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Korean War

In 1949 at the age of 19, I joined the Army. Not to see the world but to change my lifestyle. I talked two friends into enlisting with me the summer after we finished high school. We were looking for a way out of a small town. The three of us went to Korea, but only two came back. Our friend was a medic whose whole convoy was captured.

After we finished our Armed Forces Field Test with automatic weapons in El Paso, half our unit went on leave from June 1 to June 15, 1950. The other half planned to take leave from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the end of the month. Then we were scheduled to go to Colorado or Alaska for mountain training. But when the war in Korea broke out in June, all leaves were cancelled. We packed up and headed for Japan, where we were briefed and waited for MacArthur to gather the forces for the invasion at Inchon (September 15-16, 1950).

My unit had been trained on M-16's (four .50-caliber machine guns on half-tracks) and M-19's (twin 40mm cannons on a light tank), extremely powerful ground weapons. Our basic duty was ground support for the Marines and Infantry. We stayed with the Marines to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, at which time the First Cavalry relieved the Marines. We convoyed across the Korean Peninsula to Pusan where we loaded on landing craft in preparation for an invasion at Iwon. The mammoth firepower we demonstrated was very effective. One M-16 could shoot about 650 rounds a minute per gun. The North Koreans and Chinese didn't want any part of that. We could mow down a forest with them, firing horizontally or vertically.

Unable to cross the rice paddies in our tanks, we had to stay on the roads such as they

were. Sometimes we had to travel a long way to get around a rice paddy to reach our goal. With a two or three-mile firing range, however, we could handle most problems. During the early stages of the war, we took care of all the villages as we swept through the valleys of Korea. But we didn't think about the mountain hideouts that later became a problem. Advancing quickly, we sometimes were cut off from the rear as a result of enemy soldiers and mortar coming down from the mountains.

A person probably could travel all over Korea via trenches. They were everywhere. There also were tremendous numbers of caves. Since it was difficult for soldiers to take a cave without heavy casualties, we were called upon to fire our 40mm cannons at them using different types of projectiles. Some were piercing and some were explosive. At times, the explosives could cause the caves to collapse. By the time we finished, the troops could walk into the caves to evaluate the damage, take prisoners, and destroy any remaining supplies or ammunition. We did that over and over again.

I felt sorry for the North Koreans and Chinese. With very little firepower or equipment, they sacrificed their lives by the thousands. That was all they could do. They tried to intimidate the American troops with noises such as whistle blowing, drum beating and hollering. Often we had to fire at approaching armies of hundreds of men who were armed with hardly anything more than noisemakers and rebel yells. I've heard that only one antique rifle was issued per five men. It didn't take them long to read the writing on the wall and disappear for a while.

When we landed behind the lines at Inchon, we immediately expanded and moved behind the North Koreans. They had circled their equipment around Pusan, which was devastating to our forces and the South Koreans. Once the enemy realized we had cut off their supply line with our Inchon invasion. They abandoned their equipment and weapons and headed for the mountains to reorganize up north.

At that point, we were very much in control. MacArthur had told us, "We'll have you boys home by Christmas." That didn't happen. Though I don't totally understand politics, I believe wars are fought either to be won or to please political leaders. Sadly, when politics create a war, young men have to fight it and sacrifice their lives for someone else's philosophy.

Usually the South Koreans served with their own units and had advisors. Not as well trained as American soldiers, they had a tendency to retreat when things got hot. In the 1950s, the Korean people placed little value on human life. The communists then, as now, used civilians as shields or camouflage and threatened to kill them if they provided information to the enemy.

When we passed through Seoul, very little was still standing. Rather than taking a chance on one spy or one individual endangering our mission or our troops, we sometimes had to destroy whole villages or blow up caves — a simple task with our antiaircraft artillery. That's sad, but war is war. The same thing happened during the Civil War in the United States.

It was not unusual to see Korean orphans begging to be adopted by the Americans. Soldiers, squads or companies often adopted a little boy and trained him to do menial labor such as cooking and cleaning. That was a glorious time for the child because he had a place to sleep and clothes to wear for the first time.

After landing in Iwon, in far North Korea, we expanded and went up the coast to the Chosin Reservoir (close to the Yalu River). Some Marines continued on to the Yalu River, where the Chinese entered the war. It was hard for the military leaders to understand that the Chinese soldiers were coming over to hide out in the mountains and fight at night. MacArthur and his leadership team wanted to think we only were fighting the North Koreans. But the Chinese Volunteer Army was there as well. Of course, they weren't volunteers. Finally our military

officials in Japan came to realize we indeed were fighting the Chinese.

