

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMES R. HEERSMA
Doctor, Navy attached to the Army, Korean War
1995

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Heersma, James R., (1924-). Oral History Interview. 1995.

User Copy: 2 audio cassettes (ca. 100 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 100 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

The Blue River, Wis. native, discusses his military service in World War II and the Korean War as a medical officer attached to the 3rd Division. He talks about enlisting in the Navy V12 program at Western Michigan University, choosing to attend medical school to lengthen the amount of school he could attend prior to active duty, and being transferred to the Army in 1950 and sent overseas. Heersma comments on the plane ride to Korea, feelings about leaving his wife in the United States, taking boat with the Marines from Japan to Korea, duty in the field at Chosin (Korea) and hearing artillery fire from American ships. He details the process of medical treatment in the field. Heersma touches upon receiving a firearm, the surgical staff, morale among the troops, and treating Korean civilians who had been injured by military attacks. He comments on serving with Turkish troops, psychological effects of war, lack of medical supplies, riding in an ambulance which was attacked by Chinese troops, and feelings when he received orders back to the Navy. He talks about prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases among soldiers, self inflicted wounds, religion among troops, and the change in his own religion belief from a strict Christian to Agnostic. Heersma touches upon stateside service treating military dependents in California, difficult transition to civilian life, the differences between Korean War and Vietnam War veterans, and his involvement in the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch

Heersma (b. June 9, 1924) enlisted for military service from his hometown of Oak Lawn, Illinois. He was enrolled in the Navy V12 program during World War II and served in surgery during the Korean War.

Interviewed by Mark D. Van Ells, 1995.

Transcription by WDVA Staff, 1998.

Transcription edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay. Today's date is July 14, 1995. This is Mark VanElls, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Dr. James Heersma, currently of Blue River, WI, a veteran of World War II and primarily the Korean Conflict. Good morning.

Heersma: Good morning.

Mark: Thanks for driving in on this blistering hot day.

Heersma: Fortunately, cool in the car.

Mark: I suppose we should start by having you tell me a little bit about where you born and raised, a little bit about your upbringing and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Heersma: I was born on a 15-acre truck farm in Oak Lawn, Illinois. At that time Oak Lawn was 500. People that know Oak Lawn, it's 75,000 now.

Mark: It's hard to imagine a farm in Oak Lawn.

Heersma: Yes it is. 500 at that time and we were on Cicero Avenue and I was born on the kitchen table because the doctor couldn't deliver my mother in the bed. She was in her 40s. I was the fifth of five and an afterthought. Worked on the farm and was fairly isolated as a child because all my older brothers and sisters were gone by the time I got anywhere. It was a good life but an isolated life. We hit the depression when I just started to be able to have cognizance of things. I was 6 and it hit full fury. So I still have my apprehensions from those times and I save everything and worry about money and all the other things that people do who lived through those 30s. Went to public grade school. My father was very active in community affairs. He was president of the school board and elder in the church and so forth. I went to Chicago Christian High School. We were Dutch reformed and very strict. This interview will see I was quite an awakening for the Dutch reformed boy going into service and becoming an agnostic. Went to Hope College. I was in my senior year when we hit Pearl Harbor and it was a memorable Monday morning occasion. They called all the students to the assembly and heard Roosevelt announce the war. I enlisted in the Navy at that time in the V1 Program and went on to college, at Hope College in Holland, Michigan as a civilian. Then became involved, enlisted in the Navy actively then and went to Western Michigan College in the V12 Program.

Mark: I've interviewed a lot of guys from the ASTP.

Heersma: That's army.

Mark: Yeah. I'm not as familiar with the navel.

Heersma: Well, the original programs were V1 and V7. V1 for underclassmen, V7 for upperclassmen. Then when we became active-duty, in other words in uniform in school, that was all lumped into V12. I was a grade hero. I looked at the list of things and how long it took and I saw medicine took the longest so I went for pre-med to stay out of the war as long as I could.

Mark: Did you have an interest in medical affairs?

Heersma: I had a great interest in Science and if I wanted an easy A, I'd get a math or chemistry course or something like that. So, I was interested in that field. As a senior in high school, I was the only child at home on the farm and was very involved. I got my best grades in my last semester in high school. I went to school three days a week and I worked on the farm Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and went to school Monday, Wednesday and Friday and I was a 4.0 at that point. I was starting to get my bearings and get interested in studying at that time. Then, went to Western Michigan and chose Madison and had my orders to midshipmen school to be on a destroyer and went home on interval leave and got a telegram from the Navy Department that I had been accepted to Northwestern and had a change of orders to go to Port Smith Naval Hospital.

Mark: New Hampshire?

Heersma: In Port Smith, Virginia. So I ran all the way out the backfield. My dad was plowing and just sat on a clump of dirt and cried. So anyhow, we went on to Port Smith and I spent 3 months there until the fall session at Northwestern. I was in uniform until a junior and at that time the war was over. I felt obligated to service my state in the reserve. So I was working in the steel mills at night and working on my masters and going to medical school all at the same time. I was down to 130 pounds and got my MD and my masters both in '48 and met my wife as a junior and married as soon as we got out and she got out a got a job. She was a medical technologist.

Mark: Now was this...you qualified as a World War II veteran and I'm wondering if you helped finance this education with the GI Bill or some state funding.

Heersma: I was very fortunate. Of course, I had the GI Bill then for the rest of my college and my wife was working as a lab technician and I was working in the steel mills. So we were able to get the rest of my education on that basis. Didn't spend a nickel that we didn't have to at that time. I interned at St. Luke's Hospital in Chicago and was in a pediatric residency there when I got a

call from the Washington Navy Department that I would be getting my orders and should start preparing but I got a call because I was to leave within 2 weeks.

Mark: This is after the Korean War.

Heersma: That was in, I think it was October, early October of '50 and the Korean War broke out in June of '50. So, the first thing we did was go out with my sister, and on her money, we bought a '50 Oldsmobile. So my wife and I went out to Fort Sam Houston, Texas and I had five days orientation and most of it was getting your life insurance and being told how bad it was over in Korea. So then I took my wife home and went on to Chicago and flew out.

Mark: This is an interesting part to me. You were in the Navy reserve.

Heersma: Yes. The Navy was ordered by the Secretary of Defense to transfer 1,500 Navy Reserve doctors to the army in this time of crisis. 570 of us went overseas and then...I don't remember how many of us went on beyond Japan. Some stayed in Japan and the rest of us went on into Korea. The time then, I remember I was lonesome, depressed and everything else and flew into San Francisco and this stewardess had her eye on me in the back of that plane. I no more was interested in that stewardess than I wanted to fly. I remember we hit rough weather coming into San Francisco and she wouldn't give me a bag to throw up in and I says "Baby, if you don't, I'm going to aim it right at you". I was really down. Went to Fairfield Soo-Soon, the airforce base outside of San Francisco and laid around there waiting for...it was a matter of priorities, getting on a plane and things like that, head winds, which were prevalent right then so they couldn't fly. I never did forget that we had a plane that was taken out of mothballs from World War II to fly over and I was sitting next to this other doctor, Neal Mittlecamp, who I was a resident with and having just had that great episode of nausea on the tail of a plane, I decided I was going to be over the wing this time. So I was sitting over the wing in the middle of the plane and we just took off and my foot slipped on the floor. I couldn't figure that out. The floor looked wet. I put my finger down there. During the takeoff, we popped a wing tank on my side and gasoline was coming in through the fuselage right on my floor. I called the steward over and I says "There's gasoline on the floor coming in here out of the wing". He said "Thank you very much, don't say anything". He went up and that plane banked around and I never felt that thing hit the ground. That pilot was a master. He really laid her in there. You know who the first guy off the plane was. You're darn right I was. Anyhow, a couple days later, we made it and we had about 4 hours gas reserved for Honolulu. Spent a couple hours in Honolulu and then on over to Guam. That was, they talk about the Japanese taking vacations there now, but God, it was just sand burrs and sand burrs when I went through there. Then came into Yokohama, then we had another

close call. The radar wasn't very good in those years and we came in a rainstorm and the pilot misjudged the air...the landing strip by about 50 yards in the nut. Instead of just taking off and coming around again, he tried to bank that thing in. I never did hear 50 guys scream like that when that wing got within about a foot of the ground. So he did go around again. I got more yet on planes. When I got back they always wanted me to go up in these fighter planes because they had to have their flying hours in. I said, "No way am I going up in one of those things". Maybe I'm digressing too much.

Mark: Oh no, that's fine.

Heersma: So there, it got me to Camp Drake and Japan.

Mark: Was that near Tokyo somewhere?

