Korea: The Unfinished War

TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Date: July 1, 2003

The Cold War Turns Hot

The news came, finally, on July 27th, 1953. After three years of staggeringly bloody warfare and two years of halting negotiations, a U.S.-led United Nations team and Communist representatives from North Korea and China signed a truce in Panmunjom, North Korea.

A Universal Studios newsreel put it this way: "The long war, undertaken to stop Red aggression, is over. The enemy holds less territory than before his troops marched, but the cost has been bitter for both sides...."

The war had ended in stalemate, with Korea still divided. Two million or more Koreans and Chinese were dead - along with almost 37,000 Americans. The Americans who fought in Korea returned home not to parades but, mostly, silence.

In this special report, we explore a war that's often overlooked but that helped to define global politics, and American life, for the second half of the 20th century.

Vince Krepps is a smallish, soft-spoken man, 72 years old - a typical age for a Korean War veteran. He's one of the roughly one million veterans of that war alive today. Vince steps lightly on the big granite map under his feet, the map of the Korean peninsula. It's part of the Maryland State Korean War Veterans Memorial, which lies along a little-traveled part of Baltimore's inner harbor.

Vince walks off the north end of the map, into where China would be, and points to the list of names etched into the slightly-elevated stone arch that wraps around the memorial.

"I think the K's start in the next tablet over," he says. He finds what he's looking for. "He's the third marker, the third name down that's etched in marble here. 'Krepps, Richard W.'"

Losing a brother is devastating for anybody. But when Vince Krepps came into the world in the little coal and steel town of Linwood, Pennsylvania, in 1931, his twin brother Richard came right behind him.

"We were never parted," he recalls. "Oh, we got measles together, we got everything together, you know. And as we got older we went on dates together with the girls that we met. We joined the Army together - was in the same platoon, just different squads."

The 19-year-old twins landed in Korea with the 2nd Infantry Division in the summer of 1950. They'd come for what President Truman called a 'police action.' That's a phrase that infuriates Korea veterans to this day.

"I heard it started from a reporter and he [Truman] just picked up on it," says Vince. "Somebody says, 'You mean this is a police action?' He says, 'Yes, that's what it is, it's a police action.' We was only over there for a short period of time to chase the North Koreans out of South Korea and the war would be over in a few months and we'd all be home.

"But it didn't turn out that way."

In the late 1940's, with World War II freshly behind them, Americans hoped peace and prosperity had finally come to stay. Millions bought new homes in the suburbs and had babies; there was talk of a new gadget called a television; Perry Como sang about doing as you please "in a land where dollar bills are falling off the trees," in his hit, "Dreamer's Holiday."

But as the 40s closed, an emerging global enemy looked ready to cut the holiday short.

In September, 1949, President Harry Truman announced that the Soviet Union had detonated an atomic bomb the previous month. Just weeks later, Communist forces led by Mao Tse-tung took power in China. In January, 1950, accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury.

The Red Scare was on, in Senator Joseph McCarthy's speeches and in radio debates about whether to officially ban the U.S. Communist Party.

American leaders said they'd learned from their experience with the Nazis that the U.S. needed to confront the world's bullies sooner rather than later.

At the same time, though, the United States had dramatically downsized its military. Especially in Asia. Almost nobody guessed that the first big test of the Cold War would come in Korea, the Utah-sized peninsula that juts out from Asia's east end. It had been sliced in half at the end of World War II, when the Soviet Union occupied the North and the Americans the South. The two occupation zones had hardened into separate countries, one a communist dictatorship tied to the Soviet Union, the other a corrupt, authoritarian society linked to the United States. In 1948 and '49, the Soviets and the Americans had pulled most of their troops off the peninsula.

Neither South Korea nor its American protector were ready for what happened on June 25th, 1950.

Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered…

"The war which occurred that day occurred right after I had been married, and I had just recently returned from my honeymoon," recalls Alexander Haig, later a four-star general and Secretary of State in the Reagan administration.

In the summer of 1950, Haig was a 25-year-old aide in General Douglas MacArthur's occupation headquarters in Tokyo. He was on duty that Sunday morning, June 25th, when a phone call came in from across the Sea of Japan, in Seoul. It was John Muccio, the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea.

"And he told me that the North Koreans had attacked, an attack that was launched at six that morning, down several routes, with massive forces," Haig recalls.

