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Frederick Kooyers Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

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Mr. Frederick M. Kooyers
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Offensive Against Kodish and Emitsa, December 29-31, 1918
BATTLE OF BOLSHIE OZERKI, MARCH 31–APRIL 4, 1919
Preface

Interviewee: Mr. Frederick M. Kooyers

Interview I: June 8, 1977
Mr. Kooyers' residence in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Interviewers: Ms. Nancy L. Johnson
Ms. Deborah A. Lenning
Associate Directors - Polar Bear Oral History Project
Hope College, Summer 1977
Mr. Frederick M. Kooyers was born in Reman, Michigan on September 29, 1894. Both of his parents were born in Holland, Michigan. Mr. Kooyers attended Muskegon Public School, where he completed the eighth grade.

He was drafted into the army on June 19, 1918 and underwent training at Camp Custer, near Battle Creek, Michigan. Trained as a machine-gunner, he served as a corporal in Company "E" of the 339th Infantry. After three weeks of training in Camp Custer, the regiment was transferred on July 14 to Camp Mills, New York until July 21, 1918. The next day, his company boarded the H.M.T. Northumberland and sailed for England to continue their training. They arrived at Liverpool on August 4, 1918 and immediately left for Stoney Castle Camp, where they remained until August 25. The next day they sailed for North Russia on the H.M.T. Nagoya. They landed in Archangel on September 5, 1918.

The Second Battalion, which included Company "E", remained in Archangel until November 8. They were involved in the defense of the Seletskoe Sector from November 14 until December 29, 1918. From the latter date until January 3, 1919, the company was involved in an offensive battle at Kodish, on the Emsta River. The defense of this area continued until January 14, 1919.

Mr. Kooyers' platoon was not involved in another battle until Bolshie Ozerki, at the 18th Verst Post Obozerskaya-Onega Road, on March 23, 1919. The American troops captured the village that day.
and defended it until March 29, 1919.

During the month of April, "E" Company participated in the defense of the Vologda-Archangel Railroad. On May 1, 1919, the company returned to Bolshie Ozerki and defended it until May 21. They then left for Economie, an island north of Archangel, where they remained until they, along with Companies "A", "G", "I", "L", and "M", boarded the steamer H.M.T. Czar on June 2, 1919. After arriving in Brest, France on June 11, they remained in Camp Pontanezen until June 21. They then sailed on the U.S.S. Von Steuben, arriving in New Jersey on June 30, 1919. After a stop in Detroit to march in the Fourth of July parade on Belle Isle, the men of "Detroit's Own" arrived in Camp Custer on July 5, 1919. Two days later, Company "E" was demobilized and Mr. Kooyers was discharged.

He returned to Muskegon and married Blanche Marie Bouchard on October 14, 1919. They had two children, Donald F. and Susan Kooyers Artill. Mr. Kooyers owned a dry cleaning business in Muskegon which he turned over to his son after fifty-six years. Since his wife's death in 1975, he has resided in the Michigan Veterans' Facility in Grand Rapids. Still in excellent health, he has busied himself since retirement with golfing, his interest in conservation, and his affiliation with the Captain Howard H. Pellegrom V.F.W. Post in Muskegon, of which he is a charter member.

In his interview, Mr. Kooyers describes his personal perception of the expedition to North Russia. His story of his experiences as a non-commissioned officer there illustrates the average soldier's ignorance of the purpose of his mission and his
resultant confusion. Mr. Kooyers' interview is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the attitude of unquestioning patriotism that compelled the soldiers to fight loyally for an unknown cause.

Mr. Kooyers recounts his experiences candidly and without bitterness. As he explained to us in a letter dated June 1, 1977:

I love life and everyone is my friend, and if I am insulted or someone tries to give me a bad time my memory goes back to a time that my lovable Dutch mother on such an occasion, put her arm around me and said just be thankful you are not like that, and just remember:

He who has a thousand friends
Has not a one to spare.
He who has one enemy
Will see him everywhere.

I mention this to give you a picture of me.
JOHNSON: Mr. Kooyers, first of all, did you enlist or were you drafted?

KOORYERS: I was drafted.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about that?

KOORYERS: My experience first was that when I was examined, I had a little small heart condition. And they wanted to reject me, and they wanted to know if I had any objections going into the service. I said, "No, I want to go where the rest of them are going, and I want to go." I had to lay down for an hour, and when I got up the doctor examined me again. He says, "Well, you got a heart murmur. What do you want to do?" I says, "Well, I want to go." So I went into the service.

JOHNSON: What was your training experience at Camp Custer like?

