

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
LEE R. HASPL
Artilleryman, Army, Korean War
2004

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Haspl, Lee R., (1931-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Video Recording: 3 videorecordings (ca. 65 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Lee R. Haspl, a Prague, Czechoslovakia native, discusses his service in a Howitzer unit of the U.S. Army, 25th Infantry Division during the Korean War. Haspl explains his parents' connections to the United States, moving to the States in 1946, attending high school in Tarrytown (New York), and attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He reflects on growing up in Czechoslovakia during World War II: seeing an aerial dog fight, censorship of BBC news, and having a grandfather who was arrested and killed in the Dachau concentration camp. Haspl describes being drafted in 1951 even though he was not yet an American citizen. He touches on basic training at Camp Chaffee (Arkansas), failing to avoid assignment to Korea, his arrival in Japan, assignment to the 25th Infantry Division, and feeling welcomed by his new unit. Haspl talks about his job loading 105 mm Howitzer shells, eventually being promoted to Sergeant First Class in charge of all six units in his battery, and refusing to extend his tour by a month in exchange for master sergeant stripes. He mentions arriving in the "Punch Bowl" and discusses a close call while being shelled. He portrays discovering there was a sixteen-year-old soldier in his unit. Haspl details his combat duties and describes relations amongst the troops in his racially integrated artillery unit. He tells of his lucky survival after wandering into a minefield at Heartbreak Ridge. He characterizes a little Korean girl who wandered into the outfit and tells of giving her food and clothing before she disappeared during the night. Haspl portrays the Korean houseboys who followed the Army and the Turkish troops, who had wonderful food and took ears off the enemy as souvenirs. He talks about going to a MASH unit to get his tooth fixed and stopping on the way to have a meal with some British troops who used actual plates. Haspl explains how tired the men often were, the work necessary after moving to a new location, and busting a sergeant for refusing to dig a foxhole. He touches on problems with friendly artillery fire and states he took home a piece of shrapnel that landed right next to him. Haspl speaks of meeting his girlfriend in the States before his deployment, becoming a citizen upon his return, and getting married. He mentions his worry about getting captured because Czechoslovakia had become a communist country and being instructed to say he was born in Brooklyn. Worried about mail censorship, he details having a friend in Milwaukee who would receive letters from Haspl's parents in Prague and send them to Haspl in new envelopes, and who would route letters from Haspl to Prague the same way. Haspl states he did not tell his parents that he was fighting in Korea. He recalls feeling bitter towards communists. Haspl details a big rat getting into his bunker and someone killing it with a shovel. He mentions being afraid of hemorrhagic fever, having a rash on his legs and an infected foot, and hearing problems caused by not using earplugs. Haspl states his unit had a terrible cook and the C-rations were often better than the mess hall food. He touches on being miserable in winter conditions and listening to news on an Army radio. He tells of Chinese propaganda over the loudspeakers and seeing them put gift baskets in no man's land. Haspl speaks about being shipped home just at the end of the war and using the GI Bill for education and VA hospital care. He reflects on the United

State's continual involvement in wars, his own relations with the Russians when he was growing up in Prague, and his first time eating donuts when he went to see the American Army in Plzeň (Czechoslovakia). In 1952, he recalls meeting an Army man who was serving as an advisor in Indochina.

Biographical Sketch:

Haspl (b. 1931) served in the Army from 1951 to 1953. He grew up in Prague (Czechoslovakia) until moving to New York in 1946, where he attended Hackley School. In Korea, he served as a gunner and as chief of the firing battery with C Battery, 69th Field Artillery Battalion, 25th Division. After the war, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and took a semester of graduate school classes at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He married Sandra, raised two daughters, worked with exports, and eventually settled in Madison.

Citation Note:

Cite as: Lee R. Haspl, Interview, conducted October 4, 2004 at Studio C, Wisconsin Public Television, 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 numbers were WCKOR058, WCKOR059, and WCKOR060.

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 a paragraph between the second and third tapes. Wisconsin Public Television should have complete audio of the interview, but there was a problem during the reproduction of the tapes for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. The missing parts are italicized as a means of identifying them in this transcript and the actual tape end and start in the WVM copy is clearly noted.

Interviewed by Mik Derks, October 4, 2004

Transcribed by Wisconsin Public Television staff, n.d.

Transcription reformatted and edited by Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff, 2010

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Mik: Tell me where--

Lee: Where it all began?

Mik: Yeah.

Lee: Well, I tell you, it began, I hate to tell you the year. Before I tell you how old I am, I ran into a guy last week in Las Vegas and he was about the same age as I am. And I asked him, how old are you? Must be about the same age. He said, "I tell you, I'm somewhere between forty and death." I thought that was pretty good, so, I'll leave that at that. But anyhow, it started for me in Prague, which is now the Czech Republic. That's where I was born. And my mother who was also born in Europe, but came to the United States when she was a little girl, and spoke English, or American English without an accent. So she spoke to me in English and my father spoke to me in Czech and I became bilingual. And that's why I, I do have an accent, but perhaps not as bad as some others--Kissinger, for example. But anyhow, that's where it started and she always told me about the United States, she was just homesick for the United States. This was in the '30s and of course then the war started and we were stuck there. And so I planned on going to the United States at my earliest opportunity, which finally came about after the war in 1946. And I, as a matter of fact, the whole family came to the United States, but then they returned, unfortunately. And two years later in '48, the Communists took over. I stayed here, and they were over there. So I was on my own from age fourteen on. I went to high school in New York, in Tarrytown, New York. And after finishing high school, 1950, I applied to two universities, University of California, which was my first choice, that's where my parents went to school--but nothing happened. The second one was the University of Wisconsin. They accepted me, so off I went to Madison, Wisconsin. And ah--

Mik: How did you happen to even know about Wisconsin?

