

Wisconsin Public Television  
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ELROY W. ROEDER, JR.  
Mortarman, Army, Korean War  
2004

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Madison, Wisconsin

OH  
1023

OH  
1023

**Roeder, Elroy W., Jr.**, (1929- ). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Video Recording: 2 videorecordings (ca. 56 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

**Abstract:**

Elroy Roeder, a Rothschild, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, Easy Company during the Korean War. Roeder recalls being drafted in 1951, taking basic and engineering training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), and never using his engineering training in Korea. He recalls landing in Pusan and being sent directly to the front lines in an area called “the Punchbowl.” Roeder talks about his first combat experience in a mortar unit and seeing dead bodies. He details fighting at Heartbreak Ridge: having to retake the hill three times, the difficulty of fighting uphill, seeing artillery fire overhead, clearing out bunkers, and having many casualties. He recalls friends being wounded and killed in nearby bunkers and states he was “just lucky all the way through Korea.” Roeder reveals that wounded and dead soldiers were often booby trapped and couldn’t be helped. He explains his duties carrying ammunition, supporting the mortar gunner, and fighting with the infantry. He talks about throwing grenades when he’d hear movement at night, only sleeping during the day, and learning to throw empty C-ration cans ahead as noisemakers. Roeder speaks of fighting with a French battalion and characterizes a soldier named Luke who was put in the French Foreign Legion for killing a police officer. Roeder tells of volunteering for a night patrol with the French, almost getting captured, and escaping by jumping off the hill and walking through a mine field. He speaks of fighting on Bloody Ridge and spending three freezing nights on the hill without blankets. He describes the noise and waves of attacking Chinese troops. He talks about spending a few nights waiting in ambush to try and capture prisoners of war in return for a week of R&R, but not finding anyone. Roeder explains how prisoners were captured and that prisoners captured on hills were often made to carry American wounded. He recalls being in a convoy when his truck got a flat tire and having trouble finding his unit again. He comments on hearing carols played over enemy loudspeakers during Christmas Eve and getting a hot turkey dinner and ice cream. Roeder talks about not having adequate cold weather gear, only getting a change of clothes once a month, and not having showers. He details learning to dig foxholes in the field and he portrays sharing a foxhole with a new soldier who always fell asleep during watch. He describes his homecoming: having no celebration, taking off his uniform right away because he felt looked down on, having his old workplace refuse to rehire him, and not talking about his experiences.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Roeder (b.1929) served in the Army from March of 1951 to December of 1952 and fought in the Korean War with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. After honorable discharge, he worked for thirty-six years at Weyerhaeuser Paper Co., and he currently resides in Rothschild, Wisconsin.

**Citation Note:**

Cite as: Elroy Roeder, Interview, conducted September 24, 2004 at Wausau, Wisconsin by Mik Derks, Wisconsin Korean War Stories, for Wisconsin Public Television.

**Context Note:**

Raw footage interview filmed by Wisconsin Public Television for its documentary series, "Wisconsin Korean War Stories." Original WPT videocassette numbers were WCKOR056 and WCKOR057.

**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, September, 24, 2004.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Public Television staff, n.d.

Transcript edited and reformatted by Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff, 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

**Transcribed Interview:**

Mik: Okay, we are all set. I think probably the best way to begin is just to go back all the way to how you got into the military.

Elroy: Well, I was drafted, like everybody else was at that time. I think it was nineteen--nineteen fifty-one I was drafted, yeah. I was married in 1950 and I got drafted in '51, in January.

Mik: So they were taking married men?

Elroy: Mmm hmm. When I got married at that time, at the time in 1950, Truman was over there, you know, I mean no not Truman, I mean MacArthur and he was the general. He said the war would be over by Christmas. Well that was a mistake. I got married, I got married in October, in January I got drafted. Signed up for basic training in March, down in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, that's where I done my basic and took all the--my engineering training through my basic. Laid mines, and demolitions, stuff like that, you know, build bridges. I got overseas and they didn't need any of it. They needed infantry men, that's what they put me in then. Soon as I got off the boat, in Pusan.

Mik: And when was that?

Elroy: When I got off the boat? Ahh, let's see that must have been in August of '51. In August, because I was on the front lines on my birthday, I know that, on my twenty-first--my twenty-second birthday, I know that.

Mik: And when was that, your birthday?

Elroy: Twenty-second of September. I was on the front line already from August to September.

Mik: So what happened once you got off the boat in Pusan?

Elroy: Well they put us on a troop train right off the bat, and stay around there, because they needed reinforcements up in the front. And they put us on troop trains with no windows in it, everything was boarded up, I don't know why. We traveled, I don't know, I think we traveled all night, and the next morning we got off the train--don't know where we were at the time. And then put us on trucks and took us on up to the front lines, right from the trucks.

Mik: What?

Elroy: The first line I was on they called it the 'Punch Bowl'. Says we are going up to the punch bowl, oh, now that sounds exciting. And that was the first battle I was in, in

the Punch Bowl. That's not in the book I don't think. It was just like a punch bowl, mountains all around, down in the middle is valleys, you know.

Mik: So tell me about your first battle.

Elroy: Well, I was in mortars, they put me in sixty mortars, that's a--and got up, often at night time, and got acquainted with the guys that I work with. Three of us on a mortar, on a sixty mortars. An ammo-bearer, and a gunner, and observer, forward observer, you know. That's the first battle I was in. I know I seen a lot of bodies laying around, Korean body, Chinese and Korean bodies laying around, North Koreans. That's the first--I never thought I'd see a dead body. You know I never seen a dead body before, you know lying out in the open. I was surprised that that didn't bother me. All bloated, most of them are bloated up you know, laying there for quite awhile. But there was no battle there, it was almost over with. It was cleaning up when I got there. Then, from there, we moved to the, from--down reinforce and go back to the next hill.

Mik: What, what was your unit?

Elroy: The unit I was in? 23rd Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Division. Easy Company, that was the company I was in. I don't think there's too many come home from that company, easy company, cause I think we lost over three quarters of the guys that were in the Heartbreak Ridge. That was the biggest battle I was in. Took us, you take it, you come back, they chase you off, you take it. Took it three time before we got to take the hill. Every time you come down you reorganize get and then you start going back up again. It's all up hill, you know. That's the worst part of it. Carry your ammunition and all the grenades you can carry and climb those damn hills. A lot of places they had ropes, tie ropes on a tree, hang on to the ropes and pull yourself up.

