

In Korea, "That War" Will Never Be Forgotten

Story and photos by R. R. Keene



The walls of War Memorial Hall in Seoul are etched with the names of every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine from every country who died fighting for the Republic of Korea.

Bam! Bam! Bam! There was a steady roll of naval gunfire over Flying Fish Channel. It shook the hulls of the warships whose gun crews adjusted and fired another thunderous volley. The ships—trim, dual-stacked destroyers with 5-inch guns—hung on in a precarious formation against what appeared to be a fast-moving mud slide rather than powerful currents of the world's highest tides.

In the distance, the target was a promontory, an island named Wolmi. It was linked by a causeway to the port city of Inchon, which one could barely make out against the backdrop of the Korean Peninsula. Erupting upward were wink-of-an-eye flashes of explosions, followed by growing geysers of earth which resembled ugly mushrooms captured in time-lapse photography—sprouting and collapsing at terrific speeds.

Krump! Krump! Krump! The waves of sound reported back to destroyer captains such as Commander Robert A. Schelling of USS *Lyman K. Swenson* (DD-729) and gunnery officers such as Lieutenant Junior Grade Peter W. Wood of USS *DeHaven* (DD-727), along with sailors of USS *Collett* (DD-730), *Gurke* (DD-738) and *Henderson* (DD-785) steaming

in trace of USS *Mansfield* (DD-728). The squadron of destroyers would later be known as the "Sitting Ducks."

Those posted at battle stations on the weather decks, and not assigned as lookouts for mines which infested the channel, squinted hard through the residual overcast of Typhoon Kezia and the black smoke of destruction, looking for the muzzle flashes from North Korean shore batteries. As their 5-inch guns taunted communist gunners with a continuous barrage, the destroyers boldly ventured into Wolmi-do Harbor hoping to make themselves too tempting a target for nervous communist gunners only 800 yards distant.

Incoming salvos from enemy batteries sent up geysers of brown water, and the sound of steel being punctured by rounds from 75 mm communist guns was far from comforting. *Collett* and *Gurke* absorbed hits. *Collett* took four 75 mm rounds into her hull, wounding five crewmen. *Gurke* had three holes punched into her. *Swenson* had a near miss—so close that it killed an officer.

It was a dangerous tactic executed bravely by the crews of the destroyers. By becoming sitting ducks and drawing communist fire, U.S. Navy lookouts spotted the enemy positions. Had they remained too long in the harbor or tarried in the channel, they would have beached on the mud flats and might have had to rely on grenades, Thompson submachine guns and pressure hoses to repel borders.

Behind the destroyers, American and British battle cruisers with 8- and 6-inch guns struck the North Korean batteries with devastating accuracy. Overhead, Navy and Marine planes from escort aircraft carriers peeled off and struck with rockets, bombs and napalm. The Navy took an incredible risk and no doubt saved the lives of many Marines who did not know or understand the meaning of the "Sitting Duck" squadron.

Two days later, on 15 Sept. 1950, Marines bobbing uncomfortably and queasy in their landing craft witnessed a similar naval bombardment. It was a sight the leathernecks would never forget. It was a terrible time, and they whispered a silent prayer that unlike so many other landings Marines had made during World War II, this one in this war would be a cakewalk.

Leathernecks of First Marine Division such as John Stevens, James Rose and John Lyons with 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment; John Bastian, Cornelius Fineran and Ben Collie with 1/5; and a few thousand other guys such as Warren Sell and Bob Rhodes with 1st Bn, 1st Marines; Bill Alli, Daniel Savino, Leon Kreida, George Coyle and Arthur Debetaz with 2/1; or Frank Pollotta with 1st Combat Service Group will tell you today that it was

Things in Korea had definitely changed, but so too had the veterans.

far from a cakewalk, but they got through it and lived to return 50 years later.

Kimpo International Airport sits on the southern end of Seoul, the capital of the Republic of South Korea, which is officially known as *Taehae Min guk*. The airport is ringed and squeezed by high-rise apartments and industrial complexes providing homes and livings to more than 10.2 million people. Viewed from a Korean Airlines' Boeing 747, on the Military Historical Tours organized reunion it all appeared very tight, and nothing resembled the field where the First Marine Aircraft Wing in the autumn of 1950 once parked and launched F4U Corsairs.

The veterans were returning to Korea after 18,262 days, or 50 years. They were greeted by rain, sheets of it, from "Sowmai"—a September typhoon which skirted the Korean Peninsula. The unceasing downpour did not dampen the spirits of those who made the 13-hour flight from New York and were welcomed by a guard of Korean military personnel lining the red carpet rolled out in their honor.

