

William Childress

A Poet Remembers Korea

Once had a photograph, faded and creased, that showed me grinning ferociously into some soldier's clicking glass eye. Fatigues (HBTs we called them because they were made of herring bone twill) oozed down my 120-pound frame, a body no available uniform would fit, and both my hands held blocks of TNT. My blond hair was crew cut and spiky in Korea's early spring sun, and the landscape around me was rolling farmland, dotted with Koreans busy at a grim task—the relocation of centuries of their dead.

The graveyard would soon be an airstrip for Sabrejets and the prop-driven Mustangs of the ROK Air Force, who hot-rodged the fast little planes to beat all hell. It was bitter cold, but the smell of rotting human flesh cramped my nostrils and surely seeped through the white masks worn by the removal crews. Even so, I felt a sense of excitement that only a 19-year-old straight from a sharecrop farm could feel. This war was my ticket off that farm, and to someone used to following farting mules from sunup to sundown, a “police action” wasn't very daunting.

At some point, I wrote a poem about displacement of the dead, refugees even as corpses, but that untutored effort is long gone, the victim of hard traveling, house fires, and dissolution in the fumes of drinking that consumed me for half a dozen years after Korea.

I've never quite figured out how that war got its hooks into me. Ignorance was to be my shield against any problems it might cause. As far as combat went, I saw little compared to line soldiers. From late 1952 through the war's end, fighting was as sporadic as peace agreements. All the serious battles had been fought, and now the brass were skirmishing in Panmunjom.

I was an army Demolitions Specialist, MOS 3533, in a Combat Engineer unit billeted by marines and paid by the Air Force—one of those weird wartime hybrids called SCARWAF (Special Category Army Reassigned With Air Force). I haven't met any Scarwafians or even seen the shoulder patch in decades, but it was a white winged sword on a red background. Our job was to build an airstrip for marine, USAF and ROK pilots so that endless circles of planes took off and landed round the clock to bomb North Korea. The thunder of jets and propeller

planes was almost constant in the closing days of bomb runs. Strangely, I reached a point where it never bothered me anymore.

One day Ted Williams, who saw duty twice as a marine pilot in WWII and Korea, crash-landed his Skyraider on our strip. None of us peons were allowed to see him, though, even from afar, and I've lost the pictures I took of his fighter-bomber being hoisted by a crane. I might've been able to trade them for baseball cards.

In the lost photo I mentioned, I was skinnier than a stick. But by the time I completed my second hitch, as a paratrooper, I was iron-hard and weighed a muscular 165. I guess you could say I grew up in the army—seven inches and fifty pounds in seven years.

I never understood why my buddies bitched about army chow. I had never eaten so good, even in Korea, and found C-rations delicious and K-rations entirely palatable. It takes very little to please a redneck from a sharecrop farm.

I couldn't wait to join the army. It promised a bed of my own, escape from a younger brother who regularly peed in the one we shared, meat three times a day—and \$57 a month to spend! It also meant getting out from under the heavy hands of my stepfather.

To give him credit, he reluctantly signed up his favorite mule. He had to. No one at the Oklahoma City induction center would believe a kid standing 5 feet 1 and weighing 103 pounds was 18 years old. As it was, I almost failed, because 105 was the army's lowest weight limit.

"Tell ya what," chuckled the beefy SFC at the weigh-in, winking at a nearby corporal. "Go eat some bananas and drink all the water ya can, and we'll weigh ya again." I did, came back, and saw with sinking heart that I still weighed only 104.

The sergeant grinned.

"What the hell," he said. "You want in that bad, I'll *give* ya the pound, kid."

I've always been grateful for his generosity, because the military changed and molded my life in far-reaching ways. Through it I attained a Master of Fine Arts degree, even though—to this day—I don't have a high school diploma. My old man took me out of school to hit the migrant trail too often for me to graduate.

The best education I got came from participation in a war. As a combat engineer, I saw and experienced things that changed me forever, that gave me insights into human beings I'd rather not have had—that touched the soul I came home without. Along with a hardscrabble childhood, those experiences were the making of me as a poet and writer. But in retrospect, they may also have hampered me from realizing my fullest potential. If one aim of being a writer is to change things for the better, cynicism in my case made me say, "Nothing really matters anyway." It was an attitude that took me on a six-year bender.

