

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD F. ARNE
Medical Corpsman, Navy/Marines, Korean War
2005

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

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Arne, Donald F., (1931-). Oral History Interview, 2005.

Video Recording: 2 videorecordings (ca. 60 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Donald Arne, an Oshkosh, Wisconsin native, discusses his Navy service as a medical corpsman serving with the 7th Marine Regiment during the Korean War. In 1951, Arne states he failed the test to play trumpet in the Navy Band but decided to enlist anyway. He speaks of boot camp at Great Lake Naval Recruit Training Center (Illinois), medical corpsmen training at Bainbridge (Maryland), assignment to Philadelphia Naval Hospital (Pennsylvania) where he worked with veterans returning from Korea, volunteering for the Fleet Marines, and combat training at Camp Pendleton (California). In Korea, he talks about assignment to the 1st Marine Division, 7th Marine Regiment, 3rd Battalion, H Company. At first part of a reserve force, Arne recalls being put on the Jamestown line of defense and going out on night patrols. He states his time in combat changed his outlook on life and he reflects on his feelings during combat. He states he was usually in the middle of the patrol, but he once led point. Arne analyzes the camaraderie of Marines and the bond between corpsmen and Marines. He compares patrol tactics and contrasts media coverage of the Korean and Iraq Wars. Arne details the mission of combat patrols and tells of once ending up in the middle of an unmarked mine field. He details his work as a corpsman in the field: never knowing what the situation would be, giving first aid, sending wounded back to the medical facilities, and witnessing how Marines would never leave wounded behind. He explains he had a corpsman friend who would go on Arne's patrols with him, and Arne would go on his friend's patrols in return. Arne details befriending a Marine at Camp Pendleton who he later ran across in Korea after his friend was mortally wounded. Arne talks about playing taps for military funerals. He recalls a story about a Marine who had lost his foot walking down the hill under orders, and he remembers seeing a foot lying in the middle of the trail during a combat patrol. He states bullet wounds were the most common injury he dealt with. He relates how accepting the Marines were of replacements and tells of playing a joke on them by slipping jelly jars into the fire, which would loudly explode. Arne describes getting a minor shrapnel wound in his back. He speaks of being in charge of sanitary conditions and recalls a situation where Chinese artillery had zeroed in on a bathroom area. He characterizes a "gung-ho" Marine officer who had a long family military history and who wanted to earn a Purple Heart. Arne touches on UN forces that were nearby, including Australians, Greeks, and South Koreans. Assigned to the motor pool during his last three months, he recalls befriending the cook and supply sergeant and occasionally providing alcohol for special dinners with them.

Biographical Sketch:

Arne (b.1931) was a Navy medical corpsman from 1951-1955 and served with the 1st Marine Division, 7th Regiment from 1952-1953. After honorable discharge at the rank of 2nd class petty officer, he served four years in the Oshkosh Police Department before working in promotional marketing sales. Arne married, raised four children, retired in 1992, and currently resides in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Citation Note:

Cite as: Donald F. Arne, Interview, conducted May 18, 2005 at Appleton, Wisconsin by Mik Derks, Wisconsin Korean War Stories, for Wisconsin Public Television.

Context Note:

Raw footage interview filmed by Wisconsin Public Television for its documentary series, "Wisconsin Korean War Stories." Original WPT videocassette numbers were WCKOR100 and WCKOR101.

Related Materials Note:

Photographs of this narrator's military service can be found in Wisconsin Public Television. Wisconsin Korean War Stories records (VWM Mss 1389).

Interviewed by Mik Derks, May 18, 2005.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Public Television staff, n.d.

Transcript reformatted and edited by Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

Mik: Not on the camera, my voice will never be. So I'll be real quiet when you're talking because I don't want my voice--

Don: Why is that?

Mik: Because it's about the people and the narration will not be me, it will be a narration that I write, but there will be very little of that.

Don: Oh, that's what I was going to say, somebody would have to give a lead into—

Mik: No you would be surprised, because we start at the beginning--you tell us how you got into it. And I can--you see I cut and paste and put things together so that some of it will be you talking on camera but others will be photographs and archival footage and so on, so I can piece things together so I can write the narrative just like narration but it's all your story, your words. So how did you decide to get into the Navy? When was that, and where were you?

