VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Benton Bastian

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

January 23, 2011

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This interview is being conducted on Sunday, January 23, 2011 with Mr. Benton Bastian at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Bastian was born on July 17, 1926 in Hinkley, Illinois. He is a retired insurance adjustor and learned of the Veterans History Project through a cousin who heard about this project on the radio. Also with us today is his daughter, Dannita. Mr. Bastian has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

Benton, just before entering the military what was your life like? Where were you living? What were you doing?

I was living in Hinkley, Illinois – a little town of about 600. I had quit school.

You quit school early?

Yes. I still got a diploma because I got drafted into the Army and I lacked only so many credits. I think the law then allowed you to receive a diploma if you had so many credits if you were drafted.

So you didn't like school.

I hated it.

How old were you when you dropped out of school?

Eighteen. I got drafted when I was 18 years old.

So you were living at home if you were going to high school.

Yes. I had very good parents and a very good home life. I had five sisters; two of them were Army nurses in the South Pacific. They went in about 1942 into the service.

How did your parents feel about your decision to drop out of school?

Well, my mother didn't like it at all. In fact, she told my older sister at one time, if I ever have to go into the Army she'd kill me first. My sister kind of believed that. But she didn't. She lived through it.

Induction and Training

So you were 18 when you were drafted?

Yes.

That would have been 1944.

Yes. November 6, 1944. I went to Ft. Sheridan, Illinois and got processed. Subsequently I ended up in Ft. McClellan, Alabama where I took infantry placement training.

What do you remember when you went to be processed at Ft. Sheridan?

I was scared to death.

Was that the first time you were out of Hinkley?

Well, really, yeah. I was a small town kid and I was very nervous.

How did you get to Ft. Sheridan?

By train. And when we got processed – we got our shots and stuff there …

So what was it like? Was it a large group of guys?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And the barracks smelled of mothballs because we had all these new clothes. It was a terrible smell! You can imagine the hundreds of people in this one building and it smelled of mothballs.

How did you get processed? What did you have to do?

We got shots and had to go get our clothing. There wasn't really too much to it outside of that. And a couple of days, then, we were on our way to Ft. McClellan, Alabama for our training.

On a troop train?

Yes.

So you went from Illinois down to Alabama.

Yes. We were supposed to get 16 weeks of training, but at that time the Battle of the Bulge was going on and they needed replacements so they cut it down to 14 weeks.

So you lost two weeks you would have had.

Then, when that was all done …

What was your training like when you were there?

We learned how to march. We had to fire all these various different weapons. We learned the use of the bayonet, of course, and medical care for ourselves. It was pretty comprehensive. I thought we got good training.

What was your barracks like?

They were tarpaper shacks. They were nothing but wood frames with tarpaper over them. We had I don't know how many people in them – they weren't real big.

At each end we had a coal stove. At night we could have that fire on. In the morning when we got up we had to put the fire out, clean the inside of the stove and paint the inside of it with that black whatever it was so it would be nice and clean. It sat on a little sand pit. There was one on each end.

It wasn't real good quarters, but it was acceptable.

What was a typical day like for you?

Well, you think Alabama is warm but it's not. It's cold. It snowed and rained. It was all clay and it was slippery when it rained – we'd slip and slide when we had to march.

So this would have been around Christmas?

Yes. I spent Christmas there.

So you'd get up in the morning – how did they awaken you?

With a whistle. And I'd hear this whistle way off in the distance about 4:30 in the morning and all of a sudden it's practically blowing in my ear. It was horrible laying in bed and waiting for it to get to you. And you'd have to get up. Of course, at that age you don't want to get up at 4:30 in the morning.

How many guys were in that room?

I don't know. There might have been 20.

Were there bunk beds or single beds?

In that one it was just single. It wasn't a regular barracks. These were makeshift things that they put up hurriedly during the war.

It was just for the time being so they'd have something there.

Yeah.

So you got up at 4:30. How much time did you have to get dressed?

Well, not very much time. Everything was in a hurry. It was always run, run, run. And the restrooms were in a separate building, and if you wanted to go down in the middle of the night you had to walk quite a ways to go to the restroom. Fortunately I was young and didn't have to get up too often – like I do now (Mr. Bastian chuckles).

When you got up you had a sergeant or somebody. Did you have an inspection?

Yeah, we had inspections. Always inspections. We'd come back from training at noon and they'd say take everything outside and scrub the floors. We'd have to scrub the floors and eat within that hour or period that we had.

What happened if you didn't pass inspection?

We'd get some punishment. We wouldn't be able to do certain things.

What about going to eat. Did you go as a group?

Yes. We had to line up to go to eat. And, of course, we got the occasional KP – kitchen police – where we had to work: wash pots and pans, peel potatoes or whaterver.

What was a typical breakfast like?

It was good food – eggs and bacon and stuff like that.

Was there a lot of food?

Yes. The only thing, one thing we got once a week was mutton and I didn't particularly like mutton. But I always ate it because I was hungry.

After breakfast what happened?

We'd line up and maybe have a roll call. I don't remember if we had roll call before or after breakfast. Then we'd march out and train – whatever we were going to do that day.

So you had some classroom classes and some field classes?

Yes. All kinds of stuff.

You mentioned learning to shoot different types of weapons.

Yes. Once in a while we'd have a film about World War II to show us what was going on in Europe. It kept us informed.

What sort of things did you do in your free time? I know you didn't have a lot of free time.

No, we didn't. We went to bed pretty much. We'd have Sunday off, usually. I was fortunate I was drafted with my best friend. He and I were born on the same day – and a cousin of mine, too. So we all took our training together.

Were you in the same barracks?

No. But then, after that we got sent to Ft. Meade, Maryland and we got separated. They went to France and I went to Italy.

From Ft. Meade we went to Ft. Patrick Henry, and from there we got on a ship and went to Italy.

Let's back up a little bit. When you were in Alabama you had Christmas there?

Yes.

Were you able to go home, or did you stay there.

No, no. We got five days off en route to overseas.

That was your Christmas.

That was in – I forgot what month.

You celebrated Christmas at home, normally?

Oh, yeah.

So how did you celebrate your first Christmas away?

I don't remember – I think we had turkey, I suppose. We didn't do anything that I recall.

Were you able to communicate with the people at home?

I don't think I did. I don't think I ever called home. I wrote letters, of course.

So you were able to write, at least, during that time.

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

First Deployment

So you left Alabama, and you said you had five days at that time?

En route to Ft. Meade, Maryland. And there again we got processed, and we got more equipment.

And that was getting you ready to go to Europe.

Yes. We got different clothing – combat clothing.

How did you get to Ft. Meade?

By rail.

A troop train again?

Yes. We we were there just a short time. Then we were shipped to Ft. Patrick Henry, Virginia. There, I think, we got our rifles and stuff like that. From there we went and got on a ship at Norfolk, Virginia – the USS West Point, which was the former USS America, which was a luxury liner.

So it was one of the luxury liners …

There were about 10,000 of us on that ship.

So you were on what had been a luxury liner. What were your accommodations like?

They were just tiers – like four or five tiers.

Were they like hammocks?

Yes. They were hammocks.

About how many men were on the ship?

About 10,000.

That was a lot.

It was a big ship.

We ate twice a day. You'd no more get breakfast and pretty soon you'd be in a line to get the evening meal. You stood all day in line to get to eat.

I remember one time. They had a PX on board and you could stand in line and buy a candy bar. And I bought a whole box of Mars Bars. And I got sick on them because the ship was rolling back and forth (chuckles). But I ate all them.

You ate all of them yourself. How long did the trip take?