Mik: Well from that photo it looks like what was left of the trees. Where they all shattered like that?

Elroy: The what, the what?

Mik: The trees.

Elroy: Oh yeah. That's from artilleries and napalm. We could watch the planes come in and before--we knew when the planes were coming, and drop napalms on those hills, we knew we'd be taking them after they were done, you know--and artillery shells and from the ships and from our own artillery. You could see the ships shells--you could see over the head, over your heads, you know it was that low. It was--oh yeah, how big they are I would have known, but I didn't know how big those shells were, they were big, when you hit the mountain. You wouldn't--it didn't affect them guys too much, they dug in just like the Japanese during the Second War, you know in them islands, the same thing there. You had bunkers, they were in the mountains,

you had to crawl right in there to get them out. Flame throwers and air raids and-- whenever you took a hill you always made sure when you took a hill you'd go on the opposite side of the hill, and then they couldn't get you with their artillery. Unless they send down, in mortars, well then they come over the top, you know. But those artilleries can't hit you. And same thing with us, we fire at them guys, they were always on the opposite side of the hill, you are not going to shake them out of there. The only thing I liked about it when we took the hill we had a place to sleep. Could crawl in them holes, pull them guys out and we'd take over. 'Cause we knew we were safe in there. It's ah--experience.

Mik: So tell me about Heartbreak.

Elroy: Oh, that's a long story [laugh].

Mik: Well we got lots of tape.

Elroy: But ah anyways that was, when we took that hill, we took it- first time we tried it at night time. We chased, got chased off right away. And then the second time, went up a ridge, that one I won't forget. We was going up kind of a draw, and we looked to our right and our left, we see guys running up at the top there, and we knew they were Chinese and we told our Company Commander, you know, pass the word down, you know "There's people running up on top of the hill, who knows, they are going to shoot us sooner or later, you know." Kept on walking, kept on walking, kept on walking, finally come to like a dead end, you know, you might say, at the end of the draw--and then all hell let loose. They really poured into us guys. And I remember that I was laying behind, I jumped behind a big oak tree, and I lost my shovel, my trench shovel you know? The old one. It was laying on the side and every time I tried to grab it the guy would be shooting at me. But that shovel--so I wouldn't grab it, you know. You could see they were laying mortars down on us, and grenades, killed a lot of guys and wounded a lot of them. We got back off again but it was--I never got a scratch, most of the guys, they all got hit, one way or the other, they got wounded, that was the worst part. And then there was another one on Heartbreak Ridge, let's see which one was that--[Pause] got to think about that one, so darn many times I went up there. I was thinking about it when I was talking something about this story, I was thinking, I got ahead of myself again now. But anyway when we took that ridge, then, about through the third time we made it, then it was all right on the top, they moved down, there on Heartbreak Ridge. Of course there are other units coming in from other directions you know, we weren't the only unit going up there, there were so darn many. Oh yeah, there was once, getting back to this Heartbreak Ridge again. Then after that we went, took a, went up another ridge, well that we took. First we see guys in bunkers and we had um--they call it a 4.2 recoilless rifles, shoot like a rocket, you know and then we, could see them guys in the bunkers, those are the guys that later shelled in the bunkers and blow them out. But anyway, we took that ridge, and there's a kind of an opening so we all dug in around there, kind of a woods area, there was a French battalion that was with us too, attached was a French battalion. They always with us guys and we all dug in

and then they started giving, you could see the mortars coming in. You could hear them on your walkie-talkies or radio, the incoming, you could hear a static on there. Looked up you could see the mortars coming, and they were coming. You could see them coming down in the sky, you know something's gonna-you're not gonna make it. And that's what I was telling your partner there. That's two of my buddies, right next to me, from here to the table. I dug a hole here, I was digging, like a, like a chipmunk, you know get that hole down, you know. And they--I could see a shell go right in there. They were laughing once and then I didn't hear nothing, I knew they were dead. And um, another buddy of mine, from here to the wall, he was dug in, he got hit, but he was just wounded. And he says to me "I'm wounded!" I says, "Well just lay there," I says "Don't move." I says, "Nobody can help you." And then after it was all over with well then, the medics came took care of everybody and then we just got everything organized and then we got another round. Then I went to a different spot, I thought that this spot didn't look too good, so I went to a different hole and I was going to jump in there, I thought 'I'd better not, I'll dig my own'. Good thing I did. 'Cause that one guy, was two guys in there and they got hit. Just lucky, just lucky all the way through Korea. I done a lot of praying [chuckle].

Mik: So when you hit in a fox hole it's like a direct hit?

Elroy: Direct, hit, yeah just comes right in there. Those mortars they come right straight down, you know. And ah--they come right in. I think we lost, I think a dozen of us walked off that hill that, when we got relieved. The next day we got relieved. You could hear a guy screaming on the line, for help. You couldn't help him. Because they were booby trapped. Chinese and Koreans lay booby traps near the bodies, you know. If you were wounded, and you moved, you were gone. We used to tie ropes around our feet, a rope or something and pull 'em. The booby trap, you know, you wouldn't kill yourself, you know. But a lot of them were booby trapped. That was the worst part.

Mik: When you go up a hill like that, where are the mortar teams?

Elroy: We were right behind the infantry.

Mik: You're right behind the infantry?

Elroy: Yeah, we're no more than maybe a couple hundred feet away, or yards. We're right behind them. We usually give them support. If the infantry takes, starts going up a hill we give them support with the mortars and all that, to help them out. And then you got your forward observers; they tell you where to drop 'em, you know. Those mortars don't go that far, you know.

Mik: What, what was your job?

Elroy: Well I was a--well my job was everything. Carried ammo, I helped, well, we all carried ammo. We each had six rounds you had to carry in three, you had pouches,

carried three in the front, three in the back, and then each one of us had to carry ammo. And then we had to help the gunners out in case one gets killed, then you take over, you just move in. And then if your gun's out of order then, then you go with the infantry.

Mik: So you are carrying your ammunition, you're carrying your rifle?

Elroy: Rifle, all the grenades.

Mik: Grenades?

