on the battle scene.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Well now, by that time had you completed your university training?

Gerken: Completed it. I was working for Pan American.

Appleton: And when you started working for Pan Am you'd already graduated.

Gerken: At this point I was invited to join a group, a field service group out of Philadelphia, working for Philco Company.

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: Philco used to make televisions as you may know.

Appleton: Yes. Okay.



*In 1953 Louis Gerken and Major Nichols engaged in secret electronic warfare training at Ramey Air Force Base, Puerto Rico, part of the USAF Strategic Air Command.*

Gerken: They were at that time getting experts in electronics and engineering to staff out Army, Navy and Air Force facilities as far as aircraft and operating stations in the world. I was selected for that. And before that even had happened, I had been commanding officer of a company in Puerto Rico, out of the U.S

Air Force. When I was at Philco, they sent me down to a Strategic Air Force Command to talk to the general staff about the missions in the Air Force, the B-29s and B-50s in Puerto Rico. So they tasked me for a short tour in Ramey Air Force Base, Puerto Rico. That's in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. Ramey Air Force Base is five miles north of that. Even during that time I was attending reserve meetings in the Army as a commanding officer, as a lieutenant, in a city called Mayaguez. Mayaguez is the head of the engineering schools they have in Puerto Rico for their civilian students, and also the military uses it. I had charge of an engineer company myself, a commanding officer as the captain. By that time I'd been promoted . . . jumped over from lieutenant directly to captain.

Appleton: Well you were very fortunate.

Gerken: But it was because of work that I did for the Army Air Force.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: Peace time Air Corps because during this period General Curtis Le May, in the Air Force, in SAC (Strategic Air Command at Omaha, Nebraska), he was staffing several places around the world with his heavy bombers and his recon bombers, RBs, reconnaissance as well as bombers.

They sent me to Puerto Rico, to Ramey, to teach some of their engineers and pilots and operators how to operate some of the electronics in those aircraft: B-29s, B-50s, B-36s. Some of it included the EB-36 which is a monstrous cavern of electronics stuffed into this big Convair-Vought aircraft. It has ten engines I think on it, and it was something I was involved with heavy training. I used to fly a little bit with those guys, and then I even converted a C-47 for what they call a Ramey Guinea Pig, which is an aircraft we could take up in the air and fly it around the base, and operators even on the ground with ground power, and the aircraft they could even sit in a B-36 or a B-50 looking at the air equipment and getting headings on and determining what kind of signals that were generated by this aircraft. These were all synthetic signals that I had conjured up in an electronic laboratory.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: So that was one of the first Air Force Guinea Pigs. The Guinea Pig was the C-47 flying that I had converted with the Air Force techs that were there to perform these purpose.

Appleton: Well, you've got involved in a lot of things.

Gerken: But as a result of that the Navy was getting involved more in electronic warfare, so they asked the Air Force if they could release me and go to a Navy facility and get some training in Annapolis, Maryland where they were setting up in this electronic warfare command in the Navy aircraft. And this time they were Lockheed

Electras, even Lockheed even 131s, I guess they were, four engine aircraft stuffed with electronics.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: So I worked for many years in that field in Puerto Rico. The Air Force sent me back to Puerto Rico. During this stint I had been in San Juan enough to know and to stop in a bank where I met my wife. Her name was Carmen. She was a teller and a manager's assistant in a bank in San Juan, Puerto Rico. We got married there and spent our honeymoon, a day or two in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands.



*Louis and his wife, Carmen,  
in 1976, in Chula Vista*

Appleton: Yes. My, how nice. Well then, you continued in the military . . .

Gerken: Even with the Air Force and the Navy. These were civilian positions, but during that time I was continuing on my own, getting educated in all of the many hundreds of courses I've taken with the Army, Navy and Air Force of all these things.

Appleton: Right. All the electronic stuff.

Gerken: Most of the time I would get a week off and instead of using it for a week of vacation with my wife somewhere, I'd go two weeks to Fort Sill to an Army nuclear weapons course . . .

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gerken: . . . which qualified me for a Prefix 5, on my MOS. So my life has been filled with this kind of thing.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Chock-a-block full of things, servicing, helping my own career along but with my organization, whoever I was with in this business. So with the Navy they at one point sent me to Norfolk, Virginia to participate in some new techniques that they used in electronics. Some of these were things like MAD, Magnetic Airborne Detection, a new type of radars, snorkel submarine detecting sonars, and radars that could be used in aircraft. So I did that for about ten months or a year there in Norfolk, Virginia.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Now you eventually ended up also working at the Pentagon, you said. What did you do there?