I don't know how long – maybe five days. I'm just guessing at that.

What did you do besides standing in line for food?

We didn't do anything. There was nothing to do.

Did you read? Were there card games? Did you meet people; talk to people?

Oh, I met people. I didn't know anybody. I was scared. I was a young guy who had never been away. I got picked on a lot – I was skinny with glasses. It was uncomfortable.

It was uncomfortable being picked on, or uncomfortable knowing where you were going – or both?

Well, I wanted to be in the Army. I wanted to join earlier, but the folks wouldn't sign, of course.

So you knew you were going to Italy.

Not right away, but on the way over they told us.

So your family had no idea where you were.

No.

Did they know you were going overseas?

Yes. They knew that because the night before I left I called. That was the only time I called home, then. I couldn't tell them I was going overseas, but they knew I was. Everything was very hush-hush in those days.

What were you able to tell them?

Nothing!

Just that you couldn't talk to them for a long time?

Something like that, maybe. I got the message across somehow and I don't remember how, because they acknowledged it. But you know, they listened in on your conversations.

Right. Were your letters censored?

Yes. My mother saved every letter I sent home. I started reading some of them the other day. They were kind of stupid (chuckles).

Did they have pieces cut out or blacked out?

I haven't run into any of them from Italy yet.

So you were on this ship for five days. Where did the ship dock?

In Naples, Italy. And we docked up against sunken ships. The whole harbor was filled with sunken ships.

How did you feel when you saw that?

Well, I don't know. It didn't seem to affect me then. What they did – they built a wooden platform on top of these ships so we could get off.

So they used them as a foundation.

Yes. For a dock.

And then we went north of Naples to a place called the "dairy farm." It had been owned by Mussolini's son-in-law who, incidentally, later on he had executed – his own son-in-law. But anyway, this was a modern dairy farm for the time but it was not being used. It was being used by us.

They had tents. We lived in tents there. It was a replacement center, is what it was.

What time frame was this?

This was in 1945 – probably March or somewhere.

How did you get to the dairy farm?

By Truck.

And then I was at a donut shop – the Red Cross had a donut shop. And I noticed these guys who had these big boots on that impressed me. And I found out they were from the mountain infantry. I found out I could volunteer for that, so I did. I was impressed by these guys. Then I found out also they had mules, and that interested me because I had farmed with horses – I come from that area. So I joined up with this infantry – the Tenth Mountain Division had a training center there.

How did you get connected to them? Who did you have to talk to?

I don't remember who I talked to.

But I liked that. I really enjoyed that. We learned how to mountain climb and how to rappel down cliffs, and then the care of these mules.

And what was your responsibility?

I was just training.

What were you training to do?

Well, we had to train how to pack a mule. There are certain ways to do that. You don't just throw a case of C-rations on the back of a mule without knowing how. So we did that.

We had a lieutenant whose father was a re-mount man in Missouri. He bought and sold mules for the Army. So this lieutenant was well versed in mules. He gave us the nomenclature of the mule (chuckles). Anyway, it was interesting.

How long did you do this training?

That was a couple of weeks.

When you were done with the training, what did you do?

Well, they put us on a ship again.

With your mules (chuckles)?

No. We went from Naples to Leghorn, Italy. That's in northern Italy. We got off there and I really didn't do much of anything. I felt more in the way than anything else.

What were your official responsibilities supposed to be?

I don't know!

Well, I'll tell you what happened. Shortly thereafter the war ended. A guy came into the tent one day and said they were looking for volunteers to go to the Pacific. So I and another guy raised our hands. The other guy didn't get to go because he had been there longer in Italy than me. So I got to go to the Pacific.

So we loaded on a ship again. The day we left Leghorn, Italy the first atom bomb dropped. And then, before you know it we're a little way out in the ocean and the second bomb was dropped. They announced over the loudspeaker that we weren't going to the Pacific, we were going to New York. And I was madder than a wet hen.

Returning Home the First Time

Really.

I wanted to go to the Pacific.

So we went back to Camp Shanks, New York. I got the first steak I ever had in my life. Everybody got a steak before, and I never had a steak before in my life. It was outstanding. Delicious.

How did your family learn that you were home?

I don't know. I think when I showed up home. I went from Camp Shanks to Camp Grant and hitchhiked home from there.

You hitchhiked.

Yes. I did a lot of hitchhiking then.

What was your parents' reaction?

Well, I got off hitchhiking from this car in little Hinkley. He let us off right in the downtown, which wasn't big, of course – this other guy and I. And here comes my mother up the street and she spotted me. She couldn't believe it – they couldn't know I was coming, I'm sure. So we had a reunion there.

Did you have a little party – welcome home?

No, no. I don't think so. I wouldn't have stood for that.

So you had been gone for how long?

Less than six months.

Then I was home for 30 days and I got a telegram that said to stay home for 45 more days. They didn't know what to do with us. The war was over in Europe and Asia, too.

What did you do with your time – you had 72 days at home.

I drank – I was a big drinker. I partied and had a hell of a time.

You didn't do anything else – go to school or anything.

No, no.

So then I had to report back. I think I went to Ft. Sheridan again. And they sent me to Camp Gruber, Oklahoma. A recruiting sergeant came by one day and said if you reenlist you get 30 day leave and $300. Well, that attracted me. I only had to give up three years of my life for $300 and a 30 day leave. So I signed up.

Do you know what you signed up for?

Three years in the infantry. I was a big infantry guy – everything had to be infantry. So I did. And I came home and we were eating supper one night and I said I had reenlisted. My parents just about had a fit! My poor parents really had a hard time with me.

Anyway, I went from Camp Gruber back to Ft. Sheridan, and they sent me out to Ft. Ord, California by train.

While I was out there they were training us. We were waiting to go overseas. They had a bulletin board there that said they were looking for volunteers to go to China with the MP's – 701st MP Battalion. So I signed up. China really appealed to me – that's the Orient, and it's appealing.

Then they sent me from Ft. Ord all the way over the east coast to Ft. Belvoir, Virginia to join up with this 701st MP Battalion. We were there just a short while. We had the ugliest first sergeant that ever lived. I've got a picture of him somewhere. He was just plain ugly. He'd been in the Army over 30 years and was mean as hell. He came across as being mean, but really wasn't.

Then they put us on another train and sent us all the way out to Ft. Lawton, Washington.

So you've just been crossing the country by train!

I'm having a great time. I'm riding in club cars, drinking. I'm partying!

These were not troop trains, these were passenger trains.

Oh, no. They gave you meal tickets and everything.

Let me ask you this. When you were doing all this traveling you were in uniform. How did people respond to you? How did civilians respond to you when they'd see you.

Well, when we went to Ft. Lawton in the state of Washington, we were going through the mountains. We'd stop in these little towns and they'd take us out and we'd have to march up and down the station platform for exercise. They'd have donuts and stuff for us, the civilians, and coffee. They were good to us out in the northwest.

Second Deployment

How about on the trains?

Oh. The trains were pretty well loaded with military people. There weren't a lot of civilians traveling during the war because there wasn't room for them, really. I don't remember having any conversations, really, with any civilians.

Then we got to Ft. Lawton and they put us on a ferry boat. We went someplace to get on a big ship. Then that ship took us to Korea.

Do you remember the name of the ship?

No.

Do you remember how many guys were on it?

…

These were smaller ships than the one I went on before – probably 4,000 people on them or less, maybe even 2,000.

Were they regular military?

Yes, they were. They were troop ships.

So you had already crossed the Atlantic before and now you were doing the Pacific.

Yes.