Elroy: I used to carry about a dozen grenades on me, and cause when you are at night time, you don't sleep at night. Whenever you hear something below ya, then we'd dig a, we'd dig a perimeter, well everybody had to be lying down, all of us guys and then the, you never know, you get a counter attack, and then if you'd hear a little noise, a lot of rats running around up there, you know. Well then you throw a grenade out, you know. Either a rat or a person [chuckle].

Mik: Either a four legged rat or a two legged rat [ laugh].

Elroy: Yeah you never know, well. We learnt a lesson up there. First time I was up there I learnt a lesson. When you eat, you had C-rations in all the cans, you know. Always throw the cans ahead of you. So if something is walking, they'll hit that can, you'll hear them rattle, you know. Then you know there is something wrong. You always see a dead body the next morning. Only time you slept was at daytime. Daytime was just like a picnic. You could lay on your side, on ground, take in the sun. At night time you were awake all night. If you weren't moving you were sitting. Most of the time, we were on the move. We are always on the move every night, patrols I was on patrol one night and, with the French battalion. I volunteered, which I don't think I should've ever done, but I did it anyway. Two of us, I was on one side of the radio operator, and the guy was a forward observer for the, with a fifty caliber machine gun, you know. We were on patrol and I was up on the, I don't know what ridge that was anymore. And we are going along and walking and walking and walking. And, I says to my partner, I says, "You smelt something?" "Yeah," I says, "That's garlic." He said, "Chinese eat a lot of garlic, if you smell garlic you're getting pretty close." We were getting pretty close to them guys and all of a sudden everything let loose. Them Frenchman you couldn't understand them, you know, I didn't know what was going on. Well, we had to go back. Finally, the commander there, he's top of the hill he says, "You're on your own." I says, "Holy Cow, don't how to get out of here." So we, we kind of went back, I come to a ridge, so I says to my partner "Let's jump." I says; "It's the only way we can get out of here." and we did. We hit some sand, we didn't get hurt. Then we found our way back to the lines after that. Night time then finding your way through the mine fields, they're all marked when you go on patrol they marked the mine field--you go through them. You go back on your own and try to find them markers, you know, we made it. That time almost got captured, a lot of them got captured that night. I was close.

- Mik: So when you are on a night patrol and you get attacked like that, what, what do you move away from, the light of the guns?
- Elroy: Yeah, you go back, you can see air shots coming from you, you go back. We had, a fifty caliber shooting right over our heads, you know from our lines. They give us support to get back, you know, firing cover. You swear you think they're going to take your cap off. You see them tracers go right over your head, you know. Click-click-click, that was all you would hear, you know. They um, we got back. A lot of them got captured, I made it back. I thought I would be captured that night. The worst part of it was I was going to go home, in a couple more days. I had my time in. I just volunteered because I thought it was going to be a piece of cake. With the Frenchman, I like to go with them Frenchmen because every time you went on patrol, they always had a big meal. French bread and wine, they really, they shaved, those guys spruced themselves up when they went and I like that. You know, I had a good buddy, he was a Frenchman, he was um, his name was Luke. I wonder what happened to that guy after I left there. Him and I always talked, he was, chumming around together, 'cause we were in the same outfit. We had a lot of fun. He was a, I asked to Luke, I says "How's you come over, why'd you come over?" He says, "I had to." He was in the French Foreign Legion. And I says, "What happened there?" "Well," he says, "I was a--" he lived in Paris, he says, "I was in a bar or something and cop come in there and I hit him between the eyes and I killed him." And he was sent to prison, Devil's Island, you ever hear of that? That's where he was. He told me quite a story about that and then he says "From there you could either stay there or join the Foreign Legion." So he joined the French Foreign Legion, they sent him to Vietnam for awhile, that was when the French were over there. And they had some tough battles too at that time. And from Vietnam they went--they could come to Korea. After Korea they could go home, they'd be free--if they lived. He made it to Korea, I don't know if he ever lived through that or not. He was quite a guy.
- Mik: Did he speak pretty good English?
- Elroy: Yeah, yeah. That's why him and I--I always wish I'd have got his address, I got his picture--I don't know where, I didn't bring it along, he was a quite a guy. He could talk in English, he was the only guy who could talk English really.
- Mik: And what rank was he? Just?
- Elroy: He was a PFC I guess, I don't know what the ranks they go through, you know.
- Mik: Now how did that work with the French? You were, I mean basically just shared the line, or?
- Elroy: Yeah. 'Cause they didn't have as many people as we had, you know, just like now, in Iraq. It was the same thing, you know. You just attach it, attach them guys to us. Each, each division or company had some kind of unit attached to them like some

units had like the Thailand's and you know, people like that and we, we had the French. And the French were good fighters at that time. We liked them. They relieved us on Heartbreak Ridge, was the last time I was up there. And uh, they got, they almost got wiped out too, at that time but they held.

Mik: How many of them were there?

Elroy: French? Oh, I don't know. I really don't know, couple hundred maybe.

Mik: So it was a pretty big unit?

Elroy: Yeah, it was a company. We didn't sleep in the same holes. They had their spot where they stayed and we had, you know like. The same when you come back, you are up in a line, maybe two weeks, three at the most and then you all come back down for, take a shower you know, and get your mail and get reinforcements and they would come back with us but they were separate all the time, they never, we never stayed in the same tents or nothing like that.

Mik: And how did that happen that you went on the same patrol with them? It just--were the patrols usually mixed like that?

Elroy: Well they just, they just usually wanted fire power. So we went along, I, operator, and this forward observer were both Americans, we were the only Americans that went along that time. And in case we run into trouble, we would call in for fire power; I'd call in on the radios and I wasn't the best with it--of course, I didn't work the radio, I just volunteered, nobody else would go so I just volunteered, 'cause buddy-buddy stuff [laugh]. And that was, it was all right. Actually I think back about it, I'm not sorry I done all that stuff you know.

Mik: On Heartbreak when you are, when you're going up and getting driven, back and going up again, does it get hard, when they order you to go up the hill again?