KOORYERS: It was all in a hurry. We had to get up at daylight until late at night because we were made up to join a bigger unit so we could get overseas. So we drilled three weeks in Camp Custer, in a hurry. Then we were transferred to Camp Mills, New York for three weeks. And then we were on a boat on the ocean for thirteen days: dodging submarines, seasick twelve of the thirteen days. But we made it. When we got in England we were there for three weeks and we drilled. Then we left Camp Stoney Castle, where we were located in England. We were transferred to Newcastle-on-the Tyne in Scotland. We boarded the Nagoya to Russia—destination we didn't know—and arrived in Russia eleven days later, on the fifth day of September.
JOHNSON: While you were in Camp Custer, what did you think you were going to be doing after you finished training?

KOOPYERS: At that time the army told you nothing. You were just in the army.

JOHNSON: And they didn't let you know anything?

KOOPYERS: They don't tell you nothing. You're just in the army.

JOHNSON: What was the voyage on the Northumberland like?

KOOPYERS: They were more or less freight boats, and small--the "tubs", I called them. Seasick was the main thing--although a lot of men could eat all day and all night and never get sick. But not me.

JOHNSON: Was the food good?

KOOPYERS: I think it was English food. We were served by the English. I think it was mostly tripe. And if you've got to ask anything about tripe, I think it's the tummy off the cow, as far as we know. (laughter)

JOHNSON: How did you get along with the British on the boat?

KOOPYERS: Well, very good, although when they came down the hall they says, "Gangway!" And we all moved over. We could have threwed them overboard, but then we were only soldiers. (laughter)

JOHNSON: When did you first realize that you would be going to Russia instead of France?

KOOPYERS: We had no idea until we hit Russia. Nobody told us a
JOHNSON: Not even while you were on the boat?

KOONYERS: None of them ever said "boo" where we were headed for.

LENNING: What did you think when you were issued Russian rifles? When they took the other rifles away from you and gave you the Russian rifles?

KOONYERS: We still didn't know they were Russian rifles. They were made in America. They were Remington rifles with the name stamped out and 7.62 caliber. I have one as a souvenir. And the Russians used our rifles to shoot back at us. And we'd shoot the same thing.

JOHNSON: When you arrived in Russia, did you know anything about Russia at all?

KOONYERS: Not a thing.

JOHNSON: Anything about Bolshevism at all?

KOONYERS: Not a thing.

JOHNSON: After you got there, did they give you any lectures or other information to tell you why you were there or what Bolshevism was?

KOONYERS: Well, our theory and the most lecture we got—-at that time the submarines were operating in the Atlantic, and they tried to find out where they were being refueled. They come to the conclusion that they were refueled in Murmansk. Murmansk is a
port in the top of Russia that never freezes. Open the year round. So we were on the line of communication—the railroad's line—that went to Murmansk. So that's the reason we figured: we stopped the Germans from shipping stuff across Russia for their U-boats. That was our theory. The army might have had a different theory.

JOHNSON: They didn't tell you? You figured that out yourself?

KOYERS: Yes, we figured it out ourselves. But more or less through the grapevine you hear things, and that was our conclusion.

JOHNSON: On the voyage to Russia, was there an outbreak of Spanish flu?

KOYERS: Yes.

JOHNSON: What kind of medical supplies and treatments were there for the patients?

KOYERS: I couldn't tell you. They didn't tell you nothing. I know I was sick then—half the time laying under the bunk for days, and nobody paid any attention to you.

LENNING: Were you seasick, or did you have the flu?

KOYERS: I had the flu on the boat.

JOHNSON: You didn't get any medical treatment at all for days?

KOYERS: Oh, a doctor would come see you if they found you, but there was so many of us sick that half the time they didn't know
where we were. We'd just go hide somewhere because we were sick.

LENNING: When you got to Archangel, what happened?

KOOYERS: Well, we pulled into the Dvina River. It comes out of the White Sea. We anchored off quite a ways out, and I was one of the delegation picked to go ashore.

LENNING: How many were in the delegation?

KOOYERS: There were about six of us on reconnaissance to find out what was there. Getting into town, we heard music and dancing, and they were having a good time. So that was my introduction to the Russian people. I would say today that they were always happy-go-lucky—ready to polka.

LENNING: Did you ever find out why they were cheering and dancing?

KOOYERS: No. Just a night they were playing, that's all.

LENNING: Right after you landed, the First and Third Battalions left directly for the front. How did you feel about remaining in Archangel?

