

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT R. STRAND
Mortar Gunner, Army, Korean War
2004

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

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Strand, Robert R., (1926-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Video Recording: 2 videorecordings (ca. 60 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Robert R. Strand, a Boyceville, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service with the Army's 8th and 7th Cavalry and his recovery from hemorrhagic fever. Strand touches on being drafted despite needing glasses to see, basic and engineer training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), and being put into an 81mm mortars platoon in the 8th Cavalry upon arrival in Korea. He mentions learning skills after his arrival, such as carrying ammunition and digging foxholes. He describes working with mortars, doing night patrols, and taking cover from artillery fire. Strand states he has a busted ear drum from not wearing earplugs when firing mortars. He recalls one night where half his patrol got separated in the dark. He reflects on close calls, seeing dead and wounded friends, and finding dead bodies in the field. Strand talks about the equipment, climate, food, water, and sanitation on the lines. Stationed near the 38th parallel, he states his unit was next to some Greek troops and recalls they would pass a grenade around to keep awake. He mentions they were also next to some Thai troops who had a reputation as knife fighters. He tells of holding a phone when a communications wire was struck by lightning and getting a shock up his arm. Strand details rotation to Camp Chitose (Hokkaido, Japan) and waking up one morning with "rat fever" (hemorrhagic fever). He speaks of his superiors not believing he was sick at first, his severe symptoms, month-long recovery at a hospital in Sapporo (Japan), and a month of physical training at a rehabilitation camp. Unconscious for a week during his illness, he remembers having fever dreams and sleep walking. He characterizes other patients at the hospital as well as the head nurse, and he talks about being stuck in bed during an earthquake. Strand discusses assignment to the 7th Cavalry and spending his last few months in Korea as the company painter. He analyzes the mail service and recalls getting a cake that had been reduced to crumbs. Strand explains the permanent damage to his immune system and heart from the hemorrhagic fever.

Biographical Sketch:

Strand (b.1926) spent eleven months in Korea with the Army during the Korean War. In 1958, he graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in accounting, and he worked for twenty-seven years as a comptroller and accountant for Chet Krause Publishing Company in Iola, Wisconsin.

Citation Note:

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Context Note:

Raw footage interview filmed by Wisconsin Public Television for its documentary series, "Wisconsin Korean War Stories." Original WPT videocassette numbers were WCKOR069 and WCKOR070.

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, October 11, 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: [Talking back & forth] Take as long as you need to gather your thoughts to either let things come to mind. Ah, we'll start at the beginning, and just talk our way through kinda your story and I'll ask questions, but they are only based on what I hear you saying and if there's--I don't know, some people have ah, things they don't want to remember and if that's the case, if we get into any of those areas--just tell me. All set? So, let's go back to how you first got into the service.

Bob: Well, I was drafted, and uh, I was 4F to begin with because I had really bad eyes. I have, my eyes are like 20/200 and uh--which I didn't pass for World War II, that's why I'm a little older than a lot of 'em were; that went into the Korean War but, when the Korean War, ah, as long as it was correctible with glasses, then you were okay, so, that's when I was drafted--went in on the fourth of January of '51, and uh, went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, from Fort Sheridan, of course, that's where we were sworn in and that--but I went to Fort Leonard Wood--for eight weeks in May, as a regular basic, and then I had six weeks of engineer basic there, in a different part of the camp. So, when I went over to Korea, we were going over there as engineers, really, but when we got over there, they needed people in this--heavy weapons. They needed, they were, you know, making an attack or something like that, and they needed more people, so, although, I'd never had anything to do with that kind of weapons and that, before, I learned, you know, I had to learn in a hurry, but, anyway, I got put into the 81 mortars platoon.

Mik: Now, was that actually in Korea?

Bob: That was in Korea, yeah, we were up on ah--what is it now, into the Inchon Harbor there and walked up the hill amongst the honey buckets and all that--[smiles] And uh, then we were loaded on train and brought up quite a ways by train, I don't know exactly, where that was--where we got off the train and loaded on trucks--and so we went up to the front on trucks--and then we went into, I went into the mortar platoon. Some of 'em went in, two of the guys that I was with went into the recoilless rifle, the 75 recoilless rifle but the rest of us went into the mortars. And uh, so that's where I was for eleven months really.

Mik: What kind of training did you get on the mortars, when you got there?

Bob: Well, course they'd teach you how to carry rounds first, you know [laughs] and then dig your own foxhole, [laughs] that's the main thing. When you're in that end of it, you're down below the hill, behind the hill really, behind the line troops but you're vulnerable to other mortars mainly. When we would be crossing a valley or something like that, that's when they could get at us, with artillery, but, it was ah, as long as you were behind the hill, they'd---they didn't seem to have too much of mortars and that, but we did, we could do damage, because with a mortar, you can lob it high and it would go a long ways up and come down not too far from you if that's the way you wanted it, depending on how many cracks you put on the barrel,

you know, to bring it up in the air--but, ah, so we did a lot of, we could do a lot of damage. But, ah, you just didn't want to spend too much time crossing the valleys in between when you were moving forward, or whatever you were doing. I remember moving at night one time and uh, they--we held hands so that we didn't lose each other. We kept within distance, not really held hands, but we kept within like seeing distance in the dark and that got broken up because somebody blinked I guess and uh, for the last half, we got lost from the others and so we ended up over in a swale there somewhere, and fortunately, somebody knew the password or we'd a been hauled in somewhere or probably shot at, but ah, we managed to get by that--and got by, came back to camp again.

