

Merlin Gaisford

as interviewed by Judy Hansen

The Military – Basic Training

I got a letter that said I had been chosen and invited to Fort Douglas and I better show up. I went there for a physical and then went home for six months. They called again but the second time I didn't come back. I was in the Army! They threw me on a train and sent me to San Francisco. From San Francisco they put me on a truck and sent me about 50 miles south of San Francisco to Fort Ord an Army base on the Monterey Bay in California. Although there is no longer an army base there I guess on April 29, 2012 President Obama signed a proclamation designating a 14,651-acre portion of the former post as the Fort Ord National Monument. I was there only two days. They gave us all clothes and put us on another truck and sent us to Camp Roberts. Camp Roberts is located in central California, on both sides of the Salinas River in Monterey and San Luis Obispo counties. I took basic training there. Basic training was 16 weeks. We never marched at Camp Roberts, we always ran. After eight weeks they took half the guys and sent them to Seattle then they filled the camp up again with men from the Midwest. I finished the last 8 weeks. On the sixteenth week of training they sent us 40 miles north to a place called Fort Hunter Liggett. They had these amphitheatres with logs set up to sit on. They would give us lessons in these amphitheatres. Once we were all sitting on these logs and all of a sudden up jumped a guy, then shortly after another man would jump up, and another. Pretty soon everyone had jumped up. We had warmed those logs up that we were sitting on enough to make fourteen huge California rattlers active that were sleeping in them. Nobody got bit but these huge diamond back rattlers were three and four feet long. We didn't stay there, we moved on. After they were through with us at Fort Hunter Liggett we had to walk back to Camp Roberts. That was our 40 mile hike. Basic training was finished and I came home for a week. Then Joann moved down to Paso Robles in San Luis Obispo County California to be with me. After eight weeks in California with my wife I shipped overseas and JoAnn went back to Utah.



Going to War

I was assigned to the 49th Field artillery service battery, 489 field artillery battalion. I went to Camp Stoneman in Pittsburg, California where we caught a ferry to San Francisco and then we got on the SS DI Sulton which was a dependent carrier. That means it was a ship that carried the dependent members of family members. There were about 600 of us Army guys, 100 Marines, 100 sailors, and 1000 dependents on that ship. The Marines had to do all the guard duty, the sailors had to clean up all the puke, and I didn't have to do nothing. I was just on a cruise. It was a big ship and it moved fast, 23 knots 24 hours a day. It never slowed down. It took us nine days to get to Japan where we stayed for about two days.

We then got on a ship called SS Bolow that took us from Japan up to Korea. The water was still and just as smooth as glass. The ship was like an old tub and it would sit there and rock from side to side. It didn't have any ballast in it so it would just sit there and roll back and forth all the way across. We went into Pusan the port city of South Korea. We got on a train and went north a few miles and the destruction was evident. All the bridges were blown and hundreds of trucks were wrecked. We were on that train for a day and a half. I remember going through one great big tunnel. We got off and they scattered all of us out into different divisions. I went to the 2nd infantry division with quite a few of the other guys. I didn't know where I was 90% of the time but I know we were up above Chorwon close to where they made movie 'Porkchop hill.' We were right off the side of what was known as the Iron Triangle near White Horse Mountain. We stayed there on the front line until about the 10th of July and then they loaded a bunch of us up and took us further east to Kumsong city, which was a piece of ground that went out from the front lines about 7 miles, and had us join the 187 airborne regimental combat team that had went in there by truck. There were about 150,000 Chinese and about 100,000 of them were right there. They attacked a place on the line where there was a bunch of Koreans. It is just too horrific to describe the scene but it was one of utter destruction. They just slaughtered them Koreans. They put us in there to stop the massacre. It was a pretty big battle and I get emotional just thinking about what happened there. The Koreans, they just boogied out and headed south. We never did get the 7 miles back. We had a least three or four thousand troops and the Chinese killed 307 of us and left about 1500 wounded. I think around 20 or so of those killed were in the 187th. This battle went on for three or four days and ended about the 13 or 14 of July. We had the 187th, two regiments from the 3rd division, and then one regiment from the 45th. Each regiment had about 3000 so there were about six or eight thousand there. Even when the battle was over the Chinese kept shelling us night and day until the end of the war. The war ended about 20 days later on the 27th of July 1953. The Korean War lasted two years and one month but I was only there for the last two months.