Don: I was living at home with my parents, I was 19 years old. Well, in high school I was a solo trumpet player. So, I had been out of high school now for two years, I graduated when I was seventeen from Oshkosh High School. And I thought it would be very interesting if I could get into the Navy band. So they set up an interview for me, down at Great Lakes, in Illinois, and the problem was I hadn't really devoted as much attention to the trumpet as I should have. And quite frankly I just failed the test. But being, having some pride I didn't want to go back to Oshkosh as a failure so I decided what the heck, I will just stay in the Navy anyways. So I joined the Navy in January of '51. I went to the Great Lake Naval Recruit Training Center for eight weeks of boot camp. And while you're there they give you a test, an aptitude test to see what you might be qualified to do and for some reason my testing came out that I would be valuable to the Navy in the sense of being a corpsman, a medical corpsman. So they sent me to school in Bainbridge, Maryland for six months and when I graduated they sent me to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. And while I was there, of course, a lot of Marines were coming back from Korea. And now we are talking about November of 1951. I had a close patient who was a captain in the Marine Corps who had been wounded and his family was there, he was from Reno, Nevada and I became real close to him. As I worked there at the hospital, seeing all these guys coming back I decided I'd feel better if I was where the action was. So I asked to be transferred into the Fleet Marines, which is a combat situation type thing for corpsman, and they sent me to Camp Pendleton for combat training and in March of 1952 I left for Korea.

Mik: What was that, what was your combat training like? Was it special for--

Don: We did the same thing that the Marines go through. How to take a rifle apart and put it back together, marksmanship on the shooting course, cold weather training

was held at a place called Pickle Meadows, up and near Barstow, California. And we talk about Wisconsin winters, it was very cold and a lot of snow. And that went on for three days and then we came back, and that was part of our training because Korea has some pretty severe winters also.

Mik: And did you have any additional medical training to be a corpsman?

Don: No, I didn't need any of that. We were given our training in corpsman school, lasted six months, that was equivalent to about a two year degree in nursing at a tech school. So, we were pretty well versed on what to do in a certain set of circumstances.

Mik: So when you went to Korea in March, it had been a pretty rough winter over there hadn't it?

Don: Yeah, but when we got there--we were put ashore at Inch'on Harbor and from there we got on a train and went to where we were going to be stationed. And I ended up with the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines in a Howe company, H company. And it was quite delightful, actually. The spring, by that time, where we were was pretty nice. Probably not much different than Wisconsin.

Mik: I meant that a rough winter in terms of the Chosin Reservoir---

Don: Oh, that part of it! Exactly--exactly.

Mik: So you knew you were going into a pretty hot situation, didn't you?

Don: Well, let me explain what happened there. The Marine Corps had been holding the position on the east coast of Korea. And in February they started to move the division to the western part of Korea. And when we got there they were just finishing moving the whole division over there. And on the east there was a lot more mountainous territory than where we were. Still high hills and lowlands, but not the severe mountainous terrain they had over on the east coast. So maybe the winters were a bit worse over there, obviously

Mik: So, what happened when you joined your unit?

Don: When I joined the unit we, our particular 3rd Battalion was in reserve. And the 1st and the 5th were on the line. And in June, I guess it was actually later part of May, middle of May, we went on the line. It is called the Jamestown Line of defense. It was an entirely different kind of warfare. They called the '52--in 1952 and 1953 the Outpost War because what it was meant to be was holding your position--and having stabilization across Korea. It meant a lot of going out on patrols at night. We only had, I would say maybe, four or five major offensive or defensive fights. Mostly it was going out on night patrols, trying to secure prisoners, which were still causing a lot of casualties, but it wasn't as extreme as what they had over on the east

coast. So, I think during the time I was over there, there were something like 6,000 Marines that were combat wounded. It was a whole different outlook on my life, personally. I don't think anybody can go through a set of combat experiences and not come back a little bit changed. And I think I was one of those that was changed a little bit--in my outlook on life in general. You go out at night with maybe eighteen guys that you know and come back the next morning and there might only be twelve. And it can happen so fast that you tend to look at life a little differently. You appreciate every day--I still do--appreciate every day.

