

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
GERALD A. BUZA
Infantry, Army, Korean War
2004

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

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Buza, Gerald A., (1929-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 60 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Gerald A. Buza, a Stevens Point, Wisconsin native, discusses his service with the 3rd Infantry Division, 15th Infantry Regiment, Company H during the Korean War. Buza touches on being drafted, basic training at Fort Bragg (North Carolina), and being shipped to Korea in October of 1951. He describes his duties, first as an ammunition bearer for the machine gun platoon and later as a 75mm recoilless rifle gunner. Buza talks about retaking and holding Hill 355 near the 38th Parallel, living in bunkers, and contracting trench foot from the cold, damp conditions. He states his hearing was affected by all the shelling on Hill 355. He describes the scariest experience he encountered: being put on a forward observer patrol one night and getting lost in the dark. Buza speaks of combat conditions, eating cold c-rations, and relieving other outfits so they could take a break. He characterizes some of the soldiers he fought beside. Buza touches on the importance of changing socks, writing letters, and standing guard duty. He talks about his uneventful homecoming and having bad dreams about being reactivated.

Biographical Sketch:

Buza (b.1929) was with the Army in Korea from 1951 to 1952. After an honorable discharge, he became a papermaker with the Nekoosa Edwards Paper Company, which later became part of Georgia Pacific. Buza married, raised seven children, retired in 1991, and settled in his hometown of Stevens Point (Wisconsin).

Citation Note:

Cite as: Gerald A. Buza, Interview, conducted October 11, 2004 at Stevens Point, 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 WCKOR068.

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).

Videotape Note:

There are missing audio segments! The WVM copy of the interview is missing about three paragraphs at the end of the interview. Wisconsin Public Television should have complete audio of the interview, but there was a problem during the reproduction of tapes for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. The missing parts are italicized as a means of indentifying them in this transcript and the actual tape end in the WVM copy is clearly noted.

Interviewed by Mik Derks, Wisconsin Public Television, October 11, 2004.

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: --involved in the military?

Buza: Uh, in the service, you mean?

Mik: Yeah.

Buza: Ah, well, I tried and left when I was 18,--17 and they were filled in the Navy--I was gonna join the Navy to begin with. So, I tried the Merchant Marine--everything but the Army. So, I said, "Oh, I might as well wait until I get drafted", which did happen about a year later. So, ah, I got drafted to that training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina for six months or less, I guess it was. Then I went overseas--Korea and I landed there--two days later, I was on the--front lines. Then I was on passage in Japan on the way through.

Mik: What, what year was that?

Buza: What year?

Mik: What year?

Buza: '51.

Mik: What time of the year?

Buza" Ah, this would've been fall, it was, I went in on March '51 and trained in Ft. Bragg till October '51 is when I went overseas--

Mik: And where were you on the front?

Buza: I was in about 38th Parallel, most of the time on Hill 355. Ah, when I got there, the hill was taken by the Chinese and North Koreans and we went in to counter attack, took the hill back--it took us three days. We lost a lot of men but got high ground back. At that time, I was an ammo-bearer for the machine gun platoon. And uh, got back down, I was on the machine gun for maybe four or five months. And then they took me off and put me on the 75 recoilless rifle--back blaster they called it--ah, lived on the ground all winter, all summer. Only time we had seen, or been inside, indoors was probably when we went on R & R in Japan for 5 days--during that 14 months. Otherwise we lived in a ground hole--in a bunker--wet in the spring, fall--hot in the summer, cold in the winter.

Mik: Real cold? Was it pretty uncomfortable in the bunker?

Buza: Yeah, yeah, it was. Maybe not like 20 below zero but on the peninsula--dampness of the air. And uh, the problem when we first got there, was a lot of us were getting

trench foot from cold feet--we had the yellow time make it look like a snow pack which was warm when you were moving--walking. When you stopped and you--everything went cold, you got a lot of frozen toes. I had trench foot myself for quite a while. Which is kind of a snowy mess [laugh]--but we didn't get a shower probably once a month or less. Summertime, maybe more so, but, winter months we'd take us back into the shower tents uh, I think maybe I had three showers all winter--hmm--and a change of clothes. That was about it.

