

An Interview with 1st Lieutenant Frederick J. Kraics who fought in the Italian Campaign during WW II

Introduction

During World War II, Winston Churchill called Italy the “soft underbelly of Europe”. Therefore, it was chosen as the first place the United States and England chose to directly attack the Axis Powers in Europe. The Allies invaded Sicily and then landed at Salerno on the Italian mainland. From there they fought their way up the Italian Peninsula for the next year and a half until they reached the Brenner Pass in the Alpine mountains bordering Germany.

That strategy accomplished two things. It eliminated much of the Italian Army when Italy formally surrendered in September of 1943. But more importantly, and what most people do not realize is that 25 German Divisions were diverted from other fronts and used to defend Italy. Imagine what 25 more divisions could have done to stop the Normandy Invasion or change the outcome of the battles in Russia?

Frederick J. Kraics was a 1st Lieutenant from the 88th Blue Devil Division. He was in charge of a 36 man machine gun platoon during that long fight up the Italian peninsula to the alpine mountains bordering Germany. This is his story.

Where were you born and raised?

My father and mother were both born in a Hungarian village called Bardhaza. They emigrated separately to America in 1905, met in Greenpoint, Brooklyn and married in 1909. I was born on October 14, 1921 in Brooklyn but grew up in a small Long Island town in New York State called Ronkonkoma. The name Ronkonkoma meant “boundary fishing place” in the Algonquin Indian language. It was Long Island’s largest fresh water lake. I was the youngest of 5 children in our family. My parents had two girls and three boys.



*May 1942, Front Row Seated – Mary and Fritz Kraics
Back Row – Elizabeth, Michael, Mary, Matthew and Frederick Kraics*

I had to leave high school in my junior year to help my family pay bills during the depression. After working in a low paying job making pocket books for \$6 a week, I eventually landed a better paying job working for Grumman Aircraft at \$20 dollars a week. Grumman was expanding its capacity for making airplanes and needed good help.

How did you get into the army?

Joe Kirk was an official at the local draft board and a family friend. In the spring of 1942, Joe approached my father with a question. He told him that he would need to draft one of his boys. Which one should he take? Since I was the only boy not married, my father chose me to be drafted first.

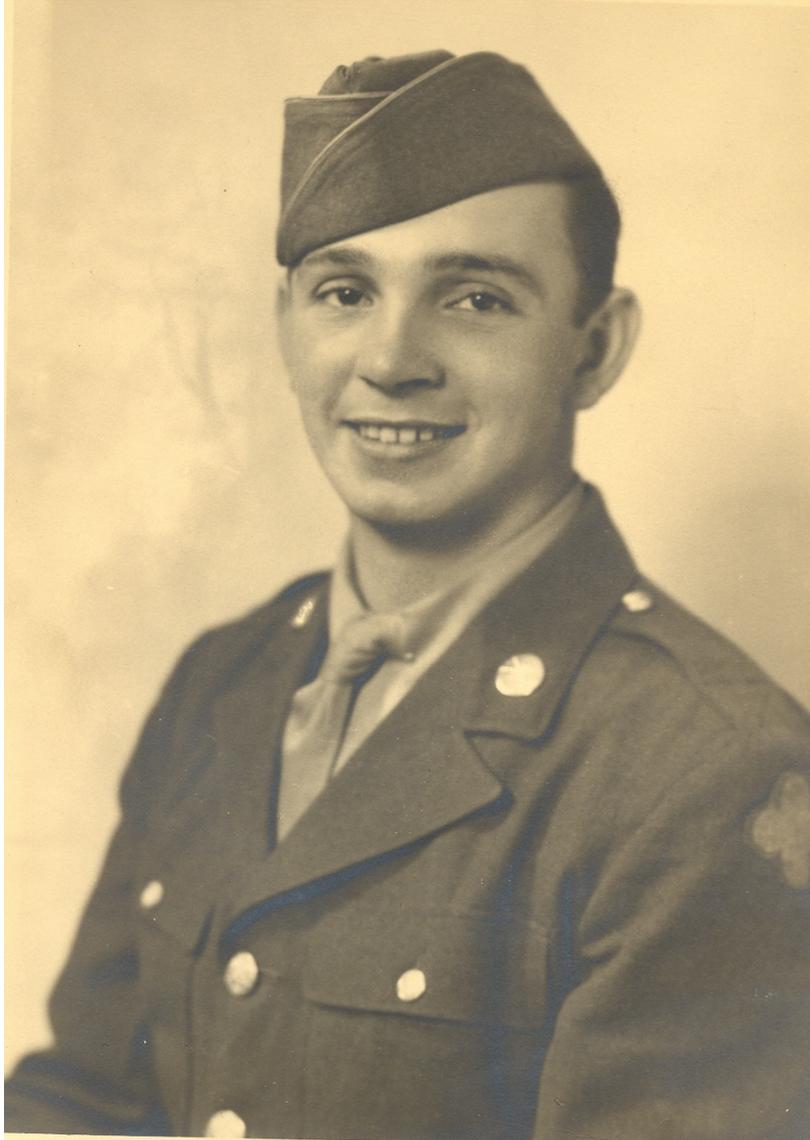


Frederick J. Kraics, May 1942, just before being drafted

In June, 1942 I got my draft notice. On July 20, 1942 I reported to Fort Jay on Governor's Island in New York City for a physical. After passing that physical I was inducted into the Enlisted Reserve Corp of the Army that same day and was sent to Camp Upton in Brookhaven, Long Island, New York.

