

World War II ranks continue to thin

With Sgt. Kratzke's help, Hitler was dispatched to the underworld... Now, the Vergas farmboy-turned-soldier belongs to the ages

For Veterans Day and Memorial Day observances, spanning decades, you could generally count on World War II veteran Ray Kratzke to be in uniform.

Local VFW and American Legion Post members, when they visited him over the years, always marvelled that healthy, fit and trim Ray Kratzke could still wear his World War II uniform.

We were saddened to learn Monday that Kratzke died at age 99—by our count, one of three remaining Second World War veterans in the general Pelican Rapids Press coverage area.

Kratzke spent nearly 200 days in combat, back in 1944-45—hardly taking his boots off the entire time. Sgt. Kratzke commanded a small anti-tank unit, and—indirectly—helped send Adolph Hitler to hell, forever.

Kratzke fought his way across northern France and into Belgium where he took part in liberating Antwerp, later meeting up with the Soviets coming from the east—as Germany fell. Along the way, Sgt. Kratzke and his men found themselves surrounded during the Battle of the Bulge—the German Army's last ditch attempt to turn the tide.

Kratzke's German language skills came in handy in Europe

A rural Vergas, Dora Township farmboy, in a largely German neighborhood—Ray spoke the language. So, when German soldiers began laying down their arms and surrendering—Kratzke was called upon as unofficial translator. The world will never know how many “Krauts” waved the white flag on orders from Kratzke—delivered in Deutsch.

An accomplished, though self-taught musician, Ray performed for a bunch of victorious, vodka-imbibing Russian soldiers when the Allies encountered one another in Germany.

We feel honored at the Press to have helped record some of Ray's history. The newspaper has published a number of profiles of Kratzke over the years—including a 2019 piece by free lance correspondent, Paul Gubrud.

Ray's obituary appears on page 7 this week.

Managing the mail—in post-war Pelican Rapids

A war-related, non-combat back injury plagued him all his life. He and his wife Lillian sold their Lida Township area farm in 1957; largely because driving a tractor was almost unbearable. He took a position with the U.S. Post Office in Pelican, and later retired as postmaster.

“He loved being in Pelican, and Vergas as well...he had all kinds of family in Vergas,” said his daughter Nita (Kratzke) Velo, a 1978 graduate of Pelican Rapids High School.

One family story that didn't make the obituary: Ray was

From My VIEW POINT

by Louis Hoglund,
 Managing Editor



known as a shadetree auto mechanic, and gained the nickname “No Parts Kratzke.” Reason: If he couldn't scrounge up a part for a vehicle, he would fabricate it in his shop.

Kratzke was active through his years at Pelican Valley Senior Living, and for the past year-and-a-half at the Veterans Administration home in Fergus Falls.

“He lived a long life and his mind was really good right to the end,” said Nita. “Even at the nursing home, he always had something going on, or something he was in charge of.”

Ray went to his grave, angry about Pelican dam removal

After walking to work at the Post Office every day for years, across the Pelican Rapids dam, Ray was mad as hell when he read newspaper accounts about dismantling the city dam, said son Leon Kratzke. “He was really upset about the dam...He probably still is,” chuckled Leon.

Later in life, Kratzke opened up about his combat experiences—just a little bit. “He would get very emotional, it saddened him a great deal,” said Nita. Post traumatic stress syndrome hadn't been a diagnosis for veterans at that time. And if he suffered from it, the family never saw any evidence. “Back then, when he got back from the war, he just went back to work on the farm,” said Nita.

His brother Clarence was also a combat veteran in WWII Europe, “never said a single word” about his experiences—right up to his death in 2015, said son Leon.

Ray's last act of defiance? Going to veteran cousin's funeral—over objections of the “authorities”

One of the final Kratzke stories involves his late cousin, Eldon Kratzke, a Korean war era veteran, who died in June 2021.

As Nita tells it, Ray was bound and determined to attend the funeral. Family members were unable to make the trip, and nursing home staff were trying to set him up with some new-fangled, high-tech, black magic, computer Zoom thing. They tried to convince him he should attend the funeral “online,” said Nita.

Well, Sarge Kratzke took matters into his own hands. Nearly a century old, Ray made all the arrangements. He talked the administrators into sending him over in a V.A. van, and went there on his own.

