

The Mysterious Captain Krantz



Captain August A. Krantz (second from the left) standing next to a train loaded with artillery caissons in Tallinn in March 1919. (Eesti Filmiarhiiv)

Some time in the very early 1900s – at least several decades before American novelist Ernest Hemingway made his oft-paraphrased observation in *To Have and Have Not* (1937) that “no well-run yacht basin in the Southern waters is complete without at least two sun-burned, salt-headed Esthonians” – an Estonian named Henry Reissar met a U.S. Army soldier named August A. Krantz and the two men became friends. As an Estonian who immigrated to the United States, Reissar played an important role in Estonia's War of Independence by returning home with his fortune in 1918 and founding the Scouts Battalion. A Swedish-born U.S. immigrant, Krantz played a key role in launching U.S.-Estonian relations when he became the first U.S. official to visit Estonia in March 1919. Proving that truth is stranger than fiction, the two men first met somewhere on the Philippine Islands, not long after they were acquired by the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898.

We first came across the mysterious Captain Krantz in three different photos we discovered during our research at the Estonian Film Archives. In one of the photos, Krantz is standing next to a train loaded with what appear to be U.S. artillery caissons – evidence that the U.S. provided military assistance to the early Estonian Republic in addition to medical and humanitarian aid. In this photo and in one other, the lanky Krantz is shown smoking a cigar. In

all three carefully labeled photos, it is obvious that Krantz' U.S. Army greatcoat does not provide enough protection against Estonia's winter. Armed only with this visual information, we set out to uncover the mystery of the cigar-loving Captain Krantz.

The Mystery Begins to Unravel

Born in Sweden, a young August A. Krantz immigrated to the United States where he eventually enlisted in the U.S. Army. The 1910 U.S. Census found Krantz at a U.S. Army fort near Laramie, Wyoming. Krantz, however, called San Francisco his home and seems to have worked for a time for the California Fruit Company which was in operation from 1895 to 1917. While the Spanish-American War of 1898 was brief, the U.S. was soon involved in the much longer Philippine-American War (1899-1902) in order to consolidate control over its newly acquired territory. Krantz – along with soldiers from California's National Guard – must have seen duty in the Philippines. During this same war, Captain John J. Pershing – the future general who would go on to command the American Expeditionary Force in Europe during the Great War – cemented his reputation as one of America's finest military leaders. And at some point during this struggle for control over the Philippines, Krantz appears to have met an Estonian named Reissar – perhaps in some South Pacific port worthy of a Hemingway story.

When Europe's Great War began in August 1914, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson vowed to keep the United States out of the war. But following Francisco "Pancho" Villa's 1916 border incursions and rumors that the German were trying to convince Mexico to declare war on the United States, President Wilson issued an order to activate all western National Guard units on June 18, 1916. As a result, the U.S. Army began mobilizing its troops in summer 1916 – including several of California's National Guard units. By the time the U.S. entered the Great War in April 1917, the U.S. Army was at least partially ready for the Great War in Europe.

With mobilization in full swing, the U.S. Army was extremely short of qualified officers. As a veteran enlisted man with twenty years of service, Krantz received a commission as a captain in the U.S. Army's Field Artillery. According to his obituary in the *San Francisco Examiner* dated December 20, 1921, Captain Krantz commanded the Headquarters Company of the 144th Field Artillery Regiment of the 65th Field Artillery Brigade of the California National Guard. This California National Guard unit was known as the "California Grizzlies" in honor of the West's most fearsome bear. Under the command of Colonel Thornwell Mullally, this unit was a part of the U.S. 40th Infantry Division. During the Great War, the 40th Infantry served as a "depot" division providing replacements and reinforcements for other front-line units. From September 26 to the end of the war on November 11, 1918, the California Grizzlies took part in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign – which broke the back of the German Imperial Army and involved over 1,200,000 U.S. soldiers.

After the Great War ended, the Paris Peace Conference was a long and drawn out affair lasting from January 1919 to January 1920. President Wilson personally took charge of the American Peace Commission which represented U.S. interests at the talks. In order to gather much needed information, the American Peace Commission sent out numerous military officers on

fact finding trips. As fortune would have it, Captain Krantz was sent to Estonia to figure out what was happening here back in March 1919. Not long after he arrived, Captain Krantz requested permission from General Johan Laidoner, the commander of Estonian armed forces, to visit the front lines of their struggle with Soviet Russia.