The army cut me a slab of real life I'd never imagined before, teaching me just how plastic "truth" can be. I was born and raised in the South, but I hated it, its ignorance, and the arrogant racism so evident during basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. One night in 1951, I was pulling KP when four soldiers came in. They wore olive drab stocking caps pulled down and their collars were up to disguise them, but I knew the bastards belonged to the KKK in civilian life. While the cook on duty quickly disappeared, this quartet of cowards headed straight for a lanky New Yorker and proceeded to beat hell out of him. He fought back, but there were too many.

His crime? Being a "Yankee" who openly befriended black soldiers.

I learned to smoke unfiltered Pall Malls in the army, a stupid habit it took me years to kick. I learned how to lose my paycheck in crap games in the latrine late at night. I learned how to sit with buddies at a table in the Beer-X, ranks of brown bottles before us, then waddle back to the barracks, stone drunk. And in a Columbia, South Carolina hotel, I got so puking drunk my buddies immersed me in a tub of cold water. What we wanted was pussy; what we got was hangovers. Away from home for the first time, kids desperate to be men, we did what we thought men did. That, too, was part of war. We knew Korea would probably take us and it did (it was April, 1951). Many went, and some didn't make it back. Years later, in October 2003, I made light of shipping out in a story in *Arizona Highways*.

One of my early heroes was a 21-year-old master sergeant, a veteran of some of the fiercest fighting of the war. So many of his company died, he rose with blinding speed through the ranks, making master sergeant in less than a year. Hardened far beyond his years, he drank heavily and his foul mouth mortared the barracks with obscenities—many of which in my Southern Baptist naïveté I hadn't heard. It was the first time I heard the words "cocksucker" and "motherfucker." I tried to imagine what my preacher back home would say to such language. Of course, that same church was still keeping Negroes outside its lily-white doors, so why should I care what a hypocrite said?

By the time I was fourteen, I was already pulling away from religion and the war finished the job. To me, it was just politics under another name. It was shocking to hear chaplains asking God's blessings on a war where hell, in the form of napalm, had already fried thousands of "gooks"—many of them not the enemy.

Such questions have nagged soldiers since Clubs M-1 were issued in the Stone Age. I adjusted—we all did—and went on climbing the slopes of manhood. In basic training, I acquired a big loose-leaf notebook and started out to be a "writer." I think I had read some correspondence school propaganda that made it sound easy, but I didn't even know how to paragraph. In fact, I made bad grades in English at my high school in Bray, Oklahoma, a low-grade school I hope is no

longer there. Dusty and countrified, the school lauded the basketball jocks that could bring it recognition, while we runts trying to learn English from a soured and decrepit teacher fell through the cracks.

What we wanted most was to slip into certain cracks, but the cute girls went for the studs, and we pimple-pusses went to the library. Years later, in college, poetry paved the way for a better love life, and I took full advantage. At least I was a romantic. Even in haylofts, I thought each coupling was true love.

By virtue of “advanced training in demolitions,” I got a reprieve many of my buddies didn’t get. Instead of Korea, the summer of ’51 saw me wading sand and rattlesnakes at Fort Huachuca, Arizona as I learned the intricacies of TNT, dynamite’s percentage of nitro and kieselguhr, and the new stuff from WWII, Composition C-3—a powerful plastic explosive that was all sorts of fun.

In Korea on job sites, my demolitions squad often burned C-3 in barrels to keep warm. A side effect no one warned about was that I would come home orange, and stay that way for several weeks. It alarmed my parents, who thought I had jaundice, but it must have been harmless because I’m seventy-three now.

Twenty-five-years later I returned as a journalist to write about Fort Huachuca, and saw the sorriest bunch of soldiers I’d ever seen in my life—whiners, bitches, and openly rebellious to officers. The officers themselves were totally dominated by the enlisted ranks. Somehow, the Alpha Dog routine of the army had reversed itself, and the result was chaos. This was during the Jimmy Carter administration.

Fort Huachuca (“huachuca” means “wind”) had become the military’s major communications center, and the lack of esprit de corps was probably a reaction to the Vietnam War and Carter’s lackadaisical leadership. I dislike Ronald Reagan for reasons too numerous to mention (hundreds of which now camp homeless in California parks and along rivers), but he finally restored the military’s pride in itself. He exploded the budget to do it, but he did it.