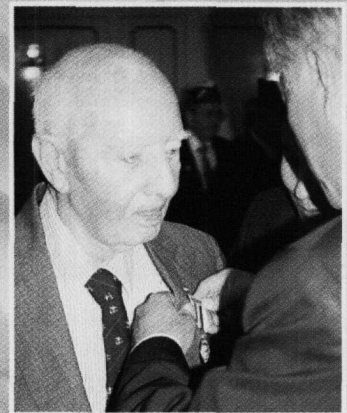
Things in Korea had definitely changed, but so too had the veterans.

Andrew Watson of Locust Valley, N.Y., who in

1950, had easily hefted the 9½-pound M1 rifle, 200 rounds of .30-caliber ball ammunition, a field marching pack, steel pot with camouflage cover and worn faded-to-yellow leggings over his boondockers, now moved a little slower lugging less equipment. Watson flashed a young man's smile and stood tall, for in his heart he's still a Marine. By chance he linked up with Warren Sell, now residing in Jacksonville, Fla., but who had been a corpsman with 1st Marines. Sell also moved more slowly than those days when strapped with a corpsman's bag. He was still the "Doc," and his demeanor and soul proved that corpsmen have hearts bigger than most.

The two made a point of showing whoever might have been looking that they could still hold their own by carrying their own luggage. They ambled past the honor guard to buses with others of their generation, some with their families. They all looked with curiosity through the evening rain toward a skyline brightly lit with neon and headlights. The veterans looked for something, anything even remotely familiar.

"*Ahn yong ha-sayo*," said a studious-looking fellow wearing a conservative brown suit. "I am Kim, Son-Jin, your tour guide, but you can call me Sam."



Inset: Retired Lieutenant General Alpha L. Bowser Jr., as a colonel, was the 1stMarDiv's operations officer. Along with other returning veterans, he was presented the Republic of Korea Korean War Service Medal.

Above: The outer ramparts of the Inchon War Memorial depict various aspects of the 1950 landing.



Incheon, Wolmi-do and the harbor where Marines went ashore under cover of U.S. naval gunfire—as well as Navy and Marine Corps planes—appear a lot less intimidating than they did 50 years ago. Incheon has become an international city visited by many foreigners.

For most Marines, the language of the country in which they are sent to fight is mostly an afterthought, as in “Yeah, I shoulda learned some of the language, but I was at the time up to my cartridge belt in communists.” Many did remember learning long ago, in passing conversations, that in Korea, the family name comes first. They had also learned that Koreans are nothing if they aren’t conservative in dress and thinking.

Thus, Sam engaged in a quick on-the-bus class of Korean Phrases 101. “*Ahn yong ha-sayo* means good day. It is very useful term and very appreciated.”

“*Ahn yong ha-sayo*,” repeated the veterans until they got it right. Sam, they reasoned, must have worked with Marines before.

While most veterans found it impossible to recognize anything, they quickly discovered that the fact they had fought in Korea was, indeed, very appreciated.

There were banners in Korean and English marking the 50th anniversary of the landing at Incheon and the retaking of Seoul. Other banners welcoming the veterans while thanking them at the same time were also a common sight.

The flashing lights of a police escort, which led the tour’s buses everywhere, was another way of saying thanks. With more than four million vehicles clogging Seoul’s thoroughfares, it also proved practical.

“An old Korean proverb states, ‘A woman who does not make *kimchi* does not marry,’” explained the guide. *Kimchi* is the source of the pungent aroma which permeates Korea. It can be discerned by those with highly developed olfactory senses from several miles off the coast. That it is pungent is beyond doubt. That it is a source of good eating depends on one’s taste buds. Korean taste buds love the spicy pickled and fermented mixture of cabbage, onions

and (sometimes) fish, variously seasoned with garlic, horseradish, red peppers and ginger. Another proverb could be: “Never eat *kimchi* alone unless you want to remain alone.” *Kimchi* was another familiarity rediscovered by returning veterans.

The veterans discovered that unlike their last tour, eating in Korea is more than a C-ration can of ham and limas cracked while squatting on a rice-paddy dike. This time they found themselves seated on woven mats, sampling *multeombeong*, an anglerfish soup with bean sprouts and watercress, or a soup of crabs served in a hot pot. They used metal chopsticks to spear large prawns, clams, squid and freshwater eel, all served with healthy side dishes of *kimchi*. Breath mints were issued later.

