

Melinda Braun

The Cost of Living

In 1952, the population of the United States was 151,684,000. Of this number approximately 3.3 million were unemployed. For the rest, an average working salary might be \$2,992. A Wear-Ever salesman could make \$10,000 a year, a waitress \$175 a month, a counter girl \$50 a week, a painter \$15 a day, and factory help \$1.25 an hour.

In 1952 a loaf of bread cost 15 cents.

In 1952 my grandfather, Harold Dahlstrom, left Wisconsin for Korea. One year of active combat. They called it a police action at first, he told me when I asked him on the phone. I stared at the black and white photograph of him standing in his army uniform in an unnamed street in Seoul, an enormous grin across his face, and pressed the receiver closer against my ear. I recognized and remembered the familiarity of that grin, enough to know that the young man smiling back at the photographer was a relative of mine.

If you died during a police action, he said, the family got \$5,000. If it was a war they got \$10,000. The bureaucrats in Washington were ready to have them fight, but weren't ready to pay. Truman changed that, he said. Two words became one and doubled their worth. He spent three months of basic training in Florida, one month on a ship through the Panama Canal to the Pacific, and another month in the harsh climate of Hokkaido. He said his first impression of the Japanese was surprising. He thought they were slender, elegant people, taller than he expected, dark-eyed and brown-skinned, the type of skin used to the climate, used to hard winter. He said the Japanese looked like Indians. He said they had beautiful white teeth.

In 1952 a tube of toothpaste cost 31 cents.

I asked my grandfather what Seoul looked like in 1952, after the Marines came through Inchon. Destroyed, he said. Bombed to bits. Chunks of concrete and rubble next to miraculously untouched buildings, red and green banners and electric lights. Acidic dust and smoke still burned in the air. Lovely people, he said. Nice people. Very polite. Very clean. They rubbed their eyes and wiped their noses in the smoke and ash.

In 1952 a 200-count box of Kleenex cost 19 cents.

They humped it north of the city, Mortar Company, 7th Infantry division, 3rd platoon. They dug hootches and bunkers on Heartbreak Ridge, fired 4.2 high angle mortars off the backs of modified Chevy's, fired high explosive M3s, white phosphorus shells, smoke M2s at the Chinese front line 2500 yards away. They spent whole afternoons watching the 105 and 155 howitzers pound the Chinese, watching the air fill with white smoke. They watched the engineers build cable lines up the steep hills, and the lines ran supply conveyors to the top. They looked at maps and counted the hills. On odd days they had classes and drills, the platoons took turns being the enemy. They did night marches. They had parades and practiced marching because the Army impressed upon them the importance of parades. They watched the human line push and pull below them. They carved into the sides of sheer walls, wrote letters in the rain, counted the number of days till R&R, added up their points, and waited for mail, magazines and packages. They waited to be sent someplace else.

In 1952 a 2-door Buick sedan cost \$2,280. A half-quart of Allstate quality motor oil cost 14 cents.

They caught shrapnel and mortar fragments in their T-52 body armor. They wore Doron vests over gray green fatigues. The vests used over-lapping, curved Doron plates around the upper torso, and nylon duck covered the shoulders. It was designed to be worn under a field jacket, covered with 6-ounce nylon that could be rinsed easily of blood, front fastened with zippers and snaps, available in small, medium, and large, and covering approximately five and a half square feet, which wasn't quite enough to prevent Corporal Mutt Meier from bleeding to death.

A Doron vest cost \$39.04.

Harold's nickname was Lucky Bastard, given to him by Corporal Leonard "Mutt" Meier, who turned out not to be quite as lucky. Mutt had nicknames for everyone. PFC Keith Christensen was "Wiseguy," since he had an answer for everything. Harold arrived two weeks after Keith and when Keith asked him how many days he'd been at war, Harold said fourteen. Wiseguy smiled over his plate of ham and beans and shook his head, "No man," he said. "One day. You've been at war one day. And tomorrow will be your first day too. And the day after that." Wiseguy grinned wider, "It's always your first damn day." This was what Wiseguy had been told himself, two weeks before Harold arrived, though Wiseguy liked to believe he'd invented it. He also liked to repeat often quoted words of wisdom, "There's only three things an American soldier is afraid of: Diarrhea, Gonorrhea, and Ko-rea." He always laughed after he said this, as if he found himself to be extremely impressed with his own cleverness.