Both North and South Korea had been itching for a fight, and there'd been dozens of skirmishes and false alarms in recent months. Not this time, says Haig. "[Muccio] assured me that it was the real thing, and I immediately called my immediate commander, General Almond. Almond then immediately called MacArthur."

Over the next few days, President Truman held intensive discussions with his advisors in Washington, and with General MacArthur in Tokyo via teletype conference. Al Haig recalls sitting in on several of the "telecons" in the Tokyo headquarters.

"I think both MacArthur and the President concluded that this was an action that could not be tolerated," Haig says, "because it was clearly instigated by the Soviet Union."

In fact, documents released by Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union suggest the attack was instigated by North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, not Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. But the documents also show that the North Koreans asked for, and got, Stalin's permission. The war between the Koreas was two things at once, most historians now agree: a civil war, and an opportunistic foray by the communist bloc.

"All of the years of argument in the Cold War were finally at a decision point," says historian Roy Flint, a former dean of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point who now teaches at Lees-McRae College in North Carolina. "You either believe all the things you've been saying or you don't."

U.S. leaders had wavered, publicly and privately, on whether they would defend South Korea militarily. Some historians suspect the war might have been prevented entirely if the Americans had made clear that they would respond to a North Korean assault.

In any case, now that the attack had come, Truman saw no alternative.

"And he responded in a way that shaped the rest of the 20th century," says Flint. "That's how important I think the decision was."

"Mauled and Humiliated"

Meeting in emergency session - and with the Soviets absent, [they were boycotting over the U.N.'s refusal to recognize Communist China] - the U.N. Security Council voted to defend South Korea. It put the United States in charge, and named MacArthur commander of the allied force. This would be the U.N.'s first war.

Fifty-three countries registered their support, and twenty-two of them offered troops and other help. But the U.S. would carry the main military load - something it wasn't prepared to do.

Jack Goodwin of Waco, Texas was a 19-year-old private with the 21st Infantry, stationed on the Japanese island of Kyushu. "I was almost ready to come home when the war started," Goodwin recalls. "They told us we were going to Korea. We said, 'Where's that?'"

Goodwin was among 406 infantry soldiers in Task Force Smith - the first Americans to reach Korea, on July 2nd, 1950. The men flew into South Korea, then boarded trains, then trucks, then finally walked, Goodwin says, to Osan, south of Seoul. "And that's where we dug in."

On their way north, the Americans had passed fleeing South Korean soldiers and refugees. Task Force Smith's job was to take a position on a hill and slow the North Korean blitz until reinforcements could follow.

War correspondent Marguerite Higgins of the New York Herald Tribune was the only woman to cover the Korean War up close. In a speech later that year she recalled walking on the morning of July 4th into "the muddy, flea-infested hut which held the battalion command post. General Barth, then assistant commander, strode into our hut with the news, 'Red tanks are heading this way.'"

Higgins recalled that the general added confidently, "'Colonel Smith's battalion on up ahead is going to take them on. I'm confident that he can hold.'"

But the men of Task Force Smith carried obsolete World War II weapons. And they were outnumbered ten to one.

The North Koreans "come through with tanks," says then-GI Goodwin - new, Soviet-built tanks - "and that got us because we didn't have nothing to take out a tank. They just went right around us and started shooting us from the back. I got off the hill and got captured the next morning."

Goodwin would spend more than three years in North Korean and Chinese prisoner-of-war camps. When the dead and missing were counted and a few survivors had drifted in, the commander of Task Force Smith found he'd lost 153 of his 406 infantrymen.

That's how things went in those first weeks, as the U.N. threw in troops as it could muster them and had them repeatedly overrun. In the first month of the Korean War, more than 2,800 Americans were killed.

In a rare combat audio recording made by the U.S. Department of Defense program "Time for Defense," broadcast during the war on ABC radio, reporter Tom Flanagan captured the sounds of uncomfortably close artillery explosions

followed by the screams of a South Korea soldier who'd been wounded in the leg. "This is getting a little too close for me," Flanagan said nervously into his microphone.

In another recording, a battle-weary regimental commander complains, 'the North Koreans have no consideration for loss of life. They have no hesitancy in losing five hundred lives to gain a small piece of ground."

"I saw my countrymen mauled and humiliated," Higgins said near the end of 1950, "by a raggedy-tag army of Soviet-directed Orientals whom we had nicknamed "gooks" and earmarked as pushovers."

For President Truman, the lesson of these humiliations was that America needed military might to match its role in the world. Speaking with reporters on his way to meet MacArthur on Wake Island a few months into the war, Truman said: "In one generation we've come from an isolated republic, to the position of the leadership of the world. And as the most powerful nation in the world, we have to assume world responsibilities."