In 1950 it took seven days of fighting over roughly 22 miles to reach Seoul, where Ed Banaszek (now a retired Marine officer) had used his amphibian tractor with others of 5th Amphib Bn to ford the Han River and ferry leatherneck infantry into the city. The city’s only bridge had been blown at the start of the war.

The returning veterans found themselves heading back azimuth of sorts. They left Seoul by train over one of the more than 20 bridges, many more under construction, and passed the *Yongdang-po*. Although not much more than a village in 1950, *Yongdang-po* was assaulted by the Marines. First Lieutenant Harry A. Commiskey climbed up Hill 85, which overlooks the Han River. Armed with only a pistol, he single-handedly killed seven communists and took out two gun emplacements. He was awarded the Medal of Honor. Today *Yongdang-po* is an upscale suburb of Seoul that is 29.4 kilometers, or about an hour’s drive, from Incheon.

The Kyong-in Expressway, a modern highway by

anyone's standard, is the seam in Seoul's urban sprawl. Gone are the fields, thatch-roofed farm houses and villages with similar-sounding names such as Sogam-ni and Kansong-ni where Marines had cautiously worked their way through to Seoul.

The expressway that links Seoul and Incheon is lined with textile mills and factories. Once near Sosa-ri, which overlooks the main highway, Private First Class Walter C. Monegan Jr. became a one-Marine tank killer and destroyed three communist tanks, damaged two more and confused the rest before being killed. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Today one can recognize where one city ends and the other begins only by noting exit signs directing traffic to the University of Incheon.

While everybody expected change, most were not prepared for the massive amount of change. "You know, we leveled these places," said one Marine.

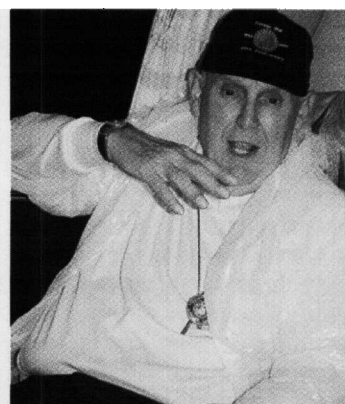
The rain, a constant traveling companion, didn't help when negotiating the streets of Incheon, limiting visibility and opportunities to catch a glimpse of Cemetery Hill, or the site of the old Asahi Brewery, prominent landmarks for assaulting members of 5th Marines who used scaling ladders to breach the sea wall that was Red Beach and doggedly push through Incheon.

The sea wall where 1stLt Baldomero Lopez went over and earned the Medal of Honor posthumously has been replaced with progress. Busy streets are

lined with multistoried buildings draped with banners heralding the 2001 World Cup Soccer Finals and Incheon's Munsu Stadium where the games will take place. It isn't that the people of South Korea have forgotten the sacrifice of men such as "Punchy" Lopez. It is doubtful they ever will, but life goes on. Incheon, like many American cities, has its monuments but marks its ability to overcome the devastation of war by the continuing prosperity of its residents.

In Incheon there are shops, restaurants, resorts, golf courses, even bungee jumps. Residents, used to foreign visitors, proudly point northward beyond Wolmi-do to Yeongjong Island, where a new Incheon International Airport was receiving its finishing touches prior to its scheduled opening this month.

There are monuments. The ghost of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, who conceived the Incheon landing, is more visible in Asian countries such as the Philippines, Japan and Korea than around his hometown of Norfolk, Va., or at his alma mater at West Point, N.Y. His statue dominates the Sinpodong area of Incheon at Observatory Hill, now named Freedom Park, which, in 1950, was taken by elements of 1/5 and 2/5. It is the first Western-style park and also contains a memorial tower commemorating the 100th



Andrew Watson of Locust Grove, N.Y., once hefted an M1 rifle while humping hills between Incheon and Seoul. This time, he took the bus. It gave him time to enjoy the various sculptured versions of the landing at the Incheon War Memorial.

It isn't that the people of South Korea have forgotten the sacrifice of men such as "Punchy" Lopez. It is doubtful they ever will, but life goes on.



Above: C/1/7 Marine George Kiernan shook hands with present-day leather-necks. Kiernan's wife, Pat, accompanied him from Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Below: The Inchon War Memorial also honors Gen Douglas MacArthur.

year of the U.S./ROK relationship.

Not much farther south is the area where the 1st Marines, led by Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, went ashore. Known as Songdo, there's a boat basin and public golf course where the amphibian tractors churned toward shore and ran into the sea wall. Soon 17.7 square kilometers of land reclaimed from the sea will be known as Songdo New Town and home to advanced industries such as telecommunications and international trade.