Lee: Well, there was another fellow in school, in high school that was from Illinois and he was kinda thinking of Wisconsin, so. It was Wisconsin or Minnesota, didn't make a darn bit of difference, but ok. So I was accepted.

Mik: Did your parents meet in college?

Lee: My parents met in Europe, and my mother had a scholarship, the University of California, and so she was gonna go there and then my father somehow got in there too and that's where they married and actually, I should've been born in California and I could've been the next president of the United States, but now, they really goofed. And I told them that, now I cannot be president. Anyway, that's--

Mik: Did you have any experience during World War II? Was there conflict right around you?

Lee: We still have a short wave radio, was in those days, were against the law. Punishable by death, and we had to have a little card on our radio, no televisions in those days. And the card--if you are listening to something like BBC, which would be on short wave, it's punishable by death. Mind you we were occupied by Germany during that time. So it was kinda scary. And one memorable thing I remember, I saw a dog fight, I was on the roof of our house and I saw an American plane and a German one was on his tail and the German shot him down and I saw him go down and I went over there to see if, it just, it made me so sad to see this poor American, a young fellow die. And but anyway that, that's not. My grandfather, I mentioned that radio, the Gestapo kind of suspected him and he, he was a Unitarian minister in Prague. And he was one of these people who liked to talk, saying, ya know, the sun will come back, ya know, right now we have clouds, but the sun will come back. Well, these, the Gestapo use to come over and listen to him and they kind of suspected he is not of the right sort of a fellow. Make a long story short, one morning at 7:00 in the morning, they broke into his home and they caught him listening to BBC. Seven o'clock was the time to listen to the news. Well, he immediately turned it, but it was too late. They took him away, they also took one of my aunts away. My aunt ended up in a force labor camp. He ended up in Dachau where they killed him. So that was, that was, it was a sad time. I saw some horrible things, during those days. And it sort of made me a little older perhaps than my cousins when I came to the United States, my own age, they seem to me like they were about ten years younger than I am. Six years of war kind of ages you. So I say, well, that was the end of wars for me, no more wars; it's over with.

Five years later, I get this letter from my friends and neighbors and I was being drafted. So I asked, when I went down there, I asked the Sergeant who was interviewing us, "Hey look, you know, I'm not a citizen." He said, "Well, if you don't take that one step forward--." Oh, they asked us, "Now if you agree with everything, you take one step forward and now you're in the United States Army. You don't take that first step, then it'll be very difficult for you to become an American citizen later on." Well, I just asked just to be sure. I had no intention of pulling out of this thing. So I went. And I was in the US Army. And, ah, it was kind of exciting at first. Ended up at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas for basic training; which was 105 millimeter artillery. And I tried to, I thought maybe I could get to Europe. I do have a facility for languages, so I took some language exams in the Army. I thought, well, maybe I'll end up in something to do with translation or what not. And after basic training, there was another course to take, leadership course, which I took because that put you another two, three weeks of not going overseas. Then they decided, well, you took all these language tests and one experience you don't have, that's Korea. So maybe that's what you should do, go to Korea and learn a little Korean. And I sort of got sort of a butterfly in my stomach. Fear, really fear. But anyway--

- Mik: How much did you know about Korea when you were drafted? Were you very familiar with the war?
- Lee: Nothing. I was--my first semester here, that's when the Korean War just started and I had a roommate who, one morning he had a telephone call and it was his brother who was killed in Korea. So I knew what was going on. That was about the last place on earth I wanted to go to. I thought, "Europe would be about where I should go with my background." Anyhow, got to Japan and we ended up at some old Japanese Army base, World War II base. And this was interesting, it was Japanese who took M1 rifles out of the crates, was still cosmoline. They dismantled the rifles, cleaned them up, my god, they knew more about those M1s than what I learned in basic training. Went out had to test them at a rifle range. And then the next day, this was very fast. Next day, we were in a big area, like a football field and they started calling names. And they would announce the outfit and where people were going. And some were ending up in Japan. I thought, "Well, gee, this would be pretty good duty." You know, occupation. I could stand that. And then my name came up: 25th Infantry Division, Korea. And that's when I got that butterfly again. I was scared. Next day or two--on a boat again to Inchon where we got off, and then they put us on a train, and then on a Jeep. I was a replacement into my outfit and actually, I felt pretty good. I got into my outfit with bag and baggage. And who comes to the Jeep but a first lieutenant. Now here I was a buck private, and he welcomed me, he was so glad to see a human being coming into the outfit. He took that duffle bag, he said, "C'mon, I'll show you where to go." My god, this is unbelievable, a lieutenant helping a private. So, that made me feel really good. The spit and polish was not there, not in Korea--not on the line. And so everybody made me feel at home, and I adjusted and that was it for almost a year. Yeah, a year.
- Mik: What was your job in the--
- Lee: The first job was putting gun powder bags in a shell. In a 105 millimeter Howitzer shell. Depending on how far we had to shoot or what we have to shoot, it was either number five, number six, whatever. And then you cut off the rest of the bags, you put 'em in. Excuse me. And then they would announce what kind of fuse to put on. So have to put that fuse on. If we had to shoot at personnel, they use to call that cabotage, and that thing would explode about twenty feet before it hit the ground. And spread out. Or if we were just shooting at the ground, that was a different kind of a fuse. So, that was my job and after that, learn how to use the Howitzer and shoot that. Actually, I went from the lowest job in that outfit to being in charge of all six units in our battery and I left there as a Sergeant First Class in one year. So I was in the right, not that I was smart, I was in the right place at the right time. They ask me now, if you, a job call for a Master Sergeant, if you'd stay one more month, we'll give you that extra stripe. And I said, "Uh uh, that's it, I want out of this man's Army." [laughs].
- Mik: So where were you in that when you first join the 25th?