Congress agreed. U.S. military spending tripled during the three years of the Korean War and never again sank to pre-Korean War levels.

The Brothers Krepps See Combat

By August, 1950, U.N. forces had been backed into the southeastern corner of South Korea, around the port of Pusan. It was then, in mid-August, that Vincent Krepps and his twin brother Richard landed with the 2nd Infantry.

The brothers had joined the Army, and gone to the fight, eagerly, Vince says. They'd watched the last war on the big screen.

"My image of war was what I seen in World War II, a lot of love stories and we won the battles. And people got killed, but you know all the wars had great endings."

The Krepps' green, ill-prepared unit spent thirteen quiet days at the front, watching the enemy across the Naktong River. Then, just after dark on August 31st, "mortar and artillery came raining in on us."

The North Koreans crossed the river and encircled Krepps's unit on surrounding hills. By morning Vince found himself pinned in a ditch, bullets 'cutting the grass' overhead. An officer ordered him to make a run for help. That meant a zigzagging sprint to an abandoned tank on the road. Then a wild drive in search of friendly forces.

"If you was ever in a tin shed during a hail storm you know what it sounded like. They were hitting my tank with everything they could hit. I could see bursts, explosions in front of me."

Further down the road, Vince stopped to help other soldiers load badly wounded Americans onto a truck. "Their chests was just laid open, blood all over them, you know. Some of them had their face blown away, arms tore off of them - I wasn't ready for any more combat, I'll be honest with you. I'd seen enough already at that time."

Vince's actions earned him a Silver Star for gallantry. His brother Richard survived that battle, too. A week later, the brothers got a present: they were assigned to pull guard duty together.

"We spent the whole three or four days - we were together talking about what we'd experienced, and home, and enjoying each other's company. Then pretty soon a call came from the front for a driver that had been wounded, and my brother was called back. And this time when we hugged and said our goodbyes" - Vince pauses to contain emotion that wells up at the memory - "we knew, you know, that we might never see each other again. We knew what it was all about now.

"That's the last time I seen him."

MacArthur's Bold Move

"As I talk with you," President Truman said in a radio address to the nation, "thousands of families in this land of ours have a son, or a brother, or a husband fighting in Korea."

It was the first of September, 1950, two months after the North Korean army stormed across the border at the 38th Parallel into South Korea. United Nations forces, thousands already dead and wounded, had been beaten back into the southeast corner of the Korean peninsula. There, 100,000 troops under the U.S. 8th Army fought to avoid being pushed into the sea, while more forces steamed across the Pacific.

President Truman sounded a note that may have seemed too optimistic, given the facts on the ground. "We believe the invasion has reached its peak. The task remaining is to crush it. Our men are confident, the United Nations command is confident, that it will be crushed. The power to do this is being gathered in Korea."

That wasn't just rhetoric. Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had just approved a plan conceived by General Douglas MacArthur: a bold amphibious landing far behind enemy lines on the west coast of South Korea at the port of Inchon. The Joint Chiefs had reluctantly recommended approval of the plan after a meeting with MacArthur in Tokyo.

Alexander Haig, then a young aide to MacArthur's chief of staff, remembers being "a fly on the wall" at that meeting - sitting outside a door left ajar and taking notes.

The Joint Chiefs were "vehemently opposed" to MacArthur's Inchon plan, Haig recalls. "They thought it was far too risky."

In the Tokyo meeting, the chiefs of the Army and Navy told MacArthur that Inchon was too far behind enemy lines. The port's narrow channel would make the Marines sitting ducks. Its dramatic tides would make the timing too tricky.

Officially, the Joint Chiefs outranked MacArthur. But there was only one MacArthur - then seventy years old, a five-star general and hero of the Pacific in World War II.

"He had been a general in World War I!" Haig points out. "So he was viewed by the military as some kind of a demigod - or somebody who had to be brought down to earth."

In later accounts of the meeting, MacArthur and the Joint Chiefs would say that the general offered a long, reasoned argument for why the Inchon landing would work.

Haig remembers it differently: "After all of these expressions of resistance, I recall his taking his pipe out and putting it in the ashtray and standing up and saying 'Gentlemen, I'll land in Inchon on the 15th of September or you'll have a new commander.' And he walked out of the room and all opposition crumbled."

Decisive Moment

The 1st Marine Division, 17,000 strong, went ashore at Inchon on September 15th.

