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Korean War

At the age of 19 in 1953, I joined the Marine Corps. Six months later, I was on a boat going to Korea. Just prior to my departure, the shooting war in Korea had ended, and it had become a war of nerves. I had heard that the Marine Corps boot camp was the toughest of all the service branches, so I don't know what possessed me to enlist with them.

Everyone was going into one branch or another at the time. I knew I was about to be drafted. A friend was talking to me one day and said, "Let's join the Marine Corps. If we join, we get to choose what we want to do and what kind of school we want to attend." So I did. His ideas didn't turn out to be completely true. Within six months of joining, it was a ticket to the front lines. I was just lucky that the shooting was over by the time I arrived. In spite of all that, the thought of being killed in combat wasn't really on my mind much.

Patriotism in those days was different than it is now. There was a lot of national pride and the feeling that it was our duty to be in Korea. Marines gain a lot of pride in themselves and their country while in boot camp as well. They stress team effort and pride in God and our country. For the first couple of days, I thought, *Oh, my goodness, what have I gotten into here?* You definitely experience a culture shock during the first few days of boot camp. After you get over that, you hate your drill instructor. Within a few weeks, you think he's the greatest man who ever lived. By the time you graduate, you're proud to be a Marine and glad you're there. It truly is a transformation.

The Marines have an ad now that says something like, "We're taking a few good men, and the change is forever." I think that's very true. Your value system changes, and your outlook on life changes. It also affects your sense of duty and patriotism and even your sense of family. When I joined, I had not been married very long, so I missed my wife tremendously. It took only

a few days to realize what my marriage meant to me.

After my training was complete, I spent the next 14 months on guard duty in Korea. Though I was classified as a field radio operator, I was stationed in the Headquarters Battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division.

Our tent compound was nice. There was a chapel for Sunday church services for Protestants, Catholics and Jews. The food was good, and we had a cafeteria. Normally, I skipped breakfast during the week. But I always went to the cafeteria on Saturday mornings because they would be serving steak and eggs. So I was well fed and living in a relatively safe compound.

For one month of my 14-month tour of duty, I was assigned to guard duty. My shift usually was for four hours during the middle of the night. There was a rumor at the time about a potential robbery of the payroll office, where cash was kept. So I was guarding only that particular building rather than patrolling a large area. Armed with a shotgun, I stood out in the open. Men with machine guns were stationed in the outhouse booth overlooking my area. Though I didn't think about it much then, I realized later that I had been the decoy. I was the one that the enemy could have snuck up behind and stabbed. Of course, that would have alerted the other Marines watching that it was time to fight. It wasn't the best job, but at least nothing happened.

Those 14 months were fairly calm except for the constant rumor that the shooting war would start again at any time. So we had to live with that threat. Though we performed a lot of maneuvers, we also had free time.

A friend of mine had been drafted into the Army a couple of months after I joined the Marines, and he was stationed in Germany while I was serving in Korea. He was able to tour Europe every weekend on a pass. All I saw was rice paddies. Occasionally, I made a trip into Seoul, Korea. Nowadays that city is all glass and skyscrapers, but there wasn't much there in those days. The market resembled a country flea market or worse. The buildings had been shattered by heavy bombing.

Sometime we checked out hunting shotguns and ammunition from the PX and went pheasant hunting. The Korean peasants and farmers in the area were not allowed to have guns, so the countryside was overrun with pheasants. After one of our hunting trips, we would bring back as many as we could carry. We kept the colorful males but gave the females to the boys and girls who ran alongside to show us where to find the pheasants. They were happy to help us because fresh meat was a treat for them. They even ate dogs. While I was there, I saw only one dog in one village. All the others had been eaten, except for a few on our compound. Those dogs stayed around the mess hall to take scraps when we came outside to wash our trays, but they never ventured outside the barbed wire. I think they knew better.

Though we hunted a lot and went on hikes, we were not allowed to leave the compound without a loaded weapon. At the time, there was still concern about the North Korean infiltrators who might be hidden amongst the South Koreans. Our compound was located in the only hilly portion of an otherwise flat area covered mostly with rice paddies. The villages contained some stone buildings but were mostly grass and mud huts.

The people dressed colorfully but certainly not well. They all were very poor and barely scraping by with a diet of rice, peppers and whatever else they could grow. For the main part, old people and preteen children inhabited the villages. The little boys always had shoeshine kits and were eager to shine our shoes for a meager amount of money or even just an apple or a stick of gum. At times, we drove a truck to a nearby stream so the kids could wash it for an apple. We would park the truck on the gravel bed of the shallow stream and then sit and watch as they

washed it. Industrious people, the villagers did anything they could to earn money or food. They've come a long way since I left in 1954.

I spent a week on R&R (Rest & Recuperation) in Japan. Industrially, Japan was ahead of Korea, and their society lived better. But it had not been that long since the end of World War II, so they still had a way to go. I went to several movies and noticed they still ran the old-fashioned newsreels. During one of those newsreels, something was mentioned about an atomic test or explosion somewhere in Nevada. Everyone in the theater got very quiet. They still remembered Hiroshima. It was a tense moment. But the Japanese knew we were friendly by then. A lot of soldiers were stationed in Japan at the time or on liberty from Korea. Of course, there were plenty of nightclubs for the Americans to go to and spend their money.

When I went into the Marine Corps, I was a Christian. I was glad to see that a church had been built on our compound. I never really shared my thoughts or Christian testimony with the Koreans, however. There always was a language barrier. We could communicate with the kids by using actions and sign language. They knew a little English, at least more than their elders knew. But they seemed to be just interested in doing things to make money rather than hearing about Christianity. And maybe I was too young to really think about trying to witness to them.

My trip home from Korea was a real experience. I was seasick for 21 days and ate nothing but oranges. I lost about 22 pounds. Food sure tasted good once I arrived back on solid ground, however. But coming home and having a 30-day leave to look forward to was great. After my leave, I was assigned to Camp Pendleton near San Diego, California. Three or four months later, I was discharged. Since there wasn't time to assign me to anything worthwhile, they put me in the maintenance crew that took care of the grounds. Basically, I moved water sprinklers and sat under trees waiting to move them again.

I had 10 days of extra leave time that I could either use or accept payment for upon leaving. So my wife and I spent that time traveling to Mexico, Los Angeles, Catalina Island and other areas in Southern California. That was before smog became a problem. The southern coast of California was beautiful. I didn't realize the difference without smog until I returned later and couldn't see anything. When we were there originally, we could see Catalina Island (22 miles out) from the coastal highway. Now you cannot.

In the Marine Corps, I learned to pay attention to detail, set goals and to make sure that I accomplished everything I needed to accomplish within a specific timeframe. When orders were passed down to enlisted men from the officers, they used to say, "Pass the word." The old saying then was, "Ten per cent of the people never get the word." That was true then and still is true today. At least 10% of our population today don't know what is going on in the world and don't care. They don't succeed at anything because they don't try. They have no goals. In the Marine Corps, those people are the first to die in battle. They don't get the word and don't know what to do or how to do it. They never paid attention.

I feel lucky now to be in a good church like Green Acres Baptist Church and to have a good family. I have a decent retirement and don't have to worry about where my next meal is coming from. Of course, all that we become is the result of the decisions we've made all through life. If those decisions are based on God's truths, I think we come out better off in the end.