Mik: What, I know it's 50-some years ago, but do you remember what you were feeling the first time you went up to the line?

Don: Well, I'd be lying if I said there wasn't some fear there. I think everybody has fear. But, you know, you rely on the people on either side of you. And we had all been trained--we were all trained how to handle ourselves in situations. Your life might depend on the Marine next to you on either side. And it's hard to explain, but you go in there feeling confident that everything is going to be fine, yet down deep inside you know there is going to be losses. And so you live with that. And you take advantage of spending time with guys and appreciating their capabilities. You work as a team. I guess that's what makes the Marine Corps what it is. When you say "Semper Fi," it means a lot. I have some good friends that I still keep in touch with from fifty years ago, and it's like we are still close friends. I appreciate that.

Mik: Friendships forged under tough conditions.

Don: Right.

Mik: When you would go out on a patrol, how was it set up? And where was the medic? Where you near the front? Near the back?

Don: It could be a squad patrol, which it probably amounted to about twelve guys. If it was a larger it could be anywhere from a platoon size which is up to forty four men. As a corpsman I probably tried to stay somewhere in the middle. Kind of a side story that I'm not particularly proud of--it's kind of interesting. We had a new sergeant that came to our outfit and he was supposed to lead a patrol out that night and he said, "Doc, you ever been on this patrol before?" I said, "Sure, I've been on it several times." He said, "Would you mind kind of directing us where we are supposed to be going and what we are supposed to be doing?" So, very unusual, but I was the point man on the patrol, that only happened once. And it doesn't happen very often that a corpsman leads the patrol. And I look back on that as a "Why did I do that?" But I did. And we came through it fine.

Mik: Well, normally the rest of the guys wouldn't want you out there would they? Didn't they take pretty good care of the corpsman?

Don: Oh, they did. God, they gave me probably more attention than I deserved. There is a bond between a Marine and a corpsman that is something that can never be broken. Even now, being a member of the Marine Corps League in Oshkosh, the Winnebago detachment--I mean I'm like, I'm like their best friend. And they-- nothing but, nothing but the best. I mean they treat me, I mean we joke around with one another but I think they respect my position with them and I respect their position with me. So, it's almost like being married. I enjoy it.

Mik: The uh--a lieutenant was telling us about these night patrols and was saying that the newspapers would say nothing significant happened in Korea today, but they weren't talking about these patrols that were going on, that was very significant to the guys that were on it.

Don: Excuse me just a moment.

Mik: Sure. [pause] Did you feel like that? I guess you were just as much in harm's way as if it was a big battle. But people paid a lot of attention to the big battles and not so much to these ongoing patrols.

Don: You know I guess it hasn't changed much either even over now in Iraq. What's going over there now is pretty much what we were doing in '52, just trying to hold our presence there and trying to do a mission that we were given, yet it wasn't the case of a thousand men storming a position. It's the same thing over there as we have. There may be a patrol going out, convoys going out. You are right. When I hear on the news now, today about casualties, suicide bombers and two Marines were killed and now the total is such-and-such a number of Marines that have been killed over in Iraq, I look back and think, "We did the same thing." And we were never kept as a score the way they do now today with the media. And that's when I--one of the faults I have is that the media is too much in the forefront over there. I guess I don't understand why they have to be that involved. That they have to, on a daily basis, make that part of the news as, "Two more got killed today" or "Three were injured," that type of thing. I mean when I look back at what we went through, that was a--we didn't have the presence of the media like they have today. And I think it's great. I mean when you are out there in a combat situation you don't need some guy with a camera next to you interviewing you; you know, it's senseless.

Mik: Well if you are in a combat situation it's probably not a good idea to have a camera there--

Don: Well I don't know, they seem to be pretty close.

Mik: Well those embedded ones, they do. What was the typical mission when you would go out on patrol?

