

Oral History Interview

With

FLOYD T. RICKETTS

Private in Battery D, 129th Field Artillery Regiment in World War I, under the command of Capt. Harry S. Truman.

Rancho Santa Fe, California

March 24, 1970

by James R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library

Independence, Missouri

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FUCHS: Mr. Ricketts, would you begin by giving a brief sketch of your background, when and where you were born, and maybe something about your education and jobs you held up until the time you entered the service?

RICKETTS: Well, I was born June 1, 1896 in Clay County near Kansas City, Missouri but spent most of my life in Kansas City up until the time I came to California in 1919. I went to the public schools in Kansas City and did some work in the City; worked for a

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printing company. With the advent of the war in 1917 I, along with a number of the other neighborhood boys with whom I was raised and grew up with as little children, joined Battery D. We were from the vicinity of 22nd and Prospect.

After the war ended, because of sickness of my brother, we moved to California, Los Angeles in 1919, and I've been living in California ever since. I worked for the Santa Fe Railroad in the personnel branch of the service and for one of the railroad unions for 45 years. I've been retired ten years and my wife and I built this home here in Rancho Santa Fe thirteen years ago and we're enjoying our retirement years here very much.

FUCHS: Did you belong to the National Guard before the war?

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RICKETTS: No. It was just that one of the boys in the neighborhood joined the Battery and then he persuaded the rest of his schoolboy friends to join with him; and there was, in my neighborhood, about fifteen that joined Battery D. We started our training there at the old Convention Hall in Kansas City, until we left for Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, where we had preliminary training, artillery school, and so forth before we left for France.

FUCHS: There were a lot of Irish boys in that outfit, I understand.

RICKETTS: About 60 percent were Irish boys. There was the O'Hares and the Schmidts and the Murphys. Tommy [Thomas E.] Murphy, I guess someone had told you, was the amateur light-weight champion of the U.S.A. in 1917; most of the young fellows were athletes of some kind. I was a semi-pro ballplayer around

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Kansas City, and there were fighters, and football players, and basketball players; and so, the Battery was pretty much all made up of athletes of one sort or another.

FUCHS: Who enlisted you in the Battery?

RICKETTS: I think Bill [William A.] O'Hare, an old buddy that I went to school with and grew up with and played baseball with.

FUCHS: What was his rank?

RICKETTS: I think he was a corporal when we were at the Convention Hall.

FUCHS: Do you have any recollections of Camp Doniphan or Mr. Truman?

RICKETTS: Well, now my only recollection of Camp Doniphan was that when we got down there -- in November I think it was -- it turned cold and it was the coldest winter they ever

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experienced in the Midwest. We were in what were actually tents, and we had what they called, Sibley stoves. We kept that thing going red hot all night long. March came along, then the dust and the winds began to have their day and my recollections of Ft. Sill was pretty rough training.

FUCHS: Did you see Captain Truman there? He was then a lieutenant, of course.

RICKETTS: He was then a lieutenant, and he and Lieutenant [Edward] Jacobson had charge of the regimental canteen; and we would see them around the canteen of course. But I didn't get acquainted with Truman until he was made captain of the Battery in France.

FUCHS: What were your impressions of the canteen?

RICKETTS: The canteen was well-run and it was a

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godsend for us to go and get something different than the usual mess hall meals. We could at least get snacks and candies and so forth.

FUCHS: Did you go over with the advanced detail as Mr. Truman did?

RICKETTS: No, I didn't go with the advanced detail. I was a cannoneer. The advanced detail left about six, eight weeks before we did. Their purpose, I guess, was to get things lined up for equipping the Battery with horses and artillery pieces when we got there.

FUCHS: Battery D had a succession of captains. Who were they, and what do you recall of them? Perhaps you could say something of why they didn't stay with Battery D?

RICKETTS: Well, Battery D, as I say, was made up of a group of young fellows that had a lot of vim and vigor and had to be on the move

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and doing things at all times; and I might say that they were a little bit unruly. The succession of three or four captains we had, for some reason or other, couldn't get along, or do the job with the Battery. When we arrived in France -- and I think we were at Camp Coetquidan at the time -- Truman was appointed to take over the Battery.

Our first impression of Truman was when he appeared before the Battery; he gave the impression of a professor more than he did an artillery officer. He had those thick glasses and the first words that I think he spoke to the Battery were, "Now men," and then he went on to tell us just what he expected of us, and what he would try to do for us. I would say that when he took over the Battery the first thing I recall, was that we had better mess. We found also that he was much interested personally in each individual

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and any of their problems; and he would talk to them.