When temperatures dropped to 40 degrees below 0 in North Korea, survival was utmost in our minds. Soldiers died from exposure and frostbite. I knew we were in God's hands and prayed constantly. Though it's not very masculine to cry, it happens when a man is in such a dire situation and wondering whether or not he will survive or whether he will remain true to his training, his country, and his parents. The last thing I wanted to do was disgrace my parents by being a coward and sacrificing someone else's life. But God was with me all the time. I was raised as a Christian and was in church every Sunday. Today I feel the same way.

The battle at the Chosin Reservoir in late November was the most extreme challenge of the Korean War. I'm proud that my unit played a vital part in that battle. Survivors of that battle were called "The Chosin Few". We did the best we could in those extreme weather conditions. Our weapons would not operate properly, and we froze to just about anything we touched. Frostbite was very common. Without the use of his feet and hands, a man can't be much of a soldier. The conditions didn't seem to be as difficult for the Chinese because they were used to that climate. It was hard to understand, however, how they could survive wearing only little rubber shoes and a few layers of clothing. Without properly functioning equipment, we could not be effective. In the end, we lost many men and a lot of equipment.

We had to worry about our drinking water and C-Rations, too, if we had them. Everything was in turmoil, so there were no kitchens or mess halls. All we had was whatever we could carry on our backs and in our hands. Only young men could have survived that ordeal. Obviously, youth plays an important role in survival and endurance.

During our time there, I was either on a half-track or in a tank. Our favorite place to sleep was under a tank. We would crawl into our waterproof, down sleeping bags still wearing our boots. In addition to our automatic weapons, we carried carbines that always went inside the sleeping bag with us. All we had to do was click off the safety, and it was ready to fire. Of course, guards were posted as lookouts 24 hours a day. Though we could sleep in the half-tracks, it was an exposed area. Some men simply slept on the ground with a put tent thrown over them. Wearing two or three layers of wool clothes and gloves, we did the best we could and learned from the experience and each other.

Things were easier for us than they were for the ground troops, however. Infantry soldiers and Marines always surrounded us. As we rode down the roads, they would be walking on each side. They couldn't ride on our equipment because it wouldn't operate with that people all over them. We had to be able to traverse, elevate and fire readily. From the valleys, we could shoot up those bunkers and caves in the mountains pretty quickly. It was our job to eliminate obstacles to the soldiers' progress. We soon learned that we could accomplish more working together than working separately. Lots of accidents happen during battle though because soldiers must react instantly.

Before the war in Korea, napalm had not been used much. The Air Force frequently hit the mountains and bunkers with napalm. When they hit the side of a mountain, everything burst into flames. Two airplanes used in that war were a blessing for us — the Corsairs and P-51s. They helped win the war to a great extent.

The South Korean Army didn't take many prisoners. What would they have done with them? That choice may seem inhumane, but that's just the way it was. If we found survivors after destroying a bunker or village, the U.S. Infantry soldiers would take charge of them and interrogate them.

When the Americans were being evacuated at Hungnam in late December, my unit had to stay back to hold off the Chinese forces and protect our troops as they were loaded with their equipment. It was a perilous job, but we had to hold our breath, say a prayer and do it. After our equipment was loaded, they took us off the beach in anything they could find and placed us on whatever ships were available. We finally managed to get out, and I ate my Christmas dinner standing up on a hospital ship two miles out watching the Americans blow up towers, ammunitions, food supplies, gasoline, etc. on the beach.

The evacuation of Korean civilians was a big problem. Thousands of them wanted to leave, too. They would have died if they had stayed there. The Ship of Mercy carried 100,000 Korean civilians out, though they were only supposed to haul a few thousand.

I was discharged in October 1951. When they asked me to reenlist, I said, "No way. I could not stand the foul language of the average GI. I wasn't raised that way. My vocabulary is not four-letter words." It was sickening to me, but I learned to survive in spite of it." If we had time off during a furlough or boot camp, the other boys went to town to carouse, gamble, etc. I would stay at camp and read or meditate. I carried a handbook of prayers throughout the war and still have it. Now I'm serving as chaplain of our unit (50<sup>th</sup> AAA, AW SP Battalion) at reunions. The membership asked me to replace the chaplain who was disabled because they remembered my testimony. My philosophy is still the same. That has paid off for me in my later years.