Don: Actually what we would be doing is two things. We would be trying to, if possible get prisoners and--which we were sometimes successful in doing, otherwise it was

just to probe their defenses to see where they were stronger, where they were weaker--kind of like a cat and mouse situation. They were doing the same thing to us—they were probing and I guess you would have to be honest in saying that the two probes never met, but they always did--they knew what we were doing and we knew what they were doing. A cat and mouse game more or less. And that's how you--they would--lie in a certain area and I remember one particular night we somehow stumbled into a minefield but the people up in front that were heading a patrol north realized it right away and everybody froze where they were and the Marines would take their bayonets and probed for the mines and they got us back out of it and we didn't have any casualties, so, thankful for that.

Mik: How do you do that at night?

Don: I, again, all I can say is the training that's given to these Marines and the situations that they are placed in is--it's remarkable. You're right, here it was, pitch black and they are on their hands and knees with their bayonets probing and when they would find a mine they would obviously let everybody be aware and mark it, and then we would just back out of where we were. It was a scary situation. You know there is nothing worse than saying, "We're in a minefield." But thank God nobody got hurt that night.

Mik: I would think that would be among the worst words you wouldn't want to hear.

Don: That's right.

Mik: "We're in a minefield."

Don: Right, right. And we weren't in that far, even 30 yards or so seems like miles when, not knowing where that next step is going to be.

Mik: Do you, again if I ask any questions that try to push you somewhere you don't want to go--just say. But do you remember your first fire fight?

Don: Uh--honestly, I guess I don't remember my first fire fight. I'm sure there was one, but I don't know which--I guess I can't remember back which was my first fire fight or which was my 100th fire fight. I do know that we had. When you mention about going out on patrol, it reminds me of the night that we sent out a eight-man patrol and it wasn't our company but the word was passed down, travels pretty fast, that no one heard anything but they just vanished, all eight of them were gone. Now I never did find out whether they were killed or captured, became prisoners or what, but it is a kind of unusual thing to happen. Nobody knows what happened to them, just were gone. And that's scary. I never did find out what the situation was. Eight Marines that I never found out what happened to them, nobody else did.

Mik: What ended up happening with corpsman when there is contact, and here are casualties; is it just madness? Is everybody calling for you?

Don: Um--I have a real good friend that lives out in Saratoga Springs, New York and a lot of times if we were going out, if I was going out on a patrol, we were both in the same company, but if it was a two-man squad patrol or something like that I would go home with him and he would go with me so there would be two of us instead of just one. We were in a situation like that and something happened and you would hear the word "Corpsman, up!" That's the call for us to go and do what we were trained to do. It's, it's entirely different than going to the hospital for some kind of treatment or whatever because you know exactly what is going to happen. We never knew as corpsman what we were going to run into. It could be not such a major wound or it could be something very, very serious. We could do what we could for that person before they were sent back to the battalion aid station. Most of our situations, our combat situations were major first aid situations. We didn't do any surgeries or anything like that. It was stomach wounds, chest wounds, legs, arms and we put dressings on them; give plasma if it was needed and you had it with you. That type of stuff. It was more or less of emergency medical technicians for the fire department or whatever else--for wherever they are located going out, not pretending they are a doctor or physician but giving that first aid that's needed before they can get back into where the medical facilities are. At that time we were starting to use helicopters for evacuation, not to the extent that they had in Vietnam but the helicopters could carry two patients, one on each side of the craft and it had like a pod, a stretcher on each side with a bubble over the top. We would put the wounded in there and fly them back out to the hospital ship or the battalion aid station, wherever it was more convenient.

Mik: I am just trying to picture some of the things you went through. And when you are on a patrol and it's night and you have casualties and you know, serious or whatever. How do you get out of there? Do people just take them over their shoulder?