Anyway, you'd wanted to start at the beginning and I guess that starts at Fort Leonard Wood--I ah, wrote all you'd want to know about that but, ah, with my bad eyes, I recall one little instance that I just as soon mention. We had bayonet practice, and I was jabbing the bayonet and I caught my glasses on a limb of a tree, and threw them off my face and I was next to blind--[laughs]and I was down crawling down on my hands and knees looking for my glasses and the sergeant came up and he said, "Frank, what are you doing?" He used stronger words than that, but anyway, and I told him I was looking for my glasses and he said, "My god, what they don't send us." [He laughs] But anyway, I got through basic and advance basic and we got over there.

And I was for eleven months in Korea, through the winter months, really. And uh, then there must been in around the 1st of April or toward mid April of '52 that I, that we rotated or went to Japan--the whole 8th Cav-Regiment went to Japan and the 7th had went a while before us. I could--it was Camp Chitose up in Hokkaido. That's a northern island of Japan. And so we were at camp there and I was there--I think it would have been right around three weeks and uh, one morning I woke up and I just couldn't get out of bed. I was in really pain and high fever and after they finally realized I was sick, and they got an ambulance and took me up to Sapporo then and I remember laying on the floor of the hospital there for a couple of hours waiting to get admitted, to that. I'd never been so sick in my life, you know, but ah, and as soon as I got up on the 4th floor and into a bed and I just passed out--and I was out for a week and when I woke up, I still had a fever of 105 so, ah, it was pretty rough ah, and you know, with that, I ached so too, and then I couldn't hardly move--so weak, but, ah, anyway, ah, I guess the--thanks to penicillin and a few things like that. I got 8 shots a day of penicillin in my butt and they finally pulled it through, but it didn't--you'd get so weak that it included pneumonia, double pneumonia that I had and a lot of pleurisy, you know in your chest area. So, it ah, like I said, they ah, penicillin did a lot for me I'm sure, finally, my lungs were practically filled with fluid. They finally tried something they'd never tried before on that--they went through my back with a, what do you call it? They put a tube in there through my back and drained out my right lung or whichever lung it was--and they took better than a glass of stuff out of there and that really started--when I started feeling better then--up until that time, I think that I was about gone, you know. A lot of them that

contracted that hemorrhagic fever, didn't make it through it, because of the fever and that.

Mik: Did they know right away what it was?

Bob: Well, I don't know if they knew right away, but, they informed me after, I suppose they worked on that during the first week or the first days but, when I came to, they told me what I had. It was what they called--they called it "rat fever" over there, because it was spread by rats. Well, in Korea, you know, you'd sleep in holes in the ground or in some of them holes that had been made before you were even there, you know--and there were rats all over the place. It was not real unusual to wake up with one crawling over your face or over your body. Ah, even in the winter, they'd come and try to snuggle in with you 'cause, you, we had those warm sleeping bags. So, they were--I never got bit by one or anything that I know of but ah, they were around--so anyway, a lot of 'em. So, I could believe it that I got--that I contacted from that, but it was the trip to Japan plus those three weeks then before I came down with that. It just took that long for it to get into my system and ah--

Mik: Do you think that saved your life--to be in Japan?

Bob: Oh, I'm sure it did, or I'm not sure, but I would guess it did. Although, they had ah, you know, they had helicopters and that there. But they weren't always ah, the fool proofest thing at that time anyway--I remember having one helicopter come in to pick up wounded, up on the line, right in front of us but they got hit. The small prop got hit by rifle shots, you know, and that broke and hit the big prop and they came tumbling down right amongst us practically, and just folded into a little ravine and everybody--the one that was wounded lived the longest. But he died before they got him out of there. But I mean, they did have them over there. So, I coulda probably, might a made it alright, who knows? Ah, but it takes a lot out of you. Like, to this day, I don't have the resistance to cold and all that. For the longest time--if I got a cold, I had to go and get antibiotics right away. Ah, or I'd get pneumonia or something like that--but, I survived.

Mik: Once you started feeling better, after they drained your lungs, how long did it take you to recover?