Elroy: Well you never think about it. I never did, I never thought about it, getting hurt, you know killed or something like that. You just gotta do it, you know. Just go up there. You know it's going to be rough every time you go 'em. Same with Bloody Ridge, I was on that ridge--that was a bad one too. That was almost as bad as Heartbreak. When we took it, it was already taken, then we relieved somebody of it, that's what we did. We relieved another--I can't think what outfit that was. And then after we got up there, well then the Chinese, they counter attacked, we held her though. Spent three nights up there without blankets. They told us that we we're going to go up on that hill, take, take Bloody Ridge, it was just bald, nothing there, it worst than Heartbreak, nothing on that ridge. And ah, we always carried blankets with us, you know, one blanket, that's all we carried. They said, "You leave your blankets down below 'cause you won't be up there--that night, you'll be coming back again." Yeah, well that was a big joke. We went up there, and three nights; freezing cold--oh--it was cold, trying to keep warm. Two guys huddling together in a fox hole, [chuckle]

son of a gun. You couldn't dig no hole up there, you had make your fox hole out of rocks, find rocks and build them up, you know so you had a little protection. And that night they let loose, they was, you could see flares coming and when they started--with super red flares up you know they were going to counter attack, the Chinese, you know. And they were coming, hollering and screaming like crazy. But we held them. Course we had good fire power. We had, there was tanks, they, we got a lot of fire power from the tanks and artillery, and airplane won't fly at night time, got to depend on your own ammunition for fire power. More fire power you got, the better it is, you know.

Mik: So, you're holding the ridge, how far apart are the fox holes?

Elroy: Mmm. Maybe, the width of this room, not really too far because they'll sneak between ya. That's about it. It was two guys to a hole. You can, you can get a little sleep, one guy guard, next guy sleep, maybe every two hours you wake the guy up and say "Hey, it's your turn to watch." and that's how it works.

Mik: But not much sleep when it's zero degrees?

Elroy: At night time you don't sleep. At least I never did. I didn't trust it. You never know. Them guys can sneak through and cut your throats or something.

Mik: So the flares come up and you hear the cymbals and trumpets?

Elroy: Trumpets and hollering, they're crazy them guys you know. Lot of time when the first wave come through all lot them didn't have the guns. Second wave took up the guns they get from the dead person, you know. They come up like flies you know them guys. They had no fear of death I guess. They just kept on coming. And they had the same problem when they broke through that, when they came into the reservoir. Chosin Reservoir, that time. The Chinese had just done the same thing over there, you know. That one I just missed, could have been up there had I been another month or so earlier I'd a been up there.

Mik: So, I am still trying to picture this, this attack. You hear them first, and then it's dark-

Elroy: Yeah, it's dark.

Mik: So?

Elroy: Pitch dark. Usually pitch dark. Bright moon, bright moon at night you don't see them guys very much. Gotta be pitch dark.

Mik: So it's basically you are just hearing them come?

- Elroy: Yeah. Well then, when they are coming, you put up flares too, we all got. It's just like day light up there, when they start setting their flares up, you know--artillery shell, they got flares in there you know. Keep shooting at shadows.
- Mik: And you were still a mortar unit?
- Elroy: Yeah, well.
- Mik: At this point.
- Elroy: When you take a hill. But when you're up on a hill then we was.
- Mik: Then you're just infantry?
- Elroy: Then you're just infantry and we're all in a fox hole, watch the perimeter.
- Mik: And the flares go up, and light the field, and you're just covered with people--
- Elroy: 'Cause you could look down, on the hill, you can look down--like if you are ever up in the mountain, it's the same thing. You know, you look down, it's pretty open, there are no trees anywhere, everything is just bare, you can see quite a ways. You can do a lot of the damage when they are coming up. They're, when they're coming I think they are just as scared as you are sometimes, but ya probably don't know it. Then when we are back, when we go back for R&R we call it, well then you could volunteer if you wanted, you can go and see if you could get a prisoner and then you get a week's R&R in Japan, you know, Tokyo. I done that a couple time. I couldn't capture anybody [Laugh]. You go out at night time see if you can wait for someone walking down the road, or something ahead of the line. See if you capture--some guys capture a couple of Chinese, but I never did--dead or alive. They don't have to be alive. There was at least--always two or three of us that went out. I went out twice I think. I couldn't find nobody.
- Mik: By yourself, or with a couple of others?
- Elroy: Well, three of us. You never go yourself, no. 'Cause how are you going to handle one guy yourself, you know. But there was three of us, three--four of us. And they didn't care because if you brought somebody back then they'd interrogate them to see if--they like that. There some guys who brought them back, of course some guys brought dead ones back. I don't know if they killed them or found them on the road someplace maybe [chuckle]. Say, "Hey, I captured a guy."
- Mik: So how did you approach that, trying to capture somebody? What did you do to try to--just hide somewhere?
- Elroy: Yeah, hide on the road, there was a lot of roads there. You have it, lay in a ditch someplace. I'd say you are not too far from the line in case too many come, you got

get help then. And they probably done the same thing. They had patrols out, ambushes. I was on patrol once with a, what you call them a three-quarter ton, truck you know. And the patrol had the mortars in that truck. They says, told us where to go, there must have been ten-fifteen of us, then we put the mortars in the truck and we went up, no lights on, one guy walks ahead of the truck for mines and stuff. We must of went a couple of miles and then we set up a perimeter, lobbed a few mortars up over there, but they didn't answer us, then we come back a couple hours--they come back into the lines. But then, you never know, you might get ambushed. They're not that dumb neither, they could do the same thing we're doing.

Mik: They let you through and then get you on your way back.

Elroy: See that truck we carried, on that one truck, that truck we went that time, that was ah--heavy mortars, that was 4.2 mortars, they were a little but heavier, you couldn't carry them, you had to carry them in a truck you know. Then you go a little bit further.

Mik: What was the range of your--of your small mortars?

Elroy: Oh, jeez. I don't know, I really don't know, maybe half a mile. 'Cause they don't shoot a straight line, they go up and then down, so they don't go too far. On the mortar you set your range with like a powder, or on it you set--on the fin in someway, you set that on there, the more powder you got on there the further it will go, gun powder.

Mik: And you are responding to your observer?

Elroy: Yeah. Actually you looked with field glasses, you know. You can tell, immediately. With the small, 6.2. I think they call them, the small mortars you don't need the big ones, you know, the 4.2s. But I don't think they got them anymore but them years--there you need observers because they go further. With ours you don't need one.

Mik: Cause you could see?