Don: The Marine Corps has a long, long tradition of never leaving their wounded behind. And I saw that first hand. If a Marine was wounded and it took three men to go and get him and bring him back or if it would take fifteen men to go out and get him and bring him back they would do it. I mean all I can say is, God bless the Marine Corps, because they really believe that it is their mission to go out and there and make sure that there is nobody left behind, get their wounded and their dead back. I saw that time and time again. It might take three guys going out after a wounded buddy of theirs and maybe two of those guys would get wounded trying to bring the first one back. But it always worked. They got their wounded back. One particular night we did run into a situation where our lieutenant got hit pretty bad and I mentioned to the sergeant that was taking over, that it was almost dawn, I said, "Why don't you give me a radio man, two stretcher bearers, and I will try to make sure that we got our lieutenant back to the main line of resistance." And that was another experience that I had that I won't forget. We did, in fact, get him back to the main line of resistance. And it worked out very well, but we were--I don't know if we were being observed by the Chinese and they just knew what we were doing and

let us go, or if they didn't know, but it became day light and we were right out where we certainly could have been observed very easily. But it all worked out great.

Mik: Things you think about afterwards--

Don: Things you think about afterwards--uh I had, I had a situation when we were in Camp Pendleton. Met a Marine by the name of Don Story, came from a small town in California, Marysville. And we became very good friends over in California, Pendleton, in fact one weekend he took I and another one of our friends to his aunt's who lived in the foothills of L.A. and we spent the weekend. First time I ever had a taco, never forget that, I didn't know what a taco was. But after we were put on board ship, not knowing where we were going, or knowing what happened to Don story--low and behold we were both in the same outfit. This one particular night we were on a patrol and a call came up, I heard a loud explosion, and they said, "Corpsman!" and I went up, pitch black and it turned out that it was Don Story who had stepped on a mine and pretty much split him open. There wasn't anything I could really do. I administered morphine, and his last words were to me were, "Don I don't want to die." And I said "You'll be ok, you'll be ok." But I think within 20 minutes he was deceased. And I still have that memory implanted in my brain and every time there is a patriotic observance and I, if I think of that particular night and Don's story I tend to be very affected by it. And I would really love, and now maybe that I am retired, I would really love to go out to Marysville, California and see if he has relatives. Let them know that he died doing his duty--that he didn't have a lot of pain, and that he died quickly. So, that's an impression that I live with. I am sure Memorial Day is going to be coming and I will be thinking of that again. And getting back to my trumpet playing, I do play Taps for many, many, many military funerals.

Mik: I heard that it is getting hard to find somebody that can play taps.

Don: Well yeah it is. Although now there is a program that the American Legion has where they are trying to get high school students involved in Taps, it's called Taps Across America. But, I think I've got two Memorial Day observances to play for and it just, seems like every couple weeks I am playing Taps. **[End of Tape WCKOR100]**

Mik: You were going to say something?

Don: Um--I was just going to mention about this Lieutenant O'Brien [Lieutenant George Herman O'Brien, Jr.] that we had, recipient of the Medal of Honor for an action he took part in. They were pulling back from a position that they had been trying to capture from the Chinese and O'Brien was giving the orders and saw this Marine on the side and said, "Take that BAR" which is a Browning Automatic Weapon, "Take that Browning and get down the hill! Do it now!" And the Marine said, "Lieutenant I can't, I'm hit." He said, "Where are you hit? Everybody else is getting hit. Take that BAR and get down the hill." Well, after things calmed down a little bit, it turned

out that this Marine that he hollered at to get down the hill with his weapon had lost a foot. So when he said "I'm hit" it was a little more severe than probably than Lieutenant O'Brian thought but the guy hobbled down the hill with his weapon on one foot. Remarkable. But again, I think it shows the training and the dedication that Marines have that I was proud to be a part of. Just stories--when you hear things like that it makes you say, "God, how can that happen?"

Mik: When you say that and you were there, imagine what it is like for people who have never experienced--

Don: Yeah, right, right. You see some horrible automobile accidents and you think back about experiences like I just mentioned here. While there might be some relativity there--it's entirely a different situation. I remember one time on a patrol we were going up to relieve a company that had been defending the position and walking along on the trail, I glanced down and to the right off the trail a little ways, and I just remembered this now because I was talking about the Marine that lost his foot, there was a foot laying there, just a foot. No shoe, or anything on, just a--which leads me to believe I am sure it was probably an enemy. But, boy, I tell you when you see something like that, your senses really get sharp and you realize what you are walking into. It's not like a stroll through the park.

Mik: When you talked about--they call for the corpsman and you run up there, you don't know what you are going to find. I can just imagine where you were when you discovered right away that it was something you could help with or just totally beyond help.