My first war-connected death wasn’t in Korea, but at Fort Huachuca in 1951. It happened to be my best friend, another runt like me, a little New York Jew named Jobe. I have forgotten his last name, but I still have a picture of him standing beside me, squinting into the desert sun.

We were coming back from the demolitions range where we’d been studying the versatility of prima cord by cutting down trees with it. The 2-1/2 ton truck carrying his squad took a curve too fast, rolled down an embankment, and came to rest on top of the soldiers. I was riding in a jeep behind it, and saw it happen in an eye-blink, sending a cloud of dust skyward. The convoy stopped. Dozens of soldiers piled out and skidded down the embankment to help.

In those days, I spent a lot of time stunned by what was happening in my life. To come from plowed furrows and cotton fields to whiskey, women, and racist

beatings kept me in a near-constant state of *what next*. Now death was added to the mix. Seeing those men, the dust of the desert mixed in their blood, their broken bones poking through flesh and hearing their shattering screams, put me in a kind of shell shock.

It took twenty men and a jeep's winch to raise the truck off them. Jobe was taken straight to surgery, but his skull was crushed and he was doomed. I was standing with others in the dispensary's hallway when a second lieutenant came out and said, "He's gone." His was the only death, although two others were so badly injured they were sent home to a life of disability.

I can still see that little guy, plain as day, brown haired, bright-eyed and stocky. We poked fun at each other's accents. His was Yankee, mine was Reb. Jobe was the salt of the earth and never did an evil thing, while bullies like those Dixie boys probably lived to ripe old ages.

Where is a god when you need one?

The army pushed for church attendance back then, but I haven't been in a church more than two dozen times in my life. From the age of fourteen, when I first read it, I considered the Bible a collection of fairy tales and loose history, and all the blood, war and perversion in its pages did nothing to ease that conviction. Jobe's inexplicable and stupid death spurred my budding atheism before I went to Korea, where actually I found several atheists in foxholes—or at least in tents.

I can't explain religion or the fanaticism it breeds. I can't explain why the wholesale butchery of a million Aztecs and Incas by the Catholic Spaniards took place with the blessings of the popes, or why the Vatican has hidden vicious sex crimes against defenseless children. But humans must need gods—they've invented so many throughout history. My distaste for organized religion has grown through the years, reaching new heights with every abortion-doctor murder or hypocritical trumped-up tax wasting impeachment.

From the age of 18 these views accumulated throughout my seven years in the military, fueled by omnivorous reading and propelled by con-artist evangelists who made millions off believers. Once I asked a chaplain why the Bible was full of war and brutality when Christianity was supposed to be loving and forgiving. He didn't like the question and shunted it aside with some bromide or other. But in his mind he was probably thinking I was the most naïve soldier in Korea.

In early September 1952 we left San Francisco on board a WWII Liberty ship, the *SS Marine Serpent*. (Not long ago I went aboard the last such seaworthy vessel, the *SS Jeremiah O'Brien*, in San Francisco Bay.) As we steamed under the Golden Gate late in the day and Alcatraz fell behind us, the dreaded prison seemed like a haven for prisoners, "whose lack of freedom guarantees their lives." An illusion,

but real enough to fix it indelibly in my mind. A decade later, the image gave rise to my poem, “*Korea Bound, 1952*,” which appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*. I was a college sophomore at the time, the old man on campus at 29.

There were weeks of seasickness and boredom before we docked in Pusan and got on a train headed north. I was the only soldier to get off at Pyongyang—nothing but stalks of concrete from previous battles. (Today, Pyongyang is a city of around 250,000.) The land was flat, the day rainy and cold, and I was alone. I felt more curiosity than fear. Pyongyang was miles from the MLR (main line of resistance), between Seoul and the Yellow Sea.

In a puddle by my feet lay a bent stick. Idly, I toed it with my boot—and saw with horror that it was the arm of a child, complete with tiny fingers. Back on the farm where animals died of diseases, I had often seen skeletal remains. But these were human remains, and the realization came home that there had been violent battles here, and this little kid had been caught in one. Suddenly, 12,000 miles from home, I wondered what my younger brothers and sisters were doing.