Bob: Well, I would say, I was probably in there maybe a month after that or thereabouts--I'm not just sure of that, but then, ah, when I was recovering pretty well, I was down to 130 pounds then, when at my worst, you know, but, then they took--moved me down to this Camp Umia, down by Tokyo; just out of Tokyo--a ways. Cause that was the rehabilitation camp then. So, they'd give you physical training--and we ran and did a lot of training like that and then, when I left there, I think I weighed 190 pounds. It was a month later, so, I snapped out of it pretty fast. Then the 8th Cav had already went back to Korea again. They kinda' regrouped and a lot of the guys that was--that I was in with had went, had rotated home, which I would have done earlier, if I'd a been there, but I wasn't in camp then. So, they just ah, they moved

me into the 7th Cav Division and I stayed with them. I was their company painter for two or three months there--just, I painted Calvary Patches all over the butt cans and rocks in front of the orderly room and [laughs] painted some things like that, you know, but that was how they kept me busy for that time, until it was time for me to go home then. So, then I was shipped home. I think I got home on the ninth of December of '52--discharged.

Mik: When you were in the hospital, were there other people there with hemorrhagic fever?

Bob: I don't know that there was or it that--I don't know of any there, that had that. There were a lot of 'em in there with a flu type thing and uh, sore throats and what not--they used to have the sore throat, "The salt brigade" they called it--[smiles] They'd get 'em all in there and every hour on the hour, they had to 'em gargle with salt. They didn't have all of the niceties that they have nowadays but, it worked, you know! Yeah, I remember the ah--I had a picture of Herup in that group, that I had there. The head nurse there, she was a sharp, and a kind of hard-minded, old lady and this one young guy came in and they wanted to give him a shot, you know, in the arm and there was no way they were gonna give him a shot. The ward boys tried and uh, and he would just--he ran up to the window and tried to jump out of the 4th floor. If they ah--didn't get away from him, and they went and told her, and she took that needle and walked up, and he was up by the window, again and he said, "If you hit me with that, I'll jump," and she said, "Jump away," and she grabbed his wrist and she jabbed him [he laughs] and he didn't go. Then another experience I had, while I was there, was an earthquake. For the time that I was in there, there was a fairly strong earthquake--it was a seven point something on what is it, the Richter scale? And the building across the street from us went down. It was a brick building. And I was on the 4th floor, and unable to get out of the bed, you know, and the rest of 'em were under their beds, but I laid there and I was reading, when it first started happening. I was propped up and reading, and my bed started rolling back and forth. So, I thought it was one of the ward boys playing tricks on me or something. I said, "Alright, cut that crap out, you know," and I looked around and there was no ward boy there and the pendulum; the lights were hanging from the ceiling--and they were swinging back and forth. And then I looked around and realized that we were really rocking up there. And like I say, the building across the street went down, and there was tidal waves, really pretty rough, ah, when it gets up to that intensity, they were pretty strong. A friend of mine came in to see me that was the--that had the mail route and he had a Jeep and he had a flat tire on his Jeep, during that time that, that happened. And he had the Jeep jacked up to change the tire and it rocked the Jeep so that it fell off the jack. He had to stop people to help him pick it back up again. [laughs] Yeah--yep.

Mik: So you were, were you getting mail, in the hospital?

Bob: Yeah, I'd get it, but it was kind of, little bit behind, ah, you know it took, I know I got a--I was writing to a girl from, well she was from Ohio at that time. And she

sent me a cake, but she sent it to Korea, and then of course, I wasn't there anymore and got to Japan and took to me in the hospital, and it was in a cracker box and it was just a pile of crumbs.[laughs] I didn't dare tell her that, but, anyway, ah, that wasn't Stella.[laughs] Ah, but, my mother sent a package of, when she, there some things in it and she wrapped it; engulfed it all in popcorn and then that came to us in Korea and the guys and I really enjoyed that, you know. And I'd get letters from my brothers, and sister, and my mother. But I, you know, and I wrote letters. The mail service wasn't all that bad, really--normally. If you were staying in one place, you know, but if you moved around, and it took a while to catch up to you.

Mik: How did it happen that you guys were transferred over to Japan?

Bob: Well, I don't know what they were. I think they were just kinda--there were a lot of them that were there were ready to rotate home, and their terms were up, and then I think they had a new offensive or whatever you call it--that was about to come off. They'd move them over there for just a matter of a couple of months, really--and uh, to get re-organized and get new troops and go back over, cause they went back into the same general area--I think maybe a little closer to the coast then we were, but ah, course, I don't really know where they were cause I didn't go with them, but they ah--and I didn't even know that they'd, that the 8th Cav went back there--but ah, and I think the 7th went shortly after I left--for the States then. That they were just, ah, I don't know what--I guess re-organizing or whatever and--can't tell you that--what it was all about. I wasn't on that end of it.

Mik: So, what's that feel like? To wake up and find out that you missed a week of your life?

Bob: It's a really weird feeling. I remembered sort of like dreams or nightmares that I had during that week. I ah, I know that I, it seemed like I would go over to this huge abyss. It was like a lake out there, like the ocean or whatever, but I could see across it. I couldn't see across the ocean, but anyway. And there was this girl over across there and I was trying to get to her and it was a gal that I used to know in Minneapolis, when I worked there. And I was trying to get to her, and every time that I'd start trying to get away, they'd grab me and take me back again and I--that's just the way it seemed to me. That I was like a prisoner or something--and what it was, that I was at the stairwell and starting to climb over and they'd grab me and take me back to bed again, I guess. That's what it amounted to, but ah, that's the only thing I remember about that whole week--but, that's--it was just about exactly a week that I was out, you know, and when I woke up, I still had 105 fever.

