

Wisconsin Public Television  
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ROBERT J. BOSBEN  
Radar Operator, Marine, Korean War  
2005

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Madison, Wisconsin

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**Bosben, Robert J.**, (1932-2009). Oral History Interview, 2005.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 27 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

**Abstract:**

Robert Bosben, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Korean War with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Air Support Radar Team. Bosben addresses his reasons for enlisting, attending boot camp with a buddy, his awareness at the time of the war as part of the Cold War, and radar repair training at El Toro (California). He talks about travelling to Korea by ship and airplane. Bosben details his work as a radar operator in the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Air Support Radar Team, an experimental unit that located aircraft at night and programmed bomb drops using a black box and a primitive computer. He explains the cooperation between his unit and reconnaissance aircraft, which provided targets. Bosben portrays the hill north of Seoul (Korea) that he worked on, living in tents, and occasionally having incoming mortar fire. He touches on having sentry duty at night. He speaks about the peace talks and the truce, which he only missed by a few months.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Bosben (1932-2009) served in the Marine Corps from 1951-1954, and was with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Air Support Radar Team in Korea from 1952-1953. After honorable discharge at the rank of sergeant, he earned a mechanical engineering degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and worked as a mechanical engineer with Boeing, Weyerhaeuser, and Rayovac Corporation. Bosben married, had three children, and settled in Madison, Wisconsin.

**Citation Note:**

Cite as: Robert Bosben, Interview, conducted May 3, 2005 at Vilas Hall, Madison, 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 number was WCKOR087.

**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 3, 2005.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Public Television staff, n.d.

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Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

**Transcribed Interview:**

- Mik: I think the best place to start is why the heck you wanted to be a Marine?
- Bob: Well, I think--first, I would say why did I want to go into the service? And I think it was, not to be too corny, but it was patriotism. We had, as you of course know, we had won World War II and defeated fascism, but we were in the middle--or start of--another war, the Cold War. And I firmly believe that every generation has to step up or we're not gonna preserve freedom for everyone or future generations. So, I think it was just a patriotic endeavor. As far as the Marines, I suppose there's a sense of adventure there.
- Mik: Best of the best?
- Bob: Best of the best or one of the best, yeah. So, it seemed attractive.
- Mik: Tell me about how it all came to pass? Where were you--
- Bob: I grew up in Madison or outside of Madison, went to East High. Worked for a year, after high school graduation, at Wisconsin Power and Light--as it was known then. And then just decided that the military seemed to be a good option. My mother wasn't too keen on it, but you know, when you're young and figure nothing could hurt you, why you do certain things. So I talked to a good friend into enlisting with me in the Marine Corps. So we went in, went three years together and we both served in Korea.
- Mik: Stayed together the whole time?
- Bob: No, we didn't stay together, we were together at boot camp, but that was it. Ah-- we went different directions and even after we came back to the States, we were in different locations. I don't know if he's forgiven me yet [laughs]. No, not really, I think he did all right himself.
- Mik: Maybe during basic you--
- Bob: We were pretty close in basic and ah--but since then not so.
- Mik: Did the war have something to do with it? I mean were you very aware of the Korean War and what was going on?
- Bob: I was pretty well aware of it, but it just was not the right thing to do. A country invading another country, and when the 38th Parallel had established as a dividing line. But beyond that, it was here thinking that this is a part of the Cold War. The invasion or occupation of South Korea by the North Koreans is just one step, maybe, in the domino theory. And I think the big concern was what will happen to Japan if we lose South Korea.

Mik: You know that's--I think that obviously the big part of that war is the communism aspect of it, and I was wondering, it seems to have started to come up right at the end, if not before the end, of WWII. Is that when you became aware of it or how did you become aware of communism, and domino theory, and things like that?

Bob: Well, General Patton had his own ideas on what should be done. And of course I think MacArthur had his own ideas on it too. But that, of course, didn't really become apparent until the Korean War actually was going and our forces, United Nations forces were headed for the Yalu River. Well, he wanted to keep on going. Of course, you know Truman said, "That's enough of that." So--

Mik: So you got out of basic?

Bob: Yeah.

Mik: And what was your training?