Gerken: I was taking classes not only in the Pentagon, but before I went there I put in for two weeks of training , ten days, in the Army Aviation Center in St. Louis, Missouri.

Appleton: Really?

Gerken: It was there before it moved to Alabama where it is now, and I would be involved in there. The general would tell me, "Alright, we know your background, and why don't you write us up a staff paper on this and this." So I'd go visiting some Army base in Texas somewhere, write it up, fly it back and then inside of the ten days I'd give him the paper. "Here's your study."

Appleton: (Laughing) That's wonderful.

Gerken: And you know, it was something that they appreciated well enough. It showed up in my record to help me along in the process.

Appleton: Well, you had the skills and you knew how to put 'em to work.

Gerken: And after I finished the tour in the St. Louis Headquarters for the Army Aviation I said, "Well, I ought to put up for the next command, which would be in the Army Headquarters in Washington," which I did. So I spent two ten-day tours in the Army Materiel Command in Arlington, Virginia, which was a general spot at that time, and during that time I was doing the studies. If I'd have been a Cold War . . . a Cold Operating Study . . . if I'd have been something on the infra-red or whatever for the Army Materiel Command. And during the ten-days I might hop to two or three different military bases around, including Air Force, you could get information to feed this reporting.

Appleton: Yes. So then you finally got to the Pentagon on a particular assignment?

Gerken: After the Army Materiel Command . . .

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: . . . across the river is the Pentagon.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: And in fact the Army has a good system of monitoring. If you were in the research and development area in the Army, they have a particular . . . a colonel billet set aside to help any of those people that are attending meetings over and aboveboard, providing extra effort to the military, to reward them in extra efforts. So this office asked me to go to the R&D office in the Pentagon.

Appleton: Okay.

Gerken: So I was there for about three ten-day tours. So there I performed a study each time.

Appleton: So it was a temporary duty in the Pentagon that . . .

Gerken: Temporary duty. During that time I'd also visit some of the Navy captains and admirals who I worked for as a civilian here at NAS [Naval Air Station] at North Island. They put me on ships and sent me to various bases around. So when there, I would cultivate the Navy admiral and the captain hierarchy to assist me in even in my civilian work.



*In 1960 Louis Gerken is giving instructions to a technician in the Aviation Electronics Shop at the North Island Naval Air Station, Coronado in San Diego.*

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Well now, did you bring your family with you many times?

Gerken: Most of those times . . . in the ten days, even back in the Pentagon, I was strictly . . . without family. 'Cause if I was there in an office, I was there in a base, then I would have to get in a plane and go here and there before I could come back to do my studies.

Appleton: Where did your family live then? Where did you have . . .

Gerken: Well, it wasn't . . . it was a family living. It was when I was here in North Island 'cause this is San Diego. It's where I've been for many years now.

Appleton: Okay.

Gerken: The work with the Navy in North Island was what brought me to San Diego in the first place in 1956.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Well so then when were you finally discharged from the military?

Gerken: Oh, when they automatically promoted me to full colonel after I've completed Command in General Staff, which I did on my own too.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Correspondence courses as well as attending the ten-days during the summer. And the correspondence could take you every weekend of the year, plus evenings during the work day when I was studying these courses to get enough still out to be a benefit to the Service. So when I was finally left . . . I was discharged as an O-6 and retired on retired reserve pay in the '80s.



*Captain Gerken at Fort Irwin, California, barracks in 1957 during summer camp training with the 574<sup>th</sup> AAA Battalion*

*In 1957 a light tank fires a  
40mm anti-aircraft gun at  
Fort Irwin, California.*



Appleton: Well that gave you a long career then.

Gerken: Yes. I put in 42 years.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: And if I'd had any regular time, I would be doubling the pay that I get now under Army reserve pay. I only get half the pay now that you get for a full colonel, regular Army.