Mik: When you say you took Hill 355 back, what did that involve?

Buza: Ah, well, it was just down to the 38th Parallel it involved the high ground for that's what Korea is very hilly and rocky; rocky and hilly. And the more high ground you possess, the more advantage you had against the enemy. So, that was the idea of being on high ground.

Mik: So, did you have to take the hill under fire?

Buza: Oh, yes, definitely.

Mik: What was that like?

Buza: Well, it looked kinda' bloody--it was a three of my--ah, my section sergeant and two other of my platoon got killed in that deal when we were taking it back. We got shelled quite a few times and that's why the ear--I lost a lot of hearing in that ear. And uh, so luckily, I come through without being hurt. Other than the ear problem--

Mik: That's pretty amazing isn't it? All the things that were going on around you—

Buza: So, we went up and when we come back down, that's when we seen--this was at dark, when we went up to take the hill back. And we came back down, ah, that's when we found our buddies were laying there, still laying, from the night before. Ah, I think there was four or five of 'em from our platoon. So, then after that, I was put out on a forward observer patrol, myself and another fella from Milwaukee. And that's a scary experience. [laughs] You're out there all alone. Uh, trying to contact the enemy, find out where they are at, their positions and so on. And on our way coming back to our company we got lost. We didn't know if we were in enemy territory or where, so we found an empty bunker. We didn't know if it was safe or not but we had no--we didn't have much alternative. We were tired, cold, nothing to eat. So, we bunked in--we stayed there overnight till daybreak. Then we moved on and when we--next day, we finally found our outfit. We--after the sun come up, we realized what direction we were going in; otherwise, we were in the dark. We didn't know where we were going. So that was about the most, ah, scary experience in my lifetime. Ah, there were more--other times that weren't quite as ah, now, what would you say, exciting? [laughs]

Mik: Yeah, I don't know if I'd say exciting. [both laugh]

Buza: Yeah, I not know--not really exciting but uh, scary, I guess would probably--ah, you always had the fear of not probably ever coming back home seeing your family--and uh, friends was probably the most scary thing of the whole thing. We were always under fire, and uh, that was--you were always looking forward for the day when you get out. Get back home! So, that was a long 14 months. Actually 12 months, you probably on the front line two months traveling up and back, you know, processing. And that's about all I could tell you right now.

Mik: What, what's it like on the front line?

Buza: Well, if you're ever out to your backyard this time the of year, there's nobody around, nothing. You just sit there and think, you know, what's gonna happen next--you know, what's gonna happen next. And uh, that night I did have a machine gun nest, that I--a bunker out of it. I, ah, had to take guard every night for about 6 hours, every night: no lights, no cigarette smoking, or no flashlight, or anything. You could light a candle in a bunker and so there was no light coming out--on the ground. That's what I used to write my letters home with--usually, they didn't get home for a couple months later. Uh, that was ah, it was scary, I mean it was not really scary. It was good times too. We had, well, you'd get pulled off--we'd have movies, and uh, one time we had ah--they pulled us back for couple days; we had a big party. Uh, all you wanted to drink, all you wanted to eat and then go back up; hardly ever got a fresh meal. Fresh eggs probably, I had on the front lines, maybe four or five times while I was there. Otherwise, you get the powdered stuff, canned rationed food. But, we survived.

Mik: Did you have to eat those c-rations cold?

Buza: Yeah, most 'o the time. You had a little heater-like you carried in your backpack. Uh, you could light but, to warm up a little can of beans and wieners or whatever but, if you were in a hurry and didn't have time, you just ate; you were hungry, you ate 'em cold, you know. Ah, most of the time you ate on the run. You didn't sit down and like at a table and eat. Ah, that was ah--we survived through it.

Mik: When, when you took fire on the line, was it mortar, artillery, what was it?

Buza: Artillery, the round that we got in on were or we got shelled were--my guess would be would've been--mortar or artillery. 'Cause it'd come in--you could hear it coming ah, small arms fire also, while we were crawling up the hill; took us probably three to four hours to get up the hill.