Being at War

They always say you never hear the round that kills ya. I was standing there one night and I heard this soft, "pfft" and some dirt flew over and hit me up the side of the head. I didn't think nothin' of it because nothin' went off. The next day when it got light about four feet from my head was this big ol' 122 millimeter mortar shell¹. There it was - just stuck in the top of my bunker. It sat in our bunker for 5 or 6 days till the end of the war. Had it gone off it would have blown the top half of me right off, thank heavens it was a dud.

We had a lot of shoot-outs every night because that is when the enemy would come and attack us. What little we slept was usually in the day. I was really tired all the time. Normally I would be up ½ the night on watch while my partner would try to sleep and then my partner would watch the other ½ of the night while I slept. I'd lay down right by the side of my partner in the trench. We were at the bottom of this big hill and when it would rain all the rain would roll down and end up in our trench. We had a sand bag that we used to hold our head up out of the water so we wouldn't drown while we were sleeping. If someone was coming then my partner would kick me pretty hard to walk me up. I'd do the same to him. Even when the rain stopped and things would dry up we were stuck in the mud. I never had a watch the whole time I was in Korea. I don't think there were many watches there so I didn't know if I was standing there four hours a night or until it was almost daylight. I know I didn't get much sleep while I was there. The next day we would start this all over again.

¹ The mortar shell was over 5 inches in diameter and about 2 feet long.

It was just about the end of the war, but of course we didn't know that. We had a tank that was right to the side of us in this little valley. It would come up at night so we had more fire-power. For some reason he had to go back to the rear. They sent a jeep up with a 105 recoilless rifle² on it. It was the first time anyone had come up to where we were. They went down into a little bunker to eat some C-rations. I decided I would go and talk with them and see what the scuttle-butt from the rear was. When we got down there I crawled up in this pear pit³ on the bunker so I could keep my eye out on the front line to make sure no one would come. We ate the C-rations and the guys in the jeep decided to leave so they got up and walked out. I got up and my feet had just hit the ground when I heard this shell coming in. Now after you've been in war a while you can tell where these shells are going to hit by their sound. I knew this shell was going to hit right where I was. Time for me just stopped and I calmly said to myself, "They got ya Merly." Then I dove for the door in the bunker and that shell went off. The concussion of it bounced me off the wall and blew me out of the trench. My whole shoulder felt like it had been hit with a sledge hammer. My ear was bleeding and my nose was bleeding. A piece of that shell must have bounced off a log or something and hit me, it didn't go through my flak vest⁴ but it sure hurt⁵. In my little 20-year-old mind I thought someone was sitting over there with a great big set of B C Scopes looking out to see if he had done any damage so I jumped up and climbed on top of the bunker and I gave them the finger for only about three seconds because of all the snipers that were out there. I knew if I stayed up there very long one of them would blow my head off. I dove back down in the trench and thought, 'Well Merly you might just have made your second mistake today.' I said to my new partner, "I got a hunch that me and you should walk up the trench a ways." He came with me and when we got up about 50 – 75 yards to the next bunch of guys all hell broke loose. The enemy must have dumped 25 rounds right on top of that bunker we had just left. I guess they saw the finger and got the message. My partner probably had it figured I was probably the smartest soldier in the town.

We went back to the rear about 20 miles to the 38th parallel⁶ and we started digging fortifications. We dug and dug and dug and after two or three weeks of that they came and told us we were only there temporarily and gave us a choice of either going back to Japan with the 187th or staying in Korea. You had to figure out how many points you had because if you went back to Japan you would be there until your two years was up. If you stayed in Korea you might get out a month or two earlier and then the Army would turn you loose. I decided I'd stay in Korea because I didn't want to go and jump out of airplanes with the 187th airborne. So they sent me to the 625 field artillery battalion.