KOOYERS: Well, they put us in what they call Bakaritsa. That's across from Archangel. It's an army camp. And as they needed replacements, then we would move up. But they happened to be the first ones to go up.

LENNING: What were your first duties in Archangel?

KOOYERS: Studying machine-gunning. I was machine gunner, and I
was going through Lewis gun. And the cute part of the Lewis gun is--the United States had it--it was invented in Belgium. The United States didn't think it was working. It was air-cooled. In Russia, it got below zero, and they used Vickers machine gun, and they had to have anti-freeze in them. A Lewis gun holds forty-nine shells, and it's air-cooled, and you don't need nothing in them--just throw it in front of you. You can shoot it from your shoulder if you're strong enough.

LENNING: What were your first impressions of Archangel?

KOOPYERS: I really can't say. We worked so fast, trained so fast, and moved so fast we had no chance.

LENNING: Did you get any passes when you were there?

KOOPYERS: Oh yes. When I was over at Bakaritsa we'd get a pass, and we had to take a tug across the Dvina River into Archangel.

LENNING: Did you have fun then?

KOOPYERS: Sure! We'd go downtown and dance with the girls and everything else. They were happy-go-lucky. They loved to see a good American boy coming. (laughter)

LENNING: What else did you do in Archangel besides training with the machine guns? Were you put on guard duty?

KOOPYERS: There were guards in there, and we'd replace them. I was never too much on guard duty because I was a machine-gunner. That was my main thing.
LENNING: What was the money situation like over there? Did they have all different kinds of rubles?

KOOWERS: Yes. The time I was there, they had what you call Bolshevik money. At that time the Bolsheviks had it. But I had tsar money—the regular old Russian money. And we had silver and coins and everything else. I brought a lot of it home, but I run into a coin collector and I showed it to him, and he said, "Man!" So I give it to him. I didn't care for it. Today I think it'd be awful valuable, but it's gone.

LENNING: How much did you know about the political situation in Archangel?

KOOWERS: At that time, at our age, politics didn't mean nothing.

LENNING: Did you know that there had been a revolution there the very night before you landed?

KOOWERS: That was history to me as well as it is to you. I wouldn't know.

LENNING: Did you learn anything about the political situation during your stay?

KOOWERS: Only just what we heard, that's all.

LENNING: Like what?

KOOWERS: Well, I know our perimeter—we was about Archangel—that was under British rule. We were in under British command, not American command. And all we done is what they told us,
only that we knew that the interior of Russia was Bolsheviks, we called them. Now they call them Communists. But in our territory we had our own neighbors. We didn't know what was going on. Just Americans together.

LENNING: Did the British seem like they had control over Archangel?

KOYERS: Yes, they did.

LENNING: What was the attitude of the Archangel residents toward the soldiers?

KOYERS: Well, the only contact we had, if we got time off, was like any other young man looking around--you're going to meet the public and you could go to dances. Outside that, we couldn't converse with them because we didn't understand their language.

LENNING: Did they seem friendly or hostile?

KOYERS: Friendly. My idea--and maybe you can see it in this country, too, if you go to a Polish hop or Polish wedding--the Russians were happy-go-lucky. I don't know how they are now.

LENNING: Some of the doughboys over there manned the streetcars after a strike in Archangel. Were you involved in that at all?

KOYERS: I must have been up on the front.

JOHNSON: What were your next instructions after Archangel?

KOYERS: They'd move a company out and you never knew when they were going to leave. I moved out and we had to take Kodish.
That was in the line of communications. They tried to break our line of communication, so we took Kodish. And we spent quite a little bit of time there. And in our book, if you read "Mournful Kodish", we lost quite a few boys there.

JOHNSON: How much did you know about the purpose of your mission after you started fighting?

KOOYERS: Just like any other army, they don't tell you nothing. You get everything through the grapevine.

JOHNSON: They just told you who to fight and that was all?

KOOYERS: That's all. They told you just before you went, and there's where you went. And you took care of what you're supposed to do.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about not knowing what you were doing there?

KOOYERS: We lived for one thing. That was to get it over and get home.

JOHNSON: Why was "E" Company split up on September 18 and October 29?

KOOYERS: My company was? I imagine that at different places you only needed so many men. When I was outside of Kodish I was there for thirteen days. We built our own lean-to and we lived outdoors. We were guarding the Emsta River. There was a group of us--about forty. And we stayed right there and lived there in fifty below zero.
fifty below zero.

LENNING: What happened to the rest of your company?

KOOYERS: They probably sent them somewhere else. They were scattered all over.