Don: We carry--a corpsman has a--let's see, I would probably compare it with about the size of a twelve pack cooler. We're all pretty much all familiar with twelve cans that go in a cooler. And that's about the size of the equipment that we carry. In part of that was a surgical kit. Scalpels, needles, sutures, that type of thing. So we could do a certain amount of that type of thing but nothing to compare with what they would get when they got back. And then we had a lot of bandages, tape--I am trying to remember what was all in there. But it was a pretty compact little first aid kit--I guess what you'd say. And it seemed to work pretty much in any occasion that we had.

Mik: Were there times when you would just run out?

Don: Pretty close, pretty close. You have to realize a lot of the wounds were of such that they were able to be ambulatory, unless it was a leg wound or something, they could walk. We'd patch them up as much as we could and send them back. Of course, there was cases too where we had to use stretchers. But I would say for the majority of the wounds that we got involved in, and it could be anything like a major wound to a superficial wound, we were able to do what we were supposed to do and get 'em back again.

Mik: About the wounds, was it primarily either mines or shrapnel?

Don: A lot of shrapnel, and mines were probably not as common as shrapnel or bullet wounds. I would--I am trying to think--maybe I would say probably more bullet wounds than shrapnel wounds.

Mik: I guess that would make sense, night patrol, it's not like they could send mortars if they didn't know where you were, the forward observer so they would contact with whatever patrol.

Don: Right, right. And they knew where a lot of our patrols were and we knew a lot of their patrols were so if possible you'd go out and set up an ambush in hope that one of their patrols would come through. I am sure they did the same thing. They're looking to ambush our patrols. And when I say black, I'm telling you those nights seemed blacker than any I've ever seen before in my life. And I guess it's maybe just a situation--it's the unknown. You don't know what might be three feet ahead of you or whatever. When it got black at night it was dark. I mean there was nothing.

Mik: And then when something would happen, if there would be contact then that damages your night vision, doesn't it? Once there are flashes?

Don: Oh sure, sure it does, sure it does. I don't know how to explain it but it's just that--again this goes back to our training in Pendleton when we would have night maneuvers to acclimatize ourselves to those situations. So when they came, "Oh yeah, we've done this before." The training at Pendleton was really something, it was great. They really trained our people.

Mik: This probably isn't as appropriate for Marines because Marines are really well trained but did you run into any panic with new soldiers coming in?

Don: No, if we had replacements they were, again it's like a family, a relative that has lived a long ways away from your---comes to visit, you immediately take them in and they become part of the closeness of your family. So, you might kid each other a little bit about, "Oh, you finally showed up," or something like that or, "You don't know what you're walking into," and try to keep some humor into the day but replacements were always welcomed, and made to feel important because they were important. You know if you lost some of your people and replacements came in you wanted them to feel that they were important and they were important. We never had any problem with that.

Mik: What about humor, when you were off the line, or--?

Don: One of the things I remember, part of our C-rations is that you got a little can of jam and maybe, how could I remind it like, maybe kind of, a little smaller than these little round tuna cans that you can buy in the store. And we'd be--when we were in reserve we'd be having a fire at night and a somebody would toss one of those into

the fire and they had a fantastic way of exploding. That was one of those welcoming things if we got a couple of replacements then we would say, "Come and sit around the fire with us," then some guy would slip the jelly can into the fire and all of a sudden BAAA WOOM. These poor guys--I think, didn't sleep much that night. That was kind of, one of our tricks. But humor is so important. I think anytime you can have some humor in whatever you are doing it seems to make the time go faster. There were always a couple guys that got picked on a lot. It was an experience that I really have to say I am proud that I was involved in. The whole year I spent over in Korea was something that you have to have been there and did it to appreciate being there. I look back on it now and you know I--you know, they talk about serving your country and doing your duty but I think it's just a bunch of words unless you actually have been there and practiced what you are saying. In the media today you hear a lot of the media saying how strong our--the troops are over there in Iraq, their mindset is devoted to their duty but--unless you're there doing it, it's just a bunch of words. I feel that I had an opportunity to serve my country and nobody can take that away from me. And maybe that's why I vote every time I have an opportunity to vote. I have that obligation to those that fell and no longer could vote--I can do it for 'em, so. I think every American should exercise that right that they have, the freedom they have to vote. It really is sad when you think that sometimes we elect people with less than 40 percent of the vote.

