

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN R. REYNOLDSON
Infantry Officer, Army, Korean War
2004

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

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Reynoldson, John R., (1929-2009). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Video Recording: 2 videorecordings (ca. 51 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

John "Jack" R. Reynoldson, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his Army service during the Korean War with the 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Division. Reynoldson touches on being in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps while attending college at the University of Wisconsin. He discusses being surprised by the outbreak of war and the high level of training the North Korean troops had received during World War II. Reynoldson mentions airborne and infantry training, being shipped to Pusan as a 2nd lieutenant, and the high casualty rate of lieutenants and captains in combat. Assigned to the 3rd Platoon, 1st Battalion, 17th Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, he talks about leading a rifle platoon, his first impressions of the front lines, the fortifications of his unit in the Chorwon Valley, and trying to appear self confident in front of his men. He mentions meeting the major who used to be in charge of his platoon. Reynoldson states he arrived after the lines had stabilized and portrays trying to take prisoners during combat patrols. He details feelings of fear and time distortion during combat and his mental state before and after combat. Reynoldson portrays a mission on Hill 404 when half his platoon was wounded or killed but succeeded at taking a prisoner. He explains why he felt his assigned missions and the war in general were worth the effort, and he touches on returning to South Korea after the war and being impressed with the country's progress. He comments on the platoon's weapons, being attacked with Chinese grenades, and leading an attack on a Chinese company. Reynoldson details being wounded during a bayonet assault, turning on his rifle's safety before losing consciousness on a stretcher, and getting flown to a MASH unit on a helicopter litter. He touches on seeing men with the "battle rattles" get taken off the front line, using sleep as an escape from fear, the responsibility of being a leader, never feeling that the war was ignored or forgotten, and the guilt he felt after coming home while his men were still fighting in Korea. Reynoldson comments on seeing Colombian United Nations troops in action, food on the front line, and the set-up of his position and command bunker. He talks about the aggressiveness of Chinese soldiers, their infiltration tactics at night, and their use of mortars. Reynoldson discusses combat using bayonets and sometimes receiving orders to send out patrols with no officers. He reflects on the difficulty of talking about combat experiences.

Biographical Sketch:

Reynoldson (1929-2009) served in the Army from 1951 to 1953. He married Virginia Goff in 1949 and started teaching junior high school in 1955. He taught English and history in Madison for nearly forty years and led Madison Board of Education personnel efforts for ten years.

Citation Note:

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Context Note:

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Related Materials Note:

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

Interviewed by Mik Derks, Wisconsin Public Television, May 28, 2004

Transcribed by WPT Staff, n.d.

Checked and corrected by Thomas Thorsen, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, WVM, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Mik: I think the best thing to do is just to start where your story started, with how you got involved in the military to begin with.

Jack: Well, I grew up in Madison and went to the University of Wisconsin, took ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], received an infantry commission, and entered the service just after the Korean War had broken out.

Mik: Did you have a sense; being in ROTC, heading toward a commission; did you have a sense of what was going on in Korea or did it take you totally by surprise?

Jack: I think it took everybody by surprise; nobody was prepared for the North Korean invasion of the South and so it was quite startling, and we did anticipate that we would be sent over as replacement rifle platoon leaders and company commanders to have command of an infantry unit.

Mik: And do you remember hearing when you got the news about Korea?

Jack: Oh yes it was in the newspapers and on the radio; there was no television at the time and we were astonished. And, of course, the North Koreans, who had been trained by Mao because they had fought against the Japanese, and had fought against Chiang Kai-shek, and they went back to Korea as complete units, and stayed above the 38th Parallel; and when they pushed across the parallel, they were complete, experienced infantry divisions, regiments and battalions and completely overwhelmed the South.

Mik: So they were allies in World War II, the Koreans?

Jack: Well in a way—

Mik: In a way?

Jack: If you consider Mao Tse-Tsung to be an ally who was fighting against the Japanese. The Japanese had created a war against Russia in 1906 and '07 and had occupied Korea. In 1925, they annexed Korea to Japan and with the then harsh treatment Japanese were typical of, they caused many, many Koreans to flee north across the Yalu River into China. And in northern China, Mao was getting his Communist Army together [and] they joined it. They were kept together as units because they spoke Korean and not Chinese, and so they learned to fight as companies, battalions, regiments and divisions. And at the end of World War II, those units came back en mass to Korea, ready to fight, and, of course, they were equipped with all Russian weapons.