Mik: Every time you went up there, it took you, you had to get up there--or are you talking about 355?

Buza: 355, Hill 355. Now then we stayed on Hill 355 all of that winter--rest of the while I was there on the 38th Parallel, holding the position 'till my rotation come up to leave.

Mik: Was there any more contact after you held it?

Buza: Oh, yes, several times. We had a tank by, ah, close to my machine gun position--which would fire a few rounds every so often--but at night--the blast of the flash of the tank--would give away your position and you'd draw fire that way--enemy fire. So, there were a lot of quiet, nice quiet days, which uh, till it was scary just bein' there [laughs]. Yeah.

Mik: How many were in your unit? How many were up there--at a time?

Buza: Yeah, well, in my own company or platoon?

Mik: Ok, yeah.

Buza: Oh, probably, ah, 28-30, 30 men, some were up on the hill when I first came--which, I said I was the ammo-bearer. We was bringing up ammunition to the machine gun--our machine gunners that were up there already--uh, taking the hill back. And lot of those died cuz--I know that I hadn't seen, you know, who were up there before I got there. So, that's just about my experience with that.

Mik: And then you became the machine gunner?

Buza: On the machine gun, yeah, for about four months.

Mik: What kinda machine gun?

Buza: 30 Caliber, air cooled, Browning 30/30. Then I got up the--the transferred me to the same platoon, only a different weapon. The 75 recoilless was kind of a bunker weapon, you shot from the crest of the hill into the enemy territory, which gave off a big blast of a flash, you know, ah, and that would give away your position, too, so we usually fired three--four rounds and down below the crest of the hill --that would draw fire--artillery and mortar, whatever they'd throw at us.

Mik: So, you'd fire the recoilless rifle and then you'd duck and incoming would start up, huh?

Buza: No, well, the recoilless gun was either direct or indirect firing, so--we uh, I was the gunner and uh, my buddy there, Archuelletta, on the picture here, he was my first gunner. We were the two smallest guys in the outfit, I think--from that recoilless rifle, breech and tube weighed about 105 pounds when one of us had to carry that--and the other one carried a tripod, course, you had ammo there, which the shell was probably eighteen inches long or longer.

- Mik: Did you fire it both ways; direct and indirect?
- Buza: Yeah, well, mostly direct, because, you, for indirect, you had to have a fire direction, ah, which we didn't always have, so.
- Mik: So, when you were firing direct, who, what were you aiming at?
- Buza: Well, mostly, bunkers or ah, look like bunkers--you look, scan the field with the glasses, you know, find out any movement or anything that looked like a gun position or ammo hole or anything like that. That's what you went for. Civilians we didn't touch them. There were civilians out there, too, so--you had a long distance. At that time, eventually, they--civilians just moved away from that area cause it was too scary to live. They were ah susceptible to being demolished--killed, you know, with all that fire going on.
- Mik: Were there any more attacks on that hill while you up there?
- Buza: Ahhh, not when I was there, no. Not that hill, there was hills around: Pork Chop Hill, Bloody Ridge, ah, they were not too far from where we were. We did relieve the 1st Marine Division way up on the Manchurian border, almost, for a week or two, so they pulled back for a rest. Relieved them for about a week, I think. So, that's as close as we come to China was Manchurian border. Ah, other than that, we'd relieve couple other outfits to give 'em a break. As we were, after this, after we took hill 355 back, kinda' settle down--we'd get rounds in every so often. But ah, and they'd send us out on F.O. and things like that and then we'd--if it was quiet where we were, we'd get--sent out to give another outfit a break--
- Mik: What, what do you remember about that night goin' up 355?
- Buza: Well, it's so long ago--I remember being scared for the tally [sp?] and if anybody said they weren't scared--they weren't in their right mind. [laughs] It was a long night. You were pinned down with small arms. You had to keep cover, move when it got quiet, move up a little and then we'd draw fire and you'd get back down and lay low for awhile--and uh, we got up there--it was early morning. And we got the ammo up there and then back down for more ammo, cuz that's the only way you got the ammo up there.
- Mik: The second trip up was easier than the first trip?
- Buza: Oh, yeah, I would say so. Yeah, it was quieter than--
- Mik: When you say it was quiet was it ah, that first time, was it just constant?
- Buza: Well, it's hard to remember really--uh, ah, I would guess you would say off and on, it was, there were sending a lot of stuff at us, cuz they knew we were coming back