Heersma: Yes. It was very nice. It had been a Japanese military installation. And golly, I had a view out the window of Mt. Fuji. I could see it on a clear day. That's the most gorgeous mountain you ever saw in your life. Just perfectly symmetrical with the snow top, just like the pictures show. So we laid around there for awhile and didn't know whether we were going into Korea or where we were going and staying in Japan and all that uncertainty for about 10 days or so. Then, finally, got my orders to the 3rd Division. Of course, the 3rd Division at that point was surrounded up in North Korea. So it was a great feeling, I got on board ship with a bunch of young Marines. My god, they were all 18 years old and I was getting a little older you know. I was 23 or 24, I guess. Pushing 25. Anyhow, I was scared to death and these guys were singing All to Montezuma and joking and laughing. They had them all souped up. I tell you they were gung ho. We steamed into Hamhung, Hungnam rather and of course I had no military experience whatsoever. By that time, I was in army gear and so on and had been issued a 45. I told them I'd rather throw it at them because I sure couldn't hit anything with it. But, I never forget we loaded over the sides from about 3 - 4 miles out in to the landing craft infantry (LCIs). Jeez, we were about 4 stories up on that ship. You throw your bag over and put an arm over each rope and slide down into the LCI. It was about 30 below. Jeez.

Mark: October, it's getting kind of late.

Heersma: It was...we missed Thanksgiving. I always remember that because I crossed the dateline in the airplane on Thanksgiving and I had 2 hours of Thanksgiving. We were almost November then you see and it's dang cold. It was all snow and ice up there. Of course, if the army was pushed and disorganized, we had summer here except for shootbacks. Boy you were cold.

Mark: I'm a little unclear as to my timeline. It is my understanding that the Chinese intervention wasn't until November and so when...

Heersma: Well, I got there the end of November.

Mark: When you got there, had the Chinese...

Heersma: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. The Chinese had been in it since the early part of November and they had the _____ marine first in Cholsom. In fact, when I joined the 3rd Division, they were holding a corridor open about, well, they went up to Hungnam and then they went up a little further north of that and held this corridor. I remember the first thing, I don't know if I can even talk about that. I'd seen truckloads of marines coming out one-layer feet and 1-layer hands on 2 1/2-ton trucks. Just all frozen and dead.

Mark: Right when you got there.

Heersma: Yeah. About 3 days after I got there. We got them out of Cholsom. So, that was my orientation in the army. Then we got that back and we got our perimeter and we were in a school about 6 - 7 miles inland. The Chinese were around all the way and they were holding perimeter and they had harassing fire. I remember we had a battalion of 105s next to us and they were firing 4,000 rounds a day. The Missouri was out in the harbor. The damndest thing you ever saw because they had these 16" shells you know. This thing would come right over that schoolhouse and they were firing harassing fire 24 hours a day. The first thing you'd get is this crack of this thing going over and those schoolhouses they make those little windows with little teeny strips between them. That stuff would just rattle something fierce because you actually got, I guess it's a sonic boom you'd get out of that thing when it would crack over. Then you could count the number of seconds back and then they actually knocked the windows out of that school with the muzzle blast of the Missouri. The windows would cave right in. You could...they were...we estimated that they were about 7 miles out in the harbor. Then the third round you'd get, or sound you'd get would be when the shell would explode on the other side. So you'd get 3 out of every round. You'd get 3 cracks from that thing. Well, we were cold taking moderate casualties then. We were mostly just scared because they were holding perimeter and the Chinese had stopped pushing real hard because they couldn't get through. Then we slowly, we're counting days, knowing who's going to unload disembark bags and that sort of thing. So finally then it was our turn. I got to know the docs and the people in the clearing company. I don't know if you know about the stages at that time in the war but...the stages of evacuation. It was battalion aid first, and then what's called a collecting company and then it went to clearing company and then it went to mobile army surgical. In our case, when we were in a situation like this, we had to go directly out to a hospital ship and bypass because they

didn't have any mobile army surgical hospital in that surrounded area. The battalion aids, everything was strict pass through. They had plasma and bandages and had no surgical facilities at all. The collecting companies had a 24-hour hold policy. Anything they could get back to duty in 24 hours, they were allowed to keep and still no surgery. At clearing, we had surgery facilities and there were about 9 docs in our platoon.

Mark: I was going to ask if you would just describe your workplace at this time.

Heersma: At that time, we were just in a schoolhouse set up. We had a ward and we had a surgical and then we would have enlisted man's quarters and officer's quarters. Basically that's what we had. The division had 3 platoons to the clearing company. The division is set up with 3 regiments and they would usually have 2 on the front and 1 in reserve and then they would keep leapfrogging as they moved. We did the same thing with medical evacuation. At times, I would be drifting miles back and writing letters and reading the Journal of American Medical Association, Time and Life and all that stuff. Other times, you'd be up there working 24 hours a day. So you would vary a great deal.

Mark: There were 9 doctors you said?

Heersma: 9 doctors in our group there. Yes.

Mark: What sort of backgrounds did they come from?

Heersma: We had...we were all about in the same boat. We were all partially through our residencies and had been called in. There were no regular army officers in our unit. Sort of caught in my tail because what happened is we were in the navy and stayed at lieutenant junior grade. These guys would come out with a lieutenant and they would put him in charge of a ward and they would be...they'd come out a colonel and in 6 months they outranked me. All of them. Here I am still sitting in there with my JG lieutenantancy. We had mostly frostbite casualties at that time because we weren't getting an awful lot of action in there. It was a good time to get oriented to how the army worked and what my job was going to be and things like that. Then it was our day on the beach finally and we again loaded into LCIs and back out and we were on board a ship that was designed for 2,000 and there were 3,700 of us. So we were sleeping in shifts. The navy told us the time before they had 6,000 on that ship getting them out of there. We had 1 guy whose always had left foot. He was always late for formation. He was always a screw up guy.

Mark: A doctor?

Heersma: He was a doctor. Irvin was his name. I'll never forget we got down...it went from 30 below, got on board that dang ship and went down to the 5th deck into an area that was about 30' by 30' and I think there were 25 of us in there. All steel bulk heads. 30 below to 104 above. I couldn't... it was just unbelievable. Anyhow, I don't know if you know anything about a 45 but...

Mark: Not much.

Heersma: Irvin had a 45. Well, if you take the clip out of a 45. If you don't have your wits about you, you got to remember there's a round in that dang chamber yet. Well, Irvin takes the clip out of this thing and he pulls it back and lets it snap. And pa-wow-ee. With 30 guys in the room, all steel bulkheads, this thing ricocheted around in there. I remember Foley, went over to Irvin and says "I'm taking this and I'm not giving it ever back to you". We were jumping under...for whatever good it would have done; we were jumping under the bed and everything else.

Mark: Did you have any training on this? Did they just give you a gun?

Heersma: Not a damn thing. We went out to the range a couple of times after we could get out. When I was with the division, I carried that thing and I had, fortunately I had done a fair amount of hunting as a doc and as we get on a little further, I was issued a carbine, which is a nice little rifle. I was getting pretty good with that thing. Fortunately, I needed it as I got further into trouble here. I know we were stationed at a prison one time and set up, I got so I could pretty well bisect a rat at 20 yards with that thing.

Mark: That's pretty good shooting.

Heersma: Not bad shooting for a running rat. But anyhow, we went on down to Pusan and...

Mark: I've got one more question. Your nursing staff. Were there women?

Heersma: No.

Mark: Who were the nurses then? All corpsmen?

Heersma: All corpsmen. We had excellent surgical technicians. We didn't have any RN nurses. We had army trained surgical technicians who were really good. The corpsmen were good. When we'd get stuff in, very little was screwed up on things. We had one mishap, which was a shame. They had held these hills and the last regiment was coming out and the engineers sent the ammo dump off prematurely and just killed a whole bunch of the last guys coming out. Which was a damn shame. After going through all that to get blown up with

your own guys. We were about 4 - 5 miles out on board ship at that time. We were going to leave as a convoy so that our ship, after we loaded, we held for a day or two. When they blew that ammo dump, why, that just listed that ship right over, 5 miles away. It was the most... I got a picture of that in this one batch of stuff I took. It's just unbelievable, when that thing went up, the whole town. They just scorched the whole town and left it.

Mark: At this point, what is morale like?

Heersma: Very relieved heading out. It was tough in there and it was worse, well I was just plain scared you know. I just got there and left my wife and we just adopted a baby about 3 days before I left and so I was really down and scared to death. But, the guys that were in the regular army, they were...a lot of them were World War II guys who stayed in. They thought they were going to have a nice, easy time when they got into this thing. Boy, they were down. Later on, I'll explain, we had a lot of self-inflicted wounds and things like that. People just wanted to get out of there. It got to the point that any self-inflicted wound, we just court martial them and keep them there and send them back. We wouldn't...if you shot a finger off, you went back to duty with your finger off.

Mark: Historians sort of pick these sorts of things apart. General MacArthur comes in for _____

Heersma: Well, not from us.

Mark: That's what I was wondering.