Mik: So what happened after you graduated and what was that process once you were—

Jack: Well, I went through airborne training to become a paratrooper and infantry basic officer classes to learn the nuances of being a leader in the infantry, then became an instructor in infantry tactics and weaponry, and then received my orders to go to Korea.

Mik: And then what?

Jack: And there landed in Pusan, took a train out to replacement depot, with a bunch of other 2nd lieutenants, and then we were distributed to various units along the line who needed replacements. And, of course, casualties among company grade officers--that is lieutenants and captains--is extremely high in combat. In fact, we figured that the average lieutenant, commanding a rifle platoon, lasted six weeks in combat, but four weeks if he was in a good unit.

Mik: Wait a minute, he averaged six weeks, but if he was in a good unit—

Jack: If he was in a highly aggressive unit, he would last probably only four weeks.

Mik: That must have given you pause for thought as you were going in.

Jack: Well, fortunately for me I didn't learn that until later.

Mik: So you were aware of the situation in Korea when you got there; things had settled down along the MLR [Main Line of Resistance]—

Jack: Well, what had happened was that the Inchon Invasion by MacArthur had pushed the North Koreans back to the Yalu River, the Chinese intervened and they pushed south. And they had been jockeying for positions along the line until the line pretty much stabilized north of the 38th Parallel; and it was at that time I joined as a replacement rifle platoon leader and we were facing Chinese soldiers.

Mik: And do you remember going up to the line for the first time?

Jack: Oh very well. And one of the most interesting things I found was, having grown up in World War II and reading Life magazine with all the black and white photographs, because color printing was not available during World War II, and I was surprised when I got to the front lines and found everything in color. So it was like looking at a Technicolor movie and I recall very vividly my surprise at seeing everything in color, rather than black and white.

Mik: Like going to a football game and waiting for the replay—

Jack: It's true, it's true.

Mik: So tell me about the first time you went up to the line.

Jack: Um, I joined my platoon, it was dug in under a railroad track which went across the Chorwon Valley. And we had, it was the perfect defensive position; it had the railroad tracks up above, it had ties holding the railroad tracks with the bunkers dug in from the rear, poked out to the front, had a wide flat valley out in front. And I went along to each bunker, introduced myself, asked if men had enough food, ammunition, etc., etc., and told them what we were going to be doing and how I was gonna try to do it.

Mik: And what was that? What, what were you going to try?

Jack: Well, being, being an effective leader, I didn't say to them, "I'm gonna try to be an effective leader." But you, one tries to give the aura of self-confidence, which is one of the hardest things to do because many times you're very, very frightened, and if you give the impression to your men of being "Lieutenant Trembleshin" they will lose confidence both in you and in themselves. So one of the masks of command, is to always look self-confident.

Mik: Were you? I mean did you—

Jack: I hope so. I hope so.

Mik: What was your outfit?

Jack: It was the 7th Division and the 17th Regiment, and I happened to have the 3rd Platoon in the 1st Battalion. And kind of interestingly when I arrived, I walked into a bunker and sitting behind a table was a major and he, I introduced myself, saluting and so forth and so on with the usual military introduction. And he said to me, "Lieutenant Reynoldson, you're going to be the rifle platoon leader of the 3rd Platoon of this battalion," of which he was in command. And he said, "I want you to treat that platoon very well because when this unit arrived in Korea; I was the platoon sergeant of that platoon." He had risen from platoon sergeant to battalion commander both on the basis of demonstrated leadership and the fact that he had survived.

Mik: So that was a field commission—

Jack: Yeah.

Mik: Or a series of—

Jack: I'm not sure if he had a field commission but at least he went from sergeant to a major lieutenant colonel.

Mik: And how long had it taken for that to happen, for him to do that? Did he get there like early 1950—?

