SOME MEMORIES OF THE KOREAN WAR

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FOR DUTY BEYOND THE SEAS
(THE USA & KOREA, 1950)

I joined the Marine Corps Reserve in 1947 together with several of my Columbia University classmates — Robert E. Buchmann (1930–1951) and Thomas L. McVeigh (1928–1951) (a swimming partner) among them — so as to enter its Platoon Leader's Class (PLC), with the three of us as a result spending two summers on active duty at the Quantico (Virginia) Marine Corps Base, first between our Sophomore and Junior years and then again between our Junior and Senior years. As a result, upon graduating in June 1950 we were commissioned as Second Lieutenants. The Korean War broke out shortly thereafter and we were called up, first to go through infantry officer training in the First Special Basic Course at the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, and then for me additionally through the Field Artillery Battery Officer Course at Fort Sill (Oklahoma).

Following a brief return east to Camp Lejeune (North Carolina), I received my orders, quaintly stated "for duty beyond the seas", more specifically to report to the Commanding Officer of the First Marine Division, then in active combat in Korea. I was assigned to Fox Battery, Second Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment (F-2-5), but then seconded, together with a team of four enlisted men, to How Company, Third Battalion, First Marine Regiment (H-3-1) as its artillery Forward Observer. It was my good fortune to able to return home a year later, more or less unscathed, but, sad to say, with both Bob and Tom having been killed in action during 1951. Here I offer three of my very early less consequential active-duty experiences:

Intravenous feeding: meal or medication?

At the time of being assigned to service in Korea I had a minor sinus infection, so the Base doctor felt it necessary to give me a one-time large Penicillin injection, meant to clear up the infection while I was on my way to Korea. As it turned out, I developed a severe allergy to the drug while en route to the West Coast and beyond. Partway across the country, I went into life-threatening anaphylactic shock, fortunately in the vicinity of Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri). I was rushed to that Army base where I received appropriate medical attention, which included a brief period of intravenous feeding. Both the Marine Corps (via the Navy) and the Army provide their personnel free medical care at all times; but in both services its officers are responsible for the cost of their meals while serving outside of a war zone (a so-called theater of operations).

Now here comes the rub: *First*, although both the Marine Corps and the Army provide their officers their meals at no cost while serving in a war zone, only the Marine Corps extends this benefit to include the times while in transit under orders to a war zone. *Second*, whereas the Navy classifies intravenous feeding as medication, the Army classifies it as meals. As a result, the Army billed the Marine Corps for my intravenous feeding. This had to be done up a chain of command from Fort Leonard Wood to the Secretary of the Army, thence to the Secretary of the Navy and then down the new chain of command via the Commandant of the Marine Corps to the Commanding Officer of the First Marine Division, thence to the Commanding Officer of my Fifth Marine Regiment, with the Army requesting that the necessary amount be taken out of my pay. When this was denied, that denial had, of course, to travel back by the same lengthy up, across, and down route, with that denial in turn challenged. All of this business stretched out over many months, with me being kept up to date with copies of it all while being in active combat (thereby, at least providing a minor diversion during a most trying period). In the end, my pay was, in fact, not docked, although I never did find out whether it was finally the Marine Corps or the Navy or the Army that was stuck with the bill.

Traveling light

Following my brief sojourn at Fort Leonard Wood described above, my next way station was the Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ) at the (now closed) Alameda Naval Air Station just outside of San Francisco. I was assigned an intermediate travel priority, awaiting a flight to Korea. Each evening I had to find out whether a space was available to me on the next morning's daily flight. It ended up with my being stuck at Alameda for 18 days, never knowing from one day to the next whether I would be flying out on the following morning. Among other odds and ends of local sightseeing, this gave me the opportunity to visit the nearby Muir Woods National Monument (established early on by Theodore Roosevelt [1858–1919]), thereby giving me my first awe-inspiring exposure to that incredible stand of old-growth Coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) trees.

But the continuing concern during my wait was what to take with me, having been allotted space on the flight for only one quite small pack. I agonized over this each day, among other dilemmas wondering whether I should be taking one or two toothbrushes, how many paperbacks to take, how much writing material, how many rolls of film, and so on and so forth — packing and re-packing a number of times. When I was finally airborne, I was seated next to a Marine Colonel on his way back to rejoin his outfit following recovery from a wound. I asked what he had in his pack and whether he had gone through the same days of indecision I had. No way, I learned. The Colonel informed me that he had quite simply filled his allotted pack entirely with bottles of Scotch. You live and learn.

This is it!

During our initial infantry training at the Marine Corps Basic School, one of our newly commissioned fellow officers raised the question one evening, with reference to our imminently expected orders to Korea, of when we should consider that "This is it!". As expected, this elicited a diversity of responses, with no consensus being reached. Some suggested that for them "This is it!" would occur upon receiving their orders to Korea; some others felt it would occur when they left stateside (to use the Marine Corps vernacular); for yet others, when they landed in Korea; and so on and so forth.