Bob: I had some training in radar repair at the 1st Marine Air Wing base at El Toro, well, El Toro was the name of the base in Santa Ana, California. And then in February, or late February, there was a couple of openings in Korea. So another fellow, from Seattle, Washington and I volunteered--and off we went. So--

Mik: How'd you get there?

Bob: Two weeks aboard a troop ship with five thousand Marines--tight quarters. Coming back was on a dependent ship. And so we had, I think, only about a thousand military personnel, but there military personnel dependents on the ship and they were off limits and so it was somewhat restrictive coming back, but a lot fewer people. When you have five thousand on a ship and bunks are five high, it's, is not too much privacy.

Mik: Did you hit a typhoon?

Bob: No.

Mik: I hear that's pretty bad when you have a troop ship--

Bob: Well, I was told that the last day before getting into Japan, the Sea of Japan would be fairly rough and I guess it was rough. But it didn't seem to bother me. I think it was a lot rougher when we left Japan and came back, and was--everyone was ah--hungover.

Mik: How'd you get from Japan to Korea?

Bob: By air. I started out at Pusan and I was there for two weeks. And then we flew up to Seoul and then by Jeep up to our location and near the 38th Parallel.

Mik: Tell me about your unit and what its job was.

Bob: Was an experimental unit called the 1st Marine Air Support Radar Team. We had a radar unit and with a Corsair control console and then a bunker, which contained a big black box and I guess a primitive computer probably. That's the way to describe it. And these three were connected together, hard-wired together. And we stayed on that same hill north of Seoul for, well almost, well the whole year I was there. So we were to pick up aircraft. We'd come up at night and the radar would pick them up and they would be locked onto and the computer would control the flight to predetermined coordinates and release bombs at the proper time. Targets were established during daylight hours by Piper Cub reconnaissance aircrafts. And then of course that information was sent back to us in some manner. Then it was fed into the black box. Now of course today with smart bombs this probably looks pretty primitive, but that's what we had over fifty years ago.

Mik: Your black box actually controlled the plane?

Bob: It guided it to the target. Well, it's established--you put in the coordinates and it would guide it to the coordinates.

Mik: And it would guide it with the pilot following the signals or it would actually guide the plane?

Bob: Well, I guess I don't know enough about it to know. I was just a radar operator. I sat up in the console when the aircraft showed up on the screen, that's what I was looking for and then I would just monitor it until the aircraft had done its bombing run, and went away and wait for the next aircraft to come.

Mik: What does that mean, to monitor it? What actually did you do?

Bob: Just watch the screen. Not remarkable, but that's what my job was. Our unit was only about twenty five or thirty personnel in size and I was the lowest ranking one of the whole group. So I had the most menial job.

Mik: What were the rest of the jobs?

Bob: Well we had, of course, a group that would actually do the radar repair and make sure that all the maintenance was done properly to keep everything working in order. And we had a number of, well, several officers and a fair number of master sergeants--tech sergeants. Most of them would spend their time down in the bunker during the actual runs.

Mik: And was it the officers that received the information from the reconnaissance?

Bob: Right.

Mik: And then they would program the black box?

Bob: I guess that's the right word.

Mik: It's fascinating because there were so many technological things happening in this war that weren't in World War II. There were jets--

Bob: Well, as I say, this was experimental.

Mik: When you volunteered for that were you--you knew exactly where you were going and this was all set up?

Bob: Well, I just volunteered for Korea and after that I was told where to go.

Mik: Aye, aye, sir.

Bob: Like a good Marine, that's where I went.

Mik: If you can still picture it in your mind's eye, describe your bunker and your outpost. What would you see when you would look around? You were up on the top of this--

Bob: On top of a hill, a bald hill. Dug in, the radar was not dug in, but my console was dug in. The bunker, it originally, well the bunker did not exist originally. Somewhere during the year I was there, we had a big bunker with timbers and overlay of dirt established. So--

Mik: Were those your living quarters?