I thought I had died and went to heaven. On a typical day with the 187 we got up at 4 o'clock, done a few things, then went and done Army PT exercises for ½ hour, after that a ½ hour run, then we'd have breakfast, and after breakfast we would go and dig for 10 hours. When we got back from digging we take a swim in the river to wash off. If you really felt like it you could buy two beers, which is all they would let anyone have, then to bed only to start over with the same routine the next morning. When I went to the 625 they took me into see the Captain and the Sargent was there. The Sargent said, "Smitty, you go get Gaisford a bunk and show him where he will sleep and the rest of you guys go back

² According to Wikipedia recoilless rifles are capable of firing artillery-type shells at a range and velocity comparable to that of a normal light cannon, although they are typically used to fire larger shells at lower velocities and ranges.

³ A pear pit is a window on a bunker.

⁴ A bullet proof vest.

⁵ I never received a purple heart for this and there is really no one that could verify the incident as a witness.

⁶ The 38th parallel is significant because it divides North and South Korea.

on that detail you were on this morning.” I thought, “Geez, another chicken-shit outfit.” We went and got my bed and we went down by the creek and the Sargent came over and said, “Do you drink beer?” I said, “Once in a while” so the sergeant said, “Here, have one.” All these guys sent out on these details were all sitting there drinking beer. That is where the detail was. They all had a rake, shovel, or something but they just sat around drinking beer. That is basically the way things went for the next eight months. We had trucks and could go buy whatever we wanted. I thought I died and went to heaven.

We made a move and went over by Chorwon . There was a big rock out where we were going to put everything up. Around it was a bunch of little snakes. They were really small but very deadly. They were vipers. We killed all that we could find. One of the guys in our unit was attacked by a viper when he was in his pup tent. He didn't know what was on him and struck at it but the viper struck back several times. He almost lost his arm.

After about two weeks, we had a 2nd Lieutenant from Logan, Utah who gave me a job digging a trench to put communication wires in. I got serious and started digging just like when I was in the infantry. The Lieutenant came out and said, “Can you drive a truck?” I said, “Yea” so he said, “Let's go for a ride.” He took me down the road for about two miles and then had me turn around and go back. They made a truck driver out of me and that is where I stayed for the rest of my time over in Korea. A month after that this Lieutenant and two other guys went up on the line to an observation point and were killed when their Coleman lantern blew up in the bunker they were in.

Going Home

They came and told us the outfit was going home. The 2nd Division was going to come in and take the outfit over. This was the 2nd time I was in the 2nd Division. I was there two days and they sent me home. We went back down to Puson and caught a ship, the SS Black. We left Puson about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The next morning I was sitting in my little bunk that was stacked four bunks high. They had about 3500 G.I's on this ship. I was getting ready to put my shoes on and KABOOM. The big old ship just gave a big jerk and my shoes went flying up the other end of the room. We hit something. I figured we hit the bottom of the ocean. So up the stairs I go as the water-tight doors were closing behind me. The only way I could go was up. I got up on the main deck in no time and looked over the side and saw another ship – a Chinese National freighter loaded with 4.2 mortar shells – which had smacked into us. We were so lucky it didn't go off. This ship's front was smashed at least 20 feet – their front was just gone. We had a big hole in our side but it was high enough it was mostly above water so it didn't hurt us too bad. It was a good thing the sea was calm. We escorted the ship into Sasebo, Japan then we just sit there for about ten days while they put a new side on our ship. Then we came on home. It was about May 1954. It took us over 30 days to get to the United States. We came into San Francisco. They put me on an airplane and flew me up to Seattle to Fort Lewis, Washington and then I went home. After a month I went back to Fort Lewis and stayed there until I got out. While I was in Fort Lewis here come the 2nd Division again and they took over. I was in the 2nd Division for the 3rd time but it was only for about a week then I went home. They kept me one day extra 'for the good of the service.' I'm still mad about that. Two years and one day. I was discharge the 4th of December 1954. They even have that on my discharge that I was detained one day for the good of the service. Military was eight years and so I had to spend six more years in inactive reserve. They never called me.