Heersma: No. In fact, I was reading these letters and I'm really knocking myself out. I'm a night reader and I get up and was reading these things. I was afraid I was going to wake my wife up because one of the guys said "None of this would have happened if Truman were alive". They hated Truman a lot more than they hated MacArthur you know. But the morale was pretty bad. I remember we were in Pusan Harbor and it was Christmas day and the Navy was trying to do everything they could for us to make it good. They knew we had a bad time. So they had a Santa Claus and god all Friday, you know he doesn't have any candy, he doesn't have any gifts or anything like that but he's coming around "HO HO HO, Merry Christmas", you know. I remember, Foley just got out of the first shower he'd had for about 2 months and Santa Claus says "Merry Christmas", and Foley says "Merry Christmas, my ass". It was just typical of how we felt at that point. We were just glad to get out of there and of course we'd been filthy dirty and everything else. It was good to get out. Then we had to wait our turn to disembark again. Down in Pusan, of course, it was warm. No snow on the ground or anything else. I never forget that ride because we were diagonally up toward Seoul. I don't remember how many

miles we went but they were going back up to try to form a line to hold the Chinese in. Sitting on that 2 1/2-ton truck, about 20 of us on the back you know, and holy crow, you're just eating dust because you got a line of these 2 1/2-ton trucks and all with personnel on them. The truck ahead of you is making dust and your truck is making dust and holy cats, by the time you get there, you're just one grime. I don't know what my lungs look like after that. It was pretty bad. I might refer to my notes, to get more particulars on some of these things if you want me to. Because then I got a little bit more of an idea of the areas. We used an awful lot of DDT by the way, because you're sitting in those...

Mark: Pest control.

Heersma: Oh, yeah. Unfortunately, during the time we were there, we were still treating a lot of VD and there's a lot of this sort of thing going around. The GI was not the most highly thought of person by the Koreans either you see. Well, let's see. Our clearing company had 156 vehicles, 9 doctors, 6 dentists, and 200 total personnel. We gave all the typhus shots and we watched the Navy dive-bombers. At night, when I was back out there they brought in a rocket launcher. The navy brought in a rocket launcher. To see one of those things operate at night is just unbelievable. It's just a real...it puts any 4th of July to shame. It's amazing. The 15th regiment came on board after I had gotten in there. These guys were really in bad shape. They had been hit real hard. On board ship, we had movies, things like that and we played an awful lot of cards. So that brings me up to about where we are, going up North again. We went up North to _____Alsan, which is quite a ways south of Seoul, south and southwest of Seoul. We set up on a beautiful spot, it was a Japanese experimental farm and it was well manicured with experimental plots and trees. It was just a beautiful spot.

Mark: Is this the same clearing company that was in Hungnam?

Heersma: Same.

Mark: Same personnel, same unit

Heersma: Same unit and everything else. I stayed with them at that point right on up for a long time. All the while, I was surprised it was as long as it was. I later on separated from them and went on to Battalion 8. Then we had a lot of sniper problems and sitting up...We set up our tent in rice paddies, which was at that time of the year, fortunately was dry. I wrote a quote down from one of the guys. He says "These roads are dusty but there's one thing you got to say for them, there no damn good either". Typical military humor, you know. We were taking a lot of casualties at that time. 50 - 60 a day and we worked in shifts. We would be on 24 hours and then off 48 hours, unless we got hit hard

and then everybody pitched in. But in general, we had 1 -24 hour on in which you were "in the barrel" so to speak. Like this 12th of January, I got..."we had over 50 casualties and the generator went out". We were operating...I said in my letter, I'd be a great ad for the battery companies because we were operating by flashlight for about 4 hours that day. We were working day and night at that point.

Mark: Now, I would assume you had to move at some point, with battles see-sawing all up and down.

Heersma: Mostly up. We were pushing back up now. We went on up to a Methodist church and we stayed there for quite a while. It was a Methodist missionary church and let's see what was the name of that town. I don't know if I'll find it in here quickly or not. But, anyhow, we had the ward in the auditorium of the church and the surgery was up on the pulpit. The officers slept in the balcony and the enlisted men slept in the basement. That's the way we set up our unit. We took a lot of casualties there. Civilian ones too at that time. I commented in this one letter on the 10th that I took care of a Korean woman who was on the receiving end of a phosphorus bomb. I don't know if you're acquainted with a phosphorus bomb but there are just terrible burns. This woman had 3rd degree burns on about 2/3 of her leg and it was just really sad to see what happens to civilians in a thing like this. We first then got involved with helicopters at that point. We would...we had so much sniper fire that we could only evacuate once a day with an armed convoy of ambulances. We were evacuating back to MASH then. So we would send out between 8 and 12 ambulances a day. Those Dodge ambulances would each hold about 6. Then, we first got our helicopters and they had a cocoon on each side. We would always send...have to send 2 guys because they had to balance them out so the real one we wanted to send and then we would send the next worse guy out along with him on the other cocoon. That was interesting. I got used to being called surgeon at that point because being a pediatric resident should never be called a surgeon you know. But, some of these days... one of these days I mention I had a new surgical about every 20 min for 21 hours straight. On the 17th of January, I had 55 patients by noon. We did 5 major surgeries in 6 hours on that day. I was really upset because we got a Chinese prisoner of war and he had a package of our Lucky Strikes cigarettes in his pocket. That really upset me to see that. We were really United Nations at that time. We were taking care of the British, the Korean, the Chinese, Thais, besides our own. Later on we were by Turks and Puerto Ricans. In fact, we had a Puerto Rican regiment in the division. Well, let's see. On the 19th, I got my letters from my wife from the 24th and 25th of December. When you get into this kind of stuff, you can imagine what it does to the mail. But, whether it's a month old or not, it's just good to get it you know. We had a couple of real toughies. This one guy was going to get something out of his pocket, he got the wrong thing, and he reached back into his pocket and pulled something

else out. He was so confused, he had pulled out his pin on his grenade. So you can imagine what kind of a case it was. He died on the ward before we could get him out and before we could do enough to him. That was in Chonan. Our platoon at that time, we had 3 docs of the 9 of the division. Peterson, C.J. Roos and Chuck Reble and myself. A dentist by the name of Staley and 46 enlisted men. I was mentioning in my letters that this was the ideal level because you weren't so far forward that you couldn't do anything but just get them out of there. And you weren't so far back that you had all the trouble with the brass. So, you weren't under a lot of constraints. We were handling between 40 and 50 on average a day. It was just a real good working group.

Mark: I want to interrupt for a second. I want you to go through these and then I'll go back with some specific questions.

Heersma: Sure.

Mark: This is curious to me. What is a diphus doing there?

Heersma: He had a foot-powered drill. Dangedest thing you ever saw. Well, these guys would get toothaches and all kinds of dental troubles up there you know. To keep them from going back out of the division, we wanted to keep them in the division, why he had regular dental hours everyday. It was a full-time job for him. But he had his little foot-powered drill that he worked with. He was the "butt" of a lot of our jokes. He was from Decatur, Georgia and he had a drawl just as thick as mud. We always were teasing Staley. He...got a little ahead of ourselves on him...but we setup in a Korean prison one time and Staley had found this air mattress and of course we were sleeping on a cement floor with our sleeping bags, harder than a rock. Staley had an air mattress that he found someplace and he was "lording" it over us. Boy, he was really going to sleep tonight, so he...we always had medical alcohol and we'd take a package of Life Savers and put it in a canteen cup and fill the canteen cup half full of water and then put in the rest of the half with medical alcohol and stir it up. Well, it beats nothing. But, it will hit you like a ton of bricks you know. Staley was what he says was a bathroom drinker, a Southern Baptist. He got his turn at that canteen cup and he could hardly talk. He was blowing up that air mattress. I remember C.J. Roos saying he just got it ready and it slept good in the sleeping bag laying on that thing and C.J. would lean over and turn the valve on that thing. About the third time Staley blew that thing up, he could hardly blow it up anymore; he had enough alcohol in him. He says, "Aw, the hell with it", and he slept on the cement like the rest of us did that night. Before, I forget on that prison. Talk about lucky Dutchmen. We came in at night, and it was dark and we backed our 2 1/2-ton truck up to a window. We were going to be in one of the offices of the thing. We unloaded all of our gear from that 2 1/2 ton truck through the windows and would you believe I

got out that morning and there was a land mine sitting right on that window and we unloaded that full 2 1/2 ton truck and not a one of us stepped on that "dog-gone" mine. You just can't believe some of that stuff. How fortunate you can be. Anyhow, we then started to get a lot of Turks.

Mark: It must be what, April?