On the other hand, we found, too, that he was a pretty strict disciplinarian. If we got out of line too far he would take what steps were necessary to put you back in line. But he, we think, was a great artillery officer, and it was demonstrated at the front later on when we got into actual action that he was a good artillery officer and very proficient in directing the fire of the Battery. He did, we think, a marvelous job.

I remember one instance while we were at the front. We were in position in an old orchard and we had set our guns and fired a few salvos into the German lines. Then we were set to protect the infantry against a counterattack that evening. Then a German airplane came over, flying at low altitude; and the pilot sprayed the Battery position

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with his machine gun, but fortunately, no one was hit. After he was out of sight, Truman ordered the Battery to abandon that position and move back about a quarter of a mile near a crossroads. I remember it was between the little village of Cheppy and Varennes; and we went into position there and set up our guns.

And that night, about midnight, the orchard which we had formerly occupied was heavily shelled. I think that Truman realized that that airplane had probably notified the German artillery of our position. They, of course, knew the locale and so forth, and they just gave that location the business. I think that act on the part of Truman in moving our location probably saved a lot of lives.

FUCHS: What about the Battle of Who Run?

RICKETTS: Well, the Battle of Who Run was a rather

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comical experience. It was our first taste of war. We were in position up in the Vosges Mountains near Kruth. I think it was more or less a training exercise for the infantry, going over the top and into the German lines and perhaps taking a few prisoners. After we fired our barrages, Truman ordered the Battery to leave that spot and return to our echelon at Kruth. Half of the Battery had moved out and was on the road ready to move. I was with the first section on the road when the Germans opened up with counterfire on the position we had just left.

There was a gas alarm and little Johnny [John J.] Higginbotham -- he was my little number three boy on the gun squad -- and myself were supposed to put the gas masks on the horses. He was only about four feet eight inches tall and I was over six feet; we got out the gas masks and did our best to get

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these masks on the horses. I think we got them on a couple of them and then we gave up. Our gun section then moved out; we weren't down where the action was, so to speak -- where the shells were falling at that time -- and for some reason we couldn't move the two remaining guns.

FUCHS: The horses came out all right?

RICKETTS: Oh, yes, no one got hurt. But it was our first experience at being under fire and I don't know whether anyone really ran or not. I didn't see anyone running. But that was the name they gave the battle, "the Battle of Who Ran." It was quite a joke in the Battery afterwards.

FUCHS: Mr. Truman relates an incident where he was on a road and a battery of French fired over his head from where they were up above

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this road? Do you recall this? Was that something that was related just to him or to the entire Battery?

RICKETTS: I think that was on the way back from the Battle of Who Ran. It was dark and we had gone about a mile and a half and all at once to our left a French battery of 75s opened up. We didn't know they were there or anywhere near, and we didn't know what had happened. That was quite a show, those guns going off almost right in your face.

FUCHS: What kind of an officer was Colonel Karl Klemm, Captain Truman's superior?

RICKETTS: I wasn't really acquainted with Colonel Klemm. I understand he was a West Point officer, and he was the colonel when we went to Camp Doniphan; but I was a private first class, and I had no contact with the commander

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of the regiment.

FUCHS: Do you recall any other incidents over there related to Mr. Truman?

RICKETTS: Well, I've said that Truman was very conscious of the well-being of the men under his command. I remember one time we had gotten some bad water. It was just shortly after the Argonne offensive, and we all had developed severe diarrhea and we were in pretty bad shape. I don't know where Truman got the idea, but he bought, we think out of his own pocket, a case of chocolate, cocoa, and issued that to us thinking maybe that would help to tighten us up a little bit. The cooks had it and issued it to us anytime we wanted it, but it didn't seem to help at all. The diarrhea was, we found out later, caused by bad water.

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FUCHS: You related to me earlier an incident about Colonel Klemm ordering a little punishment for you. Would you retell that story now?

RICKETTS: We had been in initial training down in the Vosges Mountains. From there we were moved in support of the St. Mihiel offensive. To get there it amounted to about fifteen nights of forced marching. The weather was bad, rainy, and we would sleep in the daytime in thickets or in woods and then take off at dusk and march all night long. The next morning, of course, we would bivouac in another woods or forest. After about a week or ten days most of us were pretty well exhausted and that also went for the horses of the regiment. The horses were in bad shape. Every night it seemed we would lose one or two horses. They would just drop by the road exhausted and would have to be destroyed. And there

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was an order out that we cannoneers who were walking and following the guns were not to hold onto any part of the gun or the caissons so as not to put any more burden on the horses. But walking along almost dead on your feet, you could hardly resist grabbing ahold of the caisson to help you along.