Elroy: Yeah, well you got your tracers, they'll just fall where they're going. And the guy, the company commander, who ever is in charge in the line, they tell you too where to drop it. Ten feet ahead of the guys, or twenty feet or so. You set your charge on there so it goes off at a certain time. You can have them go off in the air too. You set your charge on the point, you know.

Mik: How close was the next mortar?

Elroy: We had two of them to a company. That's all we had. Two mortar crews, six guys.

Mik: But were you together or where you--

Elroy: We, when, you mean?

Mik: The two units. The two mortars.

Elroy: Yeah, we weren't that far apart. We were together. Well, when you take a hill you are scattered out. But you go with a, maybe this platoon needs a mortar, the next platoon needs one, each platoon has its own mortars, ya know. It was interesting. **[End of Tape WCKOR056]** I didn't really like it either when we were on, over on the hill, ya know. Had to take the wounded off. Usually if you had any prisoners, they'd carry the litters, ya know. Cuz we couldn't leave the hill. And a couple guys along with them, with the prisoners and the litters. And they used to be rough on them. There, they use to tip them guys off on purpose a lot of times. Just to hurt 'em some more. Oh, it used to get us mad. And they're lucky they come off alive because of the Chinese. But ah--that was the worst part.

Mik: How did you take prisoners?

Elroy: Well, you take a hill, there's always--get 'em out of the foxholes. Some turn themselves in. Some shoot themselves. Some run back. But--and a lot of times, when we got our supplies, they're on the hill and you gotta get supplies up there, well then the Koreans, they would, they'd be the, called the supply train. They carry everything up on their backs, you know. And they'd get caught coming up. They'd get ambushed, and the Chinese would steal our supplies or mail, any mail coming up. And a lot of times you, you come off the hill, come back down, you'd--down the trail you went, you'd see a lot of letters laying along the trail, you know, they were ambushed, you know. And all your supplies, your food, and C-Rations, that's what you got, that's what you lived on. Ammunition, it was all carried up on their backs in boxes. Them guys worked hard. Them little Korean, they're short, they're civilians, ya know. They weren't the army guys. And then of course they got paid for it, yes, the United States paid for it--it was their labor. They carry our C-Rations and you get a box of C-Rations, it would last you oh, three, four days. If you can make it last that long. Whether you like it or not. Half of 'em you couldn't eat.

Mik: How about ammunition? Was that ever a problem?

Elroy: No, we were pretty much--well, you took always enough along, you know, cuz you know it's gotta last you till the next supply train comes up there, and they're usually--unless it got ambushed along the way. And then, and then you'd have to wait. But we never run out of ammunition. It was pretty good that way. You run out of mortars once in awhile cuz you only carry six shells, you know. Well, it was six, maybe twelve shells all together. You could shoot them up in one hour time, you know. But you had to wait. Cuz then they give you, you get, sit in the front, sit on the line--take your position in a foxhole and wait for ammunition to come back up again.

Mik: You said that with the foxholes this far apart, people would still get in between them? Is that at night?

Elroy: At night time. But it depends on the sit--depends on the terrain and land. If it's flat or something like that, they'd get between 'em, but if you gotta come up a hill, you'd hear 'em coming. Cuz you know, gravel flies, you know, rocks will roll, you know. You know it's not an animal because no animal's alive in that country, at that time. But--and then you had trenches. Well, a lot of times we took over holes that the enemy dug at the time when they were up there. We took over the same ones, we made 'em a little bit bigger because they were small, they could, they could sit in them little holes and we made them bigger. And then a lot of them had trenches, a lot of hills and--there was one hill that, one time we were going to, we were back and got, we got--reinforcement that were heading back for the line again on trucks and we got a flat tire. It was on a--one truck we had a flat tire. I don't know how many guys were on that truck. We waited and waited and waited and they all went by us, all of the convoy, ya know. And finally, a wrecker came, I guess, and put their, put a tire on. That was getting late already, it was getting dark and the driver really didn't know where he was going. So we were driving and driving and driving and we knew it, he was going north and north all the time. He was gonna hit something pretty soon, you know. We're all sitting in the back of the truck and you don't know what they're doing. And, finally come to a--spot, a place there. There must've been a--it's like a little encampment there. And we asked if we could stay over night there, and the guy says, "Yeah." You could stay a couple hours, he says, but we're moving out. So we stayed there a couple hours in that truck, and then we took off again before daylight. And we're driving along and all of a sudden, we're going on a road and we're on the front lines. Funny, we never got shot at. It was daylight already. Driving along that truck and was looking for our outfit, ya know, he finally found it. But we never got shot at. [Laughs]. Must've drove a couple of miles on that road, you could see the, the hill there, where the enemy was. Of course you could see the guys were all dug in there. Was kinda flat there, but kind of a paddy, rice paddy field, you know--the road running along side of it. And we never got shot at.

Mik: Felt like a sitting duck?

Elroy: Oh man, I was glad to get off that truck. And the guy was lost. Well, everybody got ahead of us, ya know, and he didn't know where he was going, you follow the convoy, you won't get lost, but you get a flat tire and you sit there and, you're the last man in. Guys are all laughing when we come in. Yeah, it was funny. There too we had--we sat for quite a while on that line, we sat there oh--at least a good week. Then they had the napalm barrels of fifty gallon drums with napalm in it. You put that ahead of lines ooh-- Far enough you could hit it with your gun, with a rifle. And then anything come through, across that field, you could, you shoot at that barrel, ya know, and get that thing exploded and napalm would be all over the place and then you'd have light. But, they never--all night long though, every night, there was a, I'll never forget it, that was Christmas, Christmas Eve, I was there. And all

night long, the enemy had loud speakers up, they were playing Christmas carols for us guys. Then every once in awhile yelled to get on, tell you we should surrender, you know, and be home for the new years, ya know, and all that kind of stuff. But it was nice, they played, we really got a kick out of it. Sat out there and listened to them Christmas carols [laughs]. Course you never know, they might attack too, at night time, but all night long they played them things, them old loud speakers blaring away. And we never tried to silence them neither. You think they would've sent out artillery shells over there, but they never did.

Mik: So did that make you kinda wish you were home?

Elroy: Yeah, you would think about home, but you think about other things too, you know. At least I did. But, that was the only time I was really--I could remember Christmas. I was only over there--one Christmas time, then the following year I went home. I think I came home in--when was that? May or some place, June some place, '52.