A jeep hove into sight, its motor whining as it slewed back and forth in the mud. A corporal said, “You Pvt. Childress?” I nodded, threw my duffel in the back, and off we went. On the way to the base, I mentioned what I had seen. The corporal shrugged. “You see stuff like that from time to time. Dogs dig them up, or they get washed up by the rain . . . well, I’ll be damned. How’d I miss *him*?”

The jeep slithered to a halt in the mud, and I saw a dark, half-submerged lump in a paddy ditch. It was an R.O.K. soldier, one arm curved partly out of the water. We got out and leaned over for a closer inspection. There was a small hole in the corpse’s breastbone.

The corporal looked around nervously. “Could be a guerrilla sniper,” he said. “We’ll report it and his graves registration people will come pick him up. I dunno how I missed seein’ him on the way to pickin’ you up. Must be workin’ too hard.”

Eventually, I would revisit that experience in a poem called “The Long March.”

The outfit we were assigned to was Marine Air Group 12 (MAG-12). The marines were there to guard the under-construction air base and take care of any enemy guerrillas that came along. It sounded very military to a wide-eyed rustic, but I wouldn’t be there a week before a young marine was found at his post one morning with his throat cut. The base went on full alert against supposed North Korean commandoes, but nothing else happened.

The engineers had their battalion of 12-man tents and the marines theirs. We didn’t mix much except at the beer tent when there was beer. The engineers were busting their asses to finish the two-mile long jet strip as soon as possible, and by everyone’s admission we did a great job. The two-mile airstrip was in use well before it was completed, and not only that, I understand that it’s still used today.

Most of my eleven months and sixteen days in Korea (until I got enough rotation points to come home) were spent working 16-hour days—blasting down small mountains that were in the way of a road or other military need. We heard about “Bedcheck Charlie,” a North Korean pilot who flew over rear echelons at night in a small plane to harass us by dropping grenades. But he never bothered our outfit.

One November night, whistles split the darkness and screaming noncoms raced through the tents yelling, “*Get to your posts! We’re under attack!*”

Scrambling into HBTs and boots, I crammed a steel pot on my head. My heart was banging like a drum. I was excited but also scared, and the knowledge both surprised and embarrassed me. I was number two on a light .30, and the other gunner and I set up just below the rim of the big earthen berm encircling our tents. The gun barrel barely cleared the dirt, and all along the earthworks I saw riflemen and machine gunners getting down on their bellies.

Suddenly, a single rifle shot cracked and that was all it took. Tracers began dotting the night like fireflies, and despite the “Cease Fire!” yells of sergeants and officers, the turbulent clatter continued for several minutes, like the “Mad Minute” in basic training. When it finally stopped, the silence was thunderous. We stayed there, freezing, for a couple of hours before someone gave us an all clear and we filed back to our tents and sleeping bags.

Next morning in the chow line, a PFC remarked, “I hear they found a couple of gooks out there in the paddies.” He didn’t say whether they were soldiers or civilians. I asked around, but nobody seemed to know or even care. The general attitude among the men was one of resignation—putting in their time to get their rotation points. The battalion commander was a West Point prick, Major Goldenthal, heartily hated and quickly nicknamed “Goldenballs.” But shithead commanders aside, we were there to work and work we did—sixteen hours a day. Still, morale was a problem until the West Pointer took an R&R to Japan and gave us a break.

I’d been there about a month when that happened—and soon got the surprise of my life. Not only did a beer truck arrive loaded with fine Asahi beer, but a truckload of whores from Seoul accompanied it. I never knew who took it upon himself to throw the party, but it sure wasn’t Goldenballs or his WAC captain wife, who sometimes visited and was also the butt of jokes. They were like Hot Lips and Frank in *M*A*S*H*.

The party boosted morale big time, but two liters of Japanese beer made me too sleepy to care about the prostitute saying, “Want to fuckee, GI?” and I dozed off. Fortunately so, since several cases of clap developed from that evening. I soon realized how rare such parties were—we never had another one.

Such immersions in the real world and its sordid side had to have an effect, but with me the effects came later. I never lost my concern for the sad farmers in stovepipe hats who, caught in a terrible war, kept trying to plant and harvest as they always had.

The following spring, I had a bittersweet assignation with a Korean village woman during a trip to Pusan, and for years I was consumed with guilt that I might have impregnated her and have a half-American son. If so, he grew up unwanted by anyone, and I have always hoped it wasn't true.