- Lee: When I landed at the Punch Bowl, which is some place in North Korea. And that's where I started and they moved us around and if you were being shelled or shot at, you got combat pay, which was really a lot of money. We got extra fifty dollars a month and I got that, I think, except for one month. Each month I was there.
- Mik: What's that like to be shelled?
- Lee: Pretty scary. That reminds me, we were mentioning this picture where I'm sitting of top of those shells. Ya know, we use to put 'em in a truck and sit on top of it and go from one place to another. But one time, and then when we were in a location, we would usually build sort of a bunker around our ammunition and one time, and we had a urinal not too far away from this bunker. And I had to go to it one time and just as I left and got back to a hole where we were living, everything just exploded. Our ammo got hit, we had a direct hit. It didn't blow the whole thing up, but it sure took a lot of it out. I mean it was—so, I was lucky.
- Mik: That's pretty earthshaking, isn't it?
- Lee: It was like an earthquake. I mean the whole, ya know, the whole ground shook and—oh yeah. So that was one experience.
- Mik: When you were at the Punch Bowl, what was the situation when you got there? Was it still pretty hot or was it--
- Lee: You could hear a lot of noise around and I mean we were not shooting at each other constantly. There were periods of time when maybe for two days nothing happened. Then all of sudden, three o'clock in the morning, all hell would break loose and there we'd go. Now that time when that ammo thing blew up, the Chinese knew exactly where we were and we had to get the hell outta there, but quick. And by the way, that was the time when we found a kid in our outfit who admitted that he was only sixteen years old. Boy, he was outta there real quick-like. Kid volunteered.
- Mik: Lied about his age to get in?
- Lee: Lied about his age. By the same token, we also had a fellow who came in with gray hair. And he was in the Army, must've been twenty years or so, and he's never been overseas during that time. And so they decided it's about time to send him overseas. Pretty old, he didn't last long either.
- Mik: When you say that all of sudden it's three o'clock in the morning, all hell breaks loose, you weren't at your guns obviously.
- Lee: We were very close to it.
- Mik: And then so it's all of a sudden, it's incoming and then do you go to the?

- Lee: We had to--maybe the Chinese were pushing and we had to support our infantry and had to get out there and start shelling. So it could happen any time.
- Mik: Take me through it, step by step. Obviously a forward observer or infantry is calling in for support, so tell me what each stage is when that happens.
- Lee: Well, you get a call and ah--then everybody's alerted calls--we have six guns in our battery just like a company. And they are alerted. And they will each have the same instructions. Where would, how far we're going to shoot, what we're going to be shooting, and then it goes. And then we may be firing for an hour or two, or whatever.
- Mik: Just as fast as you can--
- Lee: Just as fast as you can go. One after another--and we let a lot of shells go.
- Mik: What's that sound like when you're firing?
- Lee: It's pretty noisy, but you know when you're nineteen, twenty years-old, doesn't matter. Today, I couldn't take it.
- Mik: When you talked about putting the powder in the shell and the fuse, what was your next job?
- Lee: The next job would be, you know, I forgot the name of this thing, but where we would measure the distance and how to prepare the gun, ya know, where it's gonna go. So that would be the next job.
- Mik: So that's raising it and cleaning it--
- Lee: Yeah, right. And then after that, in charge of the section, about ten fellows and that one gun. And then finally, the last job was in charge of all six of these sections. It's called a Chief of the Firing Battery. That's what I was.
- Mik: And what were your responsibilities then?
- Lee: For the, it's, it's like the noncom [NCO] of the whole outfit.
- Mik: So what kind of things were you concerned with? What kind of orders did you give?
- Lee: One time I had to put a gun to a guy's head to dig a hole. I mean I--you're calling the shots to about sixty people. And there are times when some people will get unruly. We had some fights. We also had a Korean detachment with us. And taking care of them and making sure they don't kill each other. We had one guy

come in one morning and part of his skull was gone. That was from a fight, among themselves. By and large, everybody was pretty peaceful, and pretty nice people. And we had both blacks and whites in our outfit, I think that was the first time. When President Truman made the armed forces integrated, which was very good. And we all got along, it was wonderful, we had our one first lieutenant was a black soldier, he was a law student. Wonderful person. And then, I hope some of those people are still alive.

Mik: Did you get pretty close to the guys in your battery?

Lee: Yes. We were very close, very close. Although, perhaps not as close as our outfits that go through basic training and they go together overseas. That would've been even better, but here I was a replacement. And I joined these people for one year. I was in for two years.

Mik: Where did you go after Punch Bowl? Or do you remember or was it just one place after another?

Lee: Oh, god. You know, you mentioned some of those hills that was a Dag--one hill was called Dagmar. And then there were a number, numbers, going through some of my photographs, I noticed Hill 462 and things. I forgot about those things, but I was at Heartbreak Ridge, not the first time, but second time. Can I tell you a, this, maybe this is sort of off the record, but we got into Heartbreak Ridge and there was a minefield. And I had to go to the bathroom. And I didn't know it was minefield, and that's where I ended up going. And I, I'm telling you, I'm one lucky stiff. [Laughs].