We stopped at Korea to let some people off, and from there we went to Shanghai. That was impressive to me. We went up the river on this ship to the Jukong docks. All these san-pans, everything was foreign looking.

Exotic.

Exotic, that's it.

All these Chinese are coming out in their boats and waving at us. They were trying to sell us stuff, really.

Then we got off the ship and they took us into town to Shanghai New Asia Hotel. … [Two guys to a room], unless you were a sergeant or something. Officers lived in a different hotel, nicer. But New Asia was okay. In fact I wrote home and said I was never coming home (chuckles)!

The Army life was pretty good for you.

Yes.

Shanghai was an interesting city. I did a lot of different things there. I patrolled the city. We were really sent there, I think, to help patrol the city because the city had been under Japanese occupation for a long time.

There was a big foreign element in Shanghai. They had different areas – the British section, the German section, the French section and so on. I met a lot of different types of people.

Were you responsible for just one section?

Well, no. We went all over, wherever we were assigned.

There were four of us in a jeep. There was an American MP, a Chinese Army MP, a Chinese policeman, and an Indian Sikh.

With the turbans.

Yes. They had been there prior to the war when the British policed Shanghai. They had black uniforms and red turbans back in those days.

I loved them. I liked those Indian Sikhs. I got drunk one night in the wrong area of Shanghai – a dangerous area. All of a sudden this guy – I didn't know how to get out of there – this guy pats me on the back and says, "Sahib, you come with me." So he got me out of there.

Let me ask you this. So he got you out of trouble, did you have any incidents you had to deal with? Any problems with people?

Oh, I can't think of any.

We were repatriating the Japanese, too, there. There were a lot of Japanese. They had a great army there. They were clean and disciplined. We'd stand guard and they would salute us. That's what they Japanese do – they salute guards. I didn't know that. I felt awkward and wondered what to do – there were 2,000 guys out there saluting me.

So they were all together.

Yes. They were being moved down to the docks and being taken out on ships.

How were they being kept?

They were pretty much in tents, I believe.

One of our guys got drunk one night and went down amongst them and got all cut up. He was a Hispanic guy and probably tried to pick a fight with them, and they took care of him.

Did you have to go in and get him out?

No. I think he got out himself.

I did some guard duty on the docks. We could go aboard the merchant ships and eat. They'd feed us good.

But then I got assigned to the Ward Road jail to guard the Japanese war crimes prisoners, and also the Bureau Ehrhardt. There was a spy ring that was in China – a German spy ring. They were being tried and I stood guard at their trial as well as at some of the Japanese trials.

So they were being tried in Shanghai?

Yes, because they did not stop their espionage when the war ended in Europe. They were supposed to stop, but they kept on and did it to the Japanese. So they were tried for that, and I think they were found guilty.

Then we tried some Japanese war crimes people and they were sentenced to death. I actually helped hang a couple of them.

It was death by hanging.

Yes, oh yes. I helped hang General Tanaka and also a captain that was a medical officer in a Manchuria prisoner of war camp.

Was this something you had expected to do?

No. If you were on duty that was the job. If you happened to be on duty – they always hang everybody at 5:00 in the morning and I think we went off duty at 6:00.

What was your impression of that whole …

It haunted me. It was something I'd never done before, of course. And I never expect to do again.

Shanghai was quite a place. I drank a lot – we all did. I could tell you some wild stories, but I'm not going to (chuckles).

So in Shanghai you guarded prisoners, you guarded the people in the war crimes, you participated or were at the trial and were involved in the sentence …

Yes. I have a picture of that Bureau Ehrhardt by the way. In fact that picture – my uncle was in the drug store in Hinkley and he got his usual Tribune and opened it up and said, "There's Ben!" That picture showed up in the Chicago Tribune, and that's where it came from. My father went there and got it, the one I'm scanning.

So you were in Shanghai how long?

Well, I was in China almost three years. I think each place I was at, I was at about a year.

So Shanghai was the first place?

Yes.

Then I got on a ship to Taku Bar, which was not really a port. I think we had to go to shore on smaller boats. Then we got on trucks and went to Peking, China. It's Beijing now – the capital. At that time Nanking was the capital.

Well, I was in Peking and we did the usual patrol work.

One time I was sent to Chang Chung, Manchuria.

Was this a side trip from Peking?

Well, no. I was up there as a guard on a train – there were several of us. These trains were not modern trains. They had wood benches and stuff in those days. I don't know – there was probably about a dozen of us. We were guarding the train – guarding supplies up to our Army advisory group. There was an Army advisory group in China at that time.

A US Army advisory group.

No, actually it was military police. I'm not too happy about that. But the only way I could get to China was to join the military police.

But the military police – was this still the multi-national group or was it just US?

No, just us.

Anyway there were about a dozen of us on this train. This train had trucks and other supplies on it. And of course it was an old steam engine. We got between Mucden, Manchuria and Chang Chung – and of course this was communist country up there – Chinese communist, and we were neutral. But they blew up the train in front of us and a bridge, and they blew up the train behind us. So we sat there for about four days and couldn't go anywhere until they moved everything.

Why were the bridge and the trains blown up?

To antagonize us, I suppose. They were communist and we were not.

Oh, I have to tell you. The first day we left Peking. We had a wooden stove in the car. That was our heat. It got 40^{0} below zero in Manchuria. And we got the fire going so bad it burned the roof! So here we are the rest of the trip with no heat.

No heat and no roof!

And here it was 40^{0} below zero. There was no hot food. We ate either K-ration, dry rations, or C-rations which were the little cans – pork and beans or whatever it would be.

What were in the K-rations?

Oh, there's be a little can about this big around (Ms. Barrett indicates the can size is about 2" in diameter). There'd be cheese and crackers. There'd be a little bit of toilet paper, maybe a little piece of chocolate.

Cigarettes?

Yes, about half a dozen cigarettes.

C-rations was a can – a normal soup can. It would have pork and beans, a stew in one of them.

Were you able to heat any of it up?

No. We lost our stove!

But anyway, I know the train stopped in Mucden, Manchuria. This is a bleak city. It's occupied by Russians. We went into town, some of us, and snooped around. Nobody paid any attention to us. They weren't friendly at all – communist, pretty much.

And the train almost left without us! That would have been horrible. I don't know what we would have done. We were young guys – I was 19 then, at the time.

This was 1945?

No. This was 1946 or 1947.

Well, later we had to evacuate Peking because the Chinese communists were taking over. Then we went from there to Taku Bar again to get on a ship, one of our convoys which I was not on was attacked by the Chinese. So we had a lieutenant killed. I was not on that convoy. I was on a later convoy.

How did that change the convoys that were leaving? How did it change the security?

There was more security, more weapons. We provided our own security. Then I saw the Great Wall of China. That went just north of Peking, China.

I can't think of anything more we did there specifically.

We got back to Taku Bar and took a ship and went to Nanking, China. Nanking, China at that time was the capital of China. I was an embassy guard there which usually Marines provide. I don't know why, but they had Army there. There weren't any Marines in town, I guess. There was up in Peking, China – there was a regiment of Marines up there.

So you were in Nanking. And if the communists hadn't been taking over …

Peking, which is way up far north.

Was there talk about what to do as they approached?

No. We had a guy claim he shot one, one night. I don't know if he ever did or not, if he was bragging.

I know up in Peking we had a supply depot out in the middle of nowhere. Peking, by the way, was a walled city. I understand today, now, it's not. It was the forbidden city. I went by that every day. Peking was a rather small town, I thought at the time. Now it's a monstrous big metropolis with skyscrapers and everything.