Up on Hill 117 sits the Memorial Hall commemorating the Inchon landing operation, which the Koreans claim to be unparalleled in the history of war. It contains a rest area and an open-air theater. The exhibition hall displays pictures that show the life and military equipment of South and North Koreans during the 1950s. There are also displays of various weapons and military equipment.

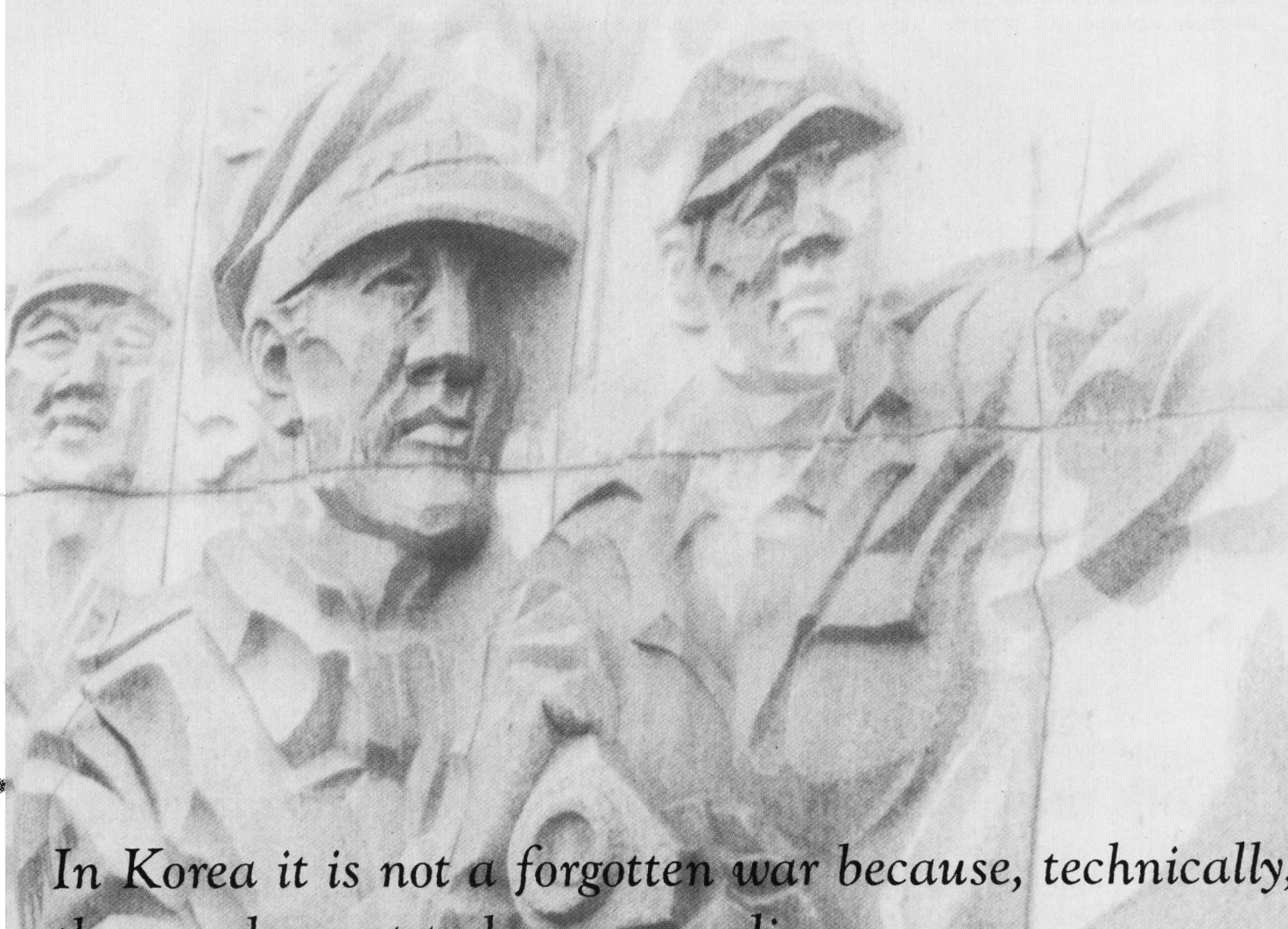
Wolmi-do, or "Moon Tip Island," on the northern tip of Inchon's inner harbor with its 600-yard causeway was, according to Major General Oliver P. Smith who commanded the 1stMarDiv, "the key to the whole operation." Today Green Beach where 3d Bn, 5th Marines landed runs into a hillside covered with

pinus as it was back then. Green Beach itself is gone; it lays somewhere beneath land reclaimed from the sea, piers, wharfs and man-made harbor.