Bob: No, we had tents. At this time, early 1952, much of the movement involved in combat was over, you know, like the Inchon and Chosin Reservoir and what have you. The main line of resistance was very well established. And although combat was continuing, it was mainly fighting over individual hills. That's why I say we spent a whole year in the same location. When we started out, we had an artillery battery located next to us for, I think, about six months. Then they moved somewhere. Ah--all this time, the truce talks were ongoing at Panmunjom and I guess they were rather contentious, slow moving. This is what I read in our magazine, the Greybeards. And they were describing how slow everything moved. So we had tents to sleep in. Out of the non--well, I should say they senior non-commissioned officers and ah--officers had pyramidal tents. And us lower level individuals had a squad tent. We did have a generator so we did have electricity. And I think we had oil heat in the tent, but during the winter time, I think you could sit on it and you still might not get very warm.

- Mik: What was that word "pyramidal?"
- Bob: Pyramidal, well, it's square and it's uniform. It's, a squad tent is big enough to house twelve or thirteen personnel. Pyramidal tent I think is designed for four.
- Mik: Were those on platforms, did they have wood floors?
- Bob: I don't really remember if we did or not.
- Mik: And that's all right. You said you went up to the installation at night so the tents were down?
- Bob: Tents were down at the base of the hill. When I first got there we were perhaps a little overexposed and I think the first night or second night we received some incoming rounds of artillery. That motivated our leadership to say, "Maybe we better move our location, our tents." So we moved it maybe a hundred or two hundred yards, tucked it in behind the hill better. Dug it into the side of the hill. So we were much better protected and then for a long time we never did receive any incoming fire, but probably about the first part of 1952, we were being shelled with mortars. And even to the point where one month, we were shelled five times. At that time, and I don't know how it is any longer, but then we had what was called combat pay. If you were fired on five times in a month, you get an extra I think it was twenty five dollars. Big deal. So, but only one of those months were we, did we qualify.
- Mik: Somebody had to go pay the North Koreans or the Chinese to mortar you five times. [Laughs]
- Bob: Well, when we'd been shelled four times, we'd kind of humorously say, "Well, gee I hope we get fired on again so we can get that extra twenty five dollars." That extra time might just have blown us to bits. So it was kind of a humorous thing.
- Mik: Well, they have to be pretty close to do a mortar attack.
- Bob: That's right, yeah. I don't know how true it was, but it was reported that they actually had a spotter behind us. And he was calling in the rounds and he did kinda walk. But they walked beyond our tents and up the hill. They were trying to hit the bunker. But they didn't.
- Mik: Did they even know what the significance of the unit was? What the radar was doing?
- Bob: I have no idea.
- Mik: How often was this in operation? Were there bombing runs every night?



Bob: Pretty much every night, yeah.

Mik: And where were they going?

Bob: I'm not sure what the targets were. As I say, they were picked out by reconnaissance. Whether they were troops or vehicles or camps, don't know. I didn't have any need to know.

Mik: How many flights a night?

Bob: I would expect probably whatever really only about two, typically.

Mik: So you were sitting up there, sometimes you were cold [laughs].

Bob: Yeah, in the wintertime.

Mik: Not much action.

Bob: In the wintertime, yeah, well it's true. Well one of the other things that we had to do, which of course several others had to do, was sentry duty and that, that was ah-- that was quite frequent. So there was another nighttime activity. And ah-- it was a two hour stretch--and that happened quite a bit.

Mik: Was there any pressure on your position other than the mortar attacks?

Bob: No.

Mik: Did you have infantry or Marines? You had Marines around you. Where were they located?

Bob: Well, there were, of course, infantry up ahead of us at some point and then we had reserve units behind us. And every once in awhile, we would see the reserve units headed up the road and so we knew either they were changing with the units on the front line or there was going to be some kind of an offensive.

Mik: Did somebody come with that black box? I mean were there people who really knew--had been trained or had even built it? It had to be maintained.

Bob: Well, I think it came from Point Mugu, California. And I'm sure that there were personnel that probably had been working with it--came with it. It was a sizeable box. I mean, today we'd probably hold it in our hand, but this was ah-- well, a number of square feet in size, surface area.

Mik: Did you ever see it opened up? Were there tubes or—you had no need to know what was in there?