Anyway, when they took you out to this place when you had to guard the supply depot, they closed those big gates. They were monstrous big wooden gates. I suppose they were 25' tall. You were stuck out there until morning when the opened it up again. I was uneasy to be out there all night long in this tent, out in the middle of nowhere. They had wire fence around it, but you were out there all by yourself.

Once in a while a train would come back in there and load up cars or bring cars.

This was in Peking.

Yes.

I gave the engineer and fireman an Army coat because we had all kinds of stuff there and you could take what you wanted.

Anyway, we went to Nanking, China then.

Let me back up. You were in Peking about a year?

Yes, about a year.

And you were about 22 at the time?

No, I wasn't that old. When I went to China I was 19, so I would have been about 20.

You talked about the tent at the depot. Were you living in a tent at the time?

No, just when we stayed there at night. When we were in Peking we were in barracks – Japanese barracks.

Wooden barracks?

No. They were stucco – they were made out of mud.

You said when you were on the train you talked about C-rations and K-rations. What did you have when you were staying in the barracks?

We had a regular mess hall. We got to eat. Whenever you came off duty you got to eat whatever you wanted. If you wanted 20 eggs, you could have 20 eggs. We ate good.

Was it American style cooking?

Yes. We ate out a lot, though. We liked the rice and sweet and sour pork and all that stuff. You could buy a meal for 25¢.

Did you have any downtime? Any R&R?

Oh, yeah. We only worked six hours a day.

So what did you do with all that time?

We went out and partied! What do you think (chuckles). I partied. That's all I did was party. The whole deal was a big party to me.

So you said you liked the bars. What else happened? Did you see any shows while you were there? Any types of live entertainment?

We had our own little enlisted men's club. We had a little Chinese band that played American music, and we partied.

Were you able to communicate with people at home?

I did call a few times from there – from China.

I went to Japan on leave once, too. And I called.

Then I'm in Nanking, and I told you I was in the embassy there. Then I got a job as a guard on a tugboat. I think it was the Whangpoo River, way up into China to these Army advisory people. I was the only … [American] on this tugboat, and I was the armed guard. I had a machine gun on top where I could shoot at pirates.

Were there pirates?

Oh, God, yeah. There were a lot of Chinese pirates and they liked to steal. The Chinese people steal, and it was okay to do that.

Is it because of the war?

Oh, yeah, probably a lot of that. But it was interesting. It was a big sea-going tug – a big one. And they had an Italian crew on it. They were in Shanghai when the war broke out they scuttled the ship they were on. They were interred by the Japanese for some reason, and when the war ended the American government hired them to operate this tugboat.

That was interesting. I enjoyed that. I got to eat well. Nobody bothered me. I set up in the pilot house watching the river go by. And that was several days – probably several weeks, I imagine.

And you just had to watch for pirates.

Yeah.

Did you ever have to shoot anybody?

No.

No pirates while you were there.

No.

It was a wide river. It was the Whangpoo (Mr. Bastian spells the word here) River, I think.

One night … While I was in Peking, China a lot of my friends left. They only got drafted for two years and I still had time to go because I had three years. So we got some new guys in, and this one guy could not handle his liquor at all. He got meaner than a dog. But I'm out in Nanking one night with him and we're hitting some of these joints, and he gets drunk and mean. And we're in the bathroom and these two white guys come

in and he starts to fight with them. Next thing you know, the Chinese cops come – the police. And they wanted to know what our names were. So we gave them our names. Next morning, the criminal investigation department showed up at our headquarters. I remember one of the company commanders saying, "Bastian, what have you done now?" The CID guy, he punches this friend of mine in the stomach because he got kicked. They were told that to see if he had a tender stomach. They asked, "Which one of you is Private Jesse James?" And I said, that's me. I gave this Chinese cop that name. Well, we were put under arrest. It turned out these guys – we thought they were white Russians – this guy was the Mexican ambassador to China. He was a big gun. And they were going to throw the book at us.

Well, as the story goes, Mexico had the hoof and mouth disease at that time. They were looking to us for help with the hoof and mouth disease in their cattle. So the Mexican ambassador requested they drop the charges. They sent me home and my friend to Japan because he had time to go – he hadn't been there too long yet.

Returning Home the Second Time

So your three years were up?

No. They sent me back. It was almost up. And I went to Ft. Knox, Kentucky. They put me on permanent KP. You know, I never got over corporal.

So you were a private when they sent you back.

No. I was a corporal.

Then the Army decided they were going to have an austerity program, and they cut everybody back one rank. So I went back to private first class, after four years. Well, I could never get any promotion because this was a regular Army outfit. We had everybody in that MP battalion: guys who had been in for years and already were sergeants. We had people there in the French foreign legion. We had people in that outfit that were in the Rangers and Special Forces – all kinds of people.

On permanent KP?

No. I'm talking about in China. That's why I didn't get promoted.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm going back to Ft. Knox. I was on permanent KP there. And about every weekend I'd get off and I'd hitchhike home all the way from Louisville, Kentucky.

All the way up to Hinkley?

Yes. And I'd take the train back because I couldn't count on getting back on time. But this mess sergeant liked me because I was a hard worker, and he'd give me an extra day off at least every other week. And I would hitchhike home.

One night a guy dropped me off in 'nowheresville.' It was all foggy. I had to walk until I got to a town and finally got a ride.

How long were you on permanent KP?

Quite a few months.

Then they sent me to Ft. Breckenridge, Kentucky. There I was training troops. They opened that camp up. It was all full of weeds. Can you believe, they had us cutting the weeds with scissors because they had nothing else. We sat all day long with a pair of scissors cutting weeds.

What did you train the troops to do?

Infantry: weapons, marching.

So you were a corporal at this time or a private?

Private first class.

And you were training them.

Well, I was about ready to get out, and this company commander called me in and wanted me to sign up again. He said he'd make me a sergeant. But I said no.

My dad was an insurance agent. He had a real good, profitable business and I was going to go home and go into business with him. So I did. And I was in two years with him – drinking and in trouble.

With your dad.

Yes. My dad never drank or smoked in his life.

Reenlistment and First Deployment to Korea

So when you left Kentucky you were 21, 22?

About 21, 22, yes. This is in the fall of 1948 that I got discharged.

And I was with my dad two years. He sent me to school out in Hartford, Connecticut – an insurance school. I was drinking. I'm a recovered alcoholic, by the way.

Well, then the Korean war broke out the last of June, 1950. I got the idea I had to be in that war. So I signed up.

With the Army again.

Yes. And my dad and mother were just beside themselves. It was a terrible scene. My dad was just crushed because he thought I would take over this very profitable business. So he started to offer me things, like the business. My mother's in tears. You think I'd budge? Not one bit. My oldest sister said, "Ben, when you've made up your mind to do something nobody can change it." And that's true. I quit smoking that way and I quit drinking that way.

So what made you want to go back?

I don't know. Sometimes I say maybe it was a geographical cure. I wanted to get away from the damn bottle. I'd like to say I was patriotic, but that's probably not true.

Well, anyway, I signed up. I went into the Army and back at Ft. Knox again.

And they said, "You again!" (both chuckle).

Yeah.

Ten days later my dad died. I came home on emergency leave. And the town took a petition to get me out of the service so I could run the business – this big, long petition. Every name in town was on it. I decided I wasn't going to take it. I was going to go back in anyway. What a dirty bastard I really was.

So you're about 21, 22?

I'd have been about 24 – old enough to know better.

So you're back at Ft. Knox in the infantry as a …

A private! They didn't even make me a PFC. Isn't that something? Today they wouldn't get by with that.

Well, what happened.

I came home for emergency leave because of my dad's death, for thirty days. Then I went back to Ft. Knox.