*Louis poses with fellow  
officers in his officer  
course at Fort  
Monmouth,  
New Jersey in  
May 1960*

*Louis attended Command and  
General Staff College  
at Fort Leavenworth,  
Kansas in 1962.*





*Louis attended an Electronics Warfare course at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey in 1963. On display at the base were various military vehicles and weapons: (top right) a World War II V-2 German 'Buzz' Bomb, (lower left) US Army missiles and guns, (lower right) a WW II German anti-aircraft gun.*

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And if I took correspondence course they allow you 65 points that you could earn on retirement points every year, by taking correspondence courses.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: If you were in the regular Army, you'd be getting one point for every day you put in your duty.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: But we were held to 65 points. So every year when they sent me my points for the year . . . what with the reserve time and extra training time I took and everything . . . I wound up with like 180 points for every year. So by rights they should have paid me a bit more.

Appleton: Yes. Well, that's about a half a year.

Gerken: But that was part of my education.

Appleton: Well, yes. Well then did you take on a civilian job then while you were still working with . . .

Gerken: With the Navy. I established a rapport with the Navy and a reputation as being a problem-solver, to where the Navy put me in charge of . . . for example . . . Admiral Zumwalt, who was at one time the Chief and Navy Operations in Washington . . . the Pentagon. He set up a surface control ship, a new kind of ship for the Navy. And he tasked the Combat Air Pac in San Diego, which is a three star Navy flying admiral, for the task of setting this ship up and doing these exercises and certain tests. And the command here put me in charge of civilians, in charge of this project for Admiral Zumwalt, who was back in Washington. Even though I was out here and actually resided on the ship for many weeks at a time when this was going on.

Appleton:; And that was at North Island?

Gerken: While I was at North Island, I had a desk there that when I was on the ship, the commanding officer gave me a desk near him and said, "Here, I wrote up the messages for that Navy captain who was a CO of the ship, to operate this operation."



*Louis's portrait in 1968 . . .*



*and at home in Chula Vista in 1970*

Appleton: Yes. How nice.

Gerken: So I essentially wound up to be a civilian manager. But the other

guys, if they knew I had some rank in the military, too. But they brought this full bore. When it wound up I had a request from the Navy in the Pentagon, "Colonel Gerken, would you become a Navy captain? We want you to join us."

Appleton: (Chuckling) Yes.

Gerken: And I didn't join it because I had so many years in, and I would probably never make an admiral or it would be difficult. So . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: . . . I didn't take him up on it. But I got a good reputation from the Navy, and had all kind of commendations in my file from any work I've done for the military, when in the military, and outside of the military, working for the military, and in civilian life.

Appleton: That's amazing! That's wonderful. Then you finally stopped working then as a civilian here . . .

Gerken: No. After I finished the Sea Control Ship Project for Admiral Zumwalt and Combat Air Pac which is the Vice-Admiral here in North Island, I decided to set up my own company 'cause it got to be . . . when I was spending a month at sea away from the family, and then they would have me on other jobs in Hawaii or the Philippines, or going to Atsugi in Japan to handle other things during the year, I wasn't with the family very much. So I set up a small company called American Scientific Corporation, which still even exists, agent number of 57851.

Appleton: It's American Scientific Corporation.

Gerken: It's incorporated in Delaware, but it operates here in Southern California. I did have a laboratory set up for a number of people working with me, and for me in National City, but I closed that out a number of years ago and primarily I worked job shopping out the work that I do for the Navy now to other companies around. I managed the projects, but they're doing sub-contract to me for the work that I sell to the government.

Appleton: And this was mostly electronics?

Gerken: Mostly electronics and electronic warfare, ASW, Anti-Submarine War Fare. Any number of specialties.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. I Well, you have . . .

Gerken: But systems management . . . if they look at it like he's noted for trouble shooter, well, the guy is a systems manager.

Appleton: A systems manager.

Gerken: A systems manager.

Appleton: Yes. Well it sounds like you had quite a variety of experiences involving electronics and mechanical and engineering projects.

Gerken: Even in the company . . . the American Scientific I had contacts with through the *Commerce Business Daily* and the Department of Commerce at US. I would observe what the Department of Commerce is seeing that the government, military in the government, is putting out on the street for jobs. And I would bid on jobs and often win them because we knew a little bit about this or that; or if it was some electronic amplifier for an EP-3 aircraft for the U.S Navy, I knew what that was. I'd bid on it. I won the contract and built some.

Appleton: Sure.

Gerken: But in this case I didn't have the expertise myself in the shop to do it, so a friend of mine who has a company who specialized in just that in San Diego, and he did it. So I was overseeing the project, and it was for me, for the government, but as long as it got satisfied . . . the requirements . . . and they had the military specs, and pass the DOD inspection.

