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Korean War / Vietnam War

A member of the Cadet Corps at Texas A&M University, I graduated with the Class of 1951. All the A&M cadets were being commissioned in those days. The Korean War had just begun. Commissioned as a second lieutenant in armor (tanks), I was unable to find a civilian job because everyone thought I would be going into the service. My folks had moved to Dallas. So I lived with them awhile, drove a furniture truck and was a mechanic at a service station.

A little telegram arrived one day, and I was off to Fort Knox for a basic officers' course. Two months later, I left for Korea as a tank platoon leader of a Regimental Tank Company with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. The Army is divided into support services and combat arms—infantry, artillery, engineers and armor. If there is fighting, and you're a combat officer, you can rest assured that you will be involved. After all, that was the reason I chose the Army. Several of my A&M classmates also were in Korea, but they were assigned to different units. I saw them at muster in Seoul. Now I see some of them at class reunions.

The Korean War was mostly an infantry war. My platoon supported the infantry in its static positions and occasionally participated in attacks against the Chinese. By the time I arrived, the war was stable. So most of the units were in fixed positions. There were no longer any major pushes made by either side.

I was responsible for 30 men in my platoon. We had the most up-to-date equipment for that time, though it couldn't compare with the technology and equipment in use today. It was my duty to see that my men were well trained and able to do their job well enough not to be killed. I was very proud of the fact that only two men in my platoon were wounded during the year I was there. One shot himself quite by accident. The other was hit during a probing attack by the Chinese.

An officer has to set an example so his men will not be afraid. He doesn't do it by being

one of the guys. He doesn't lie, cheat or steal. He doesn't gush. He has to stand there and not run, as much as he might like to at the time. It has often been said that the young second lieutenant who stands up to cross a fire-swept field and yells "Follow me!" doesn't dare look back. I was trained to do that.

At A&M, cadets came in as privates in their freshman year. They could become a corporal in their sophomore year and an NCO during their junior year. As seniors, they commanded companies or platoons, or served on a staff. I commanded a senior company at A&M because we had more seniors than we had spots for. That was easy since everyone already knew what to do.

In Korea, some of the men in my platoon were well prepared for combat. They were there for various reasons, though. Most of them were draftees. My tank commanders, however, were career military men for the most part. My platoon sergeant had been a platoon sergeant in World War II and knew what went on. I learned early in life to let the sergeants run things. Three of the soldiers were Irishmen from Boston, a cheerful lot. In those days, people could earn citizenship by serving in the military. That was their intent, though I don't think they had planned to come to Korea. It was difficult to put my men at risk, but we had a job to do, and they all were goodhearted about it.

I still correspond with Bobby Glen, one of our platoon leaders. One day in Korea, we had been alerted to go back on line after being in the rest area, but we couldn't find Bobby. He was visiting the Australian unit at the time. When he came back and walked into the command tent, he was wearing an Aussie hat with the side turned up and carrying a pheasant he had shot. Our company commander already was pretty irate, so he started in on him. Bobby just stood there with a hopeless look still holding the pheasant. Pretty soon, it got to be too much for everybody. We just keeled over laughing. Even the company commander couldn't keep a straight face.

Along with a fellow named Fred Hodges, Bobby and I were promoted to first lieutenants at the same time. First Sergeant Kamiroski had the motor sergeant cut five big silver strips from some tall juice cans and solder a safety pin to the back of them. First lieutenant bars were silver. Having no idea what was happening, the three of us were called in front of the company. Dick Matts, our company commander, said, "First Sergeant, would you do your duty, please?" Kamiroski pinned those big strips to our hats, and we were required to wear them for a week.

For a while, our tanks supported the battalion from Thailand. The Thai commander didn't get along very well with our regimental commander, though I never had known the reason. To get to them, we had to cross a river. So we built a ford of stones piled on top of each other to drive the jeeps and trucks across. Our tanks had to cross in a more shallow part of the river. Finally, we made it across and joined the Thai battalion. Of course, I had to stay with them at all times. One night I noticed they were working through the night. When I asked their commander what was going on, he said, "The regimental commander comes tomorrow to inspect." I had not been aware of that, so I saw to it that my platoon was at least presentable.