JOHNSON: Who commanded your outfit?

KOOYERS: We had a Lt. Col. John J. Baker, an old army officer from Grand Rapids. And I can remember in Camp Custer when we used to drill under some rookie sergeant. Baker would walk out and he'd say, "Company 'E'! Everybody grow six inches." It was a treat to drill under him. One thing in the army I did like was to drill with him--just to see him come out there.

JOHNSON: Then he was a good officer?

KOOYERS: He was a regular army officer at that time.

JOHNSON: Did the men like him?

KOOYERS: Yes, they did. Very strict and stern. When he hollered at you, "Yes sir"--you better. But that's the respect we had for him.

LENNING: Who was Captain Heil?

KOOYERS: Captain Heil was the captain of our company. And he was kicked out, and Baker took over. And when Baker took over everything went smooth after that.

JOHNSON: Did you ever meet Major Young or was he ever commanding your outfit in any way?
KOoyers: I've seen Major Young, but I never had anything to do with him.

Johnson: Were any of the higher men up, like General Ironside, the British general, ever around Kodish?

KOoyers: No.

Johnson: When you were put into smaller detachments, what was the rank of the man generally in charge of those smaller groups?

KOoyers: Well, generally if you had a big enough group they'd put a sergeant of otherwise maybe just a corporal. A corporal had maybe eight, seven men himself—a squad. A sergeant has a whole platoon.

Lennings: How many men in a platoon?

KOoyers: Now you've got me. There's so many squads in a platoon.

Johnson: Where did you first encounter fighting with the Bolshevics?

KOoyers: Outside of Kodish.

Johnson: How did they fight at that time.

KOoyers: It's all Indian fighting.

Johnson: What happened when you made maneuvers that surprised them? Did they retreat, or did they keep fighting?

KOoyers: We kept driving them back a little at a time, and they'd probably drive us back, too, once in a while, and then we'd have
to fall back. I would say the old-type Indian fighting.

JOHNSON: What was your impression of the discipline within the Bolshevik ranks?

KOOPERS: I know that one time on the Emsta River there was four of them that come across the bridge carrying a white flag. They wanted to join our side.

JOHNSON: Did they seem like they were a well-organized army?

KOOPERS: Well, you're going back to the idea that you don't understand their language. And the officers took them back and we'd never know what they done with them.

JOHNSON: Did you ever receive false news that the armistice had been signed?

KOOPERS: No.

JOHNSON: When did you find out that it had really been signed?

KOOPERS: I was on the front. When they signed it we thought the war was over.

LENNING: When was this?

KOOPERS: On November eleventh. We were in Bolshie Ozerki, I think it was, and they had a wire service. And we read the war was over, and we figured we would go on home. We came out of there the next year, in 1919.

JOHNSON: When you found out that the armistice had been signed,
how did you feel about it?

KOOYERS: Well, tickled to death. We thought we'd go home.

JOHNSON: How did you feel when you found out you weren't going home?

KOOYERS: Couldn't do nothing about it but stick it out.

LENNING: Did they ever tell you why you didn't go home then?

KOOYERS: Well, we couldn't get out. They couldn't take us out of there because you can't get out of the White Sea. We come out of the White Sea 'way along the next summer and had two ice crushers to get us out of the harbors. So you just couldn't get home.

JOHNSON: You said before that you figured out through the grapevine that you were there to keep the Germans from landing submarines at Murmansk. What did you think when the war was over? Why did you think you were there?

KOOYERS: For the reason that we couldn't get out. That was the main reason, and I suppose the Bolsheviks. There you had another political party in Russia, and at that time we were fighting them. We just wanted to stop the Germans, but the Russians were there—the ones that were trying to overthrow their government. Those were the ones we run into. We never run into any Germans.

JOHNSON: So, did you ever think you were just there to fight the Bolsheviks from the beginning?

KOOYERS: Well, our theory was that we were going there to cut off
the German supply. And when we got there, the Russians had an internal war, and we run into them instead. And that's where we got into it.

LENNING: Did you ever wonder why the Bolsheviks were your enemy? (pause) Did anyone ever tell you why?

KOOYERS: No. In 1918, nobody told you nothing. You just put up with what you got. Nowadays they'd go mutiny if they'd gone through what we did. They'd say, "Well, we'll quit." Those days you didn't do that. You were too patriotic; you put up with what they give you.

JOHNSON: Did anyone in your company talk of mutiny?

KOOYERS: Oh yes. They'd have a few once in a while. They'd get unhappy and "Let's have a riot", which I never was in favor of. I never was in one. They might have had some that I didn't know of.