- Bob: I didn't need to know. I wouldn't doubt, but that it had tubes in it in 1951-52. That's probably why it was so big.
- Mik: Again, if you can remember--I'm trying to picture it--when you would go up to your position, you were in the bunker? And that's where your console was?
- Bob: No, the bunker was kind of at mid height of the hill--maybe a little above mid height.
- Mik: And that's where the black box was?
- Bob: That's where the black box was, yes.
- Mik: And you were up by the--
- Bob: Well, I was up on the top of the hill. And the radar unit was thirty, forty feet away. So--
- Mik: And would you have warning or would you just wait for that blip to come on your screen? Or--I mean, did you know where to look and what to expect?
- Bob: Well, I think down in the bunker they had contact with the aircraft. So they knew when they were gonna be arriving. They knew where they would show up on the screen, approximately.
- Mik: And would they call up to you?
- Bob: Right.
- Mik: What kind of information did you provide them?
- Bob: Well, I would just tell them that, yes I have it, our plane is showing up on the screen and so--
- Mik: So you were their eyes?
- Bob: Yeah, that part of it yes.
- Mik: And it just went on like that for a year?
- Bob: That was it. I told you it was not that remarkable.
- Mik: Did you have any idea of the success of it?
- Bob: No feedback on it. But we kept on doing it so I presumed that, there must've been some merit in doing it.

Mik: And it wasn't like--what was your range?

Bob: I don't know.

Mik: Fifty miles? Hundred miles?

Bob: I doubt if we'd go that far. We wouldn't wanna--we'd be much less than that. Seoul is only twenty five miles to the south and you wouldn't want to be picking up too many blips on the screen.

Mik: Why was it at night? For the safety of the bombers?

Bob: Safety, yes--because, well, it functions somewhat like a smart bomb. Which we have today--except everything in the smart bomb is contained, it has its own guidance system. You just put in the coordinates where you want it to land and, but this would allow us to identify targets in the daylight, but then have the safety of nighttime flying to drop the bombs. Now, of course, if you're in a reconnaissance aircraft, you didn't have that safety, you were out there in daylight and you were probably at fairly low altitude and a fairly risky job.

Mik: A well placed shot could bring you down.

Bob: Right, yeah.

Mik: You weren't providing the box--were you giving them coordinates or letting them know where it was?

Bob: No, no, this was communications between reconnaissance and our leadership with the bunker.

Mik: But I mean during the bombing run. That also was going from the bomber to the leadership down there and you were just like monitoring?

Bob: I was just monitoring, that's it. Just looking at my screen--that was it.

Mik: Ever felt like you were in danger aside from the mortars?

Bob: Well, the mortars, yeah, that causes you concern. I had that the first one. Artillery shells landed, I thought at first, well, it's gonna be a long year if this keeps up. But then it didn't. But with the mortar fire, it makes you concerned.

Mik: And when you rotated out, did the installation stay in place and other people came in?

Bob: It stayed, yes. That time, I believe Eisenhower came over to Korea and he was gonna bring the war to an end. Well, which may have been political or whatever, but it actually it did end in July of 1953. A truce was established anyway, I don't know if, they say the war really ended. Cause as far as I know, North Korea's never agreed that the war is over, but they did agree to a truce and the DMZ was established and exists today, I think, which is, I believe, five miles wide. And it's pretty much centered on the 38th Parallel where it started although it's a little irregular. Some of South Korea's territory was given up and likewise on the other side some of the North Koreans' territory was given up, but basically the land mass amounted to what it started out to be.

Mik: And that's basically along the MLR, where its final position was that became the DMZ?

Bob: Yeah, right. It's one of the reasons why in the year I was there, I was told that the reason, the fighting or the combat continued, was kind of like a bargaining chip at the truce talks. And if you could demonstrate, either side could demonstrate more, more gains, why then they would be in a stronger bargaining position and they could, whatever they gain, they might be able to keep. If--once the truce was signed.

Mik: Tell me again what dates you were there?

Bob: March of 1952 to March of 1953.

Mik: And when was the truce signed?

Bob: In July of 1953.

Mik: So you just missed it?

Bob: But all the while I was there the talks have been ongoing. And as you can see, from that length of time, they were going pretty slow.

Mik: A lot of people, I understand, didn't want to be the last casualty.

Bob: Right.

Mik: Kind of hard to--when the talks are ongoing, hard to stay motivated, I would think. I think we've probably got it. Thank you.

**[End of Interview]**