I remember this one night, several of the boys were holding onto the caisson and Colonel Klemm rode by and noticed it and was quite upset, and, I was told later, he had asked Captain Truman to take us out of line away from the caissons, take us up ahead of the Battery and give us a little double-timing as punishment. I also understand that Truman refused to do it, told the colonel that the men were in very bad shape. We think that was a pretty fine act on the part of Truman not to do it.

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FUCHS: I have heard several stories that Mr. Truman took the side of the men when he felt that an order was unjust. Do you know if he ever came under any sort of censure from his superior officers for not, in a sense, obeying an order from them?

RICKETTS: Not that I ever heard of.

I had a funny experience. It's funny to me, but it wasn't funny at the time. I was the number one man on the gun squad, and my job was to pull the lanyard and fire the gun. I also assisted the sergeant in setting the quadrant for the different elevations for barrages and so forth. After the war was over we moved back into a little village named Rosières, it was near Bar-le-duc. We still had the guns and our job was to keep them clean and greased. They belonged, however, to the French Government and as I understand it were on lease to the

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United States Government.

While we were at Rosières, orders came to turn the guns back to the French Government, and we took them down to the railhead nearby and turned them in. Well, before we turned the guns in there were several things on that gun I thought might be pretty good souvenirs to take home and one was the lanyard, that was a little wooden knob and cord that you pulled to fire the gun; so, I took that off of the gun. Then I thought, "Well, I'll take the firing pin," and I took the firing pin off, and that led to another piece. So, before I got through I had a bag full of parts off of this gun, and I kept them under the straw tick that was my mattress. Several weeks after we turned the

guns in, apparently the French Government questioned our act and wanted these parts returned. I suppose some of the other fellows had taken souvenirs also.

So, one evening Captain Truman asked us if we had any of these parts and to turn them in. Well, there was complete silence and none was turned in.

About a week went by and one morning after reveille we stood formation and instead of releasing us for the day, they gave us squads right and took us up on a little hill nearby; and they marched us back and forth for about an hour or two and finally back to the village. Well, it so happened my sergeant, Sergeant [Edward P.] Meisburger, was the sergeant of the day, and the story I get from Sergeant Meisburger was that Captain Truman made the rounds of the different billets and when it came to mattresses, all mattresses had to be turned over and looked under; and when they came to mine, why, here was this little bag, and Captain Truman asked Sergeant Meisburger, "What is that?"

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He said, "Well, that's just a few souvenirs that I think Private Ricketts has collected to be taken home."

Truman then said, "Dump it out." So Sergeant Meisburger had to open the sack and dump it out. The first thing Truman said, "My god, he's got everything but the barrel."

But, I'll tell you this, nothing was ever said to me, I wasn't disciplined. I just lost my souvenirs and I've always regretted it. Many years later I asked Truman about that and he said, "Well, you just don't know how much hell I caught from headquarters about those parts being missing." He said, "I would have liked to have had you take them home with you, but I was under orders to find those parts and get them back to the French Government or else."

FUCHS: You practically field-stripped the gun.

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RICKETTS: Yes. There is another little story that concerns myself. It's a story that whenever and wherever I met President Truman later on he always told those present about me. It had to do with the start of the Argonne offensive.

We were in position and the offensive was to start at 4 or 5 a.m. The night before, my sergeant, Sergeant Meisburger, along with the other gunnery sergeants, went to Truman's tent and were given the fixing data for the offensive; that is the barrages; so many rounds at a certain elevation or distance and then so many rounds at another elevation and distance. This was all written down on what they called a firing data sheet. It was just simply a piece of paper about 6 by 8 inches that the sergeant would use once the firing started.

So, we were all set and I think it was at 4 in the morning the guns were to open up.

We had our guns set for the initial barrage. The sergeant had a flashlight and he was watching the stopwatch. We were to fire the first gun in the Battery to start it off. Just about thirty seconds

before the barrage was to start I became conscious of the fact that I hadn't put any cotton in my ears to guard against a concussion and ear damage. Well, it was dark and there was no light showing, but I did see this piece of white paper. So, I grabbed this piece of paper and tore it in two and stuffed one piece in each ear. And then came time to fire the guns. We had the guns set for the first series of fire and after fifteen or twenty rounds of that series we were to change the elevation of the gun and fire another series of rounds. The sergeant flashed his flashlight on and said, "Where's my firing data?"