- Jack: I had the impression it took just over a year. And he had been up at the Yalu River, and had fought all the way up there and then all the way back to the 38th Parallel, and then participated in the push north of the 38th Parallel to the final positions that were in place when the peace talks began.
- Mik: Because that's right, after, when they were pushed off the Yalu, they actually overran Seoul again didn't they—
- Jack: Yes they did.
- Mik: South of that and then pushed back—
- Jack: Yes they did.
- Mik: So were they, where, where was your position, what, did it have any—
- Jack: In the very center of Korea, in the Chorwon Valley
- Mik: It wasn't one of those names along the—
- Jack: It was not a famous name place because it was down in the valley but it was adjacent to two very famous hills that at least were known among the soldiers as Old Baldy and Pork Chop Hill.
- Mik: Yeah I think everybody recognizes Pork Chop Hill at least to a degree. What time of year was that when you got up there?
- Jack: I arrived there in June.
- Mik: And what were the, what's it like in that valley in June?
- Jack: The lines had stabilized. The orders apparently were to minimize American casualties. The truce talks had started, and so the idea was to hold our positions, to aggressively patrol, have small unit actions, company-size maybe battalion-size at the outset, but to try to minimize American casualties during the peace talks.
- Mik: And what does that mean, to "aggressively patrol?"
- Jack: That meant we had reconnaissance patrols at night, combat patrols, sometimes in the daytime, to try to snatch prisoners off of hilltops and mountaintops.
- Mik: And did you lead those?
- Jack: Yes I did.
- Mik: What's that like going out on patrol?

- Jack: That question really approaches, "Were you afraid?" And the answer is "Yes." You are afraid. You're terrified because every man knows with the peace talks going on, that he just might be the last man killed. And walking at night behind enemy lines is terrifying. Leading assaults on mountaintops or hilltops is terrifying. But something interesting does occur, and almost all combat soldiers say the same thing, and that is once soldiers are actually fighting, that is shooting, throwing grenades, etc, fear seems to disappear. And they're so busy fighting that they forget about fear. Another thing happens is that time seems to elongate, and what took one or two seconds for a grenade to come sailing through the air near you, seems as if it was minutes long. And so those moments of combat seem to stretch out and seem much longer that they really were.
- Mik: Do you remember any, when you would go out on patrol, would there always be contact?
- Jack: No. Many times, enemy units would be around us, but they would choose not to contact us and the reverse is true, sometimes we would let them pass through us and simply report that we had come in contact with the enemy. Not in my case on patrol but many other patrols did get into big firefights.
- Mik: But not in, on your patrol?
- Jack: Not in my experience on patrols.
- Mik: And tell me about that incident, that you wrote about which was an attack, up a hill or—
- Jack: Yes, it was a, an attack on a hill we called 404, and it was adjacent to a major hill, mountain, that we had, that another unit had failed to take a few weeks before. And so we assaulted that hill with the idea of taking prisoners, to find out just what the Chinese were doing; and so it was a matter of getting over to the base of this hill at night, and waiting for the radio to say "Go" and then starting up the mountainside and eventually come in contact, in our case, with Chinese soldiers shooting, throwing grenades, etc. And we did take the hill. And we got, we got our prisoner.
- Mik: You got your prisoner?
- Jack: We got a prisoner, yes.
- Mik: A lot of casualties?
- Jack: Oh, we had a lot of casualties. I think my unit had six dead and twenty-four wounded.
- Mik: Out of how many?

Jack: About forty.

Mik: So over half?

Jack: With high, these were high casualty rates yes.

Mik: And they knew that going in it was worth it for that prisoner?

Jack: Was it worth it? I hope it was. Which leads naturally to the question, was the Korean War worthwhile? And I have gone back to Korea with members of my regiment and I have yet to meet a man who served over there in combat who thought other than it was worthwhile. And I went back there several years ago, and when we went through Korea, the country was flat on the ground hardly one brick was on top of the other. Seoul was knocked flat except for a few buildings, and when we went back, we found the countryside was alive. Seoul was a city as modern and as big as Houston, Texas; high-rise buildings, seven bridges across the Han River, automobiles, commerce, and now South Korea has become the sixth-largest industrial nation in the world. In contrast to the North under communist rule which still could not feed itself.