Mik: Just wandering around in a minefield?

Lee: Then we found out it's a minefield.

Mik: Was that pretty common, where there a lot of minefields?

Lee: Not really, no. Not from what I have seen, but Heartbreak, yes.

Mik: Is that because it went back and forth so many times?

Lee: I don't know, and we didn't stay there long, we were there only a few days--and off we went some place else.

Mik: Now when you set up the battery, how far were you from the line?

Lee: From the line, a mile, two miles. Sometimes over a mountain. Maybe there'd be a hill and that'd be a good protection for us because once they spotted where we are and we had to get outta there. Just like that one time when our ammo pit blew up. They knew exactly where we were, so we had to pull out.

Mik: So once you take incoming, then you know that they know they've got the range and--

Lee: Yeah, oh yeah.

Mik: And tell me about the process when you pull out?

Lee: Well, one time we had to wait for battalion to tell us that we can pull out. And at one time, I didn't think we were gonna make it. We saw the infantry in our outfit. I mean, and we had equipment that we had to hook up to a two and a half ton truck. Those Howitzers are pretty heavy. So it took us a little time to pull out. Finally, we got the order and we got out. I can't even remember where that was anymore. I didn't have it as bad as some other people. I came back without a scratch. I was lucky.

Mik: Describe a little more about pulling out. What all had to be done besides hooking the guns up to the truck?

Lee: Basically, that's it. Because what, every, little equipment we had, I use to keep everything that I owned in a fuse box, metal fuse box, which was like about two, one and a half foot by something, like by a foot. That was all my possessions. Most guys kept something like that themselves so. But that went on a two and a half ton truck, we jumped on, and of course our ammo was on the bottom, we got on top of it and off we went.

Mik: And never thought twice about sitting on--

Lee: Never thought twice, ya know. And the things blowing up all over, I mean. Anyway, I tell you something else. You wanna know what was something memorable? One time, out of nowhere, a little girl, about oh maybe eight, nine years old, maybe she was ten. Korean children are a little smaller than our kids. This little soul came no shoes, just a sort of a piece of rag over her, that's all she had on. She came out of nowhere. There she is in our, in the middle of our outfit. Never said a word, so we invited her, gave her some food, she took the food, and it was evening. And where did she come from? And so what, what are we going to do? So we, we fixed up a place for her to sleep in one of our bunkers and the smallest guy in the outfit had to donate his clothing and we dressed her. We put some fatigues on her, gave her some shoes, she look like a GI. And I, and so put, tucked her in bed, thought she was gonna go to sleep and morning, she was gone. She vanished. With all her clothing and everything that we gave her. Where she came from, we never knew, never said a word. It's one of those things, but I thought maybe we helped her a little bit.

Mik: Did you have very much contact with civilians?

Lee: Civilians? We had what we called, house boys. Koreans, Korean young men who needed a job would follow the military, our outfits and maybe would help in the kitchen and stuff like that so. We had people like that, maybe three or four guys that would help the cooks. Other than that, not too much, not too much.

Mik: Now when you say they would follow the outfit--

Lee: They would stay with us. These fellows stayed with us the whole time I was there. And ah--I don't know if we, if we paid 'em something. I have no idea. But of course they were fed, they were clothed and I'm sure they got something. So it was something for them to do. Besides, they learn English. And I'm sure they used it later on, to their advantage.

Mik: How about other United Nations troops, besides—**[End of Tape WCKOR058]**
About the U.N. troops.

Lee: Yeah, the U.N. troops. We had a Turkish regiment right next to us. And ah--quite often I like to go over there because these fellows knew how to prepare food. Much, much better than our cooks. And what, what those guys did with food, you know, they, they got the same rations as we did, but oh my goodness, with the spices of the Middle East, I mean these guys were fabulous. Except they use to complain, said, "Ya know, you people don't get close enough," and ah-- "close enough to the enemy." They did sometimes come back with, I shouldn't say it, but a piece of a ear something. That's how close they would get, they were wonderful people. Just love the Turks.

Mik: I heard that they were--

Lee: I'm glad they were on our side.

Mik: I heard they were pretty handy with knives.

Lee: Yes, and I came home with one of those knives. Made in the town of B-U-R-S-A, Bursa or something like that. So yeah.

Mik: Now when you say you went over to their camp, how did you communicate with them?

Lee: This is really interesting, I don't speak Turkish and they didn't speak a word of English, but I found out what kind of women they were interested in, their food, I mean it just amazing. Somehow with facial expressions and the hands, you can really understand people. I have, ah, I have done that in my professional life as well. When I would travel overseas and talk to people. It's amazing how you can, how a person can make himself understood. Is wonderful.

Mik: Do you think that has anything to do with your European roots?

Lee: May, maybe.

Mik: So many different cultures together?

Lee: Ya know, I know a little bit of, little bit in many, many different languages, and it sort of opens the, opens the door to things. Yeah, I enjoy that.

Mik: They must've been pretty memorable people because so many of the vets that we have talked to, they always talk about the Turks.