Mik: So that's gotta be tough on Christmas Eve. You're out there on the line, you're cold—

Elroy: It was cold. We didn't have clothes you got nowadays. We didn't have insulated boots and all that kinda, we had insulated boots, they call them Korean boots and then, them things, they--you put them on, you had to wear socks like this. You know, them thin socks. And then you leave them on, you never take 'em off cuz your feet sweat and you could feel water in there and that'd keep your feet warm. You take 'em off, you never get 'em back on again. And then, the clothes, you didn't have much clothes. Lucky you had long, lucky you had underwear. We only got a change of clothes maybe once a month if you're lucky. When you go back and--if you go back for reinforcement, if they got any clothes there, they'll give 'em to ya, but then what happen if they don't fit, you throw 'em on a pile, you pick 'em out of a pile. Take a bath in a riv--in a creek some place, water. They didn't have no showers.

Mik: So did you feel pretty dirty when you'd come down?

Elroy: Oh, filthy. We could see on the pictures there, wash ourselves in snow. You know, to get you to clean up. Shave a little bit and, main thing was the meal. Got a good hot meal, that we like, ya know, like chicken or turkey or something, but Christmas Eve we had, Christmas day we had--[mumbles]--songs all night long. Christmas day we had, they brought turkey back, a nice hot turkey meal for us and ice cream, even ice cream. Boy that was a treat. And the best part was, we were eating and all of a sudden vroom, here comes the shells. They were, but they were going, landing way behind us. We never quit eating. We just sat there and--but--that was a really good treat.

Mik: So there wasn't any trouble keeping the ice cream frozen?

- Elroy: No, no, no. It was good too, it tasted like home, regular homemade ice cream, you know, in them big buckets. It was really good. I think I had ice cream once before that. I think Thanksgiving, yeah, Thanksgiving we had ice cream too. Usually holidays they have ice cream with turkey and dressing, the whole works, ya know.
- Mik: Do you remember where you were at Thanksgiving?
- Elroy: I'm thinking right now, where I was Thanksgiving. I could've been at Heartbreak Ridge. Could've been up there. Yeah, I could've been, what was that, yeah. One of those ridges, I don't know, Heartbreak or Bloody Ridge, one of those ridges I know I was up there. I know I celebrated my birthday, I was twenty-two years-old on Heartbreak Ridge. That was September twenty-second, yeah, September twenty-seventh. My birthday'll be now on Monday, I made my birthday and--I celebrated up there.
- Mik: And what birthday was it?
- Elroy: I think it was Heartbreak Ridge up there.
- Mik: But how old were you?
- Elroy: Twenty-two. My twenty-second birthday. I got married when I was twenty-one.
- Mik: Did you ever think you wouldn't see your twenty-third birthday?
- Elroy: A lot of times. When I see all my buddies getting killed, yeah, you think about it. You think about going home and you're not gonna see 'em get home.
- Mik: After the fact I suppose? In the thick of battle, you don't think of--
- Elroy: No, you just think about staying alive. Keeping everybody else, your buddies, ya know, look out for each other. That's the main thing. I had one buddy though, he was, well, he's not a buddy of mine, he was some, he lived in Hawaii. His dad owned that Libby, you ever hear of Libby--tomato--no, not tomato, it was [Libby's Pineapple]. Well, he had a big canning outfit in Hawaii. And they call it Libby. I don't think there's--or if it's in, you can't see them cans anymore. And he was a new replacement. They usually put the new ones with the old, with a veteran, you know. And he was with me in a hole one night. It was on Heartbreak Ridge, and--I told him, I said "Here's the deal," I says, "Now we place our grenades in front, three of mine, three." I don't know how many he had. I says, "Now with change, I'll sleep on it. I'll sleep for an hour and then you can sleep for an hour or if I can't sleep, you can sleep longer." "Alright, alright." So I'm dozing off and I thought, darn, I wonder if I trust that guy or not. All of a sudden, I heard him snoring. I shook him, I shook him and I says, "Hey, you're suppose to stay, you're suppose to be on guard here." "I'm awake." I said, "You're not awake, you're snoring." Ok, so I says, "You sleep awhile and I'll stay awake, and then you sleep." Well I was getting tired, I woke him up

and ok now, it's your turn. And he never, he always fell asleep. Boy I was mad at that guy. I even turned him into my Company Commander, after that; he disappeared. I don't know what happened to him. [laughs]. "If I have a guy like that to trust," I said, "I don't wanna have a guy like that in my hole. I'll stay in there myself."

Mik: Well, your life depends on it.

Elroy: Well, sure, you depend on each guy, cuz you don't know if something gonna creep up ya at night time. I told him, I says, I says, "I don't care if you get killed," I says, "But I wanna stay alive." Boy, I was mad at that guy. I wonder what happened to that guy. If he maybe didn't make it, I don't know. I never see him after that. The second night, I stayed by myself. I didn't care. Cuz you're short of people and you can't double up all the time.

Mik: Do you think you learned pretty quickly how to stay alive? Did you learn certain things that you just knew to do?

Elroy: Well, I suppose, yeah. It was just instinct, that's what it is, ya know. Like that time when I almost got captured. It was either to be captured, or killed, or take a chance at getting back and going through the mine field. Well, we took the chance going back, and we made it. What happened that night before we went off, we didn't move on to patrol yet, at daytime you scan them with binoculars, with spotting scopes, you know. And you look and he'd tell you where you gonna go, and what you're gonna do, and you put that all in your head, ya know. And I see that, that ridge was like a cliff, ya know. That hill we're gonna go on, and I thought to myself, that might be the only escape route out of there. And I could see there was, was no rocks below it. It looked like sand, which it was. It wasn't too high of a jump, maybe ten, fifteen feet, that much. And when I got up there and I thought I told that guy, I says, "That's our only chance out of here, so we gotta jump. Either that or get captured. You could fight, but the Chinese are all around us." They were talking, jabbering like crazy. They're taking--so we jumped and--we made it. It seemed like we were in the air forever, but it didn't last that long. And I had a radio on my back yet. I didn't wanna lose that. But we made her back. Then we got down there and then, I says to my partner--I says, he was a veteran too, we all called ourselves veterans at the time we were there, after a couple of months you're a veteran, ya know. And I says, "Now we gotta go through a mine field, that's gonna be another problem. If we can find that path that's alright." We found it without flashlights. Of course these other guys are going back at that time too. They were strikers coming back all night long from the French. They were all going, a bunch of them, maybe two or three, and all night long there was, you could hear guys coming in. I don't know how many got captured or how many got killed up there.