Mik: Why do you think that questions come up about what, was the war worth it?

Jack: I think most men at sometime or another look back on their service and say, "Was it worth it?" And we did. And we have talked about it and all the people I have talked to said, "Yes it was worth it." It was the first time we stopped communism. We set an example, we took a country that was completely destroyed and was able to turn it into a democracy.

Mik: Did you have those questions at the time, when you were over there?

Jack: No, I was too busy.

Mik: Just staying alive?

Jack: Yes.

Mik: Keeping your men alive?

Jack: Yes.

Mik: So, how many men are there in a platoon?

Jack: Forty.

Mik: And what's the breakdown of that?

- Jack: Well, normally a platoon is broken into four rifles, four squads; one of which is a weapons squad and has two light machine guns. And the other squads, three rifle squads, would have two Browning Automatic Rifles each and other men would carry M-1 Rifles or M-2 Carbines, which fire full automatic.
- Mik: So what did you carry?
- Jack: I carried an M-2 Carbine, which fired full automatic.
- Mik: And how long, how large was the clip on that?
- Jack: It could carry the banana clips, curved clips that you, I know you have seen, will carry up to thirty rounds each. And we would take two magazines, tape them together, one up and one down, so that when we finish one magazine we could drop that out and just turn the other magazine up, and put it in, and pull the bolt back and be ready to fire again.
- Mik: Did you ever run out of ammunition?
- Jack: Yes I did. And I had to reach for more ammunition.
- Mik: What was that situation, was it an attack or—
- Jack: It was during an attack yes. And it turned out to be kind of frightening.
- Mik: Tell me about it.
- Jack: It's the one part of my commentary that I would prefer not to, because I did kill an enemy soldier at that time.
- Mik: OK. Well, what can you talk about without going into that, just what it's like to be under attack?
- Jack: Chinese grenades left a trail of white smoke as they came, and they were potato masher grenades which had a wooden handle. And so they would throw grenades down at us and of course they could throw their grenades downhill, much further that we could throw our pineapple grenades uphill. And as they came sailing through the air they would, with this lopsided weight, an iron casting on one end and a wooden handle on the other and they would kind of center on this iron casting, and so the wooden handle would spin around and it would leave a curly cue of white smoke in the air as it came. And if it happened to be at night, there would be sparks that would be coming out that you could see. In the daytime you couldn't see sparks but you could see the smoke. And grenades would land near one and explode and sometimes they'd lift you off the ground and, of course, the concussion from a grenade is terrific.

- Mik: Is it just--so you're feeling it more than you're hearing it. The concussion was just like a buffeting or—
- Jack: The analogy that I have made is there is a pressure from an explosion nearby that's almost as if you're deep underwater. The pressure just overwhelms you and then in a moment, it's gone.
- Mik: The, when I ask these questions I want to reassure you that I'm not trying to push you in any direction in a certain way, you know, but in an area you're already going to—
- Jack: [Cough]
- Mik: But absolutely stop me because I don't want to do that, but what I am trying to get is just a sense of somebody who's been through this, of what combat is like and I think it's easy for people to make assumptions that are not based on experience or understanding of that. What is it like to, was it a large group that attacked? I mean, because I've heard stories of a hundred thousand Chinese attacking.
- Jack: Well, we, we were attacking what was essentially a rifle company, which would be Chinese, 150 men or so. And on this little hilltop that we were attacking was probably only a couple of squads of twenty men, something like that.
- Mik: So it was much more intimate, there were not that many—
- Jack: Oh yeah. Oh no. Oh no. Perhaps they looked upon our attack as American soldiers looked at these human waves, because we had a rifle company on the attack which would be over 200 men.
- Mik: And then how long were you on the front?
- Jack: Parts of two months. And then I was wounded and evacuated, went through MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital], one of the MASH units in Korea, and then back to Tokyo Army Hospital, and then back to the United States, and then eventually back here to Madison.
- Mik: Tell me about being wounded.
- Jack: Most men say the same thing, and I think you may not have heard this; a slight wound, such as a shell fragment that hits you in the hand or the arm or something, is almost as if you were burned, say, with a cigarette. You feel it, but it's not a major effort. But if a, a soldier gets a major hit on a leg, an arm, chest, the head, it's almost as if, and the analogy is often made by men who have major hits from shell fragments or bullets, like somebody walking up and hitting you with a baseball bat.