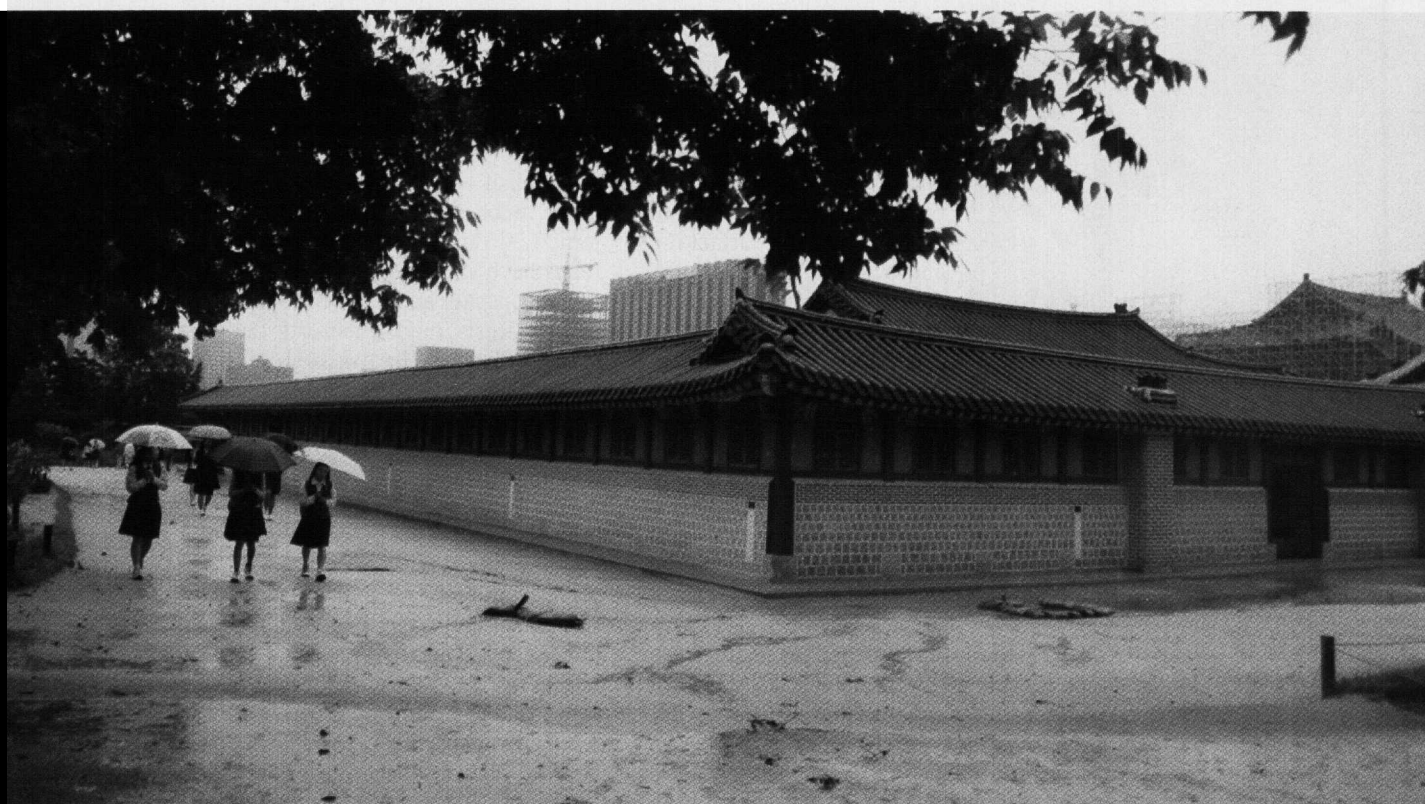
Radio Hill, from where Sergeant Alvin E. Smith, 3d Platoon guide, Company G, raised the American flag that was seen by Gen MacArthur on the bridge of the command ship *USS Mount McKinley* (ACG-7), now flies the flags of various nations and the United Nations. The flags are raised and lowered daily by members of the Republic of Korea Second Marine Division. The rest of the island has become a playground for adults. It is a carnival atmosphere, complete with a lighted midway, amusement rides, a casino, motels, cafes, sashimi shops, windsurfing and excursion cruises offered in the harbor.