Mik: It's just hard to fathom.

Don: It is--it is. It's not doing justice to those that gave their lives to have that freedom to do that. They always say "freedom is not free" and that is very true. But to a lot of people just--it's words.

Mik: How did you get wounded?

Don: I was a victim of shrapnel. And you had mentioned before about what were most of the wounds. And I was down, flat on the ground and I got shrapnel in my back. And it wasn't so severe that I had to be hospitalized for it and being a corpsman, I guess, the next day they just patched me up and that was it. So, I really wasn't severely wounded.

Mik: Now was that artillery or mortar?

Don: It was a mortar. I think it was a mortar, yeah. The Chinese were, for the most part, they were pretty well trained, too. Being a corpsman also gives you the responsibility of supervising sanitary conditions. And we had a new doctor that came over and he told myself and another corpsman that he wanted to go out the next morning and inspect sanitary conditions on the line. Well--this particular area where he wanted us to go, the Chinese had zeroed in their 75 millimeter recoilless artillery. They bore sighted 'em in. So that--what I am saying is you could look down the barrel and that's where that shell was going to go. Those poor guys on the line didn't even go out there in the day to go to the bathroom. I mean because they

were very vulnerable to a round coming in. And this doctor wanted us to go out and we both refused. He said, "What do you mean?" I said, and I spoke up and said that "You can do what you want but there is no way that we are going to go with you if you want to inspect sanitary conditions under the circumstances; it's crazy." And we finally got the lieutenant in our platoon to talk to the doctor and he canceled it. That would have been dumb.

Mik: Well in situations like that too, it's not easy to go to the bathroom at night either. People hear you or see you--

Don: Well chri--they go in a can and just at night throw--you know, dispose of what they were doing. But otherwise, getting back to the sanitary conditions, that was our responsibility to make sure that we were getting good water and that we were practicing sanitation as much as we could.

Mik: What about when you would take prisoners, were they ever wounded and you would have to treat them?

Don: I never had to treat a prisoner that we took but I know that there were some that we did. Sure, we offered them medical treatment. I guess I always [audio problems] looked at it, well like, they're part of a--

Mik: So you were talking about the prisoners, and you said they were somebody--

Don: Yeah, you know, I guess I looked at a prisoner as--a very unfortunate situation for him to be in. But I could imagine them having our prisoners and I always felt that this enemy, even though he is our enemy, he still has, probably, a family back in China or wherever he was from. My idea was that we should medically treat him the way we would want our people to be treated. That doesn't mean we loved 'em, but I think it would have been wrong not to treat them. So I always felt we should.

Mik: Your hand--

Don: Okay.

Mik: When you were going out on patrol was the medic sort of on his own? I mean, did you decide where you were or that you could accompany another medic on his patrol? Was that--

Don: Yeah, we could do that. We had the freedom to do that if we--and we'd know where some of these patrols were, and we knew from experience that it would be nice if we had another one along. So Dick Reitner, the fellow I was talking about that's a good friend of mine out in New York State, would say, "Hey, you know, care if I come along?" and I'd say "No," and I'd do the same thing for him if he was going out. I'd go with him. Even though we wouldn't be forced to do it, we wanted to do it. We volunteered. And no one said we couldn't.

Mik: I apologize, It's the third time I think I've said "medic" instead of "corpsman".

Don: Oh, that's okay, fine, fine.