Things are so different in war, even among noncombatants. Perhaps the knowledge that people back home could have cared less about Harry Ass Truman's police action made us harden our own attitudes. Whatever the reasons, every man I knew, if he went there a boy, came back greatly changed—not always into sterling manhood.

Late one day my squad was returning from a job. Bone tired, we trudged across a paddy towards the company compound. The soldier ahead of me—a black PFC—suddenly disappeared. Running forward in the twilight, I saw that he had crashed through rotten boards covering a “honey pit.” The hole wasn't over his head, in which case he would have drowned in shit, but it coated his fatigues from top to bottom with slimy green residue that stank horrendously. Before I could reach him, he heaved himself out and started towards the compound. No one came near him as he slogged towards the shower barrel, screaming in rage and frustration.

What might have been the eventual effects on a man who suffered such an indignity? It could affect anyone's mind, no matter how humorously some might see it.

Our lives fell into a routine of sleep, wake, eat and work. The scene was much like a civilian building operation, with cement being poured even as the days grew colder and freezing weather set in. We completed half a mile. A mile. The Sabrejets began using it the second the concrete dried.

The Koreans kept relocating their ancient dead, who had been buried sitting up and facing the rising sun. My squad kept lighting fuses and making little rocks of big ones, and every so often we had drills to keep us alert for possible attack. My squad carried loaded carbines; I carried a .45-caliber submachinegun, called a “grease gun” because it was shaped like one (and just about as useful as a weapon.)

A demolitions man from another unit was killed probing for mines. At the door of the aid tent, the fleshy tag that held his arm on gave way, and it thumped to the ground. A medic picked it up and placed it on his chest. I never knew his name,

so I called him MacFatrige in “Shellshock,” the poem I wrote. I don’t know why. The only MacFatrige I ever knew was a laborer in an Arizona copper mine.

The talks droned on at Panmunjom. The jets flew round the clock, plastering North Korea. We lived for mail call, occasional beer, packages from home. I sent most of my monthly check home for my folks to save, but when I finally got home, they had spent it all. Couldn’t blame them. Sharecropping is a miserable life, and it affected me as a writer as much as Korea did. There are different kinds of wars. I knew that long before LBJ coined “War on Poverty.”

Men could get weird on a diet of hard work and boredom. Years later I published a short story about a GI who took a weekend in Seoul and ate some kimchee, which made him so crazy he got a Section-8. We were also warned that the Korean black market was selling White Horse Scotch cut with wood alcohol and piss—and we had better not drink it. The days dragged. I got to be a corporal and head of a demolitions squad.

One day on a blasting job miles from camp, a Mississippi man suddenly grabbed his carbine and cracked off three fast rounds at a distant rice farmer. The bullets made bright exclamation points in the water and the Korean started running. The man was beading down on him again when I yelled, “Shoot that rifle again, and I’ll turn your ass in!”

He turned slowly, gave me a nasty look, and drawled, “What’s wrong with y’all, Co’pral? He ain’t nothin’ but a god damn gook.”

Lest folks think bigotry is chiefly a Southern habit, flash forward to Lincoln, Illinois, 1969. I was teaching at Lincoln College, and went to town to buy some film. I mentioned to the graying woman behind the counter, “It must be great to have your town named after the Great Emancipator.”

She looked at me with narrowed eyes and said coldly, “Really? What did Lincoln ever do but free the god damn niggers?” Not long after, I wrote a poem called “Lincoln, Illinois,” which someone in Lincoln read and wrote me a vicious letter about how I was assassinating their town.

In March, I was taken from my squad to be a courier of documents, and to this day I don’t know why. I was given a .45 to strap on, kept the .45 caliber submachinegun, and rode a train to Pusan, in my own compartment with door locked and instructions to shoot anyone who tried to take the satchel I carried. It was cloak and dagger stuff, and made a weird kind of sense with marines, air force, and army all working as one. It made me think the airstrip pushing to completion was more important than I thought. I liked the duty, though, which gave me time between trips to drive around Pusan. One morning, unable to sleep, I went outside and saw a Korean army truck slipping through pre-dawn streets, stopping

every so often to pick up bodies of street orphans who had died during the night from exposure, starvation, or murder.