Mik: So that's a pretty big patrol?

Elroy: Yeah, that was the worse one. The Frenchmen, before they go, they put perfume on. The Chinese could smell them too I guess. They really screwed themselves, they look like going to a wedding or something. They're all shaved and--you never washed up on the line. I never did. Of course there ain't no water up there anyway, to wash up.

Mik: Did you come under fire on any other night patrols?

Elroy: No, that's about the only one really, it was the worst one. But ah--well, I never really got the night whole. No, I don't think we ever did because--we'd go on patrols. I think this one here, I was out with the French, I think they wanted to feel, to see what the strength of the enemy--enemy strength was on that hill. I think that's one reason they went up there. Cuz they were getting close as they wanted to get. Cuz when you can smell 'em, you know you're pretty close. When you smell, you eat garlic, I could smell it right from here, you gotta be pretty close. If he eats garlic, I probably wouldn't be able to smell it. Unless he ate a lot of it.

Mik: So that's really close?

Elroy: Yeah, you're getting pretty close. And they were waiting for us, because they didn't make a sound until we got there. And then, they all leapt out at one time. And there were three sides, that was the worst part of it. If--I was over there with that Company, with the Commander that time, Company Commander I guess you call him. The French and--we're with him, you know and then--you could hear Frenchmen talking and Chinese yapping and finally he says, "You guys are on your own." That's scary when he tells you that, ya know, where you gonna go?

Mik: When they opened fire on you, did they see you or did they just know there were a lot of people there?

Elroy: Well, they put flares up. Yeah, as soon as they were close enough, they were putting flares all over the place.

Mik: And that was your signal to get out of there?

Elroy: Get out of there. Yeah. You're on your own there. Once--what are you gonna do? You know you're not gonna fight back, because you're not gonna win. You gotta get back, get out.

Mik: So what do you think the object was of these ridges? Of Heartbreak and—

Elroy: The object was, take the highest hills, I guess. Cuz always below the hill there's a valley, there was roads down there and then they could observe the enemy with their enemy troop movements, ya know, down below. That's what was the object of it. And then we took hills, you could look down at night time, you'd look down there, you could see trucks driving. The Chinese--Korean trucks driving. Hauling

supplies, or taking 'em out, or some darn thing along the roads. And you couldn't call in fire power because the airplanes don't fly--they didn't fly at night. Nowadays, they fly at night. But them years they didn't fly at night time. You could call in artillery, but sometimes artillery couldn't reach 'em--from behind the lines. That's all it was. I know we took one hill, that's when we had the Chinese really on the go. It was above the 38th Parallel already. And--we'd a kept on going, we would have won that war so fast. And--we had them on the go. But they did leave their supplies behind, or their clothes, or guns, they were running. That's how fast, that's how we were out taking the hills. More or less, we were taking hills without firing a shot. Take one hill, and you could see all the stuff laying there, and then all of a sudden they stopped us. That was the end of the war. You might say that's when the armistice was being talked about I guess.

Mik: So that was the second push. They had come in, they had crossed and pushed the U.S. forces down below the 38th Parallel and then you were on the push coming back up?

Elroy: Yeah. And then when they stopped us, we had to come back again, where the 38th was. And what hill it was, I don't know, there were so many hills there. I even looked at a book I got, I got a book at home of our outfit, what hills we're on, but I can't remember them anymore. If they'd mention the names, I'd know, but they got numbers, ya know 911 and all that, for them hills. But we were, we were about the 38th. I don't know how far, but ah--we had to come back and. Well, that's for [unintelligible]. And then when I came home, I came home through Pusan so. That's where I got on a ship.

Mik: How many times do you think Heartbreak went back and forth in terms of who held it?

Elroy: Well, other companies tried it, at least before us, they couldn't. And then finally, we took, we got the call to go in. And it took us about, I don't know, a couple of times, two or three times, I think. And the ridge that I went up on, the other ridge I had to, thought had the same problem, ya know that's different. There's a whole--ridges coming from all different directions. You take like Rib Mountain and you got maybe ridges from other mountains coming in, reinforced three or four different side, ways. And you know, they were dug in, they were, there was a, that was an important--if I read all the stories on 'em. If you did or not, that's, that was an important hill to take at that time. That was a pretty high hill, or mountain. I call 'em mountains, they weren't hills, they were--every time you take a hill you--there, tomorrow we going to the next one, over there and then getting on top and the next one's higher yet. Up and down, up and down, up and down, that's all you do. Tell you, my legs were sore, every time. And always, nine times out of ten, when you had to take a hill or something, it was raining. And try to slide up there. Get footing to get up. Of course we learned a lesson when we were--we learned from a hurry how to take that hill. Take walking up, we go this way back and forth all the time.

No matter how high the hill was. And there, that was a whole lot easier than going straight up.

Mik: Do you think when the replacements came in, did they have a better chance at surviving if they made it through the first two or three days or did a lot of them get killed right away?

Elroy: Oh, well, it's hard to say. Probably had a better chance cuz you got the experience. You know what to do. The first time up, I know the first time I was up there I was scared. I didn't know what to do. You know, when I first got up there. When I first went into combat, I didn't know what to do, you don't know how to dig a hole because we never dug foxholes in basic training. They give you a shovel to carry with you and that's it. They never tell you, hey you gotta dig a hole there right now and that was tough, ya know, but after all, after a couple days I think you learn in a hurry. You dug a full, sometimes you dug three or four holes in one day. And, you learn in a hurry. That's your life. Them holes are your life. If you don't get in the hole, you're dead. That's how I looked at it. There's somebody shooting at you all the time, you never know where different directions ya know.

Mik: Did you have more--were most of the fatalities or the casualties, were they more often caused by the shrapnel than the bullet?