JOHNSON: After the armistice, did the rest of the men in your company share your feelings about staying?

KOOYERS: Well, I'll tell you, they grumbled so much. I remember one morning it was sixty-two below zero and we were in the barracks, and they grumbled so much that the officer took us out on the Dvina River on the ice and drilled us. And there were a lot of frozen noses and frozen ears before we got through. They kept still after that.

JOHNSON: Did the Bolsheviks badly outnumber you?
KOOGERS: That, I couldn't say. They'd have to because they had a whole country behind them. Of course how many was on their side politically--they might have gone back in the country and gotten more. We don't know.

LENNING: Were their forces larger than yours on the battlefield, for instance at Kodish?

KOOGERS: Yes, they were. But we had superior equipment. Of course, they knew the terrain; there's where we run into trouble.

LENNING: What was the quality of the medical care, particularly at Kodish?

KOOGERS: I really couldn't give you that answer. I was only in the hospital once with the flu, and outside of that, I was never in there.

LENNING: So you never witnessed any cases of neglect of the wounded?

KOOGERS: No, I wouldn't say so.

LENNING: Was poison gas ever used?

KOOGERS: Not to my knowledge, no.

LENNING: Was the fighting ever continuously severe?

KOOGERS: Well, it was more or less hand-to-hand fighting. An example of what I mean is, one night one time we were outside of Kodish holding the Bolsheviks off, and I had a Lewis gun and a crew of three with me and a man manning the gun. He had set it
up on a log, and he lit a cigaretté and they hit him right in the head... So you know what that means. That night we lost three out of the four—two wounded and another one fatally so.

LENNING: You were the lucky one?

KOYERS: I was laying on the ground. I didn't happen to be on the machine gun. That's the reason.

LENNING: How many days in a row would you have to keep on fighting?

KOYERS: The idea was, we kept them away from the railroad. That was our job down in Kadish. Kadish was a road off the railroad. Then the boys drove up the railroad front and tried to push them back.

LENNING: At one time, at the front, how many hours, or how many days would you have to be there? Were you relieved frequently?

KOYERS: Well, no. We were at Kadish about four days in one stretch before it quieted down. Then we got on the Emsta River, and we had one side of the river and they had the other—December 30th to January 14th.

LENNING: During that four-day stretch, how frequently did you get to eat?

KOYERS: Well, they'd give you three hard' tack and a can of corned beef. And the hardtack was so—an example offit, we built a little shack one time after we'd been there long enough, and we didn't have a doorknob, so we took a knife and cut a little
round hole in the hardtack and used it for a doorknob! That was our doorknob to hold the door shut—until the officer came up and caught us! (laughter)

LENNING: Were there many relief troops?

KOORYERS: Well, they'd change. They'd move them around different, although at Kodish I was there up to thirteen days, but on the railroad front they'd move them up. I eventually came back to Archangel, then went on the railroad front and we'd move up by what they call versts. We would be on Verst 422, then maybe the next day you'd be on 444 or something like that, or wherever you could push them back.

LENNING: Was your clothing adequate?

KOORYERS: Yes, I would say that. Of course, we had English clothes on. I know I had two suits of underwear. When I was up to Kodish, you couldn't take them off or you'd freeze to death, so maybe once in a while we'd build a fire and maybe turn them around. And we had what they called Shackleton boots. I had a pair of size twelve with four pair of socks in them, although I wore an eight shoe.

LENNING: How common was frostbite?

KOORYERS: Very common indeed. We didn't have too good of mittens and stuff like that.

LENNING: What would happen if someone lost their overcoat or mittens? Were they easily replaced?
KOOYERS: No. You didn't lose them! Once in a while you'd find one in the woods somewhere, lying in a snowbank. You'd take it off that poor fellow, and bury him, and take that coat with you.

LENNING: What was the quality of the food?

KOOYERS: Mostly hardtack.

LENNING: What is hardtack?

KOOYERS: It's just bread, only it's baked so hard that, like I said, you could use it for a doorknob.

LENNING: How much food did they give you? Was it enough?

KOOYERS: Sometimes if you left—you might go on a hike for three days—they'd give you enough to carry with you. But you didn't get too much to eat.

LENNING: Did you ever see or hear of any cases of malnutrition?

KOOYERS: No, no.

LENNING: How did the food at the front compare with the rations at Archangel?

KOOYERS: Well, when we got back into Kodish, we had our own cooks and we had one shack we could get in. Then they made mostly stew. That's all you got up there.