Mutt called Private Henry Dewey "Big D." Big D was from Meridian,

Mississippi. He stood 6'3" and weighed over 250 lbs. His skin was black as coal tar. Big D scared the bejassus out of the Chinese, who had never seen anything like him before. He also scared the bejassus out of Harold the first time he met him, since Harold had never been in such close quarters with anyone who looked like Big D either. The Army had only been desegregated for two years, but Harold found he got along fine with Big D. He liked his laugh. Big D moved like a dancer, a disguised agility that no one would have expected when appraising his physique, which as it was commanded immediate attention and respect, deserved or not. He was the gunner and could almost lift the whole M2 mortar himself, which completely loaded weighed 333 lbs. Harold noticed that he always felt a little bit safer when he was near Big D, who had been in country for nine months, who terrified the Chinese and North Koreans, and he always wanted him as his partner when they were given a job to do, hauling logs up the sides of the hills in the rain to build mortar platforms. Big D worked hard. He said that was the one thing he knew how to do. He liked to work, liked the Army, because, he confessed to Harold more than once, no matter what happened there would always be, "some'pin to do."

Mutt Meier called PFC Peter LaDuke "Frog." Frog was half French, half Crow Indian. He always had a cigarette dangling between his lips, lit or unlit, like a security blanket. He was French or Indian depending on his mood. He was French when they ate their C-rations, and he examined the contents. "Mon Dieu. Merde. *This* is shit." Frog always traded with Warren Lindquist, his candy for Warren's cigarettes. Warren was from Ames, Iowa and his nickname was Sweets. He was the medic.

Mutt gave Harold his name when a beam collapsed inside their hootch after grenade fire, or mortar fire, or friendly fire, or whatever fire it was had shrapnel flying about. Harold had just entered, standing in the middle when whatever it was exploded. He didn't move, just stood straight, squeezing his eyes closed and trying to count. No one was hit. They coughed in the dust and then the wooden beam came down. It hit Harold on the helmet and dented it. It hit him so hard his helmet curled his ears down.

"Dammit," said Mutt, when they got the helmet off. "Jesus Christ, you're a lucky bastard," he stated, eyeing the dented metal dome.

"Why didn't you take it off when you came in?" asked Ronnie Krammer. Mutt called Ronnie Krammer "Spud" because he had a face that looked like a bowl of mashed potatoes. Two month later, Spud would have his round face burned with white phosphorus. He would go blind. "You're always supposed to take it off," said Spud.

"I don't know," said Harold and rubbed his ears.

"You goddamn lucky bastard," repeated Mutt, who, as stated before, did not have the same kind of fortune. Seventeen days after, a high explosive M3

fragment removed his left arm at the shoulder. He bled to death on Sweets before the squad could even radio back for a MASH unit. His vest was spotless. They found just a tip of a finger lying in the dirt, looking like a strange pink stick. They buried it.

Harold rubbed his temples. He had a headache.

In 1952 a bottle of 50-count Aspirin cost 39 cents.

In 1952 the Defense Department announced that American battle casualties in Korea totaled 114,685. 20,167 deaths, 82,134 wounded, 9,446 missing, 1,553 captured, and 1,885 previously missing but returned. The defense budget was 55.5 billion dollars.

In July 1952, the Company gave them a party. They had parties quite often. Whenever they came off a hill or when a large batch of people rotated home. The Army was throwing money at the Company anyway and the CO found a way to spend it. Parties. The CO ordered \$10 cases of beer, cases and cases of Coca-Cola. They went swimming and got sunburned. The cooks made them sandwiches and potato salad.

In 1952 Kraft Mayonnaise cost 41 cents. A dozen eggs 55 cents.

Harold floated in the river and imagined 10,000 Chinese coursing through the mountains to shoot his stomach open, tear out his guts, cut out his tongue, stick his head on a stake, string a necklace with his teeth. He tried to count how many ways he could die, and wondered if he would do it well - bravely and honorably. Or would he mess his pants, freeze up, start to cry? He didn't think anyone got to choose.

Mostly, he thought, it was all very stupid. Stupid ways to die. Gross. Idiotic. Things he never wanted to think could ever happen, happened. He remembered the story about the paratroopers' bodies, the skeletons, still in fatigues at the bottom of a pond some G.I.s had been swimming in. The bodies had been there over a year, and they had to call the graves registration to come and pull them out.

