

Walter Kreamer
Black Mountain, NC
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Interviewed by Reid Chapman

Walter Kreamer was born on March 5, 1916 in Beloit, Wisconsin. As a boy scout, he was exposed to a naval officer in the form of his scoutmaster. This gentleman encouraged you Walter to enroll in the Naval Academy, and with help from a congressman seeking appointees, gained admittance. He graduated from the Naval Academy in 1938, which he described as "a wonderful place," though he added, "a plebe had a hard time." He took a degree in electrical engineering.

Early in his career he cruised the Pacific aboard the USS Cincinnati seeing sights that would later be headlines: Pearl Harbor, Guam and the Philippines. He married Martha Reading, a Black Mountain woman in 1940 and lived there off and on over the years. Martha was a clerk in the Department of Justice in Washington, DC from 1938-1950.

In 1940 the Cincinnati was in Trinidad replenishing their food and fuel. Kreamer was at the time the ship's communications officer. He got notice of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. "I reported this to the captain and he gave a fighting speech." His reaction was one of surprise and "I knew we had a long war ahead." The crew of the Cincinnati immediately set to "scraping paint" in preparation for war, though the ship never saw action because it was "too old and too slow." He returned to Annapolis, MD where he enrolled in post graduate school studying communications.

In late 1943 he was assigned as a communications officer to the USS Franklin, an aircraft carrier that was given the unlucky number 13. He sailed from Hawaii to Iwo Jima, where "every new aircraft carrier was sent to bomb." At that point in time the Japanese still had a powerful air force, and he experienced what he described as "a baptism by fire."

In October of 1944 MacArthur was landing troops on Iwo Jima. The USS Franklin was hit by a kamikaze, killing 55 people. The bridge had been the target, but instead the plane struck the bomb elevator. This gave Kreamer the opportunity to return to his wife in Black Mountain for the Christmas of 1944, one that stands out in his memory as "a joyous Christmas." After repairs and picking up 500 new sailors in San Francisco, the Franklin returned to the Pacific, where they joined Admiral Halsey's fleet stationed 90 miles off the coast of Japan, attacking Okinawa and preparing for a raid. While there they destroyed the dry-docks at Kobe and met torpedo planes and fighters on a regular basis.

The morning of March 19, 1945 the Franklin suffered an air strike. One Japanese bomber landed two deadly hits, one on the fore deck and one on the flight deck. Because the crew had been arming aircraft that morning the gas lines were open, resulting in a "tremendous fire." At the time, Kreamer and several other officers were at breakfast. "The first thing we did was to wet napkins and put them over our faces and got under the tables. After about a minute we thought: 'This is ridiculous. What are we doing hiding

out." On the way to the bridge he was hit by blasts of flame. When he arrived at the flight deck he found 100 men "frozen stiff—this was the first time they saw action." He found a radio, and raised a transmitter, in an attempt to call for help. Because he held the transmitter in the air, he wasn't able to take cover and was strafed. He points out, "They missed me, fortunately." That night the Japanese sent 40 bombers to finish off the Franklin. Planes from other carriers, in part responding to Kreamer's radio transmissions, shot them down. For his actions on that day, Walter H. Kreamer was awarded the Navy Cross.

After the war he served on Eisenhower's staff in Paris from 1951-54. He described Eisenhower as "wonderful to work with," adding that he "shook everyone's hand and called everyone by first name." He then returned to the Pentagon as a communications specialist and worked in the cryptologic field. From 1957-59 he was stationed in Japan, before returning to the Pentagon, Spain, and Gibraltar. After retiring from the service he became a business manager at Warren Wilson College in Swananoa, NC.

Walter Kreamer died at the age of 87 on 23 September 2003, five months after this interview.