LENNING: What were the sanitary conditions like at the front? How often did you get a chance to take a bath or change your clothes?
KOOYERS: You didn't have a chance. You got back to town, you could take one. But at the front you didn't take a bath.

LENNING: But at Archangel it was different?

KOOYERS: Oh yes. You could go downtown and then they had sauna baths. The Russians are unique at taking a bath. They'd get switches, and they stand there and run that hot water over them, and they keep pounding themselves with the switches, and get the blood circulating. That's their way of taking a bath. Of course, they taught us the same thing.

LENNING: What was the quality of the housing?

KOOYERS: All your houses are log houses. Every one in Archangel, if you've got any pictures of them, they're all log houses, and they're all chinked in between same as we had here years ago.

LENNING: Where did you sleep at Kadish?

KOOYERS: When we were outside of Kadish we'd just build a lean-to with three sides and a roof, all out of leaves and boughs and stuff like that. And each man had three blankets, and we'd get two together and take six blankets and crawl in with your overcoat on and your shoes on and throw the six blankets over you and go to bed. If you had the luck you could get back into Archangel, and then you could get in and get inside to sleep.

LENNING: Did you ever stay in a Russian family's home?

KOOYERS: No.
LENNING: Did you ever have any encounters with the peasants?

KOOYERS: Yes, I had, when I was drawing all the rations for the camp on one hitch in Bakaritsa. In other words, if there was eight hundred and twenty-two in camp, you got an eighth of an ounce of oatmeal—so many ounces of this, so many ounces of that—and I'd have to figure how much. Then I'd pick my Russian truck driver and go down and get it. And the only reason I could get him was 'cause I used to slip him a little meat or something like that. He took me home one time—wanted me to meet his pretty daughter. (laughter) Let's keep that off the record. Most of the Russian girls weren't too good-looking. They had one pretty girl up there. I don't want to tell you my history with her. She was a telephone operator where I drew my rations. (laughter)

LENNING: What was the basic reaction you would get from the peasants? Did they look upon you as invaders or protectors?

KOOYERS: Well, we couldn't converse with them, but they were more or less pleasant. We never had any trouble with them. We knew enough to get along with them 'cause we were there, and we knew we couldn't get out so we had to make the best of it.

LENNING: Did you ever witness American troops burning villages under orders for strategic reasons?

KOOYERS: I never got into the bigger cities or towns like Onega and different places. I never got to them. I went to Kodish. The Kodish front was a long, long, dreary hike. We'd try to connect with the railroad 'way above to cut them off, but that
was it. Then I came back. I was in Bolshie Ozerki. That's another front.

JOHNSON: Did you serve with any other Allied troops?

KOOYERS: There were some Australians with us.

LENNING: How about Canadian artillery?

KOOYERS: Yes, there was Canadian artillery, but of course, they were the British.

JOHNSON: Were there any French or British fighting with you?

KOOYERS: It seems to me, now that you mention it, that there were some French. I can't remember exactly. Maybe it was in England, so don't quote me on it.

JOHNSON: How did you get along with the Australians and the Canadians?

KOOYERS: Oh, very well. Of course we were stuck in Russia together, so we didn't have any choice.

JOHNSON: Did the British direction of the expedition affect the morale of the troops?

KOOYERS: Yes. We didn't like to be ordered around by the British, but we still fought. We were patriotic, you see.

JOHNSON: Did you feel as though you were still fighting for America?

KOOYERS: Oh yes.
JOHNSON: What kind of Bolshevik propaganda did you encounter in Archangel?

KOOPYERS: Well, I remember once on the Emsta River the Bolsheviks came over and wanted us to join their side and said that if we came over, they'd take us to Moscow and we'd like it...One time they came over and asked if anyone knew a prisoner by the name of George Albers. Well, I knew George—he was from my home town. So I asked my officer, and I got to talk to him alone. He told me that he was treated very well—that he was allowed to walk around Moscow, and all he had to do was report in at dark. Otherwise, he could do as he pleased.

LENNING: Did you talk to Albers after he had returned to the States?

KOOPYERS: Yes, I did. We were in the Polar Bear Post for a number of years.

LENNING: Did he say the same thing then? It was the truth?

KOOPYERS: Yes. But I believed him at the time.

JOHNSON: Had the British or other officers told you how the Bolsheviks would treat their prisoners?

KOOPYERS: No. They never told you nothing.

JOHNSON: How were the Bolshevik prisoners treated at the front?

KOOPYERS: We treated them well. Sure.