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Well, we got down under the caisson, and we searched and searched, and the flashlight battery went out and we couldn't find it. And then appeared above us the first sergeant, Sergeant [Paul T.] Sieben, and he said, "What the hell is wrong with this gun?"

"Well," Eddie says, "I can't find my firing data."

Just about that time I realized that, my god, I had put it in my ears. I pulled this paper out of my ears and I said, "Well, is this it?" It was it, of course, and we put the paper back together and somebody brought another flashlight. We resumed firing, but we lost a little time there on some scheduled firing. But that's the story that Truman tells about me. Every time I see him he always tells those present this story.

FUCHS: What about after the Armistice when you

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wanted to go on leave?

RICKETTS: Oh. The war had ended and we were back in this little village of Rosières I spoke of a minute ago, and the word came out that any of us that wanted to take a furlough could do so. Well, I didn't have any money and very few of the fellows in the Battery did have, except the rich sergeants. So, I went up and asked Truman, the Captain, if I could borrow two hundred francs until I could get some money from home. He was very nice to me and explained to me that he just didn't have it to lend, that he had lent all of the money that he did have to others that had come before me. He was very nice about it and I'm sure if he had had it he would have let me have it.

FUCHS: Did you return on the *Zeppelin*?

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RICKETTS: Yes, we returned on the S.S. *Zeppelin*, that was a former German ship; a beautiful little ship. I remember we had some German engineers that accompanied the ship because they were familiar with the ship and the Americans were not. It was as I say a beautiful ship. However it did stall somewhere in the mid-Atlantic for about six, eight hours before it could get underway again.

FUCHS: Do you recall seeing Captain Truman on the ship?

RICKETTS: Yes, he was there, he was along.

FUCHS: Did anything happen of interest?

RICKETTS: No, about all we did on the ship coming home was just lay around and eat and play poker and try to keep from getting seasick. That's about all that I remember about that trip.

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FUCHS: I understand Colonel Klemm was already in civilian clothes by the time the outfit got back to Kansas City. I wonder why that was?

RICKETTS: I don't know. I wouldn't know about that. After I got back to Kansas City I spent some time out of the city before I left for California, which was in, I think, November 1919. I did see Truman several times, but it was just to say hello.

FUCHS: You didn't go to his wedding?

RICKETTS: No, I didn't go to the wedding.

FUCHS: Did you get an invitation to that?

RICKETTS: No. That was when?

FUCHS: June, 1919.

RICKETTS: No, I didn't go to the wedding.

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FUCHS: I was wondering if he had sent invitations to all of the members of the Battery?

RICKETTS: I don't believe so.

FUCHS: When did you next see him?

RICKETTS: Well, when Truman became Senator and he was in charge of the investigation committee, he came to California on several occasions. He called those of us in Los Angeles, Don [Donald L.] Milton, Charlie [Charles L.] Burdge, and Johnny Curto, and we would all get together. He was out twice, I remember. We met at one time at Charlie Burdge's home, and another time at my home. That was when he was Senator.

Then later I saw him in St. Louis. He appeared before the national convention of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks and gave an address. I was a delegate to that convention and escorted him to and from the convention.

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I did see him when I went to Kansas City for several of the reunions; and, of course, I also saw him in Chicago, and in Washington at various times when he was Vice President and President.

FUCHS: Do you recall any specific incidents?

RICKETTS: I remember we were in Washington and I was invited to see him at the White House. We visited in his office for awhile, my wife and I. We were leaving that evening and that was the evening he made his famous speech on the meat situation. He asked me what train I was leaving on and I told him; and he said, "Well, you'll be about up around Albany at the time I'm on radio."

He was very nice to us, though, and anytime any of the boys were in Washington he was eager to have them come over and visit him in the White House. He was very, very

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considerate that way.