Heersma: Ah, no, no...no. This is still the end of January. They impressed me that they were really handsome guys, really good-looking fellows. Excellent fighters, crooked as the devil. This one Turk, he came over everyday, we didn't realize it was everyday, he'd come over just looking like rags, you know, holes in his pants and everything else. Some GI would take a shirt and a pants and give it to him, you know. The next day he'd come back with the same pair of old rags and get another set from some dumb GI. The thing that really impressed me about them was...they had their real strict rules on servicing their equipment. When we were on the road, we were 4 miles long. We had a big outfit there. This is when I was with artillery. The Turks of course they were in and out of everybody. You're supposed to stay in your own convoy, but the Turks, they would just dart in and out. One time, all of a sudden, everybody stops, you know and you're on these one-lane roads, you could hardly get around anybody. It was time for the Turks to do their vehicle maintenance. They stopped right in the middle of our convoy, opened up the lids and changed the oil in their vehicles. Right in the middle of our convoy! Of course, you can't talk to them. You can't communicate with the guys. I'll never forget that. That's quite a ways ahead of where I'm talking about here, but when it comes to my mind, I probably ought to tell you about it. So then, we went on up to Soo-yon. I was let out at that time to a collecting company because they were having so many casualties and their doctor got the influenza at that time. In my letters, I would send a lot of our propaganda leaflets to my wife. I hadn't seen them for 45 years, it was really interesting to me. A lot of these Chinese prisoners of war that we'd get would have these. We must have dropped millions of these leaflets and of course they were all in Chinese and Korean exhorting them to give up and turn themselves in.

Mark: Did you get any leaflets back?

Heersma: No, not that I know of. I have not ever... Of course, they didn't have any Air Force, that was the thing about it. They had nothing to drop leaflets with. We had complete air control and which... Interesting, on quiet days when we get in that third position, we did a lot of hunting, pheasant hunting and we had a service company who had a couple of shotguns and we got a radio after another month or so. It was the first time we could listen to decent music and things like that. Played an awful lot of cards. Our group, the officers group didn't gamble. But the enlisted men, it was awful. They'd start a poker game on payday and the same 2 or 3 guys would have all the money in about 48

hours. Just...these guys would carry \$15,000 - \$20,000 with them. I couldn't believe it. They'd never get out, you know, they could stay in whether they were losing or not and finally they'd just take the rest of it. I don't know why these guys played. It was the same routine every month. I got my Christmas cookies in the middle of February and they were powder at that time. They had gone all the way up and all the way back. But the guys liked the crumbs real good, I wrote my wife at that point. We were not busy in the middle of February, mainly because we didn't do a lot of surgery. MASH had pulled up fairly far because they were planning a push. We were only about a mile and a half from MASH. We didn't feel we should be doing surgery when we could just run them over a mile and have a lot better facilities. Those guys, most of them had their boards in surgery and so on, where as like I hadn't. I had just my surgery from my internship when I was over there. On the 10th of February, they took Kimpo airport, south of Seoul without a fight. A lot of prisoners of war. They said that one of the prisoners of war through an interpreter told me they had lost an entire regiment on the East Side with typhus. A Chinese regiment. You could see it. We could tell a typhus case a block away. It's the most unbelievable thing. They must get terrible headaches. Usually they were Koreans, and they'd get it with these fleas. They would be walking along with 1 guy sort of slumped in the middle and 2 guys sort of half carrying him and he's got this real tight band, muslin that they put around his head. You know it was a case of typhus and you could just see them coming when they were walking down the street like that. Amazing. On the 14th of February, I worked 21 hours straight. We had 200 casualties, 5 helicopter loads out. Besides 50 POWs. That was one stretch that I had. So we started a push, Singleree is where we were at that point. We were up... getting up fairly close, hearing the artillery and things like that at that point. On the 18th, the Chinese regiment broke through our line and was in the back keeping us company. So we were all pretty uptight at that point. They got that under control. On the 20th, we made a barrel shower. We got a 55-gallon drum, put a rod through it and we tapped some holes near the top and we filled it up with water, and heated the water and then you could pull the thing down with a rope and then you'd get a shower out of the holes in the top. We thought we were real class. 19th, General Mark Clark came by and the "stuck-up" guy never stopped by our battalion. He went right on by. So, we were all sort of down in the dumps about that. 22nd and the 23rd, I saw the small pox I talked about. That was very interesting because we went out with a crew with about 5 jeeps. The lead jeep and the rear jeep had a 50-caliber machine gun mount. I was in one of the middle ones. We went up to these villages where we heard there was small pox. I'll never forget, the interpreter in this one village said "No, we don't have any small pox. They got some up in the next village". So we went up to the next village and the fellow said, "No, we don't have any small pox". The village just down below, these are all hamlets of about 8 - 10 huts you know, they just said you had them here. He said, "Oh, well, they died yesterday". It was sort of terrible because they had put...when

we finally got to the village that had a lot...that had the virus. They had them in the center hut of the village and everybody in the village would bring their child or their adult food. So if you're going to transmit this thing, that's about the best way I know. To put them in the center hut and then have everybody go in there and feed them. There's nothing you can do to tell them. Then we're into March. The Chinese that we captured, a lot of them had Russian first aid kits. Which was interesting. On the 4th, I went up because one of our observation planes crashed and I went up to retrieve the 3 men that were in the plane.

Mark: That got pretty close to the fighting, I take it.

Heersma: At that point, yah. To say, that was a foreign observer plane. On the 5th of March, I went over to a Filipino battalion to help them out. Mainly because their doctor was sick. I was getting along with the army docs real well. The colonel who was our division chief was out often and a very congenial fellow and they would "razz" me as the Navy doc, you know. They would bring out army enlistment papers for me to fill out to join the army. I did the same thing, I sent for some Navy enlistment papers and I filled out his name and gave it to the colonel one day. So we had a lot of camaraderie.

Mark: It seems kind of irregardless of rank, not irregardless but...

Heersma: Oh, yah, when you're in, you find out the good guys and the bad guys in a big hurry, when you're under pressure like that. Rank has nothing to do it. Somebody may be in charge, but everybody is working around him if he's a bum. It was interesting because, well...you got to knowing these fellows. I don't have the details of it in my mind right now because I just got up to the 13th of March and I am going to go over the rest of those letters just because it's stimulated me to do it now. But, within the next week, I got orders because they weren't making contact north of Seoul. They had taken Seoul and they weren't making contact north of Seoul and so they were going to have, I think it was the 58th Airborne was going to drop behind the Chinese lines and then the tanks were going to go through and meet them. Well, I guess I was expendable and so they put me in charge of medical evacuation of that thing. We met at the Museum of Seoul. We rendezvoused with the tankers that morning about, oh gosh, shortly after midnight. We were supposed to leave at 4:00 and we didn't leave until about 10:00. You know how that goes. I felt really scared because we were going through the Chinese lines and I was the only non-armored vehicle, I mean, me and my ambulance and my sergeant. All the rest of them were in tanks, you know. Well, we went about 12 - 15 miles behind the Chinese lines and set up a perimeter. We met the Airborne and then we were good because we had a perimeter. The tanks and the airborne would go out everyday probing to try to find the Chinese. I was there about 2 weeks. I didn't carry many casualties at that

time at all and of course it was warming up. We were at the end of March at that point. Then you're getting in the mud instead of snow and smell. Then I came back to clearing and then I was given orders to battalion aid. That was with the field artillery.

Mark: That's as close up as you get.

Heersma: Yah, we would be between 3 and 500 hundred yards from the line a lot of the time. We had our own perimeters that we would set up. So, I went up there and apparently the doc that was there just went to pieces with the pressure of it. Of course, you know when they find somebody gets scared, why they'll rub it in a little bit, you know. I remember I was up there the first day and this captain came to me. This was a regular army unit out of Fort Benning, Georgia. They had been together with the Second World War and so on, you know. These guys, again, as I talk about morale, were down because sitting over there in Korea when they thought they were going to be sitting in the Officer's club in Fort Benning, Georgia. I think it was kind of a "come down". But, anyhow, the first day I came in there, why, I don't know what kind of language you want on this thing, you know, but the guy came over to me. This captain and says "Say doc, see that hill over there?" I says "Yah". He says "There's about 1500 Chinese on that hill". I says "Well, you lazy bastard, why don't you shoot 'em off". He shook my hand and laughed and went away. They didn't put anymore pressure on me, you know, after that. We just got along fine. We were close and I was sort of the father-confessor for these guys because I was a Navy and a doctor and they couldn't tell the other guys how bad they were feeling and how scared they got some nights and things like that. So, they would come over and talk at my battalion aid station.

Mark: About the pressures of combat?

Heersma: Right.

Mark: What did you learn about? I know you're not a psychologist but...

Heersma: Well, I think it's just like any other counseling. You mostly just let them talk. You know, they get it out of their system and they know you understand and that they're not a worse guy because they're scared or down in the dumps and things like that. Basically, that's all you could do in a situation like that.

Mark: What were they afraid of most?