Mik: Is that true, were you getting up and walking around?

Bob: Yeah, they said I did it. I mean, when I came to, I couldn't get up. That don't make sense, but it's--I was just, couldn't, I was too weak to do it. Other than that, I don't know that I've ever sleep-walked, but ah, I must have been doing it then.

Mik: I know, there's nothing worse than those high fevers.

Bob: No, they're bad. Never had a fever that high, I've had fever a lot of times in my life, you know, because, I've had infections and that, but, ah, not like that.

Mik: So, you think that, that ah, that fever really did permanent damage to your immune system?

Bob: It did, and it also ah, in 1989, I had a new heart valve, my main valve; aortic valve replaced. There's an artificial valve in there and they said that at the time, the nurse told me that you may have problems for living a long life because it did, the fever did some damage, you know, to the heart and that, but, I think that it, what it did, it just shriveled that main valve up, so instead of having three flippers of that, only two, and it was kinda shriveled as it was--so, I made it to that point in the game and then ah, it got so I just would pass out. So, they replaced that. That worked. If it hadn't been for artificial valves, I suppose, ah, I'd been long under the tube. But, anyway, I'm still here--still above ground [laughs]

Mik: Yeah, still telling the story--when you were in Korea, with the mortars, where were you located?

Bob: Well, you know, I don't really remember. We went--we weren't too far from the 38th Parallel. But ah, just where we were in, I'd say about a, I can't remember the names of the ah--we were not too far from that Heartbreak Ridge for one place. Ah, we were in, if I remember correctly, it was somewhere within about the maybe two-thirds of the way or a third of the way in from the, would be the what, the west. It would be the east coast of Korea there.

Mik: The Inchon coast or the other coast?

Bob: No, it would be to the other coast--cause, I remember, cause I went inland quite a ways, by train and then uh, but we may have been further to the left--then that too. In fact, I'm not sure where we were. You know, they don't really tell you where you're going, we were in there and if you aren't one to remember, I wouldn't know the same area back again if I went over there. I know that. I'd hope I wouldn't, but ah--

Mik: Was there a lot of action going on all the time, while you were there?

Bob: All of the time, yeah, yeah, we had the Greeks on one side of us, if you can pinpoint us that way, the Greeks were on one side and ah, oh boy, now, I'm going to have troubles remembering the other side--it was some--from another country on the other side of us. I can't think of who that was now. My minds going--but--

Mik: There were Turks, there were Colombians, I think--

- Bob: Yeah, it wasn't those--
- Mik: In fact, didn't somebody tell you that Ethiopians, yeah, British?
- Bob: No, this is ah, what did you say?
- Mik: Canadians?
- Bob: No, this was ah--
- Mik: Australians?
- Bob: No, uh, they were um--
- Mik: Did you have much contact with the U.N. troops?
- Bob: Not that much, but ah, you know, we were close enough really to them that you'd see 'em once and a while. They always said that ah, like the Greeks, you know, you always had people ah, on guard at night and the Greeks--to keep their guards awake, they'd pass a hand grenade from one to the other and then they'd pull the pin and if he went to sleep this thing would go off--[laughs]so he didn't go to sleep. And uh, one of the others--it's right on the tip of my tongue but anyway, they liked to use knives. In fact, they'd go out on the front side of the hill at night and start fires so that they would get these what we called the 'gooks' or the Koreans--the North Koreans--and they would try to sneak up on them and then they'd sneak up just close enough for them to grab 'em and they'd cut their throats. That was their way of ah, special scrapping so that, they always said--if you ever get behind the lines, you better come back through the enemy, not through the Greeks or the--
- Mik: It wasn't the Turks, huh?
- Bob: No.
- Mik: We heard about them.
- Bob: Yeah, they were tough, too, but it--that seemed like the name begins with 'T' but its not, but ah--
- Mik: So, being in mortars, you didn't go out on those patrols--the--
- Bob: Not in that way, although, we did have patrols where we would go by night, or in for a particular area where they were going to move ahead so we would get at--if they had some enemy troop pinpointed somewhere in there where they couldn't get at 'em with artillery, they'd call us into that area just for a short while. We would ah, we always had a forward observer and then we'd get in there where we could get directions from him, and you could drop around--right in amongst them. Mortars

are pretty dangerous in that way, that they--you can put--I said you could put down a smokestack and a stovepipe, if you had a good guy callin' shots, or tellin' you how many cranks up or down or whatever--uh--

Mik: Are mortars easy to locate? They don't produce a blast or anything, do they?

Bob: Well, yeah, they would, at night, you'd see 'em.

Mik: They do, so, after you started firing, then, would you draw fire?