He drank a Coke and closed his eyes. He pictured his wife's face, her voice so soft compared to the harsh grunts and screams he was getting used to. The 105 howitzer blasts and chopper blades became a constant background noise. Background sounds. He remembered with sickly unease the sound of a trip wire, even though it had been a drill, the zing, the popping, the way his bowels felt when he rolled on the ground, aware of himself and the way his skin felt, noticing for the first time it would split as easily as a balloon. He was only a balloon floating over a thistle field. He was aware of how alive he was. Most of all, he was aware of how afraid he was, afraid of being lost, afraid his body rotting

at the bottom of a pool where no one would find him. He drank the rest of his Coke and kept his eyes shut, pretending he was floating in the cool, deep water of Lake Michigan. He thought about his family in Wisconsin and wondered if his son was walking yet.

At home my father crawled across an eggshell white linoleum kitchen floor. They lived in a three-bedroom bungalow that cost \$12,500 to build. A three-piece bedroom set cost \$109.00. A ten-cubic foot GE refrigerator \$439.95 at Sears.

My father gurgled and squawked and used a chair to pull himself up into a bowlegged stance, wavering on chubby pink legs and smiling at the beam the sun made through the window.

In 1952 10 jars of Libby's baby food cost 93 cents. A boy's bicycle \$37.88.

In September 1952 Harold lived up to his name again when he caught a North Korean burp-gun slug in the chest. His \$39.04 vest took the bullet and left him with a purplish green bruise. Lucky Bastard. Spud Krammer was lit up with white phosphorus and caught a bullet in his leg, and it tore off his kneecap. His face was burned, they called in a MASH unit, and he screamed hysterically until the shot Sweets gave him took effect. He was shipped back to Japan, lost his leg, and received a purple heart. Harold never heard from him after that but figured that Spud would rather have his leg and eyes any day, instead of a pin that probably cost 2 cents to make.

Harold's hands were covered with Spud's blood, and he stared at them, unable to stop thinking how much Spud's knee had looked like raw hamburger. The blood dried and crusted into the grooves and ridges of his skin, got under his nails, smelled sweet and pungent.

In 1952 a 2 bars of Dial deodorant soap cost 27 cents.

Fifty years later I asked him things he could and could not remember, or didn't want to. The long distance phone call costs 10 cents a minute for the evening/weekend rate. I asked him what it was like in the Fifties. He said you could swim all day at the city pool for a dime. They'd stamp your hand and you could just come and go as much as you wanted. The daily paper cost a nickel. Since I didn't know anything about the cost of things I just listened and nodded. Occasionally, I interrupted to ask what certain things meant, what the numbers stood for, how much it was worth, what things looked like. I asked carefully. I asked about the weather. Like here, he said. The Midwest. Hot, humid summers, bitter winters. Many died of exposure. Frostbite. I was afraid of the things I might hear, what he might tell me, what I wouldn't understand. He said he lost a lot of good friends. Good guys, he told me. I could not ask if he ever killed

anyone. It didn't matter, I thought, because he could have said yes or no. He could have said both and it would have been true.

He called back a half-hour after we said goodbye, and my father handed me the cordless phone with unusually bright, curious eyes. I knew why he was calling back, but my head was pounding, my tongue dry and swollen, afraid of the thoughts I had left him with, unable to prepare myself for what they would be, a confession I was not qualified to listen to or understand. I took the phone, and left the kitchen, walked into the dining room, moving straight for the large picture window. His voice was small, like a child's, tightly pleading with the grief of things I would never know about, things I could barely imagine. "I just wanted you to know," he began, "I wanted you to know I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't want to hurt anybody. I didn't want to hurt them."

I rubbed the knot at my throat, looked up, and pressed my head against the windowpane. "I know," I repeated, realizing that I didn't know anything, I didn't know anything at all about my family, I didn't know anything about their lives, and I knew nothing of my history.

I stood at the window after we said goodbye a second time, not ready to answer my parents' questions because something had wrapped itself around my neck and I could not speak, I could barely breathe. I imagined Harold in his house, sitting in his recliner in front of the TV, sitting in the dark, sitting and thinking about things that happened fifty years ago, things as fresh as new milk and as sharp as razor blades, trying to remember the price of each, remembering how much the cost of living was in 1952.

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