Heersma: Well, we took some hellish casualties over there you know. I guess there's still what, 8,000 that are not accounted for from the Korean War. It just was...it was a vicious thing, it was twice as ferocious as the as the Vietnam War. It's just that the Vietnam went on so long that you had more casualties in

it, you see. We were taking probably twice the casualties that there were in Nam. I know...this one British outfit, they, well this gets a little ahead of us, but anyhow. We just took an awful lot of casualties and it wasn't limited to just the infantry on the frontline you know. You'd get nailed no matter where you were, because this thing was such a see-saw outfit. Well, we... I got organized and sort or related to these fellows as time went on I remember I got to know the commanding officer real well. He was just a real nice guy and he was setting up one time. He'd go ahead you know and pick our positions and set it up and he went up there, and he was with a... it wasn't a jeep, it was sort of the next stage bigger than a jeep. We sandbagged all our vehicles because there was so much mining going on. Well, he hit a mine with that thing and I guess it threw him about 25 - 30 feet and took the back quarter right off that vehicle. If he wasn't sandbagged, he'd been dead, you know. He broke about 8 ribs and he wouldn't go back. He's gung-ho, you know, keep his guys, he wouldn't go back. I remember about every second or third day, all I had in the way of novocaine was dental surrets. These little things that had about 2cc and I'd give him a rib block, block the nerves on his back on the side where he had the broken ribs for about 2 weeks so he could stay on duty. We got to know these guys awfully well with that kind of stuff going on you know. Then we...we got up North. We were going without any resistance and we were North of the Ingun River, which is really quite a ways up in North Korea on the West Side of the peninsula. We set up in this little valley north of the river and the Chinese had a 90-mm Russian cannon that was on track. They used to pull those things up and direct fire and then run because they couldn't sustain, because our artillery would knock them out, you see. The direct fired on us. We just set up...they set up on that hill. I hadn't even had my foxhole dug yet. I remember this captain, I was with a black battalion and they heard these rounds coming in and they dove. The captain landed right on the ground. The next morning, his sergeant came in blind. He never once saw _____ . Well, we stayed there and dug in and I wrote Doc a number of letters and then we got word that we were going to hit. The Chinese were going to try to break through. This was in April. So, I said, "One of these days you're not going to some letters, because the mail will go to hell when this thing happens". I remember, I was set up there in some trees. We'd got pulled back then because we got hit pretty hard and we went back about 2 - 3 miles. We were setup in some trees and I dug about a 4-foot foxhole that day. We were firing all day long and I set it on an angle so in case you got a tree burst, you wouldn't get hit you know. They fired so much that night that I went out the next morning and talked to them. They burned the paint right off the barrels, they had fired so much. About 8:00, this guy came running through the area, he says "You better get out of here Doc". He was about 150 yards ahead of us. He had a 50-caliber machine gun, one of these water-cooled ones. He'd fired so much, he fired all night long he said, he ran out of water and burned the gun up. He said they were just stacked 6 - 8 deep in front of his machine gun set up there.

Mark: The Chinese?

Heersma: Yah, the Chinese and North Koreans. Then some of the infantry started running through there and we didn't have our orders to go. Jeez, our guys, unless he gets his orders, we don't go you know. So we were sitting there ready to defend ourselves. I had my carbine and at that time was pretty used to it. So, anyhow, we... I had a fair number of wounded. Those Dodge ambulances would hold about 6 wounded. We finally got our orders and of course the bad problem for me is... as an individual is that, in a convoy, the ambulance is always the last one because if somebody gets hurt, hits a mine, or anything like that, I'd pick them up on the way through you see. Well, hell, I couldn't pick anybody up, I had 6 guys in there now. But I was the last guy. We went about 4 miles down the road and we got cut-off. They came across a field and just like they are in this country, you know, you got a railroad track and the road alongside of it, you know. Well, I don't know how many of them, but they were coming across that field. They hit a vehicle up ahead of us and so the _____ was stopped on the road. I'll never forget I... somebody let loose on me with an automatic rifle and never been on the receiving end of something like that. I had my ambulance sandbagged and christ, the first thing I knew, the visor went right out of my window right in front of my nose. So I said to the sergeant "Come on, let's get down in the ditch here". They sprayed that ambulance. Well, I got him the next time he raised his head off the railroad tracks. I was waiting for him. I plugged him. Well, they shot the tires out of the ambulance and I'd be damned. We had 6 guys in there and the back end had about 4 rounds in it, shot the tires out, I had a round that hit the sandbag right under my butt. We finally got going again and I... we got out of the attack and stopped the ambulance because we were running on all tires out.

[TAPE - SIDE B]

Mark: We're having a bit of a go...

Heersma: He says "We're having a bit of a go!", I could have hugged him. It was the first bit of humor I had all day. This guy took all 6 of my people and went on until we got some tires on the ambulance. Bringing a little racial thing here. We were behind a 2 1/2-ton truck when we were getting hit there. People often talk about black people not being yellow and stuff like that. But, jesus, these guys... I've never seen them show any cowardice but they had a 50-caliber machine gun on a ring stand on top of that 2 1/2-ton truck. The guys were firing across the railroad tracks at the Koreans and Chinese. They'd last about 20 - 30 seconds and then get knocked out of there. They were sitting right up in the air with nothing protecting them. These guys were fighting to get up on that ring stand. You talk about yellow, they're sure not yellow.

Well, then, we got in... we pulled into someplace, it was about 11:00 that night finally. I'll never forget, I was so upset I got separated from the unit all together with that ambulance getting hit and there was a marine sentry up there and I asked him which way my unit went. He says well you can just up to the top of the hill and take a right here. I went up to the top of the hill and was going to take a right and that son-of -a-bitch sent me right over the edge into a rice paddy. I went back, after a day like that, I went back with a carbine, I was going to kill him. He was gone, he knew what he did. He was just a son-of -a-bitch you know. We were army and he was a marine. He was going to send me over the side. That's the first time I was going to kill my own guys. But, you get so wound up and used to it. It was one of those things. Well, I finally found my guys and got in. We were in a riverbed north of Seoul. That was the 30th of April then. The Chinese were going to take Seoul for May Day and so we knew they were going to really hit that night. I sat up, it was late and I sat up in the riverbed with my tent, my battalion aid station and I don't think I was set up 10 minutes and "KA-WOOM"! My tent went right over. I went up and looked over the edge of that thing and here there's 18 - 155s sitting on top of the bank. They let a full 18 rounds go right over my tent. So I had to take everything down, it was about 12:30 - 1:00 by that time. Took everything down and went down and set up under a railroad trestle that had been bombed out, but at least I had 2 uprights on each side of my tent. Well, they had a cruiser and 2 or 3 destroyers, all of our artillery and that went on all night long. You just couldn't believe it. The fire power. I went out in the morning and _____ of barb wire about 300 yards ahead of battalion aid there. I counted 400 in less than a block laying on the barbwire. The Air Force, I talked to the Air Force fellow later, he said the Korean regiments were 18,000 and he said that this one division was retreating back up north and they had 70 guys left out of 18,000. Just decimated. So they never took Seoul for May Day. Then we slowly started to move forward again. I was getting sort of anxious because word was out some of the guys were getting their orders back to the Navy. Of course, at that point, you have mixed feelings. You don't want to leave your buddies in a lurch. They're sitting out there in the mud and you're going to go back to a floor and all the rest of the stuff. Well, I finally got my orders then and we... my sergeant drove me a half a day to get me back to the Forward Air Station. Talking about airplanes again. We pulled up on the side of this airstrip and they had these metal mats they throw in the mud, you know. We went to this Quonset hut and the guy said, who I was and where I was going, he said "You're supposed to go over to the other side, there's a place for the people going out". He said "But be careful, because if you go driving across here to go over there, you're going right over the runway, if you want, it's about 4 miles if you drive around the end of the thing". So, I said "Well, let's go". So we start out and we pull up and he says, we stop by this runway and look both ways. We don't see anything, we're going to start the jeep up and "shrooom", this fighter plane came in about 130 miles an hour right across the top of that jeep. I said "we've gone through this

much, why don't we drive around". So, we drove around this thing and got over to this Quonset hut on the other side and my corpsman was going to make small talk with the guy at the desk while I was waiting for my plane and he says "What are you with here? What unit are you with"? He says, "I'm with Combat cargo". He sticks his chest out. My corpsman he about died. We drove a half a day to get back to this guy and he thinks he's in combat. Then I flew back to Drake and called the wife and had a miserable ride home. It was great but it was miserable. We went on board a general ship and we're not overloaded then of course because we're going the other way but god-all-Friday the North Aleutian route is just as bad as the North Atlantic route. That ship was tossing and turning. I took so much Dramamine, until my ears would pop and then I found the center of the ship as best I could and I was sitting out in the hall on a chair in the middle and the thing is still rocking all the way. Everybody was taking their turn heaving over the side, you know it was just a miserable ride. Got into Washington, Pemberton and drank my first fresh milk. We had powdered milk for all that time. I remember I drank a full quart of milk right down the hatch. It tasted so good. Then I flew back and had a wonderful reunion with my wife and baby daughter who was then pushing 9 months. Then I was assigned to the Marine Corps recruit depot in San Diego.

Mark: I'd like to interrupt here if I could. I want to go back to some things in Korea. If you would, I would be interested in your description of how a casualty went through your aid station or your clearing company. I assume when they came, they would come in in bunches and that would have to be some sort of triage. So, I'm interested in the casualty experience and your contact.