Bob: Oh, well, yeah, but, like I say, we were down behind the hill, so, ah, we never--the only time they could get at us if we were in a ravine where they could hit. We had artillery rounds come in ah, at us and they'd probably hit the slopes up above us and that would--so you'd get shrapnel and that coming down, that's from the rocks and that. I've--I had shrapnel--in fact, they teared my pants all up once and uh, I know of the first thing that we did was for those that--who were out with what we called, "On the gun," we'd set the gun up and the rest of us would dig foxholes, you know, if you ran out a bad spot like that, you'd dig em pretty deep. I remember once our lieutenant came in right on top o' me, because, the rounds were coming' in against that ah, front of the hill there and uh, he was pretty vulnerable, but he came in on me and so I had it deep enough. He was really a 'peach' of a guy. Lieutenant Slyker, his name was, from Texas. Yep--

Mik: So, you got shrapnel through your clothes but never through your skin?

Bob: Never through my skin. One time, I--we were going across the valley and artillery rounds came in and they hit our, we had a three quarter ton truck that we had carried our gun with, in that. And we were on there. And uh, shrapnel came through---it went that far below my crotch and ripped through that metal seat, but, it never touched me. And then I'd--as soon as we knew that we were--that they were at us then we jumped off and I crawled into what would a been a--really a latrine ditch that someone had dug. And I got everything in there but my feet. And uh, a round came in and hit, I'd say eight or ten feet from me--just with a thud and it was a dud. So, it was that man upstairs, you know, watching--so, it was a dud--it never went off. And things like that you remember but you don't, you know, they get, you can make you pretty teary eyed just to hear that you got through that--but, for the most part we were well bossed and well managed, I think, as far as getting us around and that. But, once in a while, things go wrong and all that--like when I told about us keeping in sight of each other and somebody took their eye off the guy ahead of 'em and they're gone--and then so, you don't know which way to go and uh--but other than that, ah, it was pretty good.

Mik: You know, I hear so many stories about the action at night--and then we just can't imagine. Visibility is so difficult, and we're gonna change tapes. **[End of Tape WCKOR069]**What were we about to talk about?

Bob: [unintelligible] I had something on my mind that I was gonna' say, but, I can't remember what it was now.

Mik: Well, we were talking about, how, I said that, I can't imagine what--I mean, it seemed like most of the action was at night. All the patrols and attacks seemed to be at night and--

Bob: Well, it's for us, I guess maybe it wasn't quite that--because for the line troops I'm sure it was a lot of happenings at night, but, if we couldn't see, we had to go by their directions, of course. If we had--the forward observer would tell us where to--we did quite a bit of firing at night but, would be if they had somebody pinned, you know, in a certain spot--or they were--once in a while, you'd get a new, I suppose, a new force would come up against 'em there and they would be coming in toward 'em. I'm saying, if they could pinpoint 'em, you know, we could stop them before they got up to where there would be hand fighting, and the hand fighting--I know, it wasn't too often that we would get, we would be advancing to the point where you'd see, but at this one place, that we were they had ah, a special push going on there where we advanced and ah--I don't know. We put several rounds into this one area and then we advanced through that spot, and there were Koreans laying all over the place. You know--unbelievable, hanging in trees, and what not, ah, kind of a sickly looking mess, you know. Thank God, it wasn't our guys, but, ah, cause then, another occasion, there's one, I told you two of our friends went into the 75 recoilless rifle. I helped carry one of those off the hill. He was--he had a hole right in his forehead. I don't know if he got snuck up on and shot that way or what, but anyway, it happened to be that. He was big boy from Michigan--can't remember his name, exactly, either, but he was a pretty good friend. The other one was Richter and his name began with 'R', but I can't remember what it was. But ah, we carried him down the hill and across the river to a waiting Jeep, there. Unhappy times, not that we had too many happy times there but, you know, our normally, day by day a--it wasn't really that bad. And every once in a while, maybe, every two or three weeks, they would bring up a truck in there, a three quarter ton truck with breakfast for us, maybe eggs and whatever--once in a blue moon, they'd bring a shower in there. Otherwise, we would bathe in the little creek that went through the valley there, when you were by their spot. You couldn't drink the water, but you could bathe in it more or less. Although, the Koreans, we had CTC boys, they called 'em, that was civilian aides or helpers, you know, that would help set up, help with digging the foxholes or whatever, you have 'em do. And uh, they could take a leaf and drink it from the little stream, you know, and if we did that, our innards woulda come out the wrong way, you know, it was just that bad, but--but you could bathe in it.

Mik: So, they had developed an immunity to it--by living there?

Bob: Oh, sure, yeah, even ah, well, even in Japan, we weren't to eat at the regular restaurants, you know, we ah, we did on occasion, but usually you wouldn't. We'd go back to the barracks to eat--did a little drinking there maybe once in a while, but, yeah, you have to have a little sake or something.