It must have been hard for your mom when you said you were going back.

Oh, yeah. My mother was beside herself. My poor parents. They really did have a bad time with me.

So you went back to Ft. Knox, and your job was what?

Well, I was getting processed to go overseas. And I ended up back at Ft. Lawton, Washington again for the second time, and processed us there to go overseas. And they flew us over, via Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. I got into Tokyo at Camp Drake for assignment. They assigned me to the Third Infantry Division. They were down at Beppu in southern Japan, up in the mountains training.

They had a real shortage of troops after the war broke out. This is in probably September or October of 1950. They had put 8500 South Koreans in our division. A division has 12,000 to 14,000 in it, so you can see we had more Koreans than we did. But they brought them from Korea over to Japan and we trained them. It was pretty hard to do because they didn't speak English.

So how did they do it? Did you have translators?

Well, they had some. And you just did whatever you could do.

Acted out.

Yes.

And finally we got done with that and went down to the docks, wherever they were nearby there, and took a ship to Wonsan, North Korea.

So how long were you there helping train these people?

I don't know – a month or so. It wasn't too long. Maybe a little longer. And we went to Wonsan, North Korea.

I can remember when we marched down from this mountain. This mountain was a terrible place, by the way: rain, cold, foggy.

What time of year was it?

October.

So fall.

Yes. And just miserable weather. I'm not saying cold, cold but chilly.

Damp and chilly.

It was miserable place to be. And we went down and got on these ships to go to Wonsan, North Korea. On the way over these Koreans all got sick. They were vomiting all over the place. We were slipping and sliding all over the place on it. We got so angry we just mistreated them terrible. I'm ashamed to say that. Eventually we landed at Wonsan, North Korea, which is way up on the east coast. I think we went over there on a kind of a landing ship where they dropped down in front like an LST and you just go up on the beach. We spent the night in foxholes.

Foxholes.

Yes. They had been dug by a previous unit that had been there. So we spent the night. And the next day we went by truck up to Hamhung, North Korea – north of Hamhung. And we built a perimeter defense around a bridge. So were again foxholes by

the way. And it's starting to get chilly now. This is November. It was the same as being in Minnesota or Canada – that type of temperature. That night all of a sudden hell broke loose – explosions and look up out of the hole and there's tracer bullets going over. We thought, "Holy smoke, what's going on!" And I didn't get up out of the hole because I would have gotten shot if I would have.

The next morning, here all these dead Chinese are laying around there. And one of guys with his bayonet was taking their gold teeth out. Chinese like gold teeth. And he was taking them out. Well, the lieutenant got pretty mad at him and made him stop that.

Then they formed what they called "Task Force Dog." It was made up from our battalion of I don't know how many people. And we went north then because the Marines and the 31st Infantry Regiment from the Army were in real trouble up there. We went up to open the road for them. On the way up we came across these trucks – ambulances, trucks and jeeps – all scattered along the road. And this was kind of on a cliff.

Nobody was inside?

They were all dead. They were American Marines. The Chinese could drop their grenades down on them from up above. So one truck had all these guys sitting in back with their rifles. All of them are black; dead. Along the road they were dead. I don't remember how many.

So this is the North Koreans dropping …

This was the Chinese.

The Chinese were working with the North Koreans?

Yeah. About this time is when the Chinese came into the war. I think it was something like 300,000 Chinese came across the border into North Korea and attacked all of our units.

I was in the Tenth Corps. And the Eighth Army on the west coast, too, was attacked.

The First Marine Division, especially the 31st Regiment of the [Army] Seventh Division, had a bad time up there. The 31st Regiment of about 3,000 had 2,800 killed or captured, including the commanding officer who was a full colonel.

We didn't have it too bad, I don't think. We got sniped at and stuff. Of course the airplanes came in strength. In fact we were up in the mountains and you could see the pilots as they flew by.

How far into North Korea were you?

We were in that general Chosin Reservoir area, which is not too terribly far from the Yellow River, which borders Manchuria.

Well, when we got all that done we came back. Of course, the Chinese overwhelmed us. There were so many of them. That when we got back to Hamhung we evacuated by ship.

How much time did you have to evacuate?

I don't know – a couple weeks, probably, to get everybody.

You knew that they were coming.

Well, they had to get the Seventh Division, the First Marine Division, and 100,000 refugees back, plus us. We were the last division off.

I want to mention something about the civilian refugees. They suffered just terribly. Much more than we did. And they were also dangerous, because Chinese would use these – they wore these baggy white clothes, and they could hide a weapon underneath. And we had one of our officers – Lieutenant LeBlanc – killed by them. He was standing there and one of these guys took a weapon out and shot him.

Most of them were okay, but they suffered terribly. You'd come along the road and there'd be babies laying along the road frozen. A woman even gave birth and abandoned the baby because they couldn't take care of it. They had no food or water. No homes.

I have to tell you, we weren't nice to them like we should have been. I remember we used to kick them out of their homes so we could go in and get warm. One guy, one old Korean guy – they all wore white clothes – he was crawling along in the field on all fours and one of our people was shooting at him just for fun. We all made him stop it, but it showed you how mean we could be, too. We weren't all angels.

[Begin second disk]

Eventually, Christmas Eve day, we got on these amtracs, I think they call them.

So this is on Christmas Eve what year?

1950.

1950 yet.

We got on these small craft and went out and got on bigger ships. We got literally kicked out of North Korea by the Chinese.

There was no way the Americans could stop them, there were so many of them. I've got pictures in one book of Chinese piled up – dead Chinese.

Well, then we went to South Korea, down to Pusan. We landed in Pusan. And they made the mistake of letting us off that night.

And what did you do (chuckles)?

Well, I commanded an oxcart for transportation from a Korean guy. And we went through that town like fire. We'd go in and grab bottles of booze wherever we could find them. And when we got back on the ship that night there was an officer standing there making us give up our little contraband. They never let us off again the next night.

Anyway, finally we got on trucks and headed north, back to the front. We rode in these open air trucks. It was cold.

I didn't mention that in North Korea it got down to 30^0 to 40^0 below zero. And you realize, we don't have anyplace to go at night. We were in a hole in the ground.

Right. You were in foxholes. How did you keep warm in the foxholes?

We didn't. We'd get out of them at night and stomp our feet all night long – dance around. I didn't have a bath for three months. I had lice. We got lice from the Chinese because we'd occupy their holes and they had lice, so we'd get the lice. My first three months over there I didn't have a bath. And to make the story worse, we all got dysentery. And you can imagine what we were like after three months.

Well, they put up shower points for us along the rivers. You'd go in one end of this tent where the showers were at. You'd take your clothes off, and it was cold. You'd go in this shower tent and they'd try to make hot water – they'd have a heater to heat it – but it would get cold. And you were only allowed to be in there for so long and you had to move on. Then you'd come out and they'd delouse you – or maybe they'd delouse you before you went in – I don't remember. And they'd give you clean clothes, then put you on a truck and haul you back to the front again.

How many times did you go through that – the delousing and showers?

Well, the rest of the time I was over there.

Which was how long?

Well, I was over there twice. I don't know how long – 20 months maybe.

I had forgotten about that.

So we went back north again on trucks. The Chinese by that time they had moved. The Chinese could not conduct an offensive operation for long because they didn't have the logistical ability to do so. Most of their stuff was done by foot. So they gave up their big offensive that we all had to bug out on. And they were on their way back – we were pushing them back.