Heersma: OK. Well, most of the triage, of course, happens at each step. In other words, battalion aid will take care of minor things, collecting will take care of the next step of things, so when they come to us, most of it was stuff that was going to have to go back. We had... we varied between a 24 and a 72 hour policy. We were... when we were expecting a lot of casualties or we were expecting to move a lot, the division surgeon pushed us down to 24 hour. Anything we couldn't handle in 24 hours, we had to send it right on through right away. Then, the reason we did so much surgery in some of these times is that we couldn't evacuate but once a day because of the night sniper fire. So, if you got somebody at 11:00 and the ambulances had made their run, you had to make a judgement whether this guy was going to live if you held him for 24 hours or whether you had to do some more definitive work on him. We had... I think one of the funniest things that ever happened to me was... this Chinese fellow came in and he had been shot in the back. It went into the back, left flank and came out the front. I don't know if know what omentum_____ is. But, there's a fatty drape sort of thing that hangs in the abdomen. Well his omentum was hanging out the bullet wound in the front, you know. Well, the ambulance was going out and so we just had to operate on this guy because he had peritonitis already. So... in the move

before we were in this Methodist church that I was telling you about. In the move before where the 2 1/2-ton truck had broken the suction machine. With the suction machine, you have a suction pump, then you got a reserve, which is a glass jar, and the gunk goes in the jar and then the pump doesn't get contaminated with all this stuff. Well they broke the glass jar on the 2 1/2-ton truck so we didn't have any suction. Well the Chinese ration is rice, dried powdered fish and garlic. They give them a packet of this stuff and then they've got their little bowl and wherever they go they'll find some water and eat this up. Well, we opened this guy up and he had a hole in his stomach and we had no suction to empty that stuff out. It reeked! You can imagine what that dried fish and garlic smelled like second hand. C.J. Roos had a year of orthopedic surgery and a year of surgery at the time and he just lifted that stomach out of the wound and gave it a squeeze over the side. Then we sewed the stomach up and we started to run the bowel. You just pull it through so you're looking for holes in it. Well, we found a hole in the small bowel and he was going to sew it up and I'll be damned, here a worm sticks his head out of there. Here this guy had about a 6-inch ascaris in his intestine. So I was giving the anesthetic at that time and this crazy nut puts that worm up on the top and we put our \$5 each on the worm as to which side he was going to go off and how long it's going to take him to get off the drapes and fall on the floor.

Mark: While you were in surgery?

Heersma: Oh, yah. We put him up... Well, you're a bunch of nuts, what else are you going to do in a situation like that. Well this Methodist church, they had sub-flooring and they didn't have the regular flooring in the church and we had these southern cooks. I hated them. They would sit around all night and I called it "hillbilly" music, you call it Country Western now. I called them hillbillies and they could swear. Oh god, they could swear. About 15 - 20 minutes later, we hear this commotion coming from the basement. Because the enlisted men were living in the basement. Here, these... this garlic and fish and rice crap was dropping through the floor onto these guy's sleeping bags down there in the basement. So, we had a wild time. We had fun. So, they came in...most of them came in by ambulance and if we were getting hit hard the ambulances were just coming in all the time. We didn't get anything off the ground itself. It all had been processed by battalion aid and by collecting and either by a corpsman or a physician. We took care of a fair amount of medical stuff between infectious... there's a lot of infection going on.

Mark: That's what I was just going to ask. In your experience, what sort of casualties did you see?

Heersma: When we would be busy then of course 3/4 of it was injury casualties. A surprising amount of it, was vehicle accidents because the Korean roads were so terrible. We were road bound you know and the troops would be going along on a 2 1/2 ton truck and the dang thing, you'd go off on the shoulder and they'd roll a 2 1/2 ton truck. Well, here you got 20 guys that the truck rolled over with. Everything from crushed skulls to broken arms and this sort of thing. We had a lot of that type of injury. In addition to... they didn't have any good artillery. The Chinese had a good mortar but they didn't have any good artillery to speak of. Of course, artillery is just an unbelievable weapon, oh my god. We'd go through some of the stuff we'd shot at and you just pulverized that stuff with a 105. But, the injuries, grenade stuff and... their small arms were not the caliber of ours. The caliber of our rifle when it hit you, it knocked you down. This stuff was just a little better than a 22. So it wouldn't knock a man down. A lot of this through and through stuff... I took a lot of shrapnel out of people. We had a policy not to definitively close a lot of these wounds because we didn't have the means of doing it. But if there was a piece of shrapnel that was within reach, we'd just get the foreign body out and open it up so it had good drainage. Chest wounds were terrible. I remember I sat up with a Turk all night one night and he had a chest wound and the ambulances had left and I put I don't know how many thousand cc of blood in this guy and I was pulling 300 - 400 cc of blood out of his chest every hour or so. Just with an 18 needle. Propped him up, just took a chair like that and set it upside down so he had a recliner because he couldn't lay down. He couldn't breath if he laid down. I just tapped his chest to keep him going. Put him on the helicopter as soon as we could. The helicopters couldn't fly at night. They didn't have the navigation at that time to fly at night so we just had daytime helicopter evacuation. They all came in pretty much with ambulance.

Mark: You also mentioned self-inflicted wounds and you mentioned VD and these sorts of things.

Heersma: Yah. I say VD like you wouldn't believe. I'd see lymph nodes in the groin. You couldn't imagine some of this stuff. If you ever wanted to impress to teenagers not to have free sex, take a couple of pictures of those guys. Holy crow. It would make you vomit.

Mark: Was there a lot of prostitution?

Heersma: No, it wasn't prostitution. You gave a girl a candy bar at the most. It was awful.

Mark: Wasn't a problem for a GI who was lonely?

Heersma: Oh, no. Uh uh. Unfortunately, you'd see a GI just take a baby off a woman's back and take her in the shack and have sex. People get so upset about this sort of thing, but you know, that's gone on for eons in war. It's just part of the war. I got ... I was upset by it because at that point I was still pretty moralistic Dutch reformed little farm boy. As time went on, you get pretty hard and bitter. You would... I had no feelings one way or the other about Koreans. The South Koreans were just as crazy as the North Koreans. We had one South Korean. He came in. What they do is, they make you kneel down and they put a piece of bamboo behind your knees. So you're kneeling on a piece of bamboo which feels great you know. Then they beat you on your bare back with bamboo while they're questioning you. I had this guy come in, in shock into the clearing company and he had swelling 2 - 3 inches thick from his shoulders right down to his butt where he had been beaten as he was questioned. Of course, I at one point toward the end there, we had forward observers for artillery, another one that will be hard to talk about but... this young second lieutenant came through as a forward observer and we lost him. We found him a couple three days later as we went up and they'd captured him. They set him on a stump and then they just beat his testicles off and then they shot him in the head. At that point, I vowed if we took anymore, because we took captures, and they weren't wounded they often had to take them past the battalion aid to say they were OK to take them back for POW. I had enough morphine, I said "Anymore of them come through, I'll just kill 'em". I just got so bitter about it. You know, a young guy like that comes through and to see him dead in another day. It's a bitch. It's a bitch. Well, want me to go on with the Marine Corps recruit depot? Or... want to talk more about Korea?

Mark: What about self-inflicted wounds?

Heersma: OK.

Mark: Was it really that frequent?

Heersma: Oh, yah. It got to the point, that we put out a notice that any self-inflicted wound we were going to court martial. Another crazy story... We were sitting in a tent in the compound one day, it was a slower day, and we had made a rule no shooting in the compound anymore. Because we...

Mark: Hunting and things like that?

Heersma: Well, you were outside the compound when you do that but anyhow, no shooting of firearms in the compound with the clearing company. Well, we were sitting out there on a warm day in Spring and all of a sudden "Boom". You could see the dust come off this tent. You got them dead to rights. About 6 of us guys pile out of there and surround that tent. Well, there's 8 blacks in there because it was a black battalion. There were 8 blacks. We

separated them all immediately and the officer, not the medical officer but the...I can't remember what they called him, anyhow, Chuck Eveland questioned each one of these guys. Captain Eveland. Each one of them was sitting on the same side of the cot looking toward the wall of the tent and the other 7 guys were playing poker and he didn't see who shot. We had separated those guys immediately and they all gave us the same story. So, we never did prosecute this guy. Talk about Chuck Eveland and prostitution and things like that you asked about. It was the cooks... they were notorious for this sort of thing. They'd cook the meal and then they'd have time to go out and shag around where the rest of us were working all the time. Anyhow, they had so many of these gals in these little shacks around the clearing company when we'd get set up for awhile, that Captain Eveland decided he was going to get all those women out of there. So he sent out a platoon one day and went through all these villages and picked all these gals up and they had about 40 of them on a 2 1/2-ton truck and they were going to ship them back. None of them knew a word of English. But all these cooks had taught them was that Captain Eveland was bad. They taught them... these Koreans who didn't know a word of English to say "god damn Captain Eveland". Here's Captain Eveland standing alongside that 2 1/2 ton truck with about 30 women up there yelling "god damn Captain Eveland". The rest of us just... we never let him forget that you know. He sent that whole bunch back. They carried their women with them a lot of the time. The marines were notorious for that. They'd shook down a marine column, I remember they said they got 400 - 500 women out of the column. Of course, it's a problem with logistics too. You're feeding them too, you know. I treated an awful lot of gonorrhea and hot tubes in women over there for that.