It all took on the look of a ruined watercolor painting under the overcast and rain. Many of the activities planned for the 50th anniversary were canceled or moved indoors due to the inclement weather.

The Korean hosts, always conscious of their guests' feelings, apologized for the weather. The veterans didn't seem to mind. They hadn't come for ceremonies. They returned to see if the people of Korea remembered what many in America have called "The Forgotten War." At a special dinner, Korean government representatives presented each veteran with the



In Korea it is not a forgotten war because, technically, the war has yet to have a ending.



Above: Seoul is a modern and growing city, where Asian architecture is comfortable next to modern high-rises.



Left: These members of the ROK Marine Corps and Navy are among the 672,000 South Koreans under arms today. They stand as honor guards atop Wolmi-do's Radio Hill, where the America flag was first raised in 1950.

Republic of Korea Korean War Service Medal as a small token of appreciation for the large contribution each veteran had made.

In Korea it is not a forgotten war because, technically, the war has yet to have an ending. There has been an uneasy truce since 1953, and from time to time conflicts spark up.

"*Mi kun ul chu ki gi cha,*" was the command North Korean People's Army Senior Lieutenant Pak Chul gave his force of 30 men. "Kill the U.S. aggressors."

In the almost surreal melee that followed, the North Koreans ax-murdered two U.S. Army officers: Captain Arthur G. Bonifas and First Lieutenant Mark T.

Barrett on a tree-pruning detail near the "Bridge of No Return" in the late morning of Aug. 18, 1976.

Up across the Imjin River and on the other side of "Freedom Bridge" is the 38th parallel. If one follows the 38th parallel as a straight line, it passes through Stockton, Calif.; Garden City, Kan.; Evansville, Ind.; Lexington, Ky.; and Charlottesville, Va. In Asia, it crosses the Korean Peninsula for 150 miles from the Sea of Japan on the east to the Yellow Sea and is buffered in the center by a meandering 2½-mile-wide swath bristling with military hardware known as the demilitarized zone, or DMZ. It is the world's most fortified border.

Dense green foliage of the DMZ runs right to the very edge of the Imjin and spreads thick and luxuriously throughout the zone like one of Korea's famed mink blankets. But the analogy ends there. There are warning signs: the universal symbol for mines (more than a million of them), checkpoints, strict prohibitions, limits on freedoms taken for granted just south of the Imjin. North of the Imjin, in the DMZ, Amur leopards, Asiatic black bears, red crowned cranes and Siberian tigers are the only living things allowed to roam free. Human movement is heavily monitored by soldiers on both sides.

Inside the DMZ at Camp Kitty Hawk, renamed Camp Boniface several years ago, is a new generation of Korean War veterans—soldiers of 1st Bn, 506th Infantry Regiment, Second Infantry Division. They boast of being "in front of them all." In as much as they are only two kilometers from the boundary lines, it's a claim none of the other approximately 37,000 U.S. troops in Korea challenge.

Soldiers of the 1st of the 506th, along with counterparts in the Republic of Korea Army, man posts around the Joint Security Area known as Panmunjom. If one grew up in the Cold War, the blue, single-story, small, rectangular buildings with green



Above: Retired vet Ed Banaszek showed his wife, Joyce, where his amtrac rolled 50 years ago.

Below: A demarcation line runs through the center of the blue buildings at Panmunjom, where truce talks are held. Republic of Korea soldiers stand guard at the corners and watch any acts of aggression from North Korean forces on the other ends of the buildings.

tables in the truce village of Panmunjom are as familiar as the now gone Berlin Wall. From inside came reports of harsh rhetoric and accusations. From just outside came pictures of North Koreans attacking and beating American officers. Occasionally, people and bodies are exchanged across the "Bridge of No Return," which straddles the line between North and

South Korea only a few feet from where Capt Bonifas and 1stLt Barrett were murdered. In and around the small area, serious games of one-upmanship—from the size of flags to which side can hurl the most insults—have been and continue to be played. However, things have ratcheted down as of late.

Inter-Korea relations have begun to thaw since South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung visited North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il in June of 2000. After the summit in Pyongyang, North Korea, the two sides reopened border liaison offices. Their athletes marched together behind a unification flag during opening ceremonies at the Sydney Olympics in Australia. The two Koreas allowed three separate visits by hundreds of persons across the border to relatives they had not seen in half a century.