After two months, I was assigned back to my squad, and soon we were enroute to a mountaintop not far from the front. A road to a temporary radio relay site was to be built there for the air force, said road making the site permanent. It was no easy task and very slow-going through much hard rock as the big dozers crunched in slow spirals up the mountain. My demolition squad was kept busy.

There's a Korean folk song called "Arirang," or some such, that I learned from a Korean. It's about a mountain that grows steeper to keep an unfaithful husband from going to his mistress on the other side. That's how we engineers felt about this mountain as we blasted, dug, laid culverts, and blasted some more.

Sometimes I would think about WWII, and the Burma Road, or the Alcan Highway, or other gargantuan building jobs. Maybe this road wasn't as big, but the blisters we got building it were. Gone, too, was the relatively cushy life in our tent enclave, for we stayed on the site and slept in pup tents. We lived on C-rations, which the Koreans loved and would trade whatever they had for. I was impressed with what they could do with the cans. The A-frame carriers—who carried staggering loads on their crude A-frames—would ask for the cans, take them, and sell them back to us as cigarette lighters and other gadgets.

In late June, I got banged up when a major dynamite charge, seeding a cliff above a large culvert we had laid, did not fire when I twisted the handle of our blaster. The platoon lieutenant, whose name was Bob Owen, was an eccentric Texan who wore his .45 automatic in a cross-draw position. We liked anyone who thumbed a nose at army regulations, and besides, Owen didn't try to be an officer. He let us do the jobs we had been trained for. He was easy-going and popular. In addition, he knew very little about hands-on demolitions work.

"Well, Corporal, what do we do now?" he asked.

The detonator was obviously broken. I thought for a minute and then said, "If I can lug a jeep battery into that culvert over there, and you can pass the wires in to me, I think I can blow the cliff."

He looked at me curiously. "How would that work?"

"Batteries have positive/negative poles, and that's what's required to fire the blasting caps." I wasn't sure it would work, but he agreed to give it a try. I snugged myself into the four-foot galvanized culvert, which sat almost directly under the blast site, and everything was passed in to me. I got set, screamed, "Fire in the Hole!" and touched the wires to their respective battery poles.

With a thunder I can still hear, the world caved in. I had far underestimated the power of the dynamite we had drilled into the cliff face, and it went off like a thousand-pound bomb. I was much too close to such a powerful explosion, and

was picked up and hurled around inside the culvert like a rock in a jar. Thick dust swirled into the other end, choking me.

The battery broke and acid got on my fatigues, which were in tatters by the time I emerged. I was so stunned I couldn't get my bearings, but finally, as Owens peered through the haze and shouted, "Are you all right?" I crawled dazedly out. I was bleeding from my nose and right ear, and was lucky the concussion hadn't killed me. Only one end of the culvert wasn't buried under tons of rock.

As soon as I was on my feet and Lieutenant Owen saw I was going to live, he shouted enthusiastically, "Corporal, that took plenty of guts! I'm putting you in for a Bronze Star!" But he must have forgotten, or it was lost in the shuffle, because that was the last I ever heard about it. Years later, with my hearing seriously affected, the Veteran's Administration wouldn't even give me hearing aids. I had to buy my own.

By early July, all of us were wearing down and fretful, wearied by endless hours of labor and wondering what the hell it was all about. We'd been there eight weeks and the talks were still going on. Rumors of coming peace reached us, but the jets kept rippling through the skies. The road was almost completed—but we knew there'd be something else after that. Sometimes our work made us envy the MLR guys, who interspersed a few hours of sheer terror on patrol with days of repose in the bunkers.

A Korean chogi-bearer who spoke primitive English came to me and said people were starving in the village at the mountain's foot. "No fish," he said. "River all fished out. Maybe some long way down, in pools we not reach."

I remembered how Oklahoma farmers illegally tossed half-sticks of dynamite in pools. The concussion brought stunned fish floating to the top. I gathered some Composition C-3 and a few capped 10-second delay fuses and jeeped down the mountain. Packing the C-3 into C-ration cans, I stuck in the fuses, taped them—and warned the villagers. With great importance, the Korean who had brought me explained what I was about to do. I hoped there really were fish in this deep bend of the river.