I did see him in Chicago. I don't recall the year; he was then the Vice President. It was about six or eight weeks before the death of President Roosevelt. He was there to make a speech. Eddie [Edward D.] McKim was with him; and I was checking in the Morrison Hotel and someone came up to my elbow and said, "Hi, Skinny," and it was Ed McKim. He said, "The Boss is upstairs," and he gave me the room number, and after I had checked in I went up to see him; and as I walked down the hall I noticed these two or three fellows sitting on the chairs down near the entrance to this suite. I went in and they were having breakfast and Truman asked me if I would like a little drink and I said, "Well, I wouldn't mind a little one, it's kind of early in the morning." He went around to a little bar and poured me about

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three-fourths of a glass of bourbon and that was my breakfast. And I now know that these guards outside were Secret Service people and they were with him at that time because, apparently, they expected something might happen to the President and they were there to protect the Vice President.

FUCHS: Did he join you with a drink of bourbon?

RICKETTS: No, he didn't join me in a drink of bourbon. I think Harry would take about one drink of bourbon and that was it. But he was always very hospitable and if you wanted more, you could have it.

FUCHS: In 1940, when he was running for his second term as Senator, he was having a rough time of it, and he needed all the help he could get. Do you recall that?

RICKETTS: I was familiar with that situation. I

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was the general chairman of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks on the Santa Fe system. Our grand president, George M. Harrison, was very active in the senatorial races, and a good friend personally of Senator Truman. Truman was in a battle down in Missouri and asked George Harrison if he could give him some help. Well, our organization sent some workers down there and money to help him in his campaign. Truman told me personally, many times afterwards, that if it hadn't been for the help of our organization, he doubted that he could have been elected.

FUCHS: Have you any other recollections or anecdotes that come to mind at this time? Maybe in connection with the reunions of Battery D, or with the American Legion conventions, or the inaugural? Did you go back for the inaugural?

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RICKETTS: Yes, I was at the inaugural. I was active in the American Legion for years. I was commander of the South Pasadena post in 1929, and I attended most of the conventions, several of which Truman attended. I don't recall the year or the places.

FUCHS: Do you recall any incidents?

RICKETTS: No incidents in particular in that regard.

FUCHS: Does anything else come to mind in connection with Battery D reunions involving Mr. Truman? Something he might have said?

RICKETTS: Well, Battery D was rather an unusual group of boys. After the war was over they kept their organization more or less intact, and, as you know, there are a lot of Irishmen in the Battery, so every St. Patrick's Day they would have a reunion. I guess it was just

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an excuse to get together. And then of course, on Armistice Day. Every year since 1919 on their return from France, they have had these reunions twice a year, something that I think is unusual in a group. But that had nothing to do, of course, with Truman. It was just the fact that we were wanting to keep our association and friendship alive.

FUCHS: Do you recall anything about the loving cup that was given to him when you came back from overseas?

RICKETTS: I don't remember that. You mean when we first came to Kansas City?

FUCHS: I understand the Battery men gave him a loving cup?

RICKETTS: I think that was after I left Kansas City, at their first reunion. I think that

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one was held at the Elk's Club; I wasn't there.

FUCHS: If you have no other recollections, that's all I have to ask.

RICKETTS: Well, my recollection of President Truman is that he was a very fine artillery officer. He was very concerned during the war to see to it that the boys under his command received as fair treatment as was possible, and he did everything he could to make their life as comfortable as it could be under the circumstances.

FUCHS: You did tell me earlier a story about the Battery guidon.

RICKETTS: Well, while we were in the billet after the war in this little village of Rosières, as I've said before, near Bar-le-duc, the French people there were very kind to us.

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(Of course, they had been through a terrible war and they had nothing really to offer except their kindness and their hospitality.) In the village was a family, a daughter and her mother, and they had lost their son. I remember that John [James E.] Casey, one of our Battery members, apparently resembled him greatly and they took a very strong liking to Casey. Little Casey was a good friend of mine, and we spent many an evening in the little cottage of these French people. They would try to do what they could to give us a little something different to eat than what we had been accustomed to. And while we were there, our guidon was lost, misplaced, or stolen. The French people heard about it and the day we left the little village of Rosières they presented us with a new guidon that they had made by hand. They had woven it with, as I recall, colored, silk thread.

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I remember the ceremony and with the Battery in formation we thanked them very much and accepted it. It was a very touching thing coming from people that wanted to show how much they really loved us and appreciated what we had done for them.

FUCHS: Isn't there a story about one guidon being made from the draperies in the Y.M.C.A.? Have you heard that?

RICKETTS: I think that was that someone had gotten some drapery at Bar-le-duc, and I think they had used that to make a temporary one. The one in the Truman Library is the one that this French family made.

FUCHS: Thank you very much.

RICKETTS: Thank you.

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