In September President Kim presided over the groundbreaking ceremony at Imjingak, a village just south of the DMZ, as both sides began rebuilding a railroad line across the border. They are hoping the railway will serve as an avenue for exchanges and trade with fast-growing markets in China and Russia. They have also started building a \$91 million

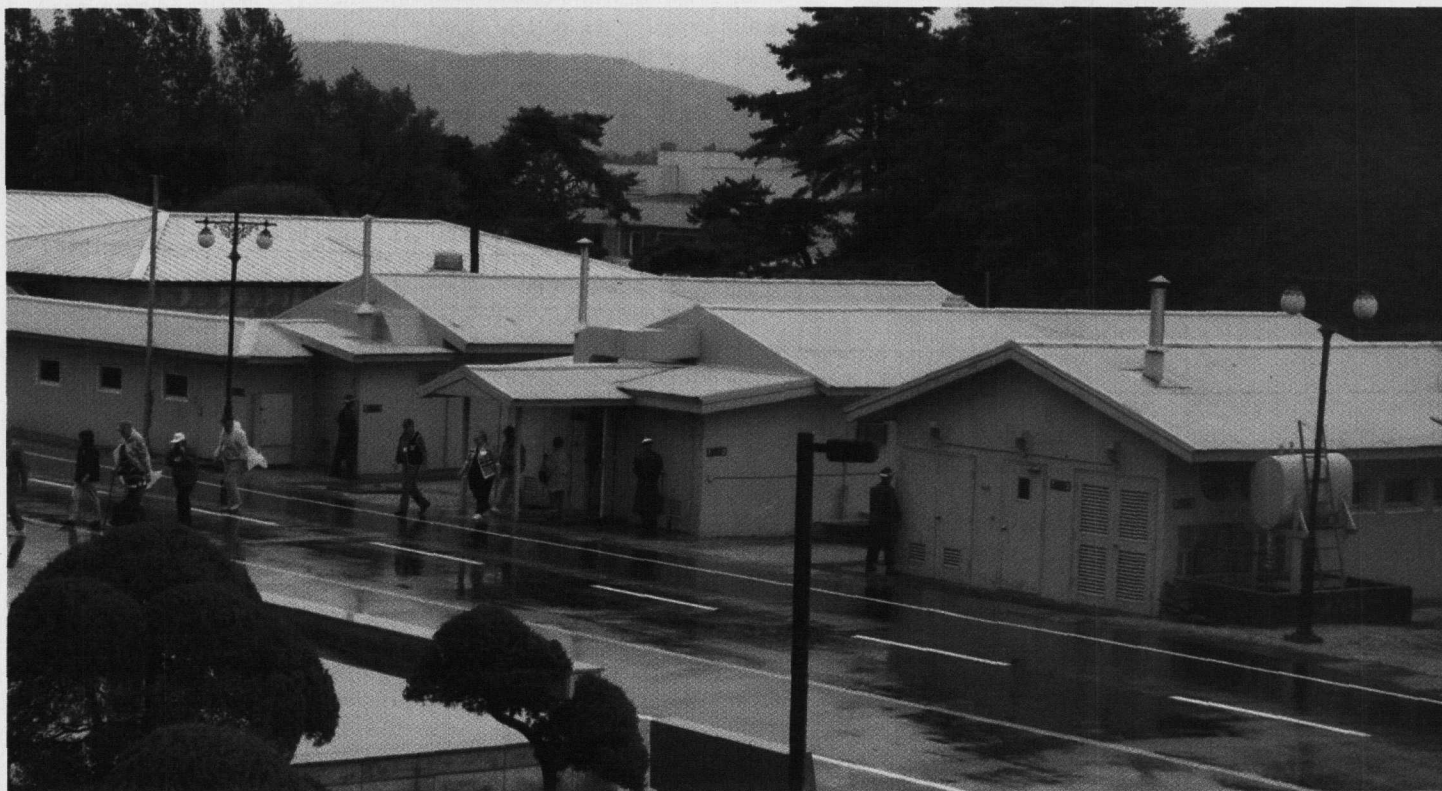
four-lane highway that will connect major expressways already in service in both Koreas. Thousands of South Korean soldiers will be used to clear land mines in the path of the rail and expressways, which are expected to be completed by this fall.

Asked if all the aforementioned Korean ventures made much of a difference in and around Panmunjom, a 2d Infantry Div soldier said, "The North Koreans have softened the opera music they broadcast by loudspeaker and stopped much of their propaganda broadcasts, but the name of the game is still constant vigilance." His words took on meaning during the bus ride back to Seoul when passengers remembered that Seoul and the Olympia Hotel where they stayed is very much within North Korean artillery and missile range.