Mik: And that's how it felt with you?

Jack: Mmhmm.

Mik: Where were you wounded?

Jack: On my right side.

Mik: And then totally incapacitated when you were hit?

Jack: No I, I kept leading. I kept leading this assault, and it was a bayonet assault. Everybody had fixed bayonets. And we closed with the enemy and got rid of all of them. And at the top of the hill, I turned, I had been wounded. I turned and went back and one of my rifle squads had not gotten up there, was still some distance down below. And I went back to them and told them to get up and get the dead and wounded, and clean the hill up; and at that time an aid man came up to me and said, "Let me put a bandage on you." And I really didn't realize that I had been wounded. I had gone through this assault and gotten back to this rifle squad, real-, without realizing that I had been wounded. It just seemed to me like there was another explosion near by.

Mik: That was the sense of being hit with the baseball bat—

Jack: Th-, that is it, I mean that was the baseball bat for me.

Mik: And then what happened when he said, "Let me put a bandage on that?"

Jack: Apparently I collapsed from loss of blood.

Mik: And were unconscious until you woke up in a—

Jack: I remember being on a stretcher and one of my last recollections before I lost consciousness was that my carbine was at my side on the stretcher, and I remembered that it was still set on full automatic and the safety wasn't on. And so I reached down with my right hand, because my carbine was laying along side me on the stretcher as I was being carried off this mountain, and I put the safety on so that if I was dropped, my gun would not fire and kill one of the stretcher-bearers.

Mik: And tell me what you were telling us about MASH the TV show.

Jack: Oh, I did appear on as portrayed by Hollywood. I am portrayed on each opening sequence of MASH. And you may remember that a helicopter, a little Bell helicopter, comes in with a bubble canopy on the front and it has two litters, one on each side of the canopy and that actually happened to me. And you maybe remember in the television show MASH, they rush up and they grab a litter off the pilot side of the chopper, put that litter on a jeep hood, and then the jeep rushes into

surgery. And in the real MASH, not the Hollywood version which is the one you see on television, but in the real MASH I was the man on the litter; because I took that route, helicopter from a battalion aid station and then to MASH.

Mik: Were you conscious when you were in the air?

Jack: At first I was, because I can remember the rush of air from the from the chopper blades coming down on the stretcher; and they put a plastic canopy over our face so it did not blow on our face, but it did blow. The down wash of the blade did blow on the rest of us, and I can recall the trip to MASH.

Mik: Were you conscious when you landed and were hauled into the—

Jack: That's hard for me to say, I've got a feeling I wasn't.

Mik: It's just all in and out—

Jack: Yes. Several days later I woke up in the MASH and looked up and saw a blood transfusion unit up above my bed, and that is really my first recollection of the inside of MASH.

Mik: And so how long were you on the line before you were wounded?

Jack: Parts of two months.

Mik: It must've been a long two months.

Jack: Even the days seemed to stretch out and seemed longer. And there is a, there is a certain kind of fear, that many men feel in combat. There is a constant nagging fear that is almost always present. And young leaders, whether they be squad leaders, platoon leaders or company commanders, feel that they have to overcome the appearance of fear. It's there and you never get rid of it. There's a second kind of fear that leaders, I think especially, have and that is a fear that they won't do their job correctly, and that somehow they will fail in their duty. And among the vast majority of soldiers, the greatest single fear that I think men have is that they will be a coward in front of their friends, in front of their own unit. And men will walk into near death and sure wounds, but they'll do so because they don't want to be a coward.

Mik: Did you encounter people who were unable to do that, who did freeze, or—

Jack: [Sigh] In actual combat I never saw a man refuse to fight. I did see men off the line who had to be replaced because they had what we called the "Battle Rattles," and they were just, they had gotten so shaky that they were no longer effective.