The next morning, the Thai commander and I are waiting when the regimental commander comes roaring up to the river and pulls out over the ford. His jeep instantly sank several feet. The Thais had spent the previous night removing part of the ford in anticipation of his arrival. That was pretty funny, but it never made the papers. I quickly disappeared back to my tanks.

When we were in reserve and not up on the lines, the officers kicked in and hired South Koreans to work in the mess halls so our guys didn't have to serve KP duty. We also hired houseboys who shined our boots, made our beds and did our laundry. That was about our only

interaction with the South Koreans since we were not around any large towns.

We never knew when we would have to provide cover for infantry troops. When accompanying an infantry patrol, we aimed the gun sights on our tanks at various targets that seemed to be likely approach paths for the enemy. The gunners on each tank had diagrams that showed how far to move the guns and what the degree of elevation or depression should be in order for all the tank rounds to hit the same spot. In other words, we could concentrate our fire if necessary. Or, by radio, I could assign each tank various targets. For the most part, we used high explosives.

A rumor started in the infantry once that the Chinese were in a cave in front of us, but it turned out to be a big black rock that looked like a hole in the ground. I used hypershot (armor piercing shells) from my tank tube to break up the rock. We had a love/hate relationship with the infantry. They loved us being there, but they knew they would take a pounding from artillery aimed at us the minute we fired our tank guns. When the Chinese attacked, however, the infantry troops were glad we were there.

I lost a lot of friends in Korea, but I managed to return home safely. After I got back to the States, the Army offered me an assignment in Germany. Young and unattached, I figured nothing could be as bad as Korea, so I decided to stay in the service and go. For the next three years, I commanded a tank company in Germany and had a good time.

After my tour of duty in Germany, I came back to the States for about 18 months and took the Armor course at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Then Vietnam came along. Sure enough, there was something that was worse than Korea.

While stationed in San Antonio, I met the woman I later would marry. We already had talked about getting married when we came in from a date one Sunday night and heard a radio news broadcast about Vietnam. President Kennedy had just announced that we were beefing up our efforts there. I told my girlfriend, "I'm one of the few combat-experienced officers still on active duty. I'll probably have to go." The next day, I was given 15 days to take leave and clear post before reporting to San Francisco for shipment to Vietnam. My marriage was put on hold for a year.

In Vietnam, I was to serve as an advisor to an infantry battalion. While everything was being organized, I worked in a supply depot at Saigon. Soldiers were flooding into Vietnam, but there was no place for them to go just yet. I finally was sent to Pleiku, where lo and behold, a colonel I knew was senior advisor. Colonel Wilson had been chief of staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Division, a training division at Fort Knox when I was there. Later he had been my regimental commander in Korea.

Next I traveled to a little place called Cheo Rio and ended up as an advisor to two infantry battalions. The advisory group there consisted of a senior advisor, two NCOs and an Intelligence officer. I was the one who dealt with the Vietnamese troops. My job was to stay with the Vietnamese battalion commander and observe where they need more training or different weapons. I had to report their shortcomings and strong points.

At the time, there were only two Huey helicopters in all of Vietnam, but there was one company of the old H-21 Banana helicopters. So we made the first all-Vietnamese helicopter assault in the central islands. No one was in the assault landing zone when we arrived, so no one got hurt. But it was a real learning experience for the Vietnamese and for the American helicopter crews. The helicopters had to do a hover check before they could fly. If they were not able to hover, they had to lighten their load. The language barrier created a little problem, too. We arrived at the assault zone and were unloading troops from the helicopters. Company

commanders had been thrown off along with ammo bearers for the machine guns so we could hover and fly. It was pretty funny as long as no one was shooting at us.

