

## **Introduction**

by

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Major General Richard Samuel “Sam” Kem’s distinguished Army career culminated in two prominent senior positions: Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Europe and Deputy Chief of Engineers. For two years at the end of the Cold War he was one of the senior leaders of the Army’s most important front line combat force, and in his last assignment he helped lead the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during a critical transition period in its modern history. As General Kem thoughtfully describes in this interview, his earlier assignments had well prepared him for his senior positions.

After graduating from West Point in 1956 and attending Ranger, Airborne, and Engineer training, General Kem went to a junior officer assignment in America’s most important potential theater of operations, Europe, in one of the key units in that theater, an armored division. His experiences in the 3d Armored Division and the lessons he learned would serve him well for the next 30 years of his career. In just a few years, however, while still a junior officer, he saw early the challenges that would confront the United States in its next combat operations in Southeast Asia, as an engineer advisor assigned to South Vietnamese engineer units in 1962. After honing his combat engineering skills with the 307th Engineer Battalion, 82d Airborne Division, he returned to South Vietnam in 1968 in the middle of the war as commander of the 577th Engineer Battalion. After seven years as a student, teacher, and staff officer, he returned to troop command in America’s front line army in Europe as commander of the 7th Engineer Brigade. His experience in combat and command culminated in General Kem’s tour as commandant of the Engineer School where he oversaw the training of young officers, the reorganization and strengthening of engineer combat units, and the development of new and vital engineer doctrine and equipment. He then returned to Europe to apply his skills and implement the lessons he had learned as Deputy Chief of Staff, Engineer, and Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Europe at the peak of Reagan Administration defense buildup and on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. From his earliest military training and assignments, General Kem’s experiences prepared him well for his culminating positions in America’s senior overseas theater.

His service in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also prepared him for assignment to senior positions in the organization that would become a major Army command (MACOM) in 1979. After earning a master’s degree in civil engineering at the University of Illinois, General Kem was assigned to the Chicago District, at that time a large district with both civil works and military construction responsibilities. In addition to learning about the activities of an engineer district, General Kem experienced firsthand the Corps’ important role in helping communities recover from natural disasters. In 1964 the district sent him to Alaska to help with the cleanup following the devastating earthquake. Later General Kem served as Chief of Public Affairs in Corps headquarters as the agency struggled with its new environmental missions and the many controversies they produced. In his next Corps assignment as Deputy Assistant Chief of Engineers in the Pentagon, Kem was a key player in the Army’s programming and budgeting cycles and in relations with Congress. As Deputy Director of Civil Works, he learned more about the Corps’ water resources program. With this varied Corps background, General Kem was named commander of the important Ohio River Division (ORD) headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio. ORD’s diverse civil and military responsibilities required careful management, especially in the early years of a new presidential administration committed to bolstering the nation’s defenses and finding new approaches to the Corps’ water resources program. These varied Corps assignments culminated in General Kem’s

becoming the Deputy Chief of Engineers and Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1989. He assisted the Chief of Engineers, LTG Henry Hatch, in confronting the many difficult issues facing the Corps, including research and development, automation, and strategic planning. After a distinguished career of 34 years, General Kem retired in the fall of 1990.

This oral history interview contains General Kem's recollections and reflections on his background and his career in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Like all oral history interviews, the transcript includes General Kem's personal thoughts and perspectives. Neither his views nor those of the interviewer necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense or the Corps of Engineers. The strength of oral history is that it captures the unique perspectives and interpretations of individuals who witnessed or participated in historical events. Oral history can supplement and enrich the official record but never replace it. Interviews are often not objective nor are they expected to be. Their value is contained in the unique personal perspective they provide.

The interviews in this publication were conducted by three historians who were members of the Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, when they taped the interviews. Dr. Paul K. Walker conducted the session on General Kem's tenure as Deputy Chief of Engineers and Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on 19 October 1990, shortly after General Kem retired from the Army. Dr. John T. Greenwood conducted two sessions on General Kem's three years as Commanding General of the Engineer Center and Commandant of the Engineer School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, on 29 June and 13 July 1987, as the general was leaving that position. Dr. William C. Baldwin and Dr. Walker conducted the remainder of the interview on 22, 24, and 29 October 1990; 13 August, 12 September, 11 October, and 5 November 1991; and 6 February 1992.

The interviews concerning command of the Engineer School and deputy command of the Corps of Engineers capture events shortly after they occurred and have an immediacy that comes from being close to events. Inevitably, however, they lack the perspective brought by the passage of time. That perspective informs the rest of the interview that ranges over General Kem's life and career from childhood to his retirement from the Army. General Kem and the interviewers reviewed and edited the transcripts, and Marilyn Hunter, Susan Carroll, and Jean Diaz edited the interview for publication. The original tapes of the interview are in the Research Collections of the Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The photographs in this publication are from General Kem's personal collection.

Conducting, transcribing, reviewing, editing, and publishing an oral history takes a long time. The Office of History thanks General Kem for the sizable amount of time he devoted to this project and for his support and patience during the lengthy publication process. His time is especially valuable because of his busy schedule as Director of the Department of Public Works for Arlington County, Virginia, a position he has occupied for more than a decade. While the production of these *Engineer Memoirs*, a series that began more than two decades ago, is time-consuming for all participants, the Office of History believes it is time well invested because of the unique and valuable historical information and perspective the *Memoirs* preserve and make available to those who read and benefit from them.