- Mik: This is probably associated with that, but what did it feel like when you came off of a patrol, when you were back safely to your—
- Jack: Immense relief. Immense relief. We made it.
- Mik: And then did you immediately start, the dread building up to when you would go out again, or—
- Jack: Well, night patrol is, that usually meant that you crawled into your sleeping bag and went to sleep. And sleep was kind of a, an escape because when you were asleep you weren't afraid. So we looked forward to sleep, and after a night patrol we would crawl into our bag.
- Mik: And just leave it behind you--[**End of Tape WCKOR018**] The one thing that I think would be really similar, would be that sense of the people in your command.
- Jack: Oh yes.
- Mik: Did you feel a great responsibility towards them?
- Jack: It's enormous. The feeling of responsibility is enormous. And when you're giving orders to your men about an upcoming patrol or an assault, you are terrified, and they are probably too. But as a unit commander, whether it's a squad leader or company commander or rifle platoon leader, you really have to try to give the impression of not being afraid, and that this is going to be successful.
- Mik: And did you ever just have the sense that it was a bad order, that that you shouldn't have been asked to do a certain patrol or—
- Jack: I think that thought goes through every infantry man's mind, "Is this really necessary?" And yet in your heart you know that it is.
- Mik: Somewhere there's a good reason.
- Jack: Yes. And I think so; the fact that South Korea has made such a total recovery is evidence that we did the right thing.
- Mik: When you came back to the States, we've heard from several people that the country just wasn't paying attention to the war, not only had that war been forgotten subsequently, but even while it was going on people were, did you have that sense?
- Jack: I never had that feeling. I thought people were concerned. Newspapers and radio were filled with war events; sure it's true no major units came home to parades, etc. because that just wasn't the nature of the end of that war. But, I did not have the feeling that there was no support back in the United States.

Mik: And subsequent to the war, you didn't feel forgotten?

Jack: No. Never.

Mik: That your service was –

Jack: Never.

Mik: Do you think it's more of a personal thing that so many people feel that way or, because they didn't get the same treatment that they saw World War II vets get or—

Jack: It may be related to the closeness of your family, and if you get family support I think that is an enormous kind of emotional support. And I did. I was married and my parents were living here in Madison, and so I received a great deal of support when I came home. I think if you came home alone, if you didn't have a family to return to, I think you might have to turn to the public and the public really is not particularly interested in an individual.

Mik: When you came back, did you miss being a part of a unit that way, part of a company, part of a platoon?

Jack: There is a certain guilt of having left your unit, and many, many people report, many men report, this slight feeling of guilt that they are home alive and their buddies are still over there in combat.

Mik: Did you have buddies? Did you have buddies in the, in the platoon or in—

Jack: There wasn't a man in my platoon that I had known before hand. They were all new to me.

Mik: Another thing that I find interesting is the fact that it was a UN [United Nations] force. Were you exposed much to soldiers from other UN nations?

Jack: Yes, the 7th Division had a battalion of Ethiopians and a battalion of Columbians attached to it, and they were very effective fighting units.

Mik: Any difference between the two, between the Columbians and the Ethiopians?

Jack: I, I, I was never close enough to them but I, I have seen them. I've seen the Columbians in an assault and they were effective in the assault, they carried through as well as they could, they didn't turn and run.

Mik: That's good. [laughs]

Jack: Yes it is.

Mik: I suppose that's always a question when it's not just US [United States] forces but—

Jack: Yes.

Mik: So what was the food like?

Jack: Food came up to us on the front lines in what were called Mermite Cans, which were aluminum containers about two and a half feet long, eighteen inches high, and a foot wide, insulated aluminum containers, and food was in these. And the food that we got on the front line came from a cooking area well to the rear. And the food we had was good.

Mik: So it wasn't the MER's, or the MRE's, the "Meals Ready to Eat" or any—

Jack: There were C-Rations available, but I happened to be in a situation where the only C-Rations I had was going up to the front, when we didn't have a mobile kitchen with us, and we were eating C-Rations.

Mik: And just describe the, it's not a camp it's, it's a position. Physically, what was that like? I mean were, there were the bunkers, just explain that to me.

Jack: Alright. My platoon was dug into a raised railway track that went across the Chorwon Valley, and this track was probably raised eight feet above the valley. And so the bunkers were not bunkers like you and I picture ordinarily, but rather we had dug in from the rear of this railway track and put firing apertures out the front. And of course we had the rails up above and we had the ties up above, so we had good overhead cover and the fields of fire out in the valley stretched out for several thousand yards. It was a perfect defensive position that I took over.