I spent most of my time in Vietnam in or near Cheo Rio. We built an airstrip, where an old Aggie friend occasionally dropped by with goodies. With our air-ground radio, we could talk to the Army tactical aircraft. When one flew over, and we needed something, we'd call them and say something like, "Hey, if you're going to Natrong, would you bring us \_\_\_\_\_?" Most of our food came from Saigon and was helicoptered or trucked in to us from Pleiku. A couple of Vietnamese were hired as our cooks.

The language barrier was fun. The Vietnamese commander and I conversed in pigeon English, pigeon French, pigeon Vietnamese and a lot of arm and hand signals. My Vietnamese interpreter had been trained in Saigon. His teacher must have been from New York because my interpreter spoke English with a definite northeast accent. When he translated the weather report for me, one of his favorite expressions was, "It rains one by one." Finally, he managed to explain that meant it would be raining "a little bit here and a little bit there", and I understood he meant scattered showers.

Eddie Browner, a young enlisted man, was my radio operator. To talk to the people in Pleiku, we used Morse code on continuous wave radios. Our radio was not very dependable, however. The hand-cranked generator was so hard to turn that it required one Vietnamese on each side of the crank. Then we had to cut the antenna to length and get it up in a tree. Sometimes we made contact, and sometimes we didn't. That got to be pretty funny. So we really were on our own more or less out in the woods.

We chased Viet Cong through the jungle at night, or sometimes during the day. Frequently, we didn't know what we were shooting at. The jungle, full of birds and animals, could be a noisy place. As we eased down a trail sometimes, we might suddenly notice a dead silence and realize we didn't do anything to cause it. So we'd ease off into the woods and wait a while. If the noise came back, we would move on. It was an eerie feeling. Luckily, we never were involved in any serious battles. We caught small Viet Cong units moving through the area occasionally, but they mostly were attempting to intimidate the people in the little villages.

In the evenings, we would sit down in a café in Cheo Rio and drink Vietnamese beer. The beer was safe supposedly, but we had been told to look out for the soft drinks because of impurities. I'm convinced we were sitting beside the people we had been chasing.

I had a good time during my more than 20 years of military service. I consider myself fortunate to have retired as a lieutenant colonel. There were a lot of exciting times, as well as rewarding times. I try to remember the fun things and forget the bad things.

In God's mystery, I've often wondered why I'm still here. So many people I knew, who seemed to be better than I was, didn't survive in Korea and Vietnam. Maybe He let me stay so I could raise my daughters, or perhaps one of their offspring will become president or another Billy Graham. I don't know why, but I thank God daily that I am still here. I wake up happy each morning.

The Army I served in was not an all-volunteer Army. We had draftees, many of whom were away from home for the first time. I had to set a good example for them. The military clerics hold general church services aimed at no particular group. When I started wearing my dress blue uniform to church, some of the men in my company would come to see what the silly thing looked like. At least, it got them in the church. I tried to do my job in the most pleasant manner possible. Sometimes it conflicted with what I really wanted to do. When I was overseas, I prayed that God would look after my folks, take care of my men and give me the wisdom to

take care of them, too.

As a child, I always was taken to church and continued going as an adult. I never had any reason to doubt God, though I've had a lot of questions. That's why I read the Bible and go to Sunday school or listen to the pastor at Green Acres Baptist Church. I don't always find the answers to all my questions, but I find comfort. Only God can explain some things.

I've had an excellent life. I came to Tyler because my father had retired and moved to Whitehouse and my wife's family was in Arkansas. Our children didn't know any of their grandparents well until then. I worked as general manager of the Chamber of Commerce in Tyler for 18 years. Then I served as director of a Court-Appointed Special Advocates, a non-profit agency for abused and neglected children in the court system. Now I try to spend time with my grandchildren and occasionally give flying lessons.

My wife died of cancer about six years ago. Though I was tempted to seek other companionship, I decided against it. I firmly believe that God will provide. Sure enough, a widow I knew invited me to a Christmas party three years ago, and we're still seeing each other. We like each other's families and have a good time together. After we started dating, I began attending services at Green Acres and transferred my membership there. I was baptized there, and my experiences have been rewarding and uplifting.