Lee: The Turks, yeah. I also had to go have my tooth fixed, so I went to MASH, and that was wonderful, I was able to get off the line and hitchhike to the rear, had a day off. And, ah, that was something. I saw as I was going into this tent, outside they had a pile of these bullet proof jackets, which was like about twenty feet high, just a mountain of them all bloody. And I thought to myself, "Buster, you are one lucky guy." I mean there were so many young fellows and were hurt or lost their lives. I mean it was a daily occurrence when these helicopters would fly between these hills with two stretchers on each side and there was a guy on each side going back to MASH. Always thinking, "God I hope the guy makes it." And how lucky I was. Ah anyway, on my trip to MASH, I had to stop for lunch some place or something to eat. So I stopped at a British place, and this was interesting. This was in the rear and I asked if they had anything to eat, this one fellow said, "Chester! One more plate." "Plate, my god I haven't seen a plate since I left the states." We were mess kits, ya know. But my goodness, I got a plate, a real plate with a knife and fork and I had a nice meal, I'm the British. And, ah, they had a place there with a dart board, ya know, on the wall. Really looked very, very British and they were really nice and thanked them and then I hitchhiked back to my outfit. I also asked my company commander one time, "Look, what would happen in case I ever got captured in this place? Ya know, I was born in a place that's now a communist country." And the guy told me, he says, "Look, your English is pretty good. Just tell 'em you were born in Brooklyn." And that's it. Fine.

Mik: Brooklyn accent.

Lee: Name, rank, and serial number and born in Brooklyn and that's it [laughs].

Mik: Well, did you feel pretty protected because you were in artillery and not right on the line?

Lee: You don't think about these things, you know. Because there are other people. If I was all alone, I think I'd be scared to death. But, ah, what, you know, sixty, seventy, or so people around and not far away the Turks, ah--I felt pretty secure. And we were on our toes all the time.

Mik: Now you told me about what it takes to move out, what happens, tell me what happens when you get to a new location?

Lee: If it's a--well, one time we got into a new location and we had an order to, every man had to be two feet underground. So everybody had to dig themselves a foxhole. And I remember one fella just wasn't gonna do it. He says, "The hell with it, I'm not gonna do it. Too damn tired." And this guy, I forgot he was a sergeant, I got him busted to a private. He dug that hole, but he was a private the next day. He got his, by the time he left, he got his rank back. But there were times when we were so damn tired that, ya know, people just didn't wanna do anything. And ah, that was the order, we had to dig in. First, you take care of yourself, and of course the equipment. We had to build a parapet for our gun, or start filling up sand bags if we had 'em. Or if there was a tank around, sometimes tanks would come in and push up dirt for us, so that we'd have a little protection in front. And then we'd string a canopy over it so that we were not seen. That was the first thing that would have to be done. And then somebody have to dig the latrines. That had to be done right away.

Mik: When you were the sergeant in charge of the whole crew, would you select the individual locations or would the lieutenant do that and tell you where to put 'em?

Lee: No, ah, you mean location, where to move, or--?

Mik: No, where the guns were?

Lee: Oh, where the guns were. That was pretty well determined. Yeah, I, I would select that with perhaps, with a company commander. Ah, that was about the easiest thing to do. We would line them up of course in a certain direction, but we were very close each other. Not too far apart.

Mik: How far apart?

Lee: Oh, I don't know, ten, twenty yards. Not far.

Mik: So you were all within an eyesight of each other.

Lee: Oh, yeah, oh, sure, sure. 'Cause when we fired those guns, by god they went ah--in unison, ya know.

Mik: On one fire order and everybody would fire at once?

Lee: Usually, oh yeah. Oh, yeah.

Mik: And who gave that order?

- Lee: Well, initially it came from the company commander. It came from ah--from up front of course, we had a, ya know, observer, a forward observer and he would telephone in and would go through the, gotta go through the ranks.
- Mik: Now is that determined by one gun firing until--?
- Lee: We would fire one gun to see where, if we're hitting the right place. So the number, there would be one gun that would fire and as soon as we knew exactly the elevation and the distance then, then all six of them would go.
- Mik: And would, I suppose that's the fire for effect command and then, but once you started firing, would you just fire as fast as you could load or--
- Lee: Sometimes.
- Mik: Or would every time there would be a fire command?
- Lee: Sometimes there were would, it all varies. Sometimes it was one after another or sometimes it would be just one, two, and then stop. We also fired short, sometimes on our own people and, ah, the heavy artillery would hit us. That happened, many times.
- Mik: The heavy artillery are further back?
- Lee: Absolutely, they may be about like five miles away. The 155s, 155 millimeter Howitzers--big guns.
- Mik: So you don't like that when fire comes in from behind?
- Lee: Well, you don't know where it's coming from, but you can hear it. You can hear it.
- Mik: You talked about your ammo dump being blown up, but were you often taking fire? Were there shells landing around you?
- Lee: Oh yeah, oh god yeah. Ah, I came home with a piece of shrapnel that hit like, I was in a foxhole and it was up about that far away from my face. Red hot! Red hot! And I watched that thing smolder and just become red, and finally it cooled down, I thought, I better take the sucker home with me. This was meant for me, but I beat it.
- Mik: What kind of thoughts do you have? You'd been through a war as a kid, it had been around you and now here you are as a young man in another one.
- Lee: Another one.
- Mik: Did you contemplate that at all?

Lee: No, it's--today at my age, ya know, I can do a lot of thinking and reminiscing, but when you're 20 years old, ah, what do you think about? You think about girls, you think about food, and getting out of this man's Army. And, ah, I think the values were a little different at age twenty. I always say I wish I had the body of a twenty-year-old and keep the mind that I've got today. What a wonderful thing that would be [laughs].

Mik: The line that the youth is wasted on the young.