As it turned out for me, "This is it!" did not occur until the actual on-the-ground start of my assignment as the artillery Forward Observer for the infantry company to which I had been seconded following the death of its previous holder of that high-risk job. The team that became mine consisted of a Sergeant and a Corporal radioman (both hardened "lifers") plus two Private First Class riflemen. On that first day, when I had to crawl up a small rise along the very edge of our front line, with my 7x50 field glasses at the ready in order to call in a barrage of 105s against some potentially advancing North Koreans forces ("Gooks", as they were referred to by us) less than 200 yards [183 m] away, I had to do my very, very best to appear properly competent and thoroughly unfrightened to my new team just below and behind me. Upon reaching the partially exposed top and straining all of my senses to what was across the valley from me, a bullet whizzed just past my head, and within a few seconds another. In the spirit of Falstaff, I rapidly decided that discretion was the better part of valor and crawled back down and out of sight. It was only then that I noticed to my abject horror and shame that my team was openly laughing at my behavior. But there is a happy ending to this tale: *First*, they were laughing because I had, in fact, not been shot at, but rather was being dive bombed by a bird whose nest I must have gotten too close to. And *second*, despite the lack of artillery fire, the enemy did not at that time decide to advance toward us.

As a postscript to the above, I might also point out that I kept that same team for pretty much the rest of my time in Korea, and we became a very close-knit and efficient unit. Near the end I did lose my Corporal owing to a Marine Corps policy that any enlisted man could choose not to be assigned to a war zone if he had five or more dependents. My Corporal, who had a wife and three children back home in Oklahoma, after having served in Korea for somewhat longer than a year, learned to his surprise that his wife had just had her fourth baby. So, after a modest amount of soul searching and advice from us, he decided that this was an opportunity not to be overlooked. However, I must also add that we did experience one fatality. At one point a young South Korean (a so-called "Yobo") was temporarily assigned to us as a porter and interpreter (the latter so we could more efficiently deal with prisoners), but rather soon he stepped on a land mine, blew off a leg, and bled to death.

BATTLEFIELD MEMENTOS
(KOREA, 1951-1952)

Since time immemorial, those soldiers who have been able to return from battle have brought back with them the spoils of war — a varying assortment of booty, scalps, souvenirs, infirmities, and a host of memories. I brought home from Korea quite a mixed bag of these. Those rather less pleasant ones that still come especially to mind include at least the following seven (with two rather more pleasant ones following those):

1. A shrapnel scar on my right forearm (treated in 1951 at a field hospital behind the lines).
2. An alimentary canal full of intestinal worms (gotten rid of in 1952 at the San Diego Naval Hospital).
3. A pilonidal cyst (removed in 1955 at the Newington [Connecticut] Veterans Administration Hospital).
4. A bloodstream full of malarial *Plasmodium falciparum* protozoans (finally gotten rid of in 1965 at the Northampton [Massachusetts] Veterans Administration Hospital).
5. A continuing aversion to anti-personnel land mines, and quite a distaste for being shot at.
6. A contempt for then President Harry S. Truman for seriously trying to abolish the Marine Corps.
7. An abiding feeling of sadness and sense of loss for those of my several comrades-in-arms who were killed in action.

But on the substantially brighter side of things, I also brought home the two items described next, souvenirs of considerable importance at least to me:

1. ***A brass spoon:*** Marines involved in the day-to-day close combat with our North Korean adversaries were able to make this evident to one and all by sporting a spoon in the pencil slot of the breast pocket of their fatigue jacket, with the shallow-bowl end sticking out. It seemed that every North Korean soldier possessed one of these distinctly shaped and apparently hand-crafted spoons, presumably made from expended brass artillery shell casings. And the usual way for a Marine to obtain that inanimate equivalent of a scalp was to liberate it from a North Korean he had either killed or captured. These spoons were the envy of our actually rather few rear-echelon troops, who would sometimes attempt to buy one, almost always unsuccessfully. Mine has long been on display in our living room, together with the ceramic plaque I describe next.

2. ***A ceramic plaque:*** In the early spring of 1952, the infantry company to which I was attached was fighting its way northward against some resistance, about 50 miles [80 km] north of Seoul (and thus in North Korea, a bit north of the present-day Demilitarized Zone). When we were temporarily held up by our enemy making its stand in a village ahead of us, I called down artillery fire on that target, after which we proceeded to take the village, and continue our advance.

In going through the village, I noticed that one of my shells had landed in a compound to unearth a grave. The crater contained a bunch of glazed ceramic shards, but among these were a couple of intact plaques covered with writing (each 5.6 inches [14.2 cm] wide x 8.1 inches [20.7 cm] high x 0.6 inch [1.4 cm] thick). I quickly picked up the two in passing, but owing to their weight soon discarded one of them. The other one I had the foresight (or intuition) to keep, and eventually brought it home with me. Over the subsequent several years I tried, without success, to find out from a number of Korean graduate students at Yale what my plaque said, but all I could learn was that the text used Chinese characters that were beyond them. So, for quite some years I set aside that quest and the matter became moribund.

The breakthrough came in early 1967 when an article appeared in the alumni magazine of my *Alma Mater* that alerted me to the existence of a Dr Gari K. Ledyard, Professor of Korean History and Director of the Columbia University East Asian Language and Area Center. From our subsequent exchanges I learned that, at least in the past, it was quite usual for highly placed individuals to be buried together with a record of their accomplishments; and, moreover, that I had been incredibly fortunate to have brought back the first of a set of 11 plaques (which Ledyard had no trouble in translating) and which in addition to letting us know whose grave I had desecrated about three centuries after his burial, actually began with a succinct statement of what was to follow.

Thus, the grave turned out to be that of an extraordinary man named Sim Chip, who was born in 1569 and died in 1644. I learned that he was writing poetry at the age of 7, later achieved first place in the nation's (the Yi Dynasty's) civil service examination, became a judge who battled for social justice, was subsequently appointed Mayor of Kaesong, Governor of Suwon Province and later also of Yoju Province, and ultimately became the Government's Home Minister.

I should note that subsequently a Korean colleague implored us to light a candle in front of the plaque during each Tet celebration.