But it is more than being threatened; one gets the impression that the Korean people are tired of the demilitarized zone, of making highways that can serve as military airfields, of fortified positions and war drills, and of putting 672,000 men and women under arms. There is every evidence they want these latest efforts to be fruitful and solid steps toward real peace on the peninsula.

The Koreans are problem solvers, and they do have problems to be solved. North Korea in spite of friendly overtures is still unpredictable. Unemployment is above 7 percent. In 1998 South Korea suffered its worst recession since the 1960s. However, Koreans will tell you that things are looking up. In 1999 the economy was back on a growth track. The stock market doubled its value. Industrial output and private consumption also grew.

While there have been setbacks, Korea has continued to prosper since 1953 and is still prospering. Asia watchers, however, say there are signs that Korea's current economy may be slowing. Nonetheless, it is likely the Korean people will come out



ahead in the long run. More than 75 percent of the population wasn't even born during the war years, yet life expectancy, 69 years for men and 76 years for women, is going up. The average family of three or four persons makes a combined income equal to 33,679 U.S. dollars, and they expect to make more.

It has been a long time and a lot of tidal water in and out of Flying Fish Channel since those Navy destroyers made sitting ducks of themselves off Inchon. There were only a few veteran sitting ducks present during a ceremony at the Memorial Hall for Inchon landing operations. Bill Jenkins from *Swenson* was there as was *Swenson's* former skipper, Robert Schelling, and his wife, Mary Anne. Peter Wood and Frederic Doederlien from *DeHaver* and Doederlien's wife, Deloris, made it too. The next day at ceremonies honoring the 1stMarDiv there were more Marines, but not that many more. A half century has taken its toll on veterans. Navy fliers, other sailors and U.S. soldiers of that war who had also returned to Korea lent support for both groups by enthusiastically attending each event.

Some had brought family members with them over great distances. In the case of the leathernecks, the Marine Corps League Detachment from Wilkes-Barre, Pa., sent a contingent consisting of George and Pat Kiernan, Ed and Joyce Banaszek, and Ken and Wilma Collins from nearby Duryea, Pa. Robert and Margaret Rhodes showed up from Leawood, Kan., along with James and Ester Rose from Toledo, Ohio; John and Joanne Bastian of Lake Oswego, Ore.; Ben and Joan Collie of Tower, Minn.; Richard and Kathryn Stone from New Canaan, Conn.; and Bob Miner of Plattsburgh, N.Y., who brought his son, Dale.

On the edge of the Yongsan district of Seoul stands War Memorial Hall. Beneath the columned pillars, etched in stone, are the names of every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine from every country who died fighting for the Republic of Korea. From the Battle of Seoul alone, the 1stMarDiv suffered 1,064 casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Murray's 5th Marines lost 177 men, 92 were killed in Puller's 1st Marines, and Col Homer Litzenberg's 7th Marines saw 72 die. However, they inflicted 13,366 casualties on the North Koreans and captured 6,490. The Marine names, along with those of approximately 36,000 other Americans killed in action, are listed on the granite walls.

Korea too paid a heavy price in blood, losing more than a million of her people in the south alone. Etched in the blocked and orderly Korean alphabet known as *hangul* are the names of 58,127 dead and more than 100,000 missing from the ROK armed forces.

Not far away is the sight of the old American Consulate where Private First Class Luther R. Leguire raised the American flag after leathernecks recaptured that portion of the city. It caused an Army staff officer to growl, "Ever since that flag-raising picture

on Iwo Jima, I'm convinced a Marine would rather carry a flag into battle than a weapon."

Col Puller, a member of the division that had turned Korea from a disastrous rout into a stunning victory, replied, "Not a bad idea. A man with a flag in his pack and the desire to put it on an enemy strong point isn't likely to bug out."

The sun finally broke over the high-rises of Seoul the morning that veterans and their families headed for the Kimpo International Airport. If they ever return to Seoul, they will land at Inchon International. Kimpo will handle any domestic flights they may take. There is even a possibility they will be able to fly into Wonsan or Hungnam up near the Changjin, misnomered before WW II by occupying Japanese forces as the Chosin Reservoir.

It was a good trip. The veterans, for the most part, came to the realization that their time in Korea, both in 2000 and especially in 1950, had been well-spent.

The most striking feature of the Inchon War Memorial is the sculpture of three warriors who could easily be Americans or Koreans, Marines or soldiers, all of whom participated in the landing at Inchon. The sculpture is another reason why "that war" in Korea is not forgotten.



Korea too paid a heavy price in blood, losing more than a million of her people in the south alone.