Lee: Exactly, youth is wasted on the young [laughs]. Right, that's so true. But anyway, when I--the most memorable day was when I was told that, ah, was it July 15th or something like that, was my time to rotate. And that's when I left, and by the way when I got back to Wisconsin, the girl that I met on a blind date before I went overseas right here at the University of Wisconsin, I had to go and see her. And she decided she's going to be my witness in front of the judge and I was gonna get my citizenship. This was in Milwaukee. And the judge, I didn't even have my civilian clothes yet, and so the judge was kinda impressed with a young kid becoming a citizen, ya know, Korean War veteran. And we were gonna get married. She was not of age, but judge said, "Well, since you're gonna get married, you are going to be a good witness." So she was my witness and today, more than fifty years later, we're still together.

Mik: Did you meet her on the blind date before you left?

Lee: My last fall before going to Korea

Mik: Tell me about that?

Lee: It was my roommate here in Madison who was going to fix me up with something special before going overseas. And we went to one of the halls on Langdon Street. I can't remember the name of it anymore. And, ah, of course I didn't know, I didn't know the lady that he was going with, but there were two women coming downstairs, and I saw one coming down, like of course, what did I see first, the legs. "Gee, I hope this is the one, not bad." And sure enough, that's the one [laughs].

Mik: Did you write to her?

Lee: And we, we went out that day. There was a place on Park Street some place and we, we even danced in the, ah--in the parking lot. So we kinda hit it off. And next day, we--I arranged to have breakfast with her on the Terrace, my favorite place, the Union Terrace. And we had a nice breakfast there, and that's when I asked her if she would write to me. She must have felt sorry for me. So she did and she certainly did write to me. In fact, she even sent me packages and, ah, that was very nice of her, and when I got back it took a month, one month we were engaged. Three months later, we were married. My friend said, "This will never last more than six months." Well, here we are [laughs].

Mik: Tell me about mail call.

Lee: That was so important, so important. We lived for mail call. And in my case, my mother and father didn't know that I was in the Army. I mean they were living in Prague. And, ah, I had to write to them through this roommate of mine that fixed me up with my present wife. I would send letters to him and he would take it out of the envelope, put it in a different envelope and mail it to Prague. And I would write stories like, "I'm having a great time, I'm doing this and that." I mean just creating stories for a whole year. Course I couldn't tell 'em where I was. My god, they would, they would've really suffered. They would've been arrested probably. And they told me later on, it was a good thing that I kept them in the dark. They sus--my mother said to me years later she suspected something was wrong or something was different because of those letters. But yeah, I kept them in the dark. And by the same token, my mother and father would write to me, but care of this friend of mine in Milwaukee. They thought I was living in Milwaukee. He would tear the envelope, put it in a different envelope and send it to me. That's how we kept it going. And of course, I tore those letters right away because didn't wanna be if I ever got captured, god help me.

Mik: 'Cause that's basically who you were fighting. You were fighting the people that they were.

Lee: Oh yeah. In fact, I found that, ah, there were some people that were not relatives, but maybe somebody that my family knew that were working on the other side. I had one aunt in Europe that was an opportunist. And when the communists came, she became a communist. And I don't know if it was somebody that worked with her or what, but was on the other side. So I had to, if you came within a sight, I would've shot 'em.

Mik: Did you guys talk about communism much? I mean that was your enemy right?

Lee: Yeah. I, you know, I really felt that, I mean I, I felt that my family was stuck over there; because of the communists they couldn't get out. I couldn't go over there to see them. And I felt bitter about it, and every time I shot that thing, going against the North Koreans or the Chinese—today they're our friends—I felt good about it. I felt like I was doing a little bit, ah, to a get even. And there were, ah--I had a friend over there who was from Germany. There were a few of us that were not citizens. And I think there were others left out the same way.

Mik: Did that cause any problem at all with? People readily accepted you?

Lee: No, oh yeah.

Mik: You were Army before you were--

Lee: Oh, absolutely. They always use to say to us, "It's the uniform, not who's inside, but you respect that uniform you're wearing or somebody else is wearing." And I believed in that.

Mik: But they must have known that you had a pretty unique perspective on this.

Lee: In those days people didn't care. It was just--you know, we were busy. We were busy. And there were times when we were not busy, when they would pull us off for awhile and that's when guys would play cards and start fighting [laughs] among themselves. It was actually better when we were busy. You put a bunch of men together, and they're like rats. Well, we live like rats. In fact, we had what we called jungle rats in Korea. My gosh, they were like about a foot long, like little kittens. One time I was trying to get some sleep, and we built these bunkers with our ah--with boxes that shells came in. Went and fill it up with dirt and sometimes we'd make some pretty nice-looking bunkers. And you could hear the rat chewing on the wood trying to get in. Well, one did get in and we were very close, you know, we'd have a like about four bunks right next to each other and little space and there was this rat, and in basic training, they showed us how you can take a, ah--take a bullet out of a M1 rifle, take it out and put some tissue or what into a powder, put it in, shoot it against a can, it will put a hole in it. Just the powder. So I was going to kill that rat, I was trying to get this bullet out of my rifle. Had a heck of a time getting it out by the, before I got any further, our truck driver came in from guard duty and I told him, look at that rat over there. Ah, he took a shovel and whacked that thing and killed it. Little kitten and the tail on it was about a foot long. And we were very afraid of that because they carried a Hemorrhagic Fever. And we did have one fellow that had Hemorrhagic Fever. Blood coming out of his ears, nose, and eyes. Never saw him again. We were definitely afraid of that. It's something that's in the fur of that rat.

Mik: Yeah, we have talked to other people.

Lee: Apparently, it was a big problem because people would get these spores all over them just from living there. And then when they would get wounded, it would drive their fabric under the skin and they would get infected that way. That was a pretty severe problem. I had some kind of a rash all over my legs. When I rotated, and ah--nobody knew what it was, but by the time I was on the ship, it disappeared, never came back. Who knows.