JOHNSON: What happened to them?
KOOYERS: Well, we turned them over to the British, and I don't know what happened to them after that. I think they were taken somewhere and locked up.

JOHNSON: Did you ever witness any atrocities by either the Allies or the Bolsheviks?

KOOYERS: No, never.

JOHNSON: Did you ever receive any letters from home mentioning the news reports about the expedition?

KOOYERS: Well, I got some letters, but most just wanted to know when I was coming home. They told me that they were lobbying in Washington to try to get us sent home, but that there was nothing they could do.

JOHNSON: Was your mail ever censored for content?

KOOYERS: I don't know if anyone ever opened my mail. But I never complained about anything. I told them about the conditions and what I was doing, but I never complained.

LENNING: What do you remember from the Battle of Bolshie Ozerki in March of 1919?

KOOYERS: (pause) I remember that. We drove them out of Bolshie Ozerki. They were established there, and we wanted to get them out. That was only one day fighting, and then it wasn't very long, and then we stayed there for quite a while and took that place over.
LENNING: You were also on the railroad front?

KOYERS: Oh, yes. I was on Versts 466, 458, 455, 448, 447, 466—they must have pushed us back a few, I guess, by the looks of it. Yes, we'd fight up and down the old railroad for a mile.

LENNING: How did conditions at the railroad front compare with those at Kodish?

KOYERS: Kodish was the worst of them all. That's why if you read the book it says "Mournful Kodish". It was rough. That was a rough deal. That was the worst part of the Russian expedition, the Battle of Kodish.

LENNING: Can you think of any particular reasons why it was easier on the railroad front? Was it because the railroad made supplies more available?

KOYERS: That could have been a possibility, because when we were at Seletskoe, at that front, we were miles from any railroad. That was all walk. We walked and walked to get in there. Kodish had one little shack that you could crawl into, if you could get back in town once in a while for relief. They wanted to keep that road because if we got that, then we could go right straight on through to the railroad. And that's what they didn't want us to do. We lost quite a few men at Kodish.

LENNING: After you held the Kodish front for weeks, in mid-January your company went back to Archangel. At that time, you were relieved by the "King's Liverpools" and "Dyer's Battalion"—White Russians. Right after they replaced you, they retreated
back to the Emsta River line, and gave up Kodish.

KOOYERS: Yes, the Russians didn't like them! We'd go out and wave at the Bolsheviks. We'd go out on patrol and meet them on the road and holler at them, and we'd wave at them. But the minute the Englishmen came in there, they just pushed them right back and kicked them out—they didn't like them. They knew we were under English rule; they knew us Americans didn't want to be there. But the minute the English came up there: "We'll bloody well take care of them!" But the Bolsheviks took good care of the English, I can tell you that. We used to tell them, "Now you'd better go up and wave at them if you want to get along." "Oh yeah?" they said. "We'll wave at them. We'll give them a couple of rounds." We said, "You just go ahead; they'll bury you here." I guess they buried a few, too.

LENNING: Did you have contact with the other battlefronts?

KOOYERS: They had other ones. They had the Pinega front, but that's something I never went to. We were sent back to Bolshie Ozerki again in May of 1919.

LENNING: When you were at Kodish, did you know where the other companies were?

KOOYERS: No, we didn't know. We had no idea. We were just on the road fighting. We didn't know where the companies were—a strange country, and we didn't know nothing. We just done what we were told.

LENNING: So for all you knew, they could have been a few miles
away?

KOOYERS: We would have heard that.

LENNING: Was the average soldier recognized by the higher command for his bravery in action? Did many in your company receive medals for bravery?

KOOYERS: Not too many. But the officers all recognized us; they was out there with us. That's all the protection they had was our good will, and we needed them.

LENNING: When did you first find out you were leaving that spring?

KOOYERS: We found out when they moved us down to what they call Economie, Russia. We used to play baseball until eleven o'clock at night, and it might get dark till twelve o'clock, and you'd just start all over again. When we were on the Kodish front, it got dark at three o'clock in the afternoon, and it didn't get daylight until nine or ten o'clock in the morning. So you didn't have what we know as daylight; it was all darkness.

LENNING: When you found out all the American troops were withdrawing, how did you feel?

KOOYERS: Well, we were all grumpy. After all, the war was over, and we didn't see why we had to be there. They used to pacify us by, like I say, one time they took us out on the ice and drilled us. We learned to shut up because what are you going to do? You can't get out. When we come out of there in June, we had two ice crushers to break the ice on the White Sea to get out into
the ocean to get home. So how are you going to get out?

LENNING: What did the men say about leaving without the war in Russia being "finished"?