There were. I activated the fuse on the first can, tossed it in, and watched it gurgle out of sight. Suddenly there was a terrific slam and a geyser of water as straight as a cypress tree silvered the air. A moment later fish were raining down, and it was a real joy to hear the villagers shout and surge forward to begin filling baskets. Kimchee on the way! I threw the other bombs, more fish fell, and it was over. The mayor, a slim elder in a tall black stovepipe hat, shook my hand and said, "Koom-op-soom-ne-dah, nampodingi nodangi." Thank you beautifully, dynamite man with yellow hair.

My time in the Land of the Morning Calm wasn't all bad.

Two nights later, we lost a Cat driver. Bone-tired from hours on the seat of the jolting D8, he forgot to let the diesel motor cool down before filling the starting engine with gasoline. There was a soft whoof like a parachute opening, and he was a fountain of fire. Screaming in terrified agony, he leaped off the dozer and started to run. Half a dozen men tackled him, threw field jackets over him, and smothered the flames. We radioed for a chopper, and fifteen minutes later a MAG helicopter hovered overhead. There were no lights on that mountaintop, and the only landing space was surrounded by rotor-shattering boulders. The pilot literally had to thread the needle—and in the dark except for the flashlights held by twenty men in a circle. They looked like wavering fireflies in the blackness.

What a goddamned pilot! He brought that fat Huey in amid a whirl of dust, and we loaded our casualty aboard. But he was too badly burned, and was dead by the time the helicopter arrived at the MASH unit. Fifteen years later, the experience gave rise to a poem called “Trying To Remember People I Never Really Knew.”

It’s one of the givens of armed conflict that many efforts and much materiel will be wasted, and so it was with our mountain road. Rough, rocky, but passable, with all its shining culverts in place, it was completed shortly before July 27th, 1953, when the Korean War ended.

On that sun-bright day, late in the afternoon, I spotted a plume of yellow dust spiraling behind a rocketing jeep in the valley 2,500 feet below. Within the hour, it came groaning up the slope as fast as it could. Reaching us, the driver jumped out, a broad smile on his face. “The war’s over!” he yelled. “The f——g war is over and we’re going home!”

Like a magician doing a table trick, he whipped back a tarp covering the back seat area to reveal several cases of Japanese Asahi beer. Cheers bounced off the blue sky, and we partied deep into the night before staggering to our sleeping bags.

Six weeks later, I was in Sasebo, Japan, waiting on a ship to carry me home. There, my last wartime experience etched itself on my memory. One day I was lying in my bunk, bored and wishing I was home, when I heard a trickling sound. Suddenly a soldier slid past, his face pasty white, heading for the door.

What was going on? It wasn’t raining, and I couldn’t detect any broken pipes. I got up and started looking around. Suddenly, two MPs and two medics with a stretcher burst in and headed for a corner bunk. Instantly, there was turmoil as the soldier on the bunk, a sergeant first class, leaped up ready to fight. Shocked, I saw that he was soaked with blood. More spurted from the mouth-like gash in his left wrist. Naked from the waist down, he wore only a bemedaled khaki shirt and tie. The MPs tackled him, but he fought with silent desperation while a frantic medic gripping a tourniquet shouted, “*Hold him! I can’t get the goddamn tourniquet on unless you hold him!*”

The MPs finally wrestled the sergeant to the floor. I saw the combat infantry badge on his chest, slick with blood. The MPs were blood-soaked, too. The medic finally secured the tourniquet, and they carried the sergeant out, but he died soon after from blood loss and shock. A gallon butt-can by his bunk, where he chain-smoked while his life drained away, was full to the brim with his blood. The rest he had lost fighting for his death.

A letter lay on the bed, short and to the point. After a year at the front and many combat patrols, he had enough points to rotate home and marry the woman he'd gotten engaged to before he shipped out. The only thing was, as she said in her letter, she fell in love with another man and had married him.

There are no Purple Hearts for soldiers killed by Dear Johns.

Finally I was home, but even as the *Simon Bolivar Buckner* eased into Seattle harbor, I couldn't believe it.

Eleven months and sixteen days in a foreign land, and two weeks for passage home. But as swarms of GIs in winter woools turned the ship's rails into a wall of olive drab, reality set in. Not even a Red Cross doughnut wagon was there to greet us. The Forgotten War was forgotten before its soldiers ever reached home.

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