Appleton: It really sounds like all of this was inspired and started back in that high school manual training program where you got interested in mechanics and machinery.

Gerken: Produce something useful for the instructor in services, who was looking for these models.

Appleton: And it just went up from there. That's quite a remarkable . . . remarkable story. [You worked for . . . ?]

Gerken: [The] DOD.

Appleton: Uh-hmm.

Gerken: . . . and with the industry and getting things done in my specialized fields, that I sometimes have asked why the government should do certain things for them, without having to even bid on it. It's what you call a Section 8, which is set up by the Small Business Administration 'cause it does help small companies, but you have to establish credibility, and it takes a bit of doing to get the credibility.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: But I have been entertained to provide services to them without

having to even bid on it.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: And sometimes an agency of the U.S government can come to me as a citizen and say, "Good morning Mr. Gerken. We were passed this information from some service activity. Can you help us in this endeavor which we are trying to do?"

Appleton: Yes. Well, you've done a lot of good work, so that's why they asked you.

Gerken: Without pay.

Appleton: Yes. Well . . . but you had a reputation that was a good one. And I'm sure that . . .

Gerken: So it gives me great satisfaction to know that there are customers out there, and when somebody could do a good job for them, they appreciate it, and it builds up your reputation.

Appleton: Of course. And it provided, probably for your company . . .

Gerken: So we do a limited amount of work even today. I was called the other day from a Navy purchasing activity to do something to replace items that we have produced dozens of before. It's an electro-mechanical thing, and in this case, not purely electronic, but electro-mechanical, and we may get some work from them.

Appleton: Do you still own the company then?

Gerken: Still own the company. It's a staff with other people, and over the years I've had various Navy retired officers, and sometimes enlisted men, in their specialties work for the company when I was in the National City Laboratory. And it's mostly now operated by me from home, but I'm delegating it out, working the jobs through job shopping.

Appleton: Yes. Now you call that 'job shopping'?

Gerken: And I'm only doing this as . . . if the military calls and says, "You built these before, and in some cases I'm the only little company in the world that still has the drawings for it."

Appleton: That still has this . . .

Gerken: The Navy headquarters will say, "Give him the purchase order."

Appleton: Go out and see Gerken out there at American Scientific

Corporation. That's wonderful. Did you ever get involved in any of the military retired service organizations? The Army engineers association or something like that? Or not?

Gerken: I've been invited many times to join military veterans of wars, you know.

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: And I'm not even a member of the American Legion. There's so many of 'em I can join but quite frankly my own family personal business life has been so occupied in providing service the best way I know down there, so it would have detracted me from doing this.

Appleton: I can understand that.

Gerken: However, I was involved with an organization that is Armed Services Logistics Engineers. (Armed Services Logistics Research and Development). Logistics supports everything in the research and development. At one time I was chairman of the organization here in San Diego, and every week, being the chairman, I would talk to various Navy captains and admirals and other doers, to come and participate in their lecture for the month. [It was called SOLE, Society of Logistics Engineers], and that's all good.

But when I was doing it I had to devote a lot of time to that, and did a good job. And I have plaques and placards. And I'm a member of this, chairman of this, and that. The AOC, Association of Old Crows.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: Old Crow is an electronic warfare expert in military. And I'm a member of it, and I get the magazine, but they ask me . . . when you pay your dues, but do you want to join the meetings? Once in a while I will attend one when it's in San Diego. You don't have to fly all the way to Orlando, Florida. So there's a number of those things.

Appleton: I love that name. Association of Old Crows. That's (laughing) a great, great name of an organization, a veterans' organization.

Gerken: Logistics support engineers. It's also a well-renowned organization, SOLE, the Society of Logistics Engineers. I was the chairman of it here in San Diego for years, and during the missions we'd have . . . going to hotel meeting in San Diego, why I'd have some admiral come over from an operating task force, and he'd give a lecture on something [on] the importance of logistics in Navy operations.

Appleton: Well, is there . . .

Gerken: I'm what's called a certified professional logistician. I have a big certificate. If you got a degree related to the logistics, they will make you a logistician.

Appleton: Now that's a certified . . .

Gerken: Certified logistician.

Appleton: Logistician.