After being chauffeured to the gates of First Lutheran Church, Fergus Falls, Ray Kratzke marched in the doors to pay his final respects to cousin Eldon—wearing his Army-issue World War II shirt and uniform cap.

• Ray Kratzke obituary appears on page 7 this week.



The late Kratzke with his unit, the 104th Infantry, during World War II. With only an eighth grade education at the country school west of Vergas, the farmboy quickly rose in rank to Staff Sergeant.

Kratzkes of rural Vergas were ‘Gold Star’ family Three served in World War II; middle brother Bernard killed

Ray Kratzke's parents sent three of their sons off to fight for their country in World War II.

Sadly, Ray's younger brother Bernard, or Ben as he was known, was killed in action in Europe March 3, 1945. He is buried at the Ft. Snelling National Cemetery, Minneapolis.

One of the truly strange war accounts was told by Ray, mainly to family. All three brothers served in different units, which was common military practice in an effort to prevent multiple casualties or losses to any one family.

In what appears to be a terrible twist of fate, Ray believes he actually saw his fallen brother on one of Europe's killing grounds.

Daughter Nita (Kratzke) Velo confirmed Ray's story. “He and his unit were fighting for their life, and walking across a battlefield when he seriously thought he saw his brother laying dead,” said Nita. There was no time to stop and confirm in the heat of combat—but the image “haunted him for the rest of his life,” said Nita.

In a written account, published in the Press several years ago, Ray was quoted “We were walking through a field and there were bodies everywhere. We couldn't stop and I didn't know where (his unit was serving), so I just kept going...30 days later I got a letter that he had been killed.”

As Nita recalls, the incident was in Germany, during the Allies drive to Berlin.

Older brother Clarence served in an armored tank unit in Europe, returned home after the war and raised a family near Vergas. He died July 1, 2015, and is buried at the St. Paul's Lutheran Church-Loon Lake cemetery.

Now, the late Ray Kratzke will join his fellow World War II comrade and brother, Clarence—in the St. Paul cemetery west of Vergas. Kratzke was baptized and confirmed at St. Paul's—and there, he will rest in peace.

City should have say on streets—not MnDOT

Great News! Wow! Something I complained about in an earlier newspaper issue has come true.

My concern was the proposed two roundabouts in one city block of the main business district. It didn't make sense. It appears that neither does it to a few others in the city.

Matt Strand and Rick Westby did their homework.

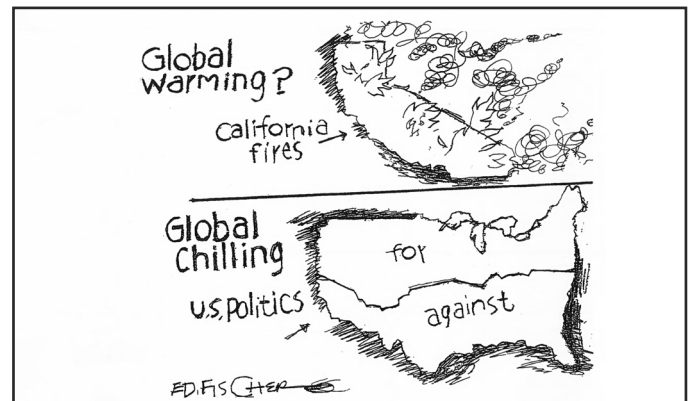
Thank you!

I just got back home from picking up my mail at the post office. Tried parallel parking on main street. Signaling that

I intended to park next to the curb, traffic behind me pulled up so close I could not back into the space next to the curb. They were eager to go around me. Having a bicycle lane next to parked cars and 14 fewer parking spaces would have been worse. MnDOT's idea does not always work for all cities.

Our cities and city council should have the final say, not MnDOT.

Cary Johnson,
 Pelican Rapids



Historic settler landmark on north end of town dedicated 75 years ago

100 years ago, September 15, 1921

• School Children Admitted Free

The entertainment committee of the Otter Tail County Fair Association has arranged an entirely different program for the schools this year.

The first day of the County Fair, September 27th will be Rural School Day, and the rural schools of the county and the schools of the City of Fergus Falls will be admitted on that day at the gate without charge. On Wednesday, September 28th, which is Otter Tail County Day, the schools in the eastern villages of the county will be admitted by ticket signed by the superintendent of schools of the village.