At Camp Upton we were given a series of tests to see if we had certain aptitudes. The Army used these tests to determine where to place each recruit. After testing was completed, we were shipped to an army post in the Cookson Hills of Oklahoma. We traveled by train from Camp Upton via the great lakes all the way to newly created Fort Gruber.

I was assigned to H Company in the 2nd Battalion of the 351st Regiment in the 88th Division. We were the first all draftee division in the Army. I had an aptitude for mechanics having worked at Grumman Aircraft, so they assigned me to a heavy weapons company as a machine gunner and sent me off to basic training.



*Private Kraics at Camp Gruber in 1942
Notice the 88th Division Cloverleaf shoulder patch*

What was army camp life like at Fort Gruber?

Discipline and conditioning were the first order of business at Fort Gruber. One of my first encounters with discipline was learned the hard way. One day three of us started to talk back to a Sergeant while we were standing at attention. The Sergeant reported us to the officer in charge and he promptly cured us of our discipline problem.

The officer made us dig a hole 6 foot wide by 6 foot long and 6 foot deep using small army shovels issued during World War II. It took all day to dig this large hole in the hard-pan dirt of Oklahoma. When we were finished, the officer lit up a cigarette, smoked it, flicked the butt into the hole and told us to cover it up. We learned our lesson in discipline the hard way that day and learned to keep quiet while in ranks after that.

Our training included becoming proficient in handling and maintaining all forms of weapons in our company. We were trained in the use of rifles, machine guns and mortars.



A Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) is being held in the left hand picture and an M-1 Garand Rifle on the ground in the right hand picture

The most complicated of the weapons we learned to use was the machine gun. We were given old World War One Browning 30 caliber water-cooled machine guns for training purposes. The first time we began to field strip a machine gun we had to clean cosmoline from each part of the gun. Cosmoline was used as a protective coating to prevent the guns metal parts from rusting.

After a while I could take apart a machine gun and put it back together without even looking. To further test us, they made each machine gunner take apart and put back together a machine gun blindfolded. They also made us do it at night to simulate wartime conditions.

Only two of us were able to take our machine-guns apart without seeing and correctly identify each piece of the gun. Because of that accomplishment I was promoted to Corporal in January 1943.



This is what a Browning 30 caliber water cooled machine-gun looked like

After Camp Gruber where did you go?

I went on extended maneuvers near Shreveport, Louisiana from June 28th until August 22nd, 1943. The last big test was a forced march of 42 miles in 60 hours. I made it and was now physically ready to be sent to war. I thought I was going to be assigned to the Pacific theater after training in the swamps of Louisiana.



The "Chow Line" - Army food served outdoors



What camp life really looked like when everyone got up in the morning.

However, after the Louisiana maneuvers I was assigned in August 1943 to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio Texas for further training. In October 1943 my division was sent to Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia and each of us was given a 10-day furlough before being shipped overseas. I used this time to visit my family and get married to my sweetheart back home, Helen McMahon.



October 16, 1943 wedding picture. We only had a two day honeymoon at the Patchogue Hotel because it took so long by train to get there and back to camp.