Mark: As for self-inflicted wounds.

Heersma: Mostly hands and toes. Blow off a finger and they'd make a mistake and hit themselves in the hand and cripes, that's a nasty wound. A hand wound. If you fracture... if you don't hit a bone, you're OK, it goes right through and through. But, boy, you hit a bone in your hand and then the exit hole is 3 times the size of the entry hole. There was a fair amount of that going on.

Mark: Is it fairly obvious?

Heersma: Oh, yah. I felt real sorry for one guy. He was a sergeant. World War II sergeant. A real good guy. He took the shotgun out one day to pheasant hunt and he just made a stupid mistake. He put his hand over the gun and was going over a rock fence or something and the dang gun went off. He had a shotgun blast into his hand. Now, nobody is going to do that. This poor devil, they court-martialed him, they busted him.

Mark: Thinking it was self-inflicted.

Heersma: How are you going to draw the line? Here he was a good guy and he didn't want to go back. The breaks on some of these people, the breakdown is really unusual. We had a fellow come in when we were set up one time, and he... we got all kinds of stuff coming in and we had a division psychiatrist and all of a sudden he yelled "hup" and about 10 seconds later he'd yell "hup" and pretty soon everybody is looking at this guy. He's got these 2 boxes he's carrying with him. What the heck are you doing with that? Well, I got a full set of Al Jolsen records here. Here this guy is sitting out in the foxhole with a hand record player and a full box of Al Jolsen records. Said "Well, what do you do with those"? He pulls this thing out and cranks up his record player and he pantomimes Al Jolsen. He is good. But, he's also crazy, you know. Stuff like that, we had orders of what you keep and what you try to give back. A lot of these guys, they fall apart, you give them a shower and you give them 48 hours in the sack and they're rear'in to go back to their buddies. I had a fellow I was taking care of and I says "How come your pants are wet"? He got hit with a... he was walking along side a tank and he got hit with small arms fire. He says "Well, I've been going through creeks for the last few days". This guy had not eaten for 48 hours and he had not slept for 36 hours. He was just totally wet from going through creeks and so on. He'd been walking along side that tank all the time. You can imagine why they go to pieces. A guy like that all he needs is a night's sleep and a shower and a little clean clothes and he's ready to go. But there was a lot of self-inflicted.

Mark: Now, you've mentioned a couple of times, your Dutch reformed background. Of course, the Korean War was part of the larger Cold War and communism versus our system here. I'm wondering perhaps your religious background or the atmosphere of the Cold War, your perspective on that, I mean, did you feel good about fighting communism?

Heersma: Ah, no. We weren't fussing about idealism. We would get into philosophical discussions and I really turned around on religion. We had a chaplain at one time that was one of the people that were scared. Well damn it, chaplains aren't supposed to be scared in my book. When we would be under fire and we'd need a chaplain around why, the sucker was back in the headquarters company 15 miles back. When he'd get the word that it was a nice clear day and there was nothing going on, then he'd go up and have a church service. Well, I lost an awful lot of religion at that point. This is a bunch of baloney as far as I was concerned. So, I... I used to get the Upper Room from the church. They'd send it out every month, which is a little daily thing. My older brother was a preacher and he'd send me religious letters and stuff like this. I revolted against this kind of stuff. I just was totally the other way.

Mark: As a result of the war, do you think?

Heersma: I don't know if it was a result of the war or just my growing up. But, I... I surprised myself going over my letters because at this point in my life, I am atheistic. At that point, I would say agnostic, which was really quite a change from what I had been.

Mark: Probably not very popular in the '50s anyway.

Heersma: Well, you got to keep that stuff to yourself in society anyhow. If you start telling anybody... especially when you're out in Blue River. It's one of these things you just don't talk about. But, we had a lot of philosophical discussions. But as far as the North and South Koreans, after watching... we didn't give a dang which one won from that standpoint. They were both pretty bad. The Koreans of course had really got it kicked out of them early in the war. Their regiments and so on at best really...

Mark: The South Koreans?

Heersma: Oh, yah. They had been mullied terribly. So, we called them ROK or Republic of Korea, R- O-K. The ROK divisions would always buckle. You'd have a line going and all the divisions, there'd be about 7 divisions along side of each other on that peninsula and the Chinese always had enough sense to hit the Korean division because it would always buckle. Then they'd come along behind you. So we didn't care a dang for those people. I felt sorry for them on the civilians, because when the Chinese would push, you couldn't tell a Chinese from a Korean and there's these thousands of people streaming down the road. Well, the Air Force would get there and just... I counted 300 - 400 of them in a block, you know, all dead. They were civilians that the Air Force had shot up because they're... the minute we go forward, old Papa san, he's got to go back up there and get his farm. The minute they go forward, old Papa san is right ahead of them running. So, they're in the middle of it by their own design all the time. Tremendous number of civilian casualties.

Mark: Well, I've just got one more thing.

Heersma: Going long, I'm sorry.

Mark: That's OK. There's no such thing as too long of an interview. I resist asking the question, but with Korean War vets, I can't resist it. That's the TV show, MASH. I'm just interested in your impressions of it.

Heersma: One day, I had been on the line for I don't know how long. This was when I was with the artillery. I had been under an awful lot of pressure. The division surgeon came up and said " Jim, why don't you take a day off and go back to MASH". So my corpsman drove me 2 - 3 hours to get back there. I hadn't seen a white woman for 5 - 6 months and I saw this bag of a nurse in army

fatigues, christ, I was so excited I couldn't stand it. She was a real sack. But, anyhow, I went back and visited with these people and had a nice relaxing day and a lot of camaraderie and they were well trained as I mentioned. These guys had their boards so we mostly talked medicine and that sort of thing. So that was my only experience with MASH. My next experience, of course, was seeing the movie when it first came out. My wife said that most of the people at the end of the movie were watching me laugh instead of watching the movie. I guess it must have... I really laughed. When I tell some of these people some of the stories of the things we did in our clearing company, they say you should have been writing the stories for MASH. There's an awful lot of detail that I had gone into about cases and things like that. So, I think those people had an entirely different world. They had a lot more brass and a lot more horseshit to put up with. Yet, they had 3 square meals a day and they had a wood floor under their feet. I was sitting in the mud for 6 months and snow. They had 2 by 4 frames in their tents, I couldn't believe this sort of stuff. We were sagging all over the place. One thing I didn't mention, was we had a fire one night. It was so darn cold and we had heat with these little oil heaters and you had a tent liner as well as the tent and these things had to go up through a hole in the tent. Well, one of those real cold nights, one of the corpsman fired it up a little too high and we burned a hospital tent down. Then we got... the guys laughed because I was always a light sleeper anyhow and they said the first thing they noticed was there's holes in our tent and they saw little bits of light in the tent, but they see me streaming through with my sleeping bag and my duffel bag going out of that tent. Well, we got everybody out of there except 2 POWs that burned to death in there. I got some pictures of that. It was just awful to see your surgical set up all burned up. It was our surgical set up and the ward in that particular tent. Then we dug a hole about 6 feet wide and about 10 feet long, just through it all in there and buried it. That was a night tragedy that we had one of those winter nights.

Mark: OK, San Diego.

Heersma: San Diego, OK. Got back into San Diego and reported to the Marine Recruit Depot and the medical Captain, which is a 4 striper in the Navy, said he was going to put me in the chief nurse's office because I had been a pediatric resident. Well, I didn't understand what that meant. But, anyhow, I find out that the chief nurse's office had women reign sick call in the morning and saw dependents in the afternoon. That's why I got that job because it was with dependents you see, for my pediatrics. Well, I ate that up. So after sick call, we were seeing these people and it started out with maybe 3 or 4 in an afternoon, well, pretty soon we were seeing 20 - 30 in an afternoon because I was taking care of most of them. Most of the dependents were being sloughed off any place they'd take their kid. So, the Marines thought that was wonderful. They gave me a two-story building up by the front of Marine Recruit Depot and I had 3 nurses working for me and we were getting up to 40

- 50 patients a day and having a ball. The Navy came through on inspection and saw this guy that was willing to work and liked to take care of kids and the next week I had my orders. I was in charge of pediatrics at the Naval Air Station on North Island. So, I got... I got out of the Marine Recruit Depot in about 5 - 6 months and went over to North Island. Then I was under a commander. Commander Matthews. I just did pediatrics all day long. I had my own nurse in this station. I finished out my active duty there. Then I got relieved of active duty, but never did get out until, you probably saw my discharge paper there.