Gerken: And in according to the Army records, I'm also . . . because I've had so many [staff positions] in the Pentagon and in the Army Materiel Command. I [also] have nuclear warfare [qualification], Prefix 5.

Appleton: What is it called again?

Gerken: Logistician. And I have a certificate that says, "Col. Gerken is an Army logistician."

Appleton: Okay.

Gerken: He's an expert in the field of logistics. But in the Army that's a fairly good kudo there.

Appleton: Sure. But you were saying you were a logistician to Prefix 5?

Gerken: Oh, Prefix 5 is the number they put before your nuclear for your prefix would be 5.

Appleton: Yes. Obviously you've earned a lot of wonderful recognitions. Is there anything else that you haven't mentioned that you want to include about your story, your military story and anything related to it?

Gerken: Well, I think I have to pass a few words back to my family. And at the present time my wife has Alzheimer's, and she's in a care center. My son lives in San Francisco and has a small company in the Mill Valley area. And he's closer to her where he could watch over her better than I could here. If I have to take care of her, and if I have a heart attack tomorrow, I can't take care of her.

Appleton: Well, of course. And then you have a daughter who works here in San Diego?

Gerken: I have an older daughter Valerie, who lives next door to us.

Appleton: Okay.



*Valerie Gerken Rios*



*Louis Gerken III*



*Sherry Gerken*

Appleton: Yes. I've been in touch with Valerie by email . . .

Gerken: You're the one that initially . . .

Appleton: . . . yes. She contacted the . . .

Gerken: And I don't know whether she visited your facility down in the museum, or whether she heard it through you . . . or . . .

Appleton: I don't know how she heard it, but the word got to me.

Gerken: Email . . .

Appleton: Yes. And then email. Word got to me and then I contacted her by phone or email.

Gerken: So she said, "Why don't you do this?"

I said, "Well, I really shouldn't because it's a burden, and if I do it right, it's gonna take some of my strength. But, I'll do it."

Appleton: Well, I hope it hasn't taken too much of your strength.

Gerken: Well you've got the basis of it now.

Appleton: Oh, absolutely! Yes.

Gerken: In my family where we had . . . my mother and father, they had five children. The youngest one was an Air Force captain, who died of a heart attack about eight or nine years ago. He was a nuclear specialist. He was a graduate PhD in nuclear physics. [He] had his own company for a while, but then he went to work for the Navy at Patuxent River in Maryland where there's a Navy facility that trains in the nuclear business. And then his heart attack caught up with him.

Appleton: Yes. Well . . .

Gerken: Well, likewise I had heart trouble. My father died, of course, of heart attack when he was in his 60s. At the age of 70 I looked at my physical situation and went to family doctors. In the Army they require a yearly physical anyway, even if you were in the Reserves. And I always kept up with that. But I went to the family doctor, who is a retired lieutenant in the Navy, and told him, "I don't know what my EKG shows, but I don't feel quite right as far as my heart." So I said, "Would you send me over for an EKG?"

I had an EKG. He didn't find anything. I said, "Would you send me to have an MRI test?"

He did, and the Scripps MRI machine . . . their engineer found that I had one vessel that brings blood into the heart that has to be by-passed from here.

So I spent three days in the Sharp Hospital here in Chula Vista, which is right next to the California Veterans Home.

Appleton: Right up there. Up the hill.

Gerken: And up to now, ten years it is still working. The doctor was a Chinese doctor, Dr. Lin. And checking his education and everything, he was one of the best medical practices in the mid-west in the U.S.

Appleton: Wonderful.

Gerken: Dr. Lin.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Chinese.

Appleton: Well, that's good. It's always good to have a good doctor. Well, I think we probably have come to the close here of the recording. We can talk about photographs and things that you have, and try to include as many as possible, but I want to thank you for participating in this part of it and sharing your military and civilian technical and electronic experiences . . .

Gerken: Civilian soldier.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Reservist.

Appleton: It's a very broad area of services that you've been involved in, but this conversation will be reviewed and will be printed out like I've shown you there. You'll receive the first copy and then copies of this conversation will be placed in Archives of the museum, the Veterans Museum here in San Diego, and also in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Gerken: And who has access to those archives?

Appleton: Researchers and people who are wanting to do research in . . .

Gerken: Military and other?

Appleton: . . . military history and students of the military services of the United States, both during World War II, which, of course, is your experience. And also in this whole what we call 'The Cold War'.