In Korea, I prayed, "Heavenly Father, just take care of me and help me to survive. Help me to go home." I wanted to see my seven brothers and sisters again and help them get an education. After I returned home, I set a pattern for education in my family. My father told me two things, "Get you a Christian helpmate and get an education. Those are two things nobody can take away from you." Through the GI Bill, the Army provided me with money for college and I earned a Masters degree in education. After that, I never had to worry about unemployment. My wife was a teacher, too. My service in Korea also taught me to better appreciate life.

When I went in the service, I didn't know anything about the philosophy, background, or even the location of Korea. I learned all that later, after leaving the service. We fought in a civil war — the North against the South. The North was controlled by Russia and communism. The South was democratically controlled by the United States. Not liking that idea, the North Koreans invaded South Korea and that started the war. It was called a police action, an "undeclared" war.

We were winning the war until the Chinese communists invaded across the Yalu River, and we were denied the ability to eliminate them with atomic bombs. Most people know about the conflict between General MacArthur and President Truman. That conflict curtailed our action in Korea. We returned to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and negotiated for two years or more about who should do what and when. Though not very satisfactorily, it was finally settled politically and was not a clear victory.

We fought for democracy in a foreign country we didn't know much about. We thought that if we let communism take over South Korea, other countries would follow suit. A few years later, the same situation occurred in Viet Nam.

The United States got twenty two other countries to help with the conflict in Korea on a limited basis. It was a terrible experience, but we survived it. It was the first war America fought with limited philosophy about winning.

If a crisis comes, I believe the American people will meet it. Though they find fault with things like Korea or Viet Nam, burn flags and speak their piece, I still believe they would volunteer to serve this country in a crisis situation. That's the American way. I wasn't a hero in

any sense. I volunteered not knowing a war was coming, but I didn't ask any questions when the time came. I don't know of anyone who did. I couldn't say that I wouldn't do it again. I probably would. I can't say that I would advise my children to volunteer as I did. Though I would encourage them to join if it was necessary, I would point out the pitfalls of war. Young people today should be thankful that they live in the greatest country on earth — America. It is great because of the philosophy of this country's early leaders. We are at war today with terrorists. If it comes to a war between Christians and Muslims, I don't know what the future will hold.

I had very little patience with foxhole religion. When someone faces stress, violence and death and he/she gets religion as a last resort. Never could figure out why anyone would put off to the last minute accepting Jesus as their Savior and make promises that tend to fade in later years. I think Jesus deserves our best all the time. Then He will stand by us when we need Him. He did me. He helped me get through that war, and I give Him all the praise and glory. Some of it was skill, and some of it may have been accidental. But a whole lot of it was His providence. I have served Him faithfully ever since and will continue to do so.

Today, I am president of the Korean War Veterans Association of East Texas. I've encouraged each veteran to write the stories of their experiences, but I'm having a hard time getting them off high center. The Korean War happened 50 plus years ago, and memories fade. War is death. That's the name of the game. If you try to soft-pedal it, you're not doing justice to the story. At the same time, one shouldn't just count casualties.

The soldiers who fought in Korea didn't receive much publicity, going or coming or even during. Maybe that's why it's called the Forgotten War. I hate to compare wars. However, the Korean War lasted just over three years (June 1950 – July 1952) and resulted in thousands and thousands of casualties, three times as many as were suffered during the ten-year war in Viet Nam. We hear a lot about the Viet Nam War and how horrible it was. But when another war resulted in three times the casualties in less than one-third of the time, any thinking person must realize how tough the Korean War truly was.

In my memoir, I wrote, "We suffered. We suffered hunger and extreme cold. We suffered in every way a soldier can suffer. Yet we fought a forgotten war." It's not fair, but what is fair? I've told my grandchildren not to ask how many men I killed. It was kill or be killed. Our survival depended on our skills, opportunity, training, and motivation. We were motivated to survive and help our brothers. That carried us through. I don't know if there's a way the Korean War veterans could be suitably honored at this point.

We fought for democracy and the right of the American people to work and make an honest living. Today some young people don't think they should have to work. Our early presidents and our pastors taught us that we must work in order to succeed, but that ethic seems to be disappearing. People should not ask, "What's in it for me?" Instead, they should inquire, "What can I do to have a free choice and decent living?" One of my standard devotional prayers is, "We have benefited so much from the American way of life. Now it's time for us to give something back in our latter years to help the dreams of younger people come true.