Mark: No, you didn't send it. You said, just received Discharge letter, I think you mentioned to me.

Heersma: But, I sent it after that.

Mark: Oh, OK.

Heersma: Yah, I sent a photostat of it.

Mark: I might have it in my in basket somewhere.

Heersma: If you don't, call and I'll send it... because I made about... when I finally found it, we found it and then I made about 6 photocopies of it. Because I thought it's one of these things that we lose periodically and I was certain I sent it to you.

Mark: Well, I'll look around.

Heersma: Yah, check that out, because I'm sure I sent you a copy. So, then that was later on when I think I was up in Marshfield by that time.

Mark: So you were never recalled again.

Heersma: No, well, once I got out and went through that I said the heck with staying in. I paid my dues. I should of because I had almost 13 years by that time and I could of stayed in another 7. We had a Northwestern Medical School reunion last year and the guys that were with me that stayed in are all 4 stripe captains and retiring pretty plush in the Navy situation.

Mark: After you got out, after you were out of active-duty, you're now a veteran. I'm interested in what you did to get yourself re-adjusted to civilian life.

Heersma: It was bad.

Mark: Some veterans complained that it was.

Heersma: As you see, I still have trouble with some of this stuff. When we got back, I was in San Diego at the Marine Corp Recruit and I couldn't sit. I couldn't just sit down and read and stuff like that. It was tough sleeping at night. We played bridge 6 nights a week. Dot was very supportive. About 6 months of that, then I could finally start a _____. But, you know I still have once in a while, things will hit me and all of a sudden you're just crying.

Mark: Nightmares for example?

Heersma: No, not too much of that. Mostly, when stuff will come up and it will remind you of something. I sleep really well. I relish being an insomniac. I'm physically active during the day and I get up about 2:00 and I read for a couple hours and I just really enjoy it. Go back to bed and sleep like a baby until the next morning. I am active in our American Legion. I'm not that conservative but what else have you got in Blue River.

Mark: I'll come back to that topic.

Heersma: OK.

Mark: There was a young man who used to work here, his grandfather was in the Battle of Buna in New Guinea in World War II and when the Persian Gulf War started up, he started having some reaction to that. Did that sort of thing...

Heersma: No. The only thing that irks me more than anything else is the people of my vintage who have been through some of this stuff, think a lot of the guys who were in Vietnam were a bunch of spoiled brats. I mean they were kids that were living in privilege and hitting alcohol and drugs too much and making a lot out of a less violent war. Not that there was any easy thing for a lot of them but, I react somewhat to the Vietnam veterans that make a lot of noise. Our guys didn't make a lot of noise.

Mark: No, they didn't. In fact, the Korean War vets...

Heersma: We didn't feel sorry for ourselves particularly. We were down in the dumps and we... I realize going over my letters that, my wife would say that nobody seems to know that there's a war going on over there. We felt bad on that account. But, I... the guys that were in World War II had so much more than we did. Some of those battles were just horrendous. You could walk for miles without stepping on the ground, step on equipment, people. So, we didn't have that type of thing to put up with.

Mark: Right.

Heersma: But, it was a nasty little war.

Mark: Well, they all are.

Heersma: Yah.

Mark: Did you find that the civilian people reacted to you differently or didn't react at all? World War II guys will sometimes tell me that they couldn't buy a drink for 2 years after the war or something like that.

Heersma: No, we just came back and slid in because there weren't that many of you.

Mark: Is that a source of resentment or _____ for you? Or did you like that?

Heersma: I was just getting on with it. I came back to my residency. It was sort of interesting because I came back to my residency, I was at St. Luke's and I was accepted for residency at Children's Memorial in Chicago and I came back there in the Fall and I was a man and these other guys were kids. I had done it all and here I got to put in another year and a half of residency in pediatrics. Here I had been in charge of pediatrics for a year and a half out in San Diego. But anyhow, I was back about 2 months and the chief at the hospital made me senior resident over about 50 guys. I leapfrogged 50 guys in about 2 months. There was a lot of resentment then. But I thought to hell with you boy, I've earned this thing and if I'm senior resident, that's it and I knew how to be senior resident. I had been a boss. But I remember there was resentment there for a couple weeks at the Children's Hospital when I went over the top of an awful lot of people's heads. Then at Marshfield, with the Marshfield Clinic, I was one of 2 docs that had the Silver Star. I got the Silver Star for that episode when we got hit on the flank that time. Trying to protect that ambulance. This other fellow, he was the 4th wave on Okinawa and just to survive in the 4th wave was quite a feat. Because the first 3 waves, they had no survivors. So, we were sort of revered at that time. Now, hell, I don't think anybody knows what a Silver Star is, you know. They have no idea what that involves. They hear about the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star and the Congressional Medal of Honor. But, nobody knows what a Silver Star is. It's just one of those things.

Mark: One of those decorations.

Heersma: Yah.

Mark: I'm sure you're familiar with the Manchurian Candidate, then.

Heersma: No, not particularly. No.

- Mark: A guy comes back from Korea, he's been brainwashed by the North Koreans and he comes back and he's a communist agent who's going to assassinate _____ . I've only seen the movie once. It's got the crazed veteran and particularly with the Korean War, that sort of disturbed, brainwashed veteran. You never experienced any sort of stand-offish-ness from people apparently. Like you know, this crazy vets going to go nuts on me. Nothing like that?
- Heersma: No. No. I think they all viewed us pretty much normal guys. Of course, there were a lot of World War II people that had been through a lot who were sort of supportive of people. I know my brother-in-law was an infantryman all through the Battle of the Bulge and the whole thing. He went through the whole "Schamooo" in Europe and he was extremely stabilizing for my wife when I was gone. He helped her a lot. If you notice the tenure of my letters, I had sent home all kinds of cartoons out of the Stars & Stripes just to keep my wife's chin up. A lot of the time, I was more concerned about her and the baby than for my own self.
- Mark: I've just got two more things.
- Heersma: Yup.
- Mark: Well, one more thing. Those veterans organizations. You mentioned that you joined the Legion. Could you tell me, when did you join the Legion? Was it soon after the war? Some time after the war? And for what reason?
- Heersma: Well, I'm not a big joiner. But, I feel responsibility to the area that I live in to a certain extent. The only service organization in Blue River is the American Legion. We've got a scholarship that we give and we give to Badger Boys State and we do projects like that. It's the only thing other than the little Methodist Church there that is in that category. So, I felt more along those lines to be part of it and to be part of a little community. Blue River is only 400 and some people. So, I have told them, I will be active in this Legion and do my share and more, but I will not be in the Legion beyond Blue River. Like they wanted me to be commanding officer, I was the finance officer for the last 3 years and... which is a fair job, you carry all the figures and books and stuff. But, if you get to be commanding officer, then you got to go to the district meetings and the state meetings and stuff like that. I just want to be here. I don't feel that we have a lot coming for being a veteran. I think it's my duty and my honor to have protected my country. I don't have a lot more coming than the guy who didn't have a chance to do it because he wasn't well or wasn't made right or something like that. He's got just as much right to Medicare as I've got and just as much right to a pension as I've got. I consider it a privilege to serve the country.

Mark: I see you joined much later.

Heersma: Oh, I just...

Mark: When did you move to Blue River?

Heersma: We've been there 15 years now.

Mark: That was the first and only time you joined the Legion?

Heersma: That's right.

Mark: I remember the second thing I wanted to ask. The first thing I wanted to ask actually. That involves the use of veteran's benefits after Korea. This may not apply to you because you were...

Heersma: Well, it did. Because my residency, I got ... I don't remember... not a lot of money but, you don't have tuition. I had an allowance you see. A first year resident in those years made \$25 a month. As a senior resident, I made \$75 a month. These guys are making \$35,000 a year now. What a ballgame difference that is. But, anyhow, I did have GI Bill through my residency, which helped pay the rent and things like that. But, we were still, we didn't have to play it near as close to our chest as we did before I went in the service.

Mark: There are various home loan programs available.

Heersma: Never was eligible for that stuff, because my income got too high. Those are related to your income. When I bought a ... I went up to Marshfield, I bought a house within the first few months. My folks lent me \$6,000 to make a down payment on the house. Then I paid my folks back. But I was not eligible for a veterans loan because of my income. Right off the bat you're making too much money. I have never gone down and gotten a card at the Veterans' Hospital. Although, oh, I froze my feet and never told anybody and stuff like that, I could probably get a card as easy as anybody. Everytime I get outside now in the real cold weather, I get trouble from it. But, if you don't turn yourself in, you don't get a card made out on it, so you don't have any benefits or anything like that. But, I don't feel I got anything in particular coming.

Mark: OK.

Heersma: And, I'm not bitter about having gone.

Mark: You've exhausted my line of questioning. Do you have anything you'd like to add? Anything we missed?

Heersma: Talked too much as it is.

Mark: No, that's not true. Well, thanks for coming in. I appreciate it very, very much.