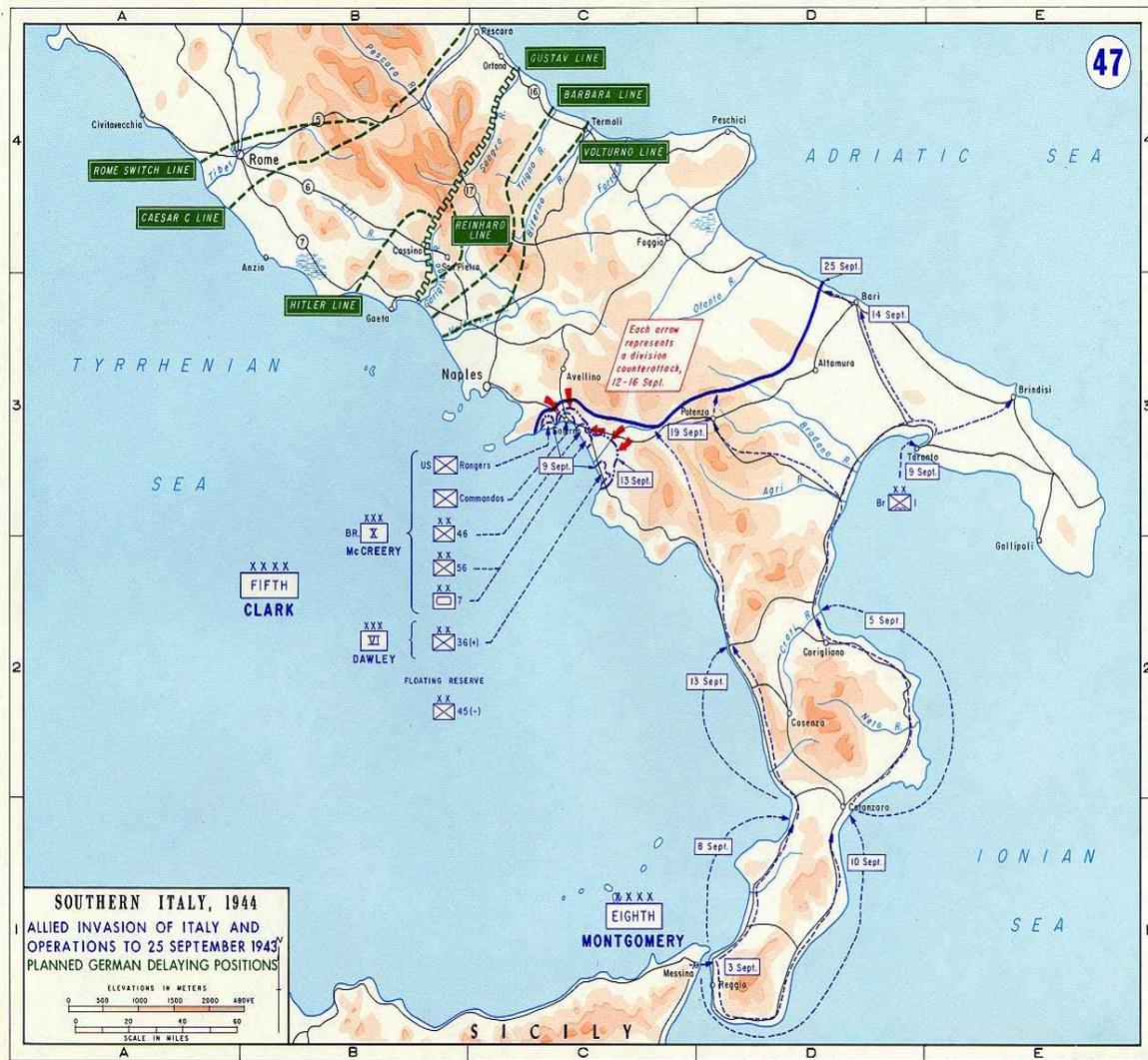
At the end of my furlough I returned to camp. It was around this time that I was promoted to Sergeant. On November 12, 1943 at Newport News, near Norfolk Virginia I embarked on a liberty ship. It was headed to North Africa. I was relieved that I was not going to be sent to the Pacific as I originally thought. My ship joined a convoy and as we crossed the ocean we encountered rough weather which made me appreciate dry land even better.

There were over 200 ships in the convoy. Liberty Ships were converted to troop transports and were packed with 600 soldiers in each ship. Sleeping arrangements stacked soldiers as many as 5 high inside the ship. It was rumored that only 2 ships were lost from that convoy. I was told that the ships lost were only supply ships sailing at the back of the convoy and did not contain any troops. The official Army records only reported that we did not lose any soldiers to enemy activity. So I never knew if the rumor of supply ship sinkings was really true or just a rumor.

On December 4, 1943 I landed at the city of Oran in Algeria and was assigned to the 2nd Corps of the Fifth Army commanded by Mark Clark. For the next few months I received army and special ranger training in the Sahara Desert and Atlas mountains. Then, on February 2, 1944 I embarked on a British ship and was transported to Naples, Italy. From Naples I marched to Minturno in the Liri Valley. Our battalion was then sent to the Cassino battlefield on the northern end of the American sector of the Gustav Line while the rest of the 88th Division remained closer to the coast.

What was it like fighting in Italy?

The Germans were always fighting on the defensive behind fixed fortifications. Their leader, Field Marshall Albert Kesserling was a defensive specialist who maximized the advantages of fighting on the defensive in Italy's mountainous terrain. The Germans constructed bands of heavily fortified defensive lines across Italy to stop the allies from advancing up the Italian Peninsula. Attacking and penetrating these lines was very difficult and very bloody.



In southern Italy multiple defensive lines blocked the Allies. They had to fight through the Volturmo, Barbara, Reinhard, Gustav, Hitler, Caesar and Rome Switch lines.