Mik: So a patrol is going out, it seems like the lieutenant or whoever is leading the patrol is telling this guy to do that, and this guy to do that, but you just sort of did what you knew how--

Don: Right exactly, exactly. We always had a good relationship with our officers. Never had a problem with 'em. We did have one lieutenant whose ancestor--he could trace his military family back to the war between England and the United States. Evidently, this person was one of the first to get the Purple Heart, only at that time I don't think it was called the Purple Heart, but that's what it is. He mentioned that quite a few times, that his great-great-great-great grandfather was one of the first to receive the Purple Heart for wounds. And he wouldn't object if he had the privilege of getting a Purple Heart. That's the kind of guy he was, a little off base. But, he did get the Purple Heart, he got it posthumously. And this guy was--he was something else, I mean he was a lieutenant that really took that silver bar on his shoulder to heart. And most of the officers were common Joes and they didn't want to be there any more than we did. But this guy was a little bit different and he was killed one night on a patrol. I guess his time was up but there were always rumors going around as to who he was shot by. Which is difficult even to think about. And I don't know why I thought about that right now other than--we were talking about how everybody got along with one another and this particular officer was what the Marines call gung ho. You know, "Charge! Let's Go! Let's do it!" And nobody likes to see anybody get hurt or killed but it happened to him. I guess I hope he died happy, you know. I don't know why anybody in their right mind would want to be wounded but he had that mindset that because of his ancestry going back to being one of the first to get the Purple Heart that he thought he would like to get the Purple Heart.

Mik: Reality didn't quite match the theory did it?

Don: No, no, no. His mindset was just kind of weird.

Mik: Did you come into contact with, or did you join operations with, any other UN Forces?

Don: Yes we did. We had Australians and we had a detachment of Greeks. These guys were really fighters. Never being that directly involved but hearing stories about them going out at night on their own little patrol with just knives. Amazing. But I really didn't have much contact other than the Australians and of course we had the South Korean troops on our flank too, on our left flank and they were well trained. They were fighting for their country and they were good people. It's amazing the difference between South Korea and North Korea now, today, when you look at how

financially South Korea is doing and how poorly North Korea is doing. It's a shame that they couldn't be united as one country.

Mik: When you went out on your last patrol before leaving the MLR, did you know that it was your last patrol?

Don: Yeah, in November of '52, late November of '52, I and another corpsman in our company were told that we were going to be deployed back out of the combat situation. And in early December, I was sent back to a motor pool. So, I finished from--I left Korea in March of '53 and so from January, 'cause it was right around Christmas when I got transferred back, I spent the last three months in a--pretty much, in a harmless environment. Ride around in a truck [chuckle].

Mik: But was that last patrol more nerve racking because you knew it was the last one or was it just another patrol?

Don: I don't know if I truly remember, but I took every patrol as it could be the last one. And I think when you know, though, that you're going to be leaving, you tend to think a little bit more of--"Hope we get through it ok," you know--I think--I don't think anybody likes to know what's gonna happen tomorrow. 'Cause if it's bad you don't want to know about it--Right? So, I enjoyed my last 3 months over in Korea, being in the motor pool. There's a good camaraderie that takes place between the corpsman, the supply sergeant and the cook. The thing that holds us all together is, if you need something in the way clothing, extra clothing or anything, the supply sergeant's there. Surprisingly, once in a while we'd get a steak dinner and the corpsman had the alcohol. So, we'd get the juice, we had the alcohol to make the mixed drink and then those three individuals always seemed to form a bond--the supply sergeant, the cook and the corpsman. So, it's just the way it is. That's the only alcohol around. So we had it.

Mik: How about the political situation, was that part of your awareness at all? The fact that the Peace Talks were ongoing all the time?

Don: Yeah, I think that everybody had apprehension, was it ever going to end? I was fortunate I was given a bunch of slides that were taken right inside the Peace Talk compound. I've got 'em on a video that I had made. It's really interesting to see those slides. It sure took a long time to decide to end it. I wasn't there but I can imagine that it must have been an awful great feeling to know that it was finally over.

Mik: I can imagine for you, of all people, though, who is so aware of casualties and we have heard that nobody wanted to be the last casualty; you didn't want to get it today and have them sign tomorrow. I suppose there wasn't anything you could do about it so why be frustrated?

Don: That's right--there is nothing you can do about it. You try to take it just as another one. But it's probably, I am sure it's more on your mind than in the first patrol you

ever gone on. Because you know if you can get through this one you are ok. Basically, hopefully you're ok. So that's it.

Mik: Well I certainly thank you for sharing it with us. And I thank you.

[End of Interview]