- Mik: So, fresh eggs or at least real eggs tasted pretty good?
- Bob: Oh, they tasted really good, yeah, yeah, it was no big deal but it was new. Something different than canned food you know--although, most of the canned food was not that bad. You know and you get used to it. You'd have a little of some ham or whatever it turned out to be and uh, enough to fill your--fill you up there, or at least keep you happy.
- Mik: I heard the beans and franks were the best.
- Bob: Well, ah, none of it was, you know, I didn't write home about any of it really, but, that's the way that is. We always got a--you'd get a cigarette ration and a beer ration. Quite often the beer was stale--you know, it was some old stuff. I didn't drink much of that. I sold it for a dollar a can to some of the other guys. [laughs] But then, of course, I smoked at that time and got the cigarette rations and that. Some of that was something terrible. Some of it came out of Canada or some of these different places--but not belittling the Canada stuff because they, we had good stuff that came out of there too, but, and we had Canadian troops not too terribly far from us--I know that--yeah--Thailanders---that's---it was the Thailanders that I was trying to think of--that were on the other side of us. They were the 'knife people' they--if you walked through their lines, you get your throat cut--they said--if you didn't know the word. Yeah--yep.
- Mik: How, were they, were those other troops in some kind of uniform, I mean, they had their own military uniforms or--
- Bob: They had, yeah, they did. They had similar to what we usually wore was just the OD's or the--what did they use? The old shabby suits, I can't think of that--
- Mik: The fatigues
- Bob: Fatigues, yeah, they had their own fatigues and that too. Uh, some different than ours, you know, but some not too, not too different.
- Mik: How were they armed? Beside from the knives.
- Bob: Well, they had, they had rifles, or depending upon what they did with--most of 'em had rifles ah, I'm not sure what they were, as far as, like what we had, we in the mortar platoon, we carried those carbines--M1 carbines, because the rifles just, you know, a carbine wasn't a lot of weight to that. They weren't very accurate either, really, but you, if you were gonna' carry a couple rounds of ammo or part of the gun, you didn't want to be carrying anything as heavy as an M1. Course, the main of our troops had the M1's and ah--as far as I--whatever I saw, they had probably equivalent guns--I don't know just what they were.

Mik: How did your, how did your forward observers communicate with you?

Bob: They had radios. Yeah, yeah, they ah, they wouldn't be as--really that terribly far away, but, they would be in range, you know. And they would ah, I suppose they were taught how to do that, but they would just spot. They knew where we were and they knew that the ah--compass angles and all this sort of thing--so, they'd say, they'd probably get in two or three shots just to get you in there, into the area and then they would, from there, they would refine it by saying down one round, or one turn, or up one turn, or a little to the side or whatever. Right one turn, or left one turn, and like I say, you could just about pinpoint it in that way. Once they got you in the general range in the general area. Once in a while, they'd suppose that we were good at it, you know, they'd get you right in there almost right away, but, ah--I had a chance to be that, forward observer, but, I--with my eyes being like they were, I had to--if I'd lost my glasses, I would have been a hazard more than anything else--you know, so--I didn't go at that, but, ah--it was worth a little more rank, I guess, but, I never did--although, I was on what they call 'on the gun' for the last two or three months of what--the time I was in Korea. There you were supposed to be drawing corporal rank but, I never did get that--and they said wait till you get to Japan--you'll get your rank and you'll get all this but, I went and ended up in the hospital--so I didn't get that either, but, it didn't--I didn't, I never planned to be a career man anyways--so. [laughs] That's a--it didn't bother me.

Mik: What's that mean, "on the gun?"

Bob: Well, that's, you actually, you would carry a part of the gun, and you would set it together, and you would be the one that manage the gun as far as sighting it, or turning the levers or uh--or putting the rounds into--like the third man on the gun would ah, dump the rounds into the barrel, you'd drop 'em into the barrel and then even that would contact with the firing pin and that would shoot out of there. Hopefully, once in a while, they wouldn't--you'd have a dud that would lob just outside of your pit that you had it set up in and then you'd have to duck pretty fast. But ah, sometimes they didn't go off and--but you'd never know, but, what they might be delayed a little bit. They normally weren't. They were contact rounds you know, so when they hit--they would explode--they didn't have too many that didn't work right. But once in a while, you get one that maybe hung up a little bit so it didn't light--it didn't go down hard enough against the firing pin--so, it would just pop, and not go where it was supposed to go.

Mik: Any that would stay in the tube?

Bob: Yeah, we had that happen too, and then of course you have to tip it out of there--that's a little bit more hazardous too, but, you just have to go through those things. I guess, another thing, I could say, that I ended up--that's--I've got an appointment now to go to Tomah, because, I have a, I had a busted ear drum--you know, back then we didn't, we weren't provided with earplugs, because, we were 'on the gun' or firing the gun, and they were pretty loud, actually. Can you imagine how that would

be a loud shot to your ears? But ah, you never really wanted to lose your hearing whether you were out there doing that stuff, anyway, but ah, so anyway, my, I have a broken ear drum which, there--I'm to go to Tomah to have my ears checked out, because they're not getting any better with my old age--so.

Mik: When you would set up the mortars, how many mortars were there?