So on our way back north, one day, we were going to occupy a hill. There was probably a platoon of us – less than a platoon; maybe thirty people. We're going up this road. Both sides of the road spread out, and we were going to occupy this hill. We didn't know if it was occupied by the Chinese or not. All of a sudden a machine gun fires at us from this hill up ahead. It was not a big hill – it was a little ridge. And we scattered.

Well, we had a brand new guy with us. And in Korea they use human waste for fertilizer. And they used to have big round tile things – they looked like tiles – three foot across and maybe stuck out of the ground a couple of feet. And that's where they used to throw all their human waste all winter for spring (chuckles) work. Well, the grass had

grown out of that. So when these people are shooting at us with machine gun fire, this young guy, he runs and jumps in that (both chuckle). Splash! The poor guy. Eventually, when he came out he was all black up to his head. We just teased the poor guy to death. I was a sergeant by this time, by the way.

When did you become a sergeant?

I don't remember. I made corporal up there in North Korea.

It sounds like you were not corporal for very long before they made you sergeant.

No.

Was it a field commission?

They don't call it that for a sergeant.

It was a promotion, though – a field promotion?

Yes.

Well, we had to decide then how we were going to get up this hill without getting shot. So we call for a tank to come up. Our idea was to get behind them, and they could fire up at them and we would be behind them and use them for shelter. Well, the tanks came up. And they spot us. We're against this little ridge. And they thought we were Chinese, so they start shooting at us with 50 caliber machine guns! I'll tell you, getting shot at by a 50 caliber machine gun is something. They're big!

We carried panels with us. They were orange, pink – whatever color. And we used them so the planes wouldn't strafe us, because once in a while the planes would shoot at us. We were always getting shot at by our own people. That was a common occurrence. So this one guy starts waving this panel at the tank and they stopped firing and came up and apologized.

Well, then we go on and do go up and occupy this hill.

Did you find anybody up there?

They were gone. And it's getting dusk then. I'm a forward observer, by the way, for a mortar platoon. I called in to fire – the guns were behind us – with a radio. I had a radio man. So I was going to zero-in for the night – our protective fire pattern. We'd send out so many shells and adjust our fire. I saw, and I feel bad about this, maybe about 100 – 200 people come up out of the valley. And I thought, what should I do with them guys. So I fired at them. And they were dropping dead in every direction. And they ran and got into this little village – these straw huts. And they got in there and I threw some white phosphorous in there and burned the town down. I think back. And I don't know if they were Chinese or civilians or what they were. I felt bad, because I might have killed a bunch of civilians. But at the same time …

You'd been attacked and you didn't know.

Right. And you had to protect yourself.

Anyway, we're up there and all of a sudden we get shelled. And I got hit by some white phosphorous – not seriously.

Where did you get hit?

Different parts of my body – burns. Well, anyway, come to find out there was an outfit of our own people on the left flank shooting at us. That was the second time that day we got shot at by our own people.

That finally settled down.

Oh, there was another incident – this was a busy day.

It sounds like it.

While we were up there they decided to send us about four new replacements. They came up and I'm talking to them during this time, and this shelling starts and kills two of these guys.

Two of the replacements?

They never saw a day's combat in their life. They're there and get assigned to us and they get killed.

Well, that's about it.

We took Seoul. I was in three major retreats over there.

About April 23 we were on the west coast and the Chinese attacked us. It was the biggest battle of the Korean War, I read.

This was in …

April. I remember being on this hill, and I remember this company commander – Captain Witt – come crashing in to us and said, "Let's get the hell out of here!" And I wondered what he meant, and I looked up and here's thousands of Chinese coming. So we took off.

How did you get out of there?

I ran!

Just running.

Yeah. One of my buddies – Sergeant McCaslin – came flying down the hill and ripped his pants off. He ran around the next few days with his rear end sticking out.

Anyway, I ran down. And off to my left at that time was a field hospital of the British – Gloucester Battalion. They had a field hospital there. A British jeep came

along and I hopped on it. There was a British soldier there. He got hit in the face by white phosphorous, and his whole face was peppered with burns.

That Gloucester Battalion, by the way, got captured – that hospital. And the whole battalion got either killed or captured – the Gloucester Battalion.

Except the truck that you were in.

The jeep.

Well, we headed south like a bat out of hell. I'm kind of ashamed of it in a way. But we had no choice, or end up like the Gloucesters.

By the time I got to where I wanted to go it was night. I slept under the muzzle of a canon that night, and slept like a dog even though they ran those canons all night – bang, bang, bang (chuckles). It never woke me up, I was so exhausted.

Did many of the men in your …

Well, Sergeant Forehand, who I would like to include here, he got captured. He got shot in the leg and broke his leg. He was 38 years old, married and had a little four or five-year-old boy. He had an awful time of it. He got captured in April and he finally died in October. He marched 150 miles with that broken leg. His sister interviewed one of the fellow POW's who survived. The night before he died he gave everything away. He said he wasn't going to make it. He said he couldn't go on any longer. The next morning he was dead. He died of malnutrition.

The Chinese never fed their prisoners. They just didn't feed them. They didn't have enough for themselves, probably. But here's the story of Geraldine Forehand, of her brother's deal, and I'd like to include it here. [SEE ATTACHED]

We will include it with the transcript.

He had an awful time of it.

Our division got four Medals of Honor during that time there. There were only 78 given in the whole war. It was a bad battle.

Then, the following May we had another incident where the Chinese overran us. It was foggy – there was a lot of fog over there.

And where were you in this one?

I was in the front. It was a little to the right of where we were at; a little different area.

This was in May?

Yes, May of 1951.

That time my good friend Sergeant McCaslin got killed. Why we happened to be good friends was he was from Lima, Ohio and my sister married a guy from Lima, Ohio and they knew each other. So we had something in common and we got to be good

friends. He was a World War II veteran – combat veteran. He was probably 28 or 29 when he died. They recalled a lot of these guys; we had a lot of experienced people in Korea that first year.

We were on this hill and the Chinese overran us in the fog. Of course there was a lot of firing going on. My friend got out of his hole to see what was going on and he got hit with machine gun fire – a burp gun; the Chinese carried these burp guns, an automatic weapon. And it killed him.

I went out to see his parents when I got home.

That pretty well wraps up that time there. This was my first tour in Korea. Now I have another tour coming.

When did you finish that tour?

I think I went home in October, 1951. I was over there about eleven months.

Were you discharged at this point?

No. I was sent back because my tour was over.

In fact, you know that bad night I had when the guy jumped in the human waste and all that?

Yes.

I had a toothache that was just horrible. This was the fall. It was cold and rainy. It was horrible. An infantry man's life is horrible. You're out in the rain, sopping wet, marching when it's cold, you're in the hot in the summer and the cold in the winter. It's not a good life.

I got this awful toothache. And that day I was telling you about with the tanks and all that. I was on this ridge with a toothache. I wanted to go back and they wouldn't let me. Well, the next day I decided I was going to go back, and I went back. I went to this dentist's tent. They had a guy sitting on a bicycle, cranking it to run the drill.

(Both chuckle) To generate the energy!

Anyway, then I was told I was going to go home. I had orders to go home and I did. I went home and I went to …

Returning to the States Again

Were you flown home?

No. We went by ship to Camp Stoneman, California. Then I flew from there to Chicago, Midway. I was home on leave.

How long were you home on leave?

Probably thirty days. This was Christmas of 1951.

My dad had died and left me some money. I bought a brand new Olds 98 car. It was a beautiful car.

I was stationed at Ft. Riley, Kansas training troops. I was a field first sergeant – Sergeant First Class rank. I got promoted out there to Sergeant First Class. When I was coming I decided – I had finished up one group of 16 weeks training and I decided I was going to go south. So I signed up to go to school at Ft. Benning, Georgia. I went to the infantry light and heavy weapons leadership school and I spent the winter there. I don't remember how many months – probably a couple of months at least; maybe three.