Gerken: Luckily I . . . basically in the control groups as you probably know

from having been in the Air Reserves . . .

Appleton: Right.

Gerken: . . . if you are in a control group, you are prone to be picked at any time sent to Korea.

Appleton: (Laughing) Yes.

Gerken: Or to Vietnam.

Appleton: Right. But you were not sent.

Gerken: In my time I was always actively participating, doing more in maximum that I could for the services, so I was never asked.

Appleton: So they never called you.

Gerken: However at one point, in one particular operating base, a commanding officer said to me: "Would you mind . . . we'll put you on a couple of days active duty, and we want you to scan these files, and all those who haven't been participating in the Reserves or even any inclination to where they weren't . . . they're gonna be on the ship to Vietnam"

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: Or to Korea.

Appleton: (Laughing) Oh, well that must have been an unusual service . . . a few days when you were doing that. Well anyway, I want to thank you again and to thank you for your service. You've had a remarkable service history, and service experience, not only as serving in the Army, but also helping and serving other branches of the service . . . of armed services as well. And for that the Museum thanks you. I thank you and your service I'm sure is valuable and is well, well appreciated.

So this will conclude our conversation.

Gerken: I'd like to mention one thing though . . .

Appleton:; Yes.

Gerken: . . . that might be just a coincidence.

Appleton: That's okay.

Gerken: My younger brother, William, was a captain in the Air Force, but

in nuclear physics.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: He was doing a good job for the U.S. Navy in the nuclear area in the East Coast. His head of that section in the U.S government was an Admiral Watkins, retired, who at one time was the Chief of Navy Operations. And that Admiral visited my brother at this nuclear facility, and when he saw a Gerken, he said, "Is your name . . . do you have a brother in San Diego?"

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gerken: He said, "Yes."

Well, it so happens that I had done special work for this Navy admiral, full admiral, Chief of Navy Operations, the number one admiral at that time.

Appleton: What a coincidence!

Gerken: I even worked for Admiral Zumwalt and an admiral three times before him.

Appleton: Isn't that amazing!

Gerken: But Admiral Watkins, James Watkins . . . I wrote a book on the subject of scientific research, and I dedicated that book to Admiral Watkins because he headed up the Department of Energy for Ronald Reagan.

Appleton: Really!

Gerken: The admiral gave me a nice Foreword in the book.

Appleton: How nice.

Gerken: I wrote a book for the company really, published by the company.

Appleton: Yes.

Gerken: Its title was *Scientific Research, Military and Civilian*.

Appleton: Yes. Well, yours has been a remarkable story, and thank you again. And we'll conclude at this time.

Gerken: *Merci beaucoup.*

## Addendum



Mr. Louis C. Gerken, President of American Scientific Corp., has been involved in the leading edge of Anti-Submarine Warfare technology for the past 30 years. His company is a consulting leader in the fields of ASW, Electronics Warfare,

Logistics Research and Development and is actively involved in the development of numerous electronic and electro-mechanical systems.

Mr. Gerken holds patents on various devices with both military and civilian applications, and he is the recipient of many commendations for projects conducted for the military. He has authored studies for Industrial and Military organizations.

Mr. Gerken holds advanced degrees in Electronics Engineering and Business Management. He holds the rank of Colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve in Research and Development. He is a graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College and Department of Defense Logistics Management College and Executive Development Courses. He lectures on subjects such as ASW, EW and Logistics.