Elroy: Yeah, most of it shrapnel, yeah. Mortars. And then they called it, the Chinese had a self propelled artillery shell. I don't know what the name of it is anymore. And that would explode above your head too. Most of it was shrapnel. I never seen too many get wounded with bullets. Once in a while in the leg or arm, but, nine times out of ten it's--when they lob in a, let's say a--maybe fifty mortar shells or artillery shells on top of you head, you know, something's gonna give. And that's what happened at Heartbreak Ridge. And that's when we took it, I wonder. That was the worse ever coming in there like maybe, we even see them coming down. You look up there and there's--all you see is shells coming down. You know you're gonna, you lucky you get out of there alive, you're lucky. So—

Mik: And it really is the luck of the draw.

Elroy: Yeah, that's all it is. But I never got a scratch, it was--when we walked up that hill, I bet you twelve of us walked off, the rest of us all were carried, or dead, a lot of 'em were wounded--

Mik: Twelve out of how many?

Elroy: Oh, maybe, maybe a hundred or more in a company. I see a lot of dead bodies laying around when I walked off that hill. When they told us we were getting, who relieved us? I think the French relieved us, yeah, I think the French relieved us. They said you guys, the French are coming out, as soon as they get here you guys can take off. Go down on the hill and you know, get off. And the French came up

there and they relieved us and--there was a lot of dead bodies laying around. We left them there and you could, because they got a special detail that takes the dead bodies off the hills. And ah--we helped the wounded out as much as you can. And then we got off and then they got clobbered again. The French lost a lot of people up there too. If we'd stayed another hour or so, I think we would've, I think that would've been it. Cuz they lost a lot of lives up there, the French did, after we left--on that ridge.

Mik: But the Chinese never did take it back again?

Elroy: No, we held it. But—

Mik: Were you ever--on a ridge or in an attack that you had to fall back? That you couldn't hold it?

Elroy: Well, like I said, that one when I went up that draw that time, that's the only time I--we had to go back.

Mik: But that's trying to get up the hill?

Elroy: Yeah, we were coming up, we were, I don't know, I think we were just gonna feel out their firepower. I think that's the reason we went up there. Because we come to a dead end, what else can you do? And there, you could see them up there waiting for us. You know you're not gonna take that hill if they're waiting for you--in the day time. That was in the daytime, that time. And we walked back again. We lost a lot of--we lost quite a few that time too. Well, quite a few, maybe ten, fifteen, that's, to me, that's quite a few. A lot of your buddies, and a lot of them are wounded. And the company commander, he got wounded. I see him coming, you know, he walked by me and I see he was, guy was helping him because he had a leg wound. The guys that were wounded, you know, we let them go down first and then we went behind them for protection.

Mik: When you got back to the States, of course you had a wife who was very aware of where you were and what was going on, did you feel like a lot of people weren't paying much attention to the war?

Elroy: Nobody that knows we're, I come back to home here, and a guy, to get my job back, the guy didn't know I was in service. And he was my boss when I left. He never missed me. I--when I got home, I got off that ship, I took my uniform off already because people look down at you, they really did. It was just like Vietnam. I come home and--well, we never had no big celebration to come home, you know, like they do now. You come home on a troop ship and come in to Oakland, California. I know one thing, I remember, I went underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, I seen that. But we docked and it was just like coming home from here, ya know. And the next day I flew home from there--on leave. And after, well, after I got my discharge, then I went back to get my job and the guy wouldn't hire me. I had to go through

channels of. He did the, he says, well, he says he won't lay that guy off. He didn't know I was gone. I say, gee you were the one that told me he was working when I was working, worked for--and well, he says, "I won't lay the guy off." I got a service officer over at the courthouse, who takes care of veterans. I went to talk to that guy and his first name was Casey, I'll never forget, I think it's Casey Jones or something like that, heck of a nice guy. And he, on the telephone, oh, he chewed that guy up. Oh man, oh man. I couldn't believe it. He says, you go over there he says, and if you don't get your job back, you come right back. He says, "We got that guy." I went over there and then talked to him. Oh--he was kinda giving me the old, ok he says, "I'll hire you. So I gotta lay the other guy off, but I'll hire." I says, "I quit." I said, "If I gotta work under the conditions like that," cuz you know, he might fire me anyway. So I quit.

Mik: Why do you think that is? That people weren't—

Elroy: People are funny--I know, I come home on a train one time, on leave, returned after basic. Sat on a train, and with my uniform on, people moved away from me. As if you're dirt, you know, that's what got me. Come overseas, this is bad. And everybody else I talked to had the same problem.

Mik: You said that, that first Punch Bowl when you went up to Punch Bowl that is your first time and you were scared, did you get over being scared?

Elroy: No. Not really, not really. What I was worried about was booby traps because there was a lot booby traps around, at that time. Grenades tied on trees, ya know, strings and stuff. But they didn't take 'em down yet, and I was worried about stepping on one of those things. But those never bothered me too much. Really never bothered me--getting killed or something.

Mik: Did you have any trouble leaving it behind you?

Elroy: No. I didn't talk to, I didn't talk to anybody about it. The first time I talked was in that book and to you guys, I always--I never talked to my wife, or my mother, or dad, or nobody else about them. They questioned me a couple of times, but you talk about it, they don't believe you anyway. That's the whole problem. And if you talk to other veterans, they probably say the same thing. They don't like to talk about the war experience because, it's--the stories aren't believable. It can't happen that way. That's how it is.

Mik: Boy, that's something we hear over and over. Some of these stories, if you were to write 'em in a book, people would say, oh, nobody will believe that, you can't make up something like it. But that's, in the chaos of battle, it really is pretty amazing things that happen.

Elroy: They think that you're making it up. You know, the stories and all. And it bothered me the first couple of months I was home, ya know. A little bit. But I talked about

it more, maybe it would've bothered me more, 'cause then the memory would've came back. All the buddies I lost and--so, I let it just, cleared it up in my mind and that's it.

Mik: The one question I had as I was trying to picture those attacks, did they get close enough that eventually they'd start using grenades as well? Would they toss grenades up towards your lines?

Elroy: Well, it was pretty hard for them to do it, coming up a hill. Try throwing a grenade up a hill, you know, cuz it might roll back down in your lap, you know. But, if you took a hill and well, they throw them down to you. Either way, works both ways, ya know. That's when you're in war, it works both ways. It's either you, either you shoot first or he shoots first, that's how it goes.

**[End of Interview]**