Mik: So it was like an earthen berm—

Jack: Yes.

Mik: That was raised and you dug right through it.

Jack: From the back to the front.

Mik: And then what was behind it?

Jack: More flat land. And we did build some bunkers back there for supplies, equipment, a command post, etc., and then behind that, flat land, then more hills, and they too were defended.

Mik: And then did you spend a lot of time going back and forth between the command post and the bunker?

- Jack: Well my command post was probably only twenty yards from the bunkers.
- Mik: Oh so you were all—
- Jack: I was, yeah we were all together sure.
- Mik: And who was your commanding officer, was the—
- Jack: A company commander, a 1st lieutenant. I was a 2nd lieutenant at this time, and we had a major named Niccoletti; he was the one who had been the platoon sergeant of my platoon and he held great affection for the platoon. On the other hand, he might have known the men were good and so we may have received some of the more difficult assignments.
- Mik: Oh boy. When you talk about coming back from patrol and crawling into your sleeping bag, was it in a tent, was it just in a covered bunker?
- Jack: Each of the men, when we returned from a night patrol, would go back to his own bunker where his personal gear was; and there his sleeping bag was, his extra ammunition, he could leave his weapon, whatever it was that he had carried, a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle], a light machine gun, an M1 rifle, a carbine, and he would go back to his bunker and I would go back to my bunker, which was our platoon command post.
- Mik: Now I suppose with a defensive position like you had there, with that whole valley in front of you and fields of fire, that there probably wasn't that much infiltration at night like they had in other areas or was that a problem—
- Jack: There was infiltration and the Chinese soldiers were excellent infantrymen. We cannot sell them short, they were very, very good soldiers. They were aggressive, and at night there were times they would come through our lines, get into our bunkers, go from bunker to bunker and throw grenades in, and then disappear in the night.
- Mik: That's gotta be a rude awakening in the—
- Jack: It would be, to have a fizzing grenade on the floor of your bunker.
- Mik: Was that the worst danger, the grenades as opposed to shrapnel as more of a problem--did you ever come under mortar fire or—
- Jack: We came under mortar fire at the, the Chinese had Russian 120mm mortars. And most of the time you cannot hear a mortar shell coming. They come rather silently. When they get real close there's a little swish that you can hear, and mortar shells have a tendency, unlike artillery, to explode just as they hit the surface of the earth

and so they're particularly devastating from the standpoint of shell fragments. And so we did receive mortar fire. Grenades, of course, were when you were in a close-in situation, and you could see the color of somebody's eyes. And that is when you would get final suppressive fire, which was automatic weapons and grenades.

Mik: And that's when the time starts going real slow?

Jack: That's when you whistle three bars of "I'll Never Smile Again."

Mik: What's that mean, "Whistle three bars?"

Jack: Oh it's a, it was an old song from World War II, "I'll Never Smile Again, Until I Smile At You." And it was a paratrooper's witticism that, "If my chute doesn't open, I'll whistle three bars of "I'll Never Smile Again.""

Mik: So it's really a different world that you find yourself in when you're in a situation like that, isn't it?

Jack: I think almost all men, and I can't speak for women because I cannot anticipate that kind of thinking, but I think almost all men wonder what it would be like to be in combat. I think every man eventually asks himself, at sometime or another, "Would I be able to withstand the stresses of combat?" And of course the question is answered once you have been in combat. You know that you can survive; you know that you can carry on. And I think you come home with a certain degree of self-confidence, assuming you survive in reasonably one piece, that you did not have when you went over.

Mik: And I've heard this before, bravery is not an absence of fear, at all.

Jack: Oh no. Oh no. You're, you're frightened, and bravery sometimes comes from being simply angry, and, and men will do things in combat that they never would do under other circumstances. And you cannot always pick the man who's gonna be the hero. Once in awhile a man that you had anticipated would not do well, turns out to be the hero.

Mik: You're speaking from first-hand experience with your platoon?