Mik: Did you carry your--

Lee: They didn't give you ear plugs. I don't think they knew what ear plugs were in those days. And I think as a consequence many of us are a little hard of hearing. Ah, one of our fellows wrote to me after I got back to the States and he wanted to get some compensation from the VA, so filled out something. His hearing was shot. But in those--things were so different back then. You know, fifty years makes a lot of difference in today. Today, we're so concerned about everything, back then—

Mik: Did you carry your own cooks with you?

Lee: Oh yes.

Mik: So you were completely self-contained.

Lee: Oh yes.

Mik: What was your mess like?

Lee: Oh let me tell you one time, brings a thought again. For three weeks, every single day, we had canned sweet potatoes. Every single day, that's what we had. I got so sick and tired of sweet potatoes, canned sweet potatoes, and when I got back to the States, the first five years, I didn't wanna see one. Now, I like 'em again. But things like that happened. Or somebody stole our bread ration and we didn't have any bread for a week or two. Things got screwed up. And ah, what was the food like? It was pathetic because, like I said before. I think the Turks were the guys who knew how to cook. But our guys, I don't know where they got 'em from. Well, our cook was kinda hitting the hooch a little bit. More than he should've, and it was pathetic. So, the C-ration sometimes were better than what he put together. And that's another thing, I ah--like a fool, one time I put a can of c-rations, what was that, just put it on a fire for just a little bit. Like a fool, I didn't put a hole in it blew up in my face. I had, I had something like corn beef hash on me all winter long [laughs]. But some of those c-rations weren't too bad.

Mik: Speaking of winter, I noticed that you were there through hot weather and cold. Does that make a difference in the way artillery operates?

Lee: No, no, made no difference at all, except we were more miserable in the winter time than any other time. But, ah, I got something like trench foot when I was over there. One time, I could not cha--this was in the summer time and we could not change our clothing for about ten days or something like that. And it would rain and rain and rain, and something happened and my big toe had a hole all the way, I mean I almost lost my big toe. Not being able to change my shoes or anything. Ah, so the weather was a factor. And winter time, we were fortunate, we ah--we had these rubber shoes; we used to call them Mickey Mouse boots. And didn't give your foot any chance to breathe, but it kept it the warm and the parkas were pretty good. So, we did alright. And again, at age twenty, you can take so much more.

Mik: Did the pace of the conflict change much, season to season?

Lee: Ah, one time we pulled to a new location and within about an hour or two, the loud speakers from the Chinese side were welcoming the 25th Infantry Division to this location and, "If you fellows would care, we're putting out some baskets for you in

the no man's zone.” They actually did. I mean, goofy things like that would happen. Did things change? Ah, not really.

Mik: Well, connected with that, how aware were you of the peace talks? Did you have any sense of what was going on politically, with the war?

Lee: No, not too much. Not too much, except we knew that it was coming to an end, and that there were negotiations, and I was more concerned about my date to rotate. That was whether it was going to end or not to be out of there--I didn't know. Ah--

Mik: How did you know it was coming to an end?

Lee: Oh, we did hear that. Ah, and we would listen to the Army, or the military radio. Was it the 8th Army radio? We would hook up an automobile battery to a radio and then that's how we got it.

Mik: Where were you when you heard that the armistice had been signed?

Lee: Ah, I think I was on the way to Japan or, or I think I was on the ship.

Mik: So you didn't beat it out by much?

Lee: No, just at the end. Just at the end. I was lucky to be there at the end rather than in the beginning when it was much, much rougher. Ya know, like I said before, 1950, '51 must have been just horrendous. Ah, then we were, ah--when I was there, we were more us fighting a trench war. We were going from one, they would move us from one place to another, but we were not really taking much ground. Just a little, back and forth, but nothing significant.

Mik: A lot of Korean veterans feel like they've never had much attention paid to them, or to their war. Did you have a sense of that when you came back?

Lee: Well, I, you know, I think something like World War II was such a tremendous undertaking, certainly demanded much more attention than what we got. But it's true they called it a police action, well, my gosh, it was no police action. It was war. And we lost a lot of people, ah, but as far as people are concerned, maybe I didn't pay that much attention to it. I got busy with other things. **[End of Tape WCKOR059]** *Went out and got my education, I think the military was good for me. I got my GI Bill. I use that to its full extent. I even got to graduate school here at the UW. Ah--I had one semester left and I wanted to get into a grad school, so I did. That's all I did, just one semester. And fortunately, I'm also the recipient of a good care at the VA today because of that, for which I'm grateful.*

Mik: *Did you have trouble leaving the war behind? It didn't stick with you when you came back?*

Lee: *No, because I think I was born in a war. Ya know, I, I was eight years old when war began for us in Europe, the occupation by Germany. And in the last, when I was in Prague, the last days war, May 5th, 1945, the people, we had a SS division in Prague, and ah--the people decided—[Start of Tape WCKOR060]*

Mik: There'd been wars as long as you'd been alive so--

Lee: Yeah, it started for me in 1939 and ah--when the Germans marched into Prague. It lasted for six years. And when you're young fellow--six years is a long--it's a lifetime. So, it was a pretty scary time, like when the Gestapo knocks on your door and seven guys march in like six o'clock in the morning, start rifling through everything you own; it's pretty scary.

Mik: Your mother had told you so much about the United States--

Lee: United States, oh yes.

Mik: How did it measure up to the image you had of it when you got here?