What made you want to go for that training?

I wanted to go south for the winter!

So I went through that course okay. Then I went back to Ft. Riley. I was going to have to train troops, and I didn't like doing that. It was boring to me. You stand out there on the firing range all day long, or you're giving physical training; you're marching the people and stuff. I was field first sergeant and had a couple of hundred troops or so I was responsible for.

I was drinking a lot, too. I'd get home. If I had to get to the bathroom at 2:00 in the morning, everybody would have to get up with me.

Second Tour in Korea

Kind of noisy.

I woke up everybody in the place. I'd make them clean their rifles or something – some mean thing.

Anyway, while I was there I decided I wasn't going to stay, so I signed up to go to Korea again. A full-bird colonel called me and said, "Bastian, are you crazy? You don't have to do this, you know." I said I was going to do it, and I did.

So, back to Ft. Lawton again. This time I took a ship over to Korea. We went to Japan first.

If you reenlist to go back, you can pick your division. I picked the second division because my uncle had served in it in World War I. I wound up by ship back over to Korea. I think I landed at Pusan and took a train north to the division rear where they had the replacement company.

This was what timeframe?

This was 1952 – about July.

I was assigned to the second division – 38th infantry.

What were your responsibilities supposed to be?

I was a forward observer.

A forward observer again.

Yes. Later I became a platoon leader in a rifle company.

Anyway, I was a forward observer. My first job was on the arsenal outpost. We had outposts over there.

This was a different type of warfare now. We had mobile warfare before. Now we're in trenches. We had trenches all the way across Korea.

So you were in tents at the time?

No. We were in trenches.

You were living in the trenches.

Yes. We had log bunkers where we stayed. But they were just trenches. It was a miserable place, too – rainy, slippery, sliding around in them.

My first assignment was this arsenal outpost. We went to this outpost, with this mainline resistance – mainline of resistance I'm referring to – down in this valley, in an armored … [vehicle]. And we'd go lickitty split because as soon as you started the Chinese would send mortars up there. There was one … [vehicle] up there that had been hit and was all burned up. But this outpost was not on a high hill. It was on a ridge; a kind of arc. And they called it arsenal outpost.

I was sent out there, and the French foreign legion occupied this position. I was sent out there as a forward guy to locate positions, register fire of the mortars. A couple of days I was out there and I was the only American there.

The French foreign legion guys are different. All they wore was combat boots and shorts. And they drank like fish. They had wine and Jap beer. And of course, I was at home – back to my old bottle again. We got drinking one day. It was a hot August day. Well, first I got there and all these dead Chinese were in the trench. They had been attacked the day before by the Chinese and fought them virtually hand-to-hand in this trench. There must have been 6 or 8 Chinese who were dead, and they were starting to bloat already because they had been dead in the hot sun in the August weather.

It must have been rather pungent, too.

Yes. Well, they had to throw them out of the trenches. They had these gas masks on. Well, I'm an American. I had to show them that we Americans could handle it, so I didn't wear one. But I made it. We threw them over the edge of the trench.

Into what?

Into 'nowheresville.' The rats ate them.

So we got drinking, then. And they played a game, then. They'd stand on the top of the bunker and the Chinese would shoot at them. I'm an American, right? An

arrogant American. I had to get up there and show them. And I did. And these bullets are cracking by – when a bullet goes by it cracks; it makes a crack as it goes by. And they're cracking by my ears (chuckles). Well, we all survived – nobody got hit.

It was a miserable place, though.

There was a hand sticking out of the trench. It was an officer – he got buried in there. You see, these bunkers – when it rained, they'd collapse sometimes and everybody in them would get killed. We'd go by and shake hands with this guy. We were bad people.

How deep were these?

The trenches? They were six feet deep. If they were any less than six you'd have to crouch or the Chinese would shoot you.

Well, that got that job done.

The next thing that happened to me there was that we lost an outpost named 'Old Baldy."

It was taken by the North Koreans?

By the Chinese. Our K company lost it. I was in the second battalion and that was [E, F, G and H] companies… Anyway, G and F companies took it back, and I was in with G company. It was a night attack. We got up to this area where we jumped off to go onto the hill. It was another hill. Then you had to go down the trenches and back up again to get to the top of Old Baldy. We attacked it at night and we got shelled terribly before we went up.

That afternoon, my company commander and I went up on a recon to an old shell hole. The Chinese spotted us and started throwing mortar rounds on us. I'll tell you – it's like having someone with a sledge hammer hitting you on the side of the head; all the explosions. But we went up Old Baldy.

We took a lot of casualties. A lot of our officers. As I remember it rained some and it got slippery. Then we had to pull back – the Chinese were too much for us. We left some people up there. Another sergeant asked who would go up with him to get those guys and I said I would – nobody else would speak up, and I was like a damn fool – I was always like a fool. I said I'd go up. And I did. We got up there and most of them were dead. I found a lieutenant up there whose stomach was all open. His intestines were hanging out. And he was alive. I'm telling him I was going to get him down. But I couldn't move him because moving him caused pain. So I left him. The next day I found him dead.

Anyway, this other guy and I – this sergeant – we got up there on top of the hill, and all of a sudden all these Chinese come up to the top and we start shooting at them. We were hitting them. But we had to get out of there because there were too many of them.

The next morning the Chinese – it was foggy; it was always foggy down in the valleys. They set up a loudspeaker and started playing Chinese music. And they said, "We're coming to get you today." There were only two times when I had a yellow streak going up my back.

That was one of them?

That was one of them. That was an awful feeling.

Did they come up?

They didn't. I got relieved then.

But that was the only time I was recommended for a valor award. I had some meritorious awards. But I didn't get it because they gave me a battlefield commission after that – up to second lieutenant. So they said they weren't going to give me a silver star because they were going to give me a battlefield commission instead.

Well, that's wrong because you don't get a battlefield commission for valor. But they did that all along. I did get a little ticked off at the time.

Anyway, then I got a commission as a second lieutenant and I went with a rifle company – Company F. And my first assignment was on 'The Hook.' It was a miserable place. This is winter again.

What was 'The Hook?'

The Hook was, well, the Canadians occupied it before us. What they did was they dug three tunnels in that hill - -in and out. The theory was if the Chinese shelled you, you'd go in the tunnels. And when the shelling stopped, you'd come out and fight them.

So the Canadians had built those tunnels.

Yes.

So, in these tunnels it was cold with dripping water off the ceilings. But that's how we lived.

So you lived in the tunnels.

Well, General Fry had commissioned me. I might add I wasn't a good officer. I was a pretty good sergeant, but I wasn't a gentleman by any imagination. Well, General Fry came up to that trench with his entourage and found a couple of my guys didn't have their rifles with them. He was going to demote me. He said, "I made you an officer and I can take it away." So I thought this would be a short term for me.

Well, before I went to F Company I was sent to Headquarters Company as the operations sergeant.

What would your responsibilities be as an operations sergeant?

Well, everything is done on paper to start with. An operations officer maps out what you're going to do and puts it on paper – your instructions: what you're going to carry, what you're going to wear, what rations you're going to take, how you're going to get there, and all that. All that had to be done because otherwise there'd be nothing but

confusion. I was his assistant, of course. He wanted me to join his group there, and I didn't like it. It was in the rear at battalion headquarters. That's when I asked, after I got commissioned, to go to F Company. That's how I got there.

So the F Company is where you were in the tunnels?