up and they were sending a lot of mortar over the hill, you know, which is a hilly terrain weapon. So, uh, well, he's not our company, but our, well he got wounded going up that hill, with artillery and mortar.

Mik: Was it hard to see?

Buza: Ah, yeah, well, the thing is you didn't really know where you were going. You know what direction you are supposed to be going---never been there. The hill is 355, it's not yards, it's kilometers or whatever—it's lower than yards. So, ah, it's all rough terrain; it's a rocky, pretty steep, and uh, treacherous getting up to it. Eventually, they'd build roads up to it, but, ah, combat--corps of engineers built roads up to it--blasted roads in the rock up to Hill 355.

Mik: By the, after you were up there a while, is that how you got up and down, by truck?

Buza: Yeah, we made a few trips, when we went back to showers and that--ah, yeah, and then we transported--that's how we got our food--was by--ah--Jeep. They got shelled a few times. They found out the roads were there, you know, they'd keep an eye on them. They'd shell them every once n' a while, when they knew something was coming through. Most of the road was kinda' camouflaged. There were some spots that couldn't be, so, you'd just put netting over some curves, that were real sharp curves, that were open to the enemy that we had to camouflage by netting and so on.

Mik: Could you see Pork Chop from 355?

Buza: No, ah, if I could, I wouldn't know it, yeah. Well, that's my experience with the Korean War.

Mik: And you were happy to get out of there!

Buza: I was happy when I got home--I'll tell you. [laughs]

Mik: What was the reception like when you got home?

Buza: Pardon.

Mik: What was the reception like when you got home?

Buza: There was no reception. No. Ah, I got into Camp Stoneman, I think. We all came back by boat. San Francisco, from there we--after we processed in Japan for a couple days the rest of the way was by boat. And from there on, we were on a troop train come back to Fort McCoy. It took us two days, I think--to get back from ah, I think it was Camp Stoneman--that's where I--went out from. So, when I got to McCoy ah, the folks didn't even know I was coming home or when--so I called and it so happened that a fella from Plover was coming home on leave, not on leave, a

weekend pass, that day, so, ah, I got a ride home to Plover with him and ah, then I met my parents. They picked me up there. Otherwise, nobody--really knew what and when I was coming home. They knew I was coming home sometime, so that was the only reception. [laughs]

Mik: Tell me about the guys you were up on the line with--

Buza: Well, Archuelletta, he was from Pueblo, Colorado, he was a good buddy of mine. Uh, you talking about the individuals that I was--yeah, well, one was; my section sergeant was from Martinsburg, West Virginia. He's the other one on the picture and well, they were coming and going some where--you know, we had the rotation deals and uh you never got acquainted real well with all of 'em because some of 'em were leaving, and some were coming, and except for a few that I was in with during the whole time, which was these two fellas. Yeah.

Mik: Do you ever think about your time over there?

Buza: Oh, yeah.

Mik: Stays with ya.

Buza: Pardon.

Mik: It stays with ya?

Buza: It stays with me--

Mik: Does it stay with 'ya, the memories of Korea?

Buza: Oh, yeah, yeah, you never forget that. Yeah--yeah--

Mik: Did you have any problems with memories when you got back? Was it--

Buza: Yah, I got some when I first got back, but--ah, I still dream about it--now--times that--it used to be several years ago, I'd dream I got called back so many times. I'd come back home and they'd re-up me and send me back. I don't know how many times. [laughs] Not, exactly the same place, but, back in service, ah, yeah, that happened a few times, quite a few times. Yeah.

Mik: What are the dreams like besides that? Are they back up on 355, is that --?