On Thursday, September 29th, Underwood, Elizabeth, Erhard, Pelican Rapids, Foxhome, Carlisle, Rothsay, Wendell, Elbow Lake, Dalton, and Ashby will be admitted. This is Red River Valley Day.

By arranging in this manner, the children will not be so crowded and will be able to be better entertained and taken care of.

The Otter Tail County Fair Association has always been an educational institution, and it is the desire of the management and friends that every child in the county will be able to avail itself of the privilege of attending the fair and seeing the wonderful resources of the county and also learning how to do better farming, better stock-raising and all the other good things which go to make up a happy contented citizenship.

75 years ago, September 19, 1946

• School Opens With Large Enrollment

School opened Monday with a large enrollment, there being 231 in the first six grades the first day and 374 in 7th through 12th grades.

Arrangements are being made to secure another teacher to help out in the first three grades as they are too large for one teacher each.

• New Doctors Open Office

Dr. Howard Kalihar and Dr. Henry A. Korda, who came with their families a week ago to locate here for the practice of medicine and surgery, opened their office Monday in the Lynnes building just South of the Pelican River. They purchased Dr. Boysen's hospital some weeks ago, but Dr. Boysen is unable to turn the place over to the new doctors until about Oct. 1.

Pelican Rapids most cordially welcomes these families and is well assured that the physical well-being of our community will be in competent and efficient hands.

• Historical Marker to be Dedicated

Much interest has been manifest in the community in the Sunday afternoon program when the historical marker just north of town will be dedicated in an appropriate manner. The grounds have not yet been completely landscaped, but the large marker containing ten bronze plaques has been finished, and the triangular piece to the south has been made in readiness for the planting of shrubbery and plants.

There are bronze plaques on which is engraved the early history of Pelican Rapids and surrounding townships, namely: Pelican, Scambler, Dunn, Lida, Norwegian Grove, Trondheim, Erhard, and Maplewood. These give a brief history of the first settlers and their historical data. The marker is constructed of native rock formation and cement and should last untold generations.

50 years ago, September 16, 1971

• Fire Destroys Large Barn on Kimm Farm

Fire destroyed a large barn on the Frank Kimm farm, located about 12 miles north and west of Pelican Rapids in Tansem Township.

According to a fire department report, Kimm noticed smoke in the barn as he was finishing milking Tuesday morning. He removed about half of his cattle from the building, but then heavy smoke prevented him from getting the rest of the herd out. By opening doors, Kimm was able to clear smoke out enough to get the remaining cows

Looking BACK

by Paul Gubrud,
 Columnist



out. The Pelican Rapids fire department was summoned about 7:30 AM, and firemen were able to remove the bulk tank and some milking equipment from the barn. Two cement stove silos were also saved, as were nearby granaries and outbuildings.

The fire apparently started high in the haymow of the building, where 5000 bales of hay were stored. The fire department remained on the scene until late Tuesday afternoon, although hay continued to burn.

Neighbors and friends pitched in to help the Kimms, the Press was told, and a temporary milking set up was being installed in another barn for the 35-cow dairy herd.

25 years ago, September 11, 1996

• Students from Estonia and Germany Among New Faces

Marta Kirs and Hannes Zacher are the two foreign exchange at Pelican Rapids High School. Both are through the World Learning Program and plan to stay through the school year.

Improving her English is one goal of Marta Kirs, a 16-year-old from Estonia.

“I write English very well,” said Marta, smiling. She indicated that speaking English is more difficult for her.

Marta is living in rural Pelican Rapids with Dave and Joanie Ellison and their daughter Laurel, who is also 16.

Hannes Zacher says he likes cows and the work associated with living on a dairy farm with Curtis and Mavis Holt.

The 16-year-old is from Braunschweig, Germany, a city of 250,000 near Hanover, so this is his first experience on a farm.

“I help with feeding the calves,” he said, stressing that he is enjoying farm life.

Jeff & Julie Meyer, Publishers
 Office Hours: Monday-Thursday, 8:30 to 5:00; Friday, 8:30 to 4:00
 Phone: 218-863-1421 • Fax 218-863-1423

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