Bob: We had, ah, three guns, I think, it was three that we had. In fact, part of the time we had two. And we had a separate crew for each gun and ah, a separate three-quarter-ton truck for each stem but, ah, that time we would take the two guns on one or the three--even, but then, there wasn't much room for troops and all that but--sometimes when we'd go on a special, like you said on a special, ah--push, push--then or whatever you want to call it. We'd go into a spot for a short while we go in there with one vehicle but, we normally had two vehicles.

Mik: And then when you got directions from the forward observer, was it just one gun that would shoot until they got the range and then?

Bob: That we usually was at, yeah, because you can--well the barrel would get hot if you shot too many rounds at once--you could pump out, you know, eight or ten rounds in a fairly fast time, which was usually enough to--because, by that time, they were moving. I suppose, you'd have to change it a little bit and ah, I don't remember--of ever pouring out in, within, ah, you know, a fifteen minute period more than maybe thirty or forty rounds at the most, because you did a lot of damage with one--you know, but--once in a while, they'd find that we were out of range. We maybe did get out of range--then the artillery would have to be contacted then. If we really got in trouble, if the line troops really got in trouble, then they would call the air people in and drop napalm, in there. That was a terrible thing to see, too. You could see the barrels coming down out of the plane and then a big eruption of fire. If they dropped them right, I suppose they did a lot of--

Mik: So, they would drop the barrels and the barrels would open and explode?

Bob: They would explode then when they hit--yeah--they didn't--I didn't see that a lot of times--cause every once in a while, if they were having problems with too many enemy troops coming in on 'em, they would call 'em in and uh, we didn't always know when it was gonna happen or anything like that, but, maybe, the lieutenant did but, we didn't know. Yeah.

Mik: Were you ever in danger from friendly artillery?

Bob: Ah, no, I don't think so--course the artillery guns were behind us and they probably had happenings like that but, we never had that happen to us. That's--it would be entirely possible because they are quite a ways, you know, in back of us, but, there are--I say 'us', the mortar patrol. So, we, like we might--you could have one, you know, some of the sharpest hills around around here are nothing compared to what--

you have to go down around La Crosse to find hills that equal; fairly equal quality. And you could be right down in a ravine--is probably where we would be--and so we would be firing up and over, you know.

Mik: So, you'd be down firing up and over and the line would be at the crest of the hill or on top of the hill?

Bob: At the top or at the crest of it, yeah, and then, once in a while, then if you'd get a move back then you'd go to the next hill. Of course, crossing that valley was always the toughest on the line troops. So, that's when we had to try to keep them at bay, with our artillery portion, with our mortars.

Mik: Say, in the course of a week, how many times would you actually fire mortars? Like every day or?

Bob: Every day. Oh, yeah. Often times toward evening or in the--early in the morning would be time of--certain times that they'd be moving more, so, they could spot them and then they'd--the forward observer would call in and tell us. So, you had to just drop your socks and go with it and, and, ah--you had to be ready, you know. So, you could get 'em in there at the right time. Usually, it seemed that, ah, at what I recalled--breakfast time would be like first daylight. It wasn't usually that bad. We'd have time to eat. Once in a while, you'd get interrupted there, too, but, yeah, every day, at one time or another, of the day, you'd get, you'd be pumping rounds out, yeah--

Mik: You know, did you say? When you, ah, when they told you that you had hemorrhagic fever, did you say you had never heard of it?

Bob: I'd never heard of it. No. No, in fact, I, it was a, I couldn't believe that I was that weak, you know--and then in that much in pain. I just, in fact, I know that ah, it was right at, you know, what they call 'reveiller' or whatever, we didn't have that when I was in Korea, but in, we got to Japan there and then into real barracks and of course, they, they had people running that you had to get up for; to be counted, you know, in the morning and so they had reveille call and I couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't even begin to think about it and anyway then the sergeant came through and told me to get my tail outta bed, and he was more or less threatening me, but then, ah, the ward officer came through a little bit later and he said, "Can't you see that, that man is in pain?" He said, "You get--get the ambulance and get him to Sapporo," and thanks for him, because they didn't really believe me. I think they thought I was, you know, being lazy, because I was a front line troop, I thought I didn't have to do that stuff, but, I was really in rough shape, but ah, anyway, they got me there. And after, like I say, a couple hour wait, on the floor, on the stretcher, I was put to bed on the fourth floor and that's the last I remember until a week later--

Mik: So, what'd ya think, when they told you what you had?