Jack: Not really, I had an excellent platoon. I didn't feel I had a, any men that were truly weak, and I think they proved that in the experience I had with them.

Mik: And what did you say the expectancy was for a lieutenant? Four weeks if it was a good company?

Jack: And six weeks if you were in an ordinary unit.

Mik: So you doubled that?

- Jack: Well, not really, I lasted--just short of a month.
- Mik: Oh, so it--It just—
- Jack: I was in a good unit, yeah. The 17th Regiment, as a matter of fact, was known as the Bayonet Regiment, and still has that reputation in history books.
- Mik: And how did they come to be termed that?
- Jack: Training and the willingness to use bayonets in an assault.
- Mik: Is there anything worse than coming that close to—
- Jack: You would prefer not to have to use your bayonet, if that is your question. You would prefer that everything you do in combat is done at some distance. But once in a while, as a last resort, it may be the only thing you have left.
- Mik: And if it is—
- Jack: You must use it.
- Mik: It's good to be well trained.
- Jack: You must use it; you must know how to use it.
- Mik: Somebody, or somewhere I read a description of the Chinese bayonets. Were they longer and thinner or—
- Jack: There were several different kinds, and some of their carbines, the bayonet actually folded underneath the rifle, and it was a long, slender bayonet, about the thickness of your finger. In contrast to the bayonets we used, which looked like either a trench knife, with about a six-inch blade, and some of the bayonets that we issued were up to twelve inches long.
- Mik: Should I check your list of questions to make sure I didn't miss anything?
- Jack: If you wish.
- Mik: Have you--feel like anything was--. Well this was a, this is sort of an interesting thing that I was thinking about as a lieutenant, your question is, "Why did men go into combat when they knew there was a good chance of being killed or wounded?" But I was also wondering what it was like, you didn't lead every patrol or you didn't—
- Jack: No.

- Mik: Lead every charge. Was it harder to pass along orders if you weren't going to be involved and knew you were sending men out into something? How did you decide when you would go or—
- Jack: Well, sometimes we would actually have orders that a patrol would not be an officer-led patrol. And then you had to pick a squad, and usually you did it in rotation, so that it always didn't fall on the same squad. And so you would rotate through your squads and say, "Okay sergeant, tonight this is your duty, and this is what we have to do. And you're gonna have to lead this."
- Mik: What would be the reason for designating it as not officer led?
- Jack: Casualty rates among platoon leaders.
- Mik: They wanted to hang on to—
- Jack: They wanted to hang on to young officers, yes.
- Mik: So out of, how many in the month you were there, I suppose it varied, but how often did you go on patrol? Twice a week, three times a week?
- Jack: Well the patrols were rotated among platoons, and my experience was, in the time I was there, I was responsible for two.
- Mik: For two? And one of them being the one that you described?
- Jack: That I described, yes.
- Mik: In the written piece?
- Jack: Mmm-Hmm.
- Mik: It's just--if you weren't there it, it's hard to imagine.
- Jack: I'm sure it is. I'm sure it is.
- Mik: And I, that must make it difficult to talk about it. The World War II vets always talked about forty years or so before they would feel comfortable talking about the experience—
- Jack: Mmm-Hmm.
- Mik: Do you think a lot of that is just the context of people can't really understand the situations, or if you try to talk about it, it doesn't seem to make sense or—

Jack: I think time heals a lot of wounds, and also it is true that combat veterans are much more likely to feel comfortable talking to another combat veteran. Because, inside they know he understands because he's been there.

Mik: And I guess that's what I was getting at, the understanding that. I suppose if you described certain things, well it's probably two things, one is putting yourself back in there, which you don't necessarily want to do—

Jack: Yes.

Mik: But the other is, things just don't sound right when you explain it to somebody who doesn't really know what you're talking about.

Jack: They would not, they would not.

Mik: Do you think you suffered any kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome which they have—

Jack: No I don't. I don't have bad dreams; I don't have anxiety attacks, etc.

Mik: Well it seems like you came out of it pretty well.

Jack: I hope so.

Mik: Well thank you.

Jack: Ok, thank you.

Mik: I appreciate it.

Jack: Hey, it's my pleasure.

[End of Interview]