Buza: Well, not really, it's hard to explain. It might had something to do with it but--it wasn't actually as would, you were there. Put it that way. Yeah--

Mik: That's gotta be hard on you to have people trying to kill 'ya.

Buza: Well, they don't know it. We don't know what we--we're firing at them. We don't know, you know. But ah, actually, it isn't, you're not trying to kill the people. You're trying to demobilize the operations and equipment. It's not that I want him, you know. I don't--it's not that way. You don't have that feeling—I got to kill him because, unless it comes to man to man hand combat, then it's either you or I, then you gotta' do something about it.

Mik: When you were on that night patrol and you were lost, that was--you just didn't know where you were, did you?

Buza: No, ah, we didn't know what we were going to run into, or who. We didn't move too much because they figured we may be moving into enemy territory, so they thought we'd better stay put as much as we can until daylight and get our bearings—little, and uh, get back to our outfit. So, it was a day and night and the next day we finally got back to our outfit. That was ah--

Mik: Oh, you were out there another night after you--

Buza: No, just--

Mik: You went out in the day--

Buza: One day, that night, the next day we got back to our outfit--it was actually one night. It was cold; we didn't have--he and I had to huddle up together to keep warm and took our boots off and put our feet underneath our knees, you know, to keep the clothes from freezing. Ah, well, you had an extra pair of socks. That didn't help much there. You did change your socks--you know, cause, you know, when you're moving, your feet sweat and you sit and then they really get cold, you know--so you change your socks, put dry socks on which helps. Put the other pair of socks back in, [laughs] the old, smelly socks back in; into your bags and--so if they dry out for the next time you need 'em--

Mik: So, the caption on that photo says, "What a party!"

Buza: Oh, yeah, well this was close to Christmas time. Ah, we got a fifth of whiskey--whatever it was for Christmas. Ah, not it, every two, for two people or whatever. A lot of those guys didn't drink, you know. And uh, that was our Christmas.

Mik: Were you on the front at Christmas?

Buza: Yeah, that Christmas, one Thanksgiving and one Christmas.

Mik: Did that seem fair?

Buza: Pardon?

Mik: Did that seem fair?

Buza: Yeah--

Mik: To be up there for Christmas?

Buza: Yeah, somebody had to be there--[laughs]

Mik: When you're out there in the middle of the night at a machine gun pose, what kinda' stuff did you write in your letters--?

Buza: Well, there wasn't much to write about besides--about things at home, you know, cuz' you wouldn't--didn't have much to write about there--write about the same thing--you sitting there--ah, watching--ain't much to write [laughs] except what you think--you know--but, ah, just to let whoever you're writing to know that you're safe and alive and doing the best you can--

Mik: And hope you stay that way--[laughs] but ah, what do you listen for or watch for when you're out there at night?

Buza: Well, enemy, ah, gunfire mostly. Shells coming in, well, you don't see them until they hit, but you could, if they go over, you can hear 'em. So, you know they're coming. Movement out in front of you; you maybe infiltrated, you know--ah, snipers and so on--ah, go through that barbed wire out there, but you can snip barbed wire, you know. Yeah, so those kind of things--what you had to do. Animals would sometimes wrestle things up and get your blood circulating a little bit, but, ah, you had to distinguish that from what it was gonna' be--[laughs]

Mik: Did most of the action happen at night? Is that when most of the artillery--

Buza: Ah, mostly, yes, unless it was a fully engaged attack, you know, then it would have been day and night, but, most **[End of Tape]** *of the bombing, you could hear bombs fall. Some of our bombers fly over, go way back into Northern Korea, bombing--yeah, you could see flashes all night out there.*

Mik: *So, what did it look like from where you were on the, like in your nest--was it just other hills, other mountains?*

Buza: *Oh, yeah, it was all hilly. Ah, course, you were on the high ground, so, the hills beyond you were probably smaller until you get to another hill in the background, which might be as high as the hill you were on or maybe higher. But, ah, it's a matter of miles. You couldn't really, ah, know how many miles, but--*

Mik: *We just ran out of tape--What time is it?*

[End of Interview]