What follows is the full text of the interview Captain Krantz gave to *Tallinna Teataja* on March 11, 1919. It is the first known interview given by a U.S. Government official to an Estonian newspaper. Although Captain Krantz seems to have been prone to exaggeration and sometimes embellishing the truth, he also seems to have been a man of his word. Just a month after his first visit, Captain Krantz returned to Estonia as part of a much larger U.S. military delegation which included additional representatives from the American Peace Commission, the American Red Cross, and the American Relief Administration. That same April, future U.S. President Herbert Hoover (who at the time served as the Chairman of the American Relief Administration) launched a major food aid program in Estonia. Captain Krantz, unfortunately, did not live for very long after his successful mission to Estonia. He died from unknown causes in Washington, D.C. at Walter Reed Hospital on November 7, 1921.

An Interview with America's Captain Krantz

Upon entering the room I see two gentlemen, one of them tall and thin, the other shorter and bulkier, both with trimmed moustaches, both probably nearing the end of their middle years. "Captain Krantz," the first gentleman presents himself, briefly and pleasantly. "Captain Reissar," says the other one, bowing. After shaking hands we take a seat and begin our conversation.

"You wish to know more about me?" Captain Krantz responds to my question. "I'm from San Francisco, California. I have large plantations there. I'm the director of a couple of banks and the chairman of the California Fruit Company. In 1916, I formed an artillery regiment in America which I took to the front in France. There I was appointed Artillery Chief of Staff. When the Germans were pushed back from Verdun and Lys with their heads beaten bloody it was in part done by my 4,800 cannons. When President Wilson came to France, I was the president of the Welcoming Committee. Now, I'm an American member of the Peace Conference.

"I can only tell you a limited amount about the reason of my visit and my authority, but what I can tell you will provide sufficient explanation. I can assure you that I have extensive authority from the U.S. and other Allied countries in matters concerning food and military issues. In matters concerning food, I'm also a confidante to the U.S. and Allied Food Commissioner Mr. Hoover.

"Estonia has attracted the attention of the Great Powers and now the future is about to smile upon her. I was given the assignment of personally finding out more about the situation on the spot and then making a report to the Peace Congress.

"You ask what kind of an impression I have of your country from my tour? I can assure you – the best. The first surprise for me was to find my old friend and war companion here, Captain

Reissar (the American amiably nods towards his companion). Did you know that we used to fight together in the Philippines with the evil Polajani [sic!] who are similar to your Bolsheviks – not believing in personal property and looting everything they can? I'm overwhelmingly happy to hear that my friend Reissar has followed the American example and formed a Scouts force of whose courage I've heard many stories. That's good news that I can pass on to your American colleagues.

“I had a tour of your front lines – Narva, Tartu, Pihkva, Valga, Ruhja, and also Pärnu and Viljandi. I can give you my word that I was most pleasantly surprised. I was expecting to find ragged groups of partisans that have revolted against the communists. Instead, I've seen an exemplary and orderly military force. There is a visible lack of weapons and equipment – but there is no lack of efficiency in the way that things are run. When we started organizing an army to fight Germany, the situation was no better in America than it is here. I've seen your troops on parades, I've seen them on the front lines, and I can say based on my authority that the U.S. and the Allies will be happy to help such a people. Please inform your readers that help is definitely coming. It is late, because the Allies have been experiencing a terrible shortage of ships until now, but help is arriving soon – in a week or two, a month at most – but it definitely will come. We – America and the other Allies have defeated German militarism, we will help Estonia crush the red hydra that is trying to suffocate her with its bloody embrace.

“Yes, I'm leaving soon, within the week. I've had a lot of meetings with your military, food, and government officials and I'm going to refer to their suggestions in the report that I'm going to hand to the Peace Congress. I assure you that the report on Estonia is going to be as positive as it can be.

“Regarding Estonia's independence I have no authority to make official statements. I can only say – by defeating your [opponents], you will insure your own independence.

“Tell your people, your soldiers, tell everybody to count on Allied assistance,” concluded Captain Krantz. “I saw little boys in the ranks at the front. When I asked them, aren't you afraid? They replied together, looking slightly amazed: 'No!' What especially pleased me was that these boys were [Boy] Scouts. I promise my true friend Captain Reissar that I will try to raise interest in his work back in America and that supplying the Scouts will be my special, personal mission. The Scouts' General John J. Pershing who is also the Commander of American Armed Forces in France (a fellow soldier of Captain Reissar's and mine) will be very happy when he receives this news.

“I will leave Estonia very satisfied. It is an interesting country and does deserve closer attention from the major powers. May she live long and prosper. This is my personal heartfelt wish.”



Captain August A. Krantz (third from left) visiting the Estonian front lines in Petseri in March 1919. (Eesti Filmiarhiiv)