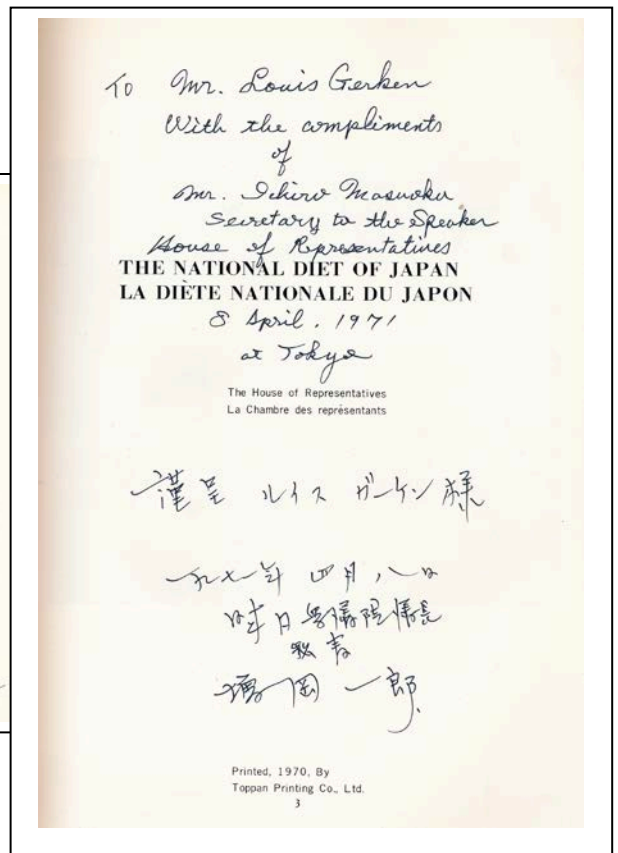
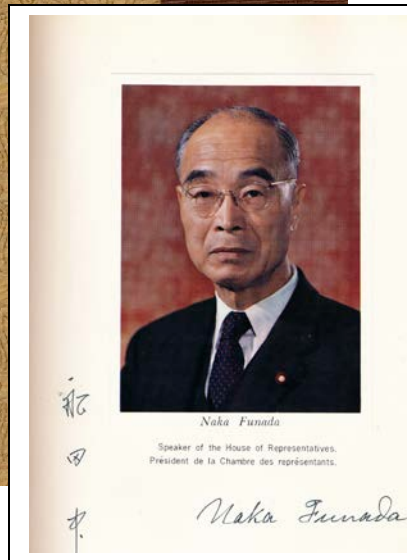
His experience is internationally founded, having worked with the Royal Air Force, Spanish, Australian and Japanese Navies in the fields of ASW and EW—both as an engineer and as a tactician. He has been involved in new concepts in ASW with the U.S. Navy, in aviation and ships, including an evaluation of the Sea Control Ship for Admiral Zumwalt. Additionally, Mr. Gerken developed one of the first EW training simulators for the Strategic Air Command in the Air Force.

Professional affiliations include memberships in the Electronics Warfare Society (Old Crows), American Society of Naval Engineers and U.S. Naval Institute.

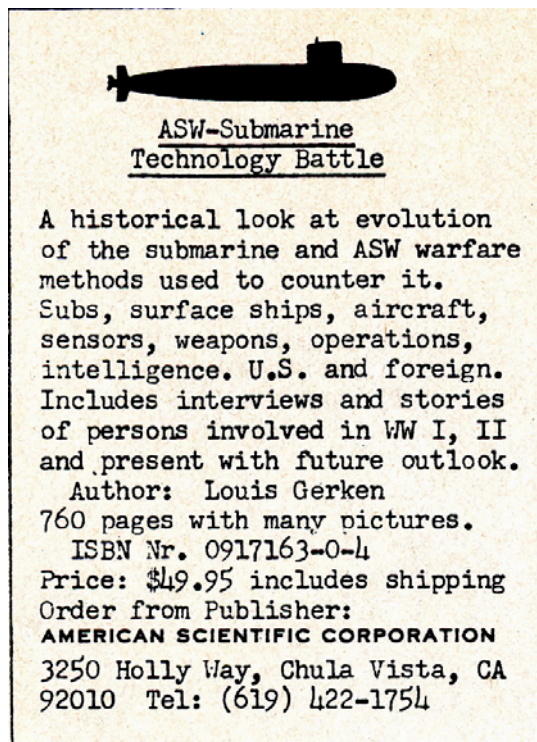
*Louis Gerken bio from his Anti-Submarine Warfare book which was published in 1986.*

*Other books by Louis Gerken:*

- *Mine Warfare*
- *Torpedoes*
- *UAV – Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (1991)*
- *Scientific Research: Military and Civilian (1997)*
- *WW II 286<sup>th</sup> Engineers Combat Battalion (1996)*
- *Airships: History & Technology (1990)*



*After WWII, Mr. Gerken was asked by the U.S. Navy to assist JMSDF (Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces) with some critical technical problems. This book about the National Diet of Japan was presented to Mr. Gerken for his services by Mr. Naka Funada, the Speaker of their House of Represent*



*Description of Louis Gerken's book  
in an ad in the magazine, "US Naval  
Institute Proceedings," 1986.*



*Louis at the Great Wall of China, circa 1997*