KOOYERS: Just glad to get home.

LENNING: Earlier you mentioned that you had the option whether to go or not. Did you ever regret your decision to go?

KOOYERS: No.

LENNING: Looking back, what is your understanding of the purpose of the American troops' presence in North Russia?

KOOYERS: We were never given any idea. When we got in England, all of a sudden the only reason why we went to Russia was you had so many Poles and Slavs who could talk the Russian language. That's why our outfit was picked to go to Russia. We had no idea. We were supposed to go to France.

LENNING: Did you ever discover the purpose of the expedition?

KOOYERS: No. Just like I say, through the grapevine, they told us were were there to stop the Germans from going across the country loading their submarines. Now, I don't know. It sounds feasible to me, 'cause we had no reason to fight Russia. It was their war and we had no right to be there.

LENNING: In other words, did you perhaps feel that the American troops were only interfering?

KOOYERS: I think mostly out attitude as we fought there--we had
no reason to be there. We knew that, and we couldn't get out.

LENNING: Upon your return to the States, what kind of reception did you have?

KOYERS: We ended up in Detroit on the Fourth of July. It was so hot, and we had to parade, and then we had to stand at attention, and the boys kept falling down from the heat. So it wasn't a very nice welcome, coming home, to parade in Detroit for the Fourth of July.

LENNING: Did you find that people had heard of the troops in Russia?

KOYERS: Well, about half the people did. And the only thing we ever found out about it was when you talk about it now, that it's a unique experience. Just like now—you go anywhere and tell them you're a Polar Bear and "My!" And if you tell them you belong to the V.F.W., they'll go "Oh yeah?" And the Polar Bears belong to the V.F.W! But they think you're different 'cause you're Polar Bears. (laughter) It's a kind of a magic word, Polar Bears.

LENNING: So some knew you'd been to Russia and others didn't?

KOYERS: Well, there was so much write-up in the paper about us, see, 'cause a lot of people'd write up "When are you going to get those boys out of Russia?" In fact, it was even in the Congressional Record. It was up before Congress to get us out of there.

LENNING: Several accounts, including Joel Moore's book, which
we've both read, claim that the British used the Americans for their own purposes—that they placed excessive hardships on them in order to pressure Washington to send more troops over. What is your opinion of this claim?

KOYERS: Well, there's no question I think the British used us, 'cause they were all officers. They didn't have troops. They were mostly all officers and non-commissioned officers. We had our own officers, but we were under the high command of the British. We knew that. That was one resentment we had.

LENNING: Were you aware of the fact that the American troops were sent over on the condition that they wouldn't get involved in the internal war in Russia?

KOYERS: No.

LENNING: Did you find that out at any time while you were over there?

KOYERS: No. But that will back up my theory about the U-boat deal—supplies. Now that you mention it, that more or less backs up what I was saying, why we were there.

LENNING: Did your experience in Russia affect your outlook on life at all? And if so, how?

KOYERS: No, I wouldn't say it was the war. I think it's my personalized idea. I've never hated anybody in this world. I've always loved life; I don't carry a whip. I was taught that way at home: to never hate anybody.
LENNING: So how did you feel when told you had to fight?

KOYERS: Went out there and fight. Of course, when you're young, you're kind of interested in pulling that little machine gun trigger. (laughter) Probably never aimed it at anybody, but . . . (laughter)

LENNING: Is there anything else you can think of that we haven't question you about, any highlights that you would like to add?

KOYERS: I don't know what it would be?

LENNING: How about holidays? Thanksgiving and Christmas--what were they like?

KOYERS: It seems to me--I could be all wrong--but they had a lot of wild turkeys in Russia. You wouldn't believe it, 'way up there in that frozen country. I think I had turkey for Thanksgiving, but I think we shot our own. I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure of that.

LENNING: How about the Red Cross and the Y.M.C.A.? Did you ever have any dealing with them?

KOYERS: Very intense in Russia. This is one that always stuck out in my crop. The Y.M.C.A. came into Archangel and into Kodish when we were there and built a little log cabin. And we were going to have supplies. I was never paid in Russia until I came home. We never got a dime while in the army. And what are you going to pay with? [The Y.M.C.A. people would say,] "Well, I don't know about that." So two night later it burnt down. And
the Salvation Army came in and put one up. We asked them the same thing, "We haven't got no money." The Salvation Army [would say], "Have what you want." They're different organizations. That's why today if the Salvation Army walk in, I always donate. They come in here. (pause) Those are the memories I have.

LENNING: Thank you very much.
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