Yes. I don't know from that point on … I wound up in the hospital then, too. I got big bumps on my head.

From …

From penicillin. I was out a couple of days – didn't know up from down. When I woke up I was in this tent with mud on the floor and it was the hospital. Mud! Anyway, it was a miserable life.

They came out with a rule that if you had been there twice you could ask to leave. And I thought, well, I'd go to Tokyo. I'd been there a few times. I could set up a little light housekeeping with a Japanese girl. I thought, well, I'd go there. Well, they didn't send me there. They sent me to Okinawa, to an island. I'm a second lieutenant and I got to hanging out in the officers club every night getting drunk. I'd get drunk every night. I just hated it there.

There was a lieutenant colonel and a captain there, and another lieutenant who had got a battlefield commission. The captain had got one in World War II. And myself. We drank together. And there was a doctor. We got to drinking every night.

But this captain and I were up there one night and we were dancing. And this major's wife had come up overnight and I tried to get her to go with me. She told her husband and the husband told the lieutenant colonel and the lieutenant colonel called me in and kicked me out of the officers club forever. I just wasn't an officer and a gentleman. I was a pretty good sergeant, but not too good as an officer.

So I could see the end of the tunnel. I wasn't going to make a career out of this. Originally I was going make a career out of it. So when the war ended in Korea they said, well, all you young lieutenants can get out now because we don't need you. So I got out. And that was the end of my story.

Returning to the States and Final Discharge

Where were you formally discharged?

Camp Carson, Colorado? I came home by ship.

By the way, I came home as an officer, so this time I got to eat in the dining room instead of down in the hold. So it was better that way.

Do you remember the name of the ship?

No. I only remember that one ship.

So you took the ship in to California?

Yes.

And from California you took a train, plane?

I took a train up to Fort Carson, Colorado. Then I got discharged and I took a train home from there.

Now, all this time you were gone were you communicating with your mom?

Oh, yeah. I wrote letters. Like I said, she saved every letter I sent.

Did you get packages from home ever?

Yes, a few times. I liked those little cigars and I'd have her send those to me – because they didn't go out fast; they stayed lit for a little while. I think she probably sent me some food, too. I don't know. Oh, yeah. My mother was a great person. Like I said, I ought to be ashamed of myself because I did what I damned well pleased. I didn't think of anybody else, I guess.

So when were you finally discharged?

1953, probably in the fall. October, I think. I was in a full seven years.

Returning to Civilian Life

So you got home. What did you do when you got home?

What do you think I did (both chuckle)?

Besides that! Did you go out and get a job?

I'll tell you what. I'm in a bar one night. I'd just got home. Just that day I said to this guy I've got to get a job. He said, "You've got one. Report to work tomorrow as a laborer for a brick layer." It was not my intention to go to work the day I got out of the army. But I opened my big mouth. And of course I reported for work all winter in awful conditions as a brick layer.

Where was this?

In Hinkley. But we did most of our work in Aurora.

One day we're plastering a house, and I'm the only guy mixing this stuff – the mud. Noon came and I was covered with white plaster. I gave this one guy my lunch bucket. I took off the overalls and gave it to another guy and said if I couldn't find

something better to do I'd go back to the Army. And I walked off the job. No notice or nothing.

You have a hard time readjusting. I didn't realize that, and I don't think people did back then like today they recognize it.

So then I got a job as a bartender. And that was great. I got $10 to tend bar, and I went on the other side of the bar when I got off and spent it. That's where I met my wife. I'm tending bar and all these girls came in – five or six of them – one Sunday. They'd been to Starved Rock and they came in for a drink. My wife was 20 years old. Of course you could eat and drink when you're 18 when you're a woman … So my friend, he's sitting down. He says to give the girls a drink. He didn't have no money either, so it was on the house. Next thing you know – he was more forward than me; I was kind of shy – he made dates. I went out with this one girl – blond girl. And my wife passed the word along that she'd like to go out with me some time. So I took her out and before you know it, I'm married. And I would have been back in the service if I hadn't got married.

As a matter of fact, my thoughts were this. As crazy as it may seem, I was going to go to Indochina and join the French foreign legion.

Really.

Yes. I probably couldn't have gotten by with it because I probably would have lost my citizenship. Although, I don't think it would have bothered me at the time. But that war ended, too, in 1954. And that's when I got married.

So you finally ended up doing … you were an insurance adjustor. How did you get there?

I got married and had to get a job. I didn't have a job. We went on a trip and did all kinds of things. I had some money. My dad left me a little bit and I had saved some in the service. We took a trip. I took her to Gettysburg battlefield. Isn't that a nice romantic place to go (chuckles)?

Anyway, when we got back I had to get a job. I was in the bar again and said I had to get a job. Someone said, "My son-in-law will get you a job." So I got a job working nights in a factory.

I saw an ad for a trainee adjustor and applied for it. I'd been in the insurance business before.

Right. Your dad's business.

They hired me. They weren't going to. But I made up a book. I had pictures of our house, pictures of her as a baby in there and a little history about myself. I took it up to this guy and it impressed him so that he went to Chicago and told the guy, "I want him." Because I didn't have a college degree or anything, and they wanted a college degree. But I got in.

Did you take any education courses; GI Bill or anything like that?

No. No, I didn't. I was too damn lazy. I never had a plan in my life. I lived day-to-day and I just never looked ahead. I was crazy. Like I said, we got married – we eloped because my mother-in-law didn't like me. In fact, when I got back she had her brother check up on me in Hinkley. She said they found out the best job I ever had was on a bar stool.

Were there any friendships you had from your time in the Army that lasted?

I have contact. I have a couple I talk to – one of them once a year, and one of them I served with the first time I was in Korea. His name is Bradley – Ernie Bradley. I talk to him quite often. I have a couple others I talk to. And I have some I served in China with I talk to.

In fact, there was a couple – a group in Indiana that has a reunion every year and I went to that a couple of times. And then this battlefield commission stuff – we had a group in Illinois that had a luncheon every month down in Peru, Illinois – LaSalle-Peru area. But they're all pretty well dead, now. Most of them were World War II. We had one from Vietnam. I was the only one from Korea. It was a small group – we had only 1100 in the whole United States in that group. Battlefield commissions were not given out arbitrarily, so I was always – I shouldn't use the word, 'proud' – but I was kind of proud that I got it because normally you have to go to OCS or through ROTC or West Pont to get a commission and I didn't do any of that.

Lasting Impressions

How did your time in the military affect the way you see the world today?

Well, I don't know. I don't like the Army today. They say they're going to put women in the infantry and it's just not going to work. I know. Not in my type of war. Maybe with the type of war they have today where they're not living in trenches or foxholes. They go back to their barracks at night, so maybe that type of thing they could. But not my type of war.

I'll tell you, I could barely make it. We'd climb those hills maybe 12 hours a day. Some of them were so steep we had to grab little outgrowths to get up them. And the hygiene. You're dirty and filthy. I can remember standing around. We all had colds. We had our handkerchiefs and they'd get all full of you know what. And we're standing around holding them up over a fire so all that stuff would get dry and crusty so we could shake it off. And they smelled awful. But that's how we lived. I wasn't pleasant at all.

How do you think your time in the service affected your life? Was it a good thing for you?

Well! It was a good thing for me because I had no self-confidence. And that was probably how I got to drinking when I was young. It gave me some self-confidence. And I learned a lot. And I got to lead other people.

Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you'd like to mention?

Not really. There are a lot of things I could tell you about Korea but I can't remember it all. You can't remember all of it, especially after all these years.

In that case, we appreciate your sharing your story. Thank you very much.