- Bob: Well, ah, I believed 'em, [laughs], yeah, and they said, 'rat fever', that's what they really, they called it that more than hemorrhagic over there, and I could believe that, you know, because, there, they say, there were a lot of rats. I've always, I always think of rats as being vermin carriers, nowadays, in a, I always put pigeons in the same class--and I didn't like those either.
- Mik: But, so, it wasn't something that, that you were aware of--when you were on the line, were you--nobody?
- Bob: No, but we, ah, we tried to keep as clean as we could but you, you know, all we had to wash up in was our helmet liner--our helmet, ah, and uh, which we did that pretty regular--but, you do wash your hands every time before you eat or anything like that. But, ah, I suppose I got it into me somehow or other there. The helmet liner that, I call it the liner, cause the outer helmet that was used for everything from washing your feet to, to ah, boiling water for whatever, for shaving or whatever you did, if you ever shaved, which I did once in a while. From that, ah, it didn't always work very good but, if we were back in a back area, where you could have a fire, used to pour a little gas, get a little gas out of a jeep there and let you start a fire with it and put it in your helmet and throw it and once in a while, the fire would follow back to your arm--but that was kind of forbidden to do that--but, we did it. You get real gutsy when you're over there.
- Mik: Was the winter weather pretty bad?
- Bob: It was about like here. Korea is pretty much on the same parallel as here. We had a lot of snow and similar cold. Ah, we had good mummy-type sleeping bags which were terrific for sleeping in, but, then an awful easy thing to get your throat cut in, if you were on a line. If you were a line trooper up on a look out, you know, because you couldn't see really. You'd pull that in right around your face like this and ah, but warm. And you could sleep right out on the snow and be warm as toast--goose down--in there--used to think, it would be nice to have one of those, but, I didn't have one. I've had sleeping bags, quite a few of 'em, but never one like that.
- Mik: What time, what time of year was it, when you went to Japan?
- Bob: Ah, it would a been, must a been a, around the first of April or somewhere in there.
- Mik: So, you weren't in Korea in the summer?
- Bob: Well, it was really, partly cause, I was there eleven months--so, I hit pretty much the first summer of '51 would a been and uh, and then ah, well, would of been in Japan then--and in the hospital of some of the better months of that summer--but, '52.
- Mik: Was it hot, like here or?

- Bob: Well, I would say about the same--yeah, we didn't ah, but, we didn't do a lot of marching or anything like that, you know, but, ah, yeah, it was similar weather--cause, I remember it, it was, like I say, it was a lot on the same parallel; pretty much as in Wisconsin here, so--we had snow and ice, warm days and cold days--and I don't remember wind so much--but, you know, we were in hilly country. You wouldn't get that, too much of that.
- Mik: When you would move into an area, would you just--the first thing you would do is dig foxholes--and then did you pretty much live in those?
- Bob: Oh, yes, that's right--you'd call it, I guess you'd would have to call it living--if we did get heavy rains there and uh, in the spring of the year--in early spring. Probably earlier than you do around here. I remember one, at one time there, it rained for near a week, steady. And I was on an outpost, at that time--and uh, and there was a lot of lightning. And uh, anyway, ah, we had comm wire from the base up to our outpost. And uh, that got hit by lightning, and then I had the phone in my hand at the time. [laughs] I remember, I said, I remember hearing somebody scream, and it was me, I guess. But ah, it melted the wire right up to the phone, you know, it was all I had in my hand was the phone, when, but, and my arm was stiff for a while--but, beyond that, you know, it didn't hurt me any but, it was kind of a terrible shock to the system but ah, I remember another ah, another one of the guys got struck, he was going down the hill, down for breakfast or whatever it was and uh, got hit--went down the hill and he survived, too. But it was--everything was wet, you know, it was wet all over. So, it would, ah, you wouldn't catch the whole brunt of it, because, I suppose it was being grounded all over the place, but, from the wet. But it was a shock to the system anyway--so you didn't really forget.
- Mik: So, you were in the outpost with the forward observer?
- Bob: No, the forward observer was ahead of us. He was up in the line troops, but we were up on ah, on higher, a higher ridge usually. Ah, more or less between us and the line troops--if somebody would sneak through to get at our area there--where we had our guns and that. That was what we were up to. We didn't really, I didn't, I think, twice we encountered somebody, but that was about all in that whole eleven months that we had anybody come on to us. We came on to dead people, dead GI's, and dead Koreans. One was a Korean but he was dressed in our GI uniform, he'd, I suppose he probably killed one of our guys and told to take the uniform and was trying to sneak into our area with that, but, somebody nailed him. We found him mainly by smell--you know, from him, cause he had been there a while, but, we first thought it was a GI and it turned out to be a Korean.
- Mik: That reminds me when you talked about goin into that area where all the bodies were around, was that just from the mortar fire?
- Bob: Yeah, well, I would say so--could a been one here and there, mingled in there that was from ah, machine gun fire, or something like that, but this, this was from ah,

from our firing--cause we lobbed it. I said thirty rounds--we must a lobbed at least that many in there in that short while--and we hit right amongst them and they were congregated in there pretty heavy. Ah, terrible to see--but, it was good for our troops--I guess you could put it that way.

Mik: That was what you were there to do.

Bob: Yeah

Mik: So, you didn't mind leaving Korea, didn't mind?

Bob: Didn't mind it at all--no! [smiles] That came upon us in a kind of a hurry--we didn't know where we were going--just one day, they said, well we're to Japan. So, that's what our lieutenant knew it but, ah, so we packed up our things and ah, went over to Inchon again--uh, went up into Hokkaido there--at Camp Chitose, just out of ah, a little ways out of, oh, the main city up there in Hokkaido, Sapporo, just ah--

[End of Interview]