Lee: I think it was very close to what she was talking about. You know what really hit me? The smell of gasoline. I guess it was because of the number of cars in New York. Ya know, landed in New York and I got this, this smell of gasoline. And that's what I remember. That was the first thing. But, ah, it was awesome, to see the buildings, the huge buildings. And we were, before we could dock, we were in the harbor close to the Harbor of New York, so I could see the skyline and the Statue of Liberty. It was, I think I got up about four o'clock in the morning and I couldn't go back to sleep just to see that, it was so awesome. Was wonderful, was wonderful! And I swore, "I'll never go back to Europe, I've had it" [laughs].

Mik: And how did that work that your family went back and you didn't?

Lee: Well, you know, who anticipated what was going to happen? And so they went back; I stayed here, went to school. And they went back. In fact, I was supposed to stay here only for a year. I had a scholarship to a rather prestigious school in Tarrytown, New York called Hackley School. And I was the poorest student in that place, these were all rich kids. And so after that one year, it was extended another year and that's when the Iron Curtain fell, '48, yeah, '48. And then I was very fortunate; a family from Illinois, whose son was at that school, befriended me. They paid for the rest of my education there for the next two years. Unbelievable, unbelievable! So I got my high school education and I applied for the university. I was broke, I didn't have any money, but I came to Madison; I had two dollars and fifty cents in my pocket when I came here. Got a job and I was going to work and go to school. Well, it didn't work too well. And after that first semester, I decided I better go get a real job some place and earn some money and come back. It was a good thing that I got drafted because then I had the GI Bill afterwards.

- Mik: What happened with your parents?
- Lee: My father passed away, my mother came here to visit, my sister came here to visit, but then they both went back. And she has since passed away. I still have a sister living over there. And my wife and I went to visit her a few years ago, spent about four weeks in Prague. I had tears in my eyes, you know, after fifty years, some, no what was it, ah yeah, more than fifty, almost fifty-eight years not seeing the place. It was kinda memorable. And now I can call her on the phone. Everything is free. It's wonderful.
- Mik: So that was quite an eventful early life you had. The first twenty some years, did you think your whole life was gonna be that way, or did it, or was it--did it seem to calm down at all?
- Lee: No, somehow I thought it was going to be the end of it. When I saw the Vietnamese, ah, Vietnam conflict, I was a little afraid that maybe wars would just continue, continue. And my gosh, I was right. That's all I've ever known through my life. You know, I was born, what, twelve years after World War I. And then World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the mess we're in today. It's awful.
- Mik: You know, that's interesting, that it seemed like Korea was so long after World War II, but it was only five years.
- Lee: Five years.
- Mik: And then it seemed like Vietnam was a long time after Korea, but that was only, you know, eight or nine years.
- Lee: Actually, it was going on even when I went to Japan. I'm sure you heard, we used to go on R and R, rest and recuperation. And I ran into a captain in Japan and I asked him where he was from, and in those days he said he's from Indochina. Indochina, yes, where there's, ah, advisors. So it started, it was going on even then.
- Mik: That's an interesting perspective. I don't know how many people who had a personal stake in communism were over there fighting like that.
- Lee: I really felt, ya know, it's funny; when the Russians took over Prague, I was a kid, and a kid goes where the Army is. And they par--there was a group of them not far away from where I lived, an open field, and an officer—he was kind of a nice guy. And he says, "You hungry?" I said, "No." But I asked him what was that? It was a US Army water retention thing on two wheels; we used to have that in our outfit too. We'd carry water in it. Anyway, they would build fire underneath this thing. I don't think it was meant for that, but they would make the most delicious ah--spiced tea. And it tasted like oranges and some other, wonderful. That's one thing that I enjoyed with the Russians. Make a long story short, I, ah, befriended a fellow who was--who was from Lake Baikal, in Siberia. His father was killed at the Battle of

Stalingrad. Nice kid, and ah--invite him to our home to a meal and stuff. But when it came to Communism, of course I never mentioned anything like that to this fellow. I knew that that's not where my heart was because of my mother's background. I couldn't wait to see the American Army, which landed in Plzeň, which was fifteen miles away from where our house was. And that's where I really wanted to go. And we went over there, and, oh, it was wonderful. It's first time that I tasted doughnuts. And some guy gave me a pack--it was a cook or bake or something. Said, "Would you like some doughnuts?" Didn't know what they were. But gave me a package of doughnuts. Wonderful. And I thought, "This is where I belong."

Mik: You must not have been too upset when you got greetings from your friends and neighbors?

Lee: Not too, not too, no. No, there are some people that absolutely do not want to serve, but I was, I was a very poor fellow. Ah, I was living in this high school as a pauper among rich people. I really didn't belong there, but least I got a good education out of it. But once I got out, I was poor. And going to the Army—they used to say this was a wonderful thing because you get three squares and a flop; where else can you get that? I got a set of clothing, like I never had before, two or three pairs of shoes. I mean, I never had it so good. I was happy.

Mik: Now tell me again what you were saying about Indochina.

Lee: Oh, yeah. I met this captain, and he told me that, you know, I thought maybe he was from Korea. No, no. He said he was an advisor in Indochina. Well, that's all I, that's all I found out about. Oh, I knew where that was, and, ah, so we must be doing something over there. Didn't pay too much attention to it until I heard about Dien Bien Phu when the French ah--defeated and had to pull out of Indochina. And who took over? We did. But now I really didn't know much about that part of the world. Except that we were involved back in 1952.

Mik: Well, thank you.

Lee: You're quite welcome.

Mik: Thank you for your service.

Lee: Thank you.

[End of Interview]