"Luckily the opposition at Inchon was not severe. The North Koreans only had about two thousand second-rate troops there," recalls Edwin Howard Simmons, a retired Marine brigadier general who was then a company commander with the 1st Marines.

The landing surprised the North Korean Army, which was then massed a hundred miles south, pressing down on Allied forces around Pusan.

"It literally turned the battlefield around and put us at the enemy's flank and in his rear," says Simmons. "The 8th Army came out of the Pusan Perimeter, attacked to the north, and essentially, by that time, the North Korean army was broken."

Within two weeks, the U.N. had taken back Seoul and restored the South Korean government in its capital. The North Koreans had retreated across the 38th Parallel into their own territory.

Now, U.S. leaders faced a crossroads.

"This is the decisive moment in the Korean War," says historian Roy Flint. "The Americans had a choice. And I say the Americans because they're calling the shots militarily for the United Nations. Should we cross the 38th Parallel?"

In other words, U.N. forces could declare victory and go home, having chased the aggressors out of South Korea. Or they could push northward, finish off the North Korean army, and try to reunite the peninsula.

Urged on by MacArthur and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Truman adopted the new, more ambitious war aim. Some of Truman's advisers feared disaster - with good reason.

"If you look at the map," says Flint, "they're going to invade across the 38th Parallel into an expanding, fan-shaped peninsula, which is going to stretch the Korean and American forces thinly at best while that force is advancing toward the Chinese border!"

"We shouldn't have gone above the 38th Parallel. That's where we should have stopped," says Frank Miller, now of Durham, North Carolina. Miller was an artilleryman in the 1st Marine Division. His unit would confront a new enemy on the North Korean side of the line. "There was reports that the Chinese were seen, but MacArthur and his crew in Japan didn't pay any attention to it."

That is, hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers were crossing into North Korea under the cover of night to wait for the Americans. Frank Miller would be wounded fighting them.

"Too Much to Ask"

If you would have told GI Vince Krepps in November, 1950, that the war would last another 33 months and cost tens of thousands more American lives, he wouldn't have believed you.

"The North Korean army at that time was pretty much a defeated army," he says. "They was talking about being home for Christmas and the war ending." Vince was eager to re-join his 2nd Infantry Division. "Here I was in Japan and I wanted to be with my brother."

Then-19-year-old Vince and his twin brother Richard hadn't seen each other for two months, since their emotional goodbye after pulling guard duty together in September. First Richard had been wounded, then Vince. Each had gone to Japan to recuperate, but they'd missed each other by a few days.

Vince had hoped that both his and his brother's wounds might be of the million-dollar variety - the kind that gets you sent home. But now Richard had been sent back to the fighting, so that's where Vince wanted to be. He'd hurt his leg in a truck accident. "I hobbled out of the bed and my right leg wouldn't touch the ground," he recalls. "So I spent a few more weeks getting therapy to straighten that out, but I walked out of the hospital limping. I wanted to be back."

As it turned out, the delay in Vince's recovery would keep him out of a hellish ordeal in the North Korean mountains.

It was one of the coldest winters on record - howling winds and temperatures way below zero. Allied soldiers were not equipped for such bitter cold. A Marine General, O.P. Smith, wrote to his commandant in Washington that "a winter

campaign in the mountains of North Korea is too much to ask of the American soldier or Marine." Smith also worried that allied troops were spreading themselves too far, too fast.

Nonetheless, from his office in Tokyo, General MacArthur ordered his forces north toward the Yalu River, North Korea's border with Communist China.

It was supposed to be a mop-up operation, recalls the then-company commander with the 1st Marines, Edwin Simmons. Now 81 and living in Alexandria, Virginia, Simmons has written military histories on the Korean War as well as a Korean War novel, *Dog Company Six*. He speaks with a thin voice and seems to struggle for breath between words. He suffered permanent damage to his lungs in the North Korean cold.

"We considered the war won," Simmons recalls, although U.N. forces moving north had taken a number of Chinese prisoners. MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo "tended to dismiss these Chinese prisoners as being a few volunteers."

In fact, the Chinese had begun crossing the Yalu River, in force, in October. By Thanksgiving, historians now estimate, Chinese troops in North Korea numbered several hundred thousand.

Just as the United States would not tolerate a Communist invasion into South Korea, China's Mao Tse-Tung had decided, with urging from Stalin in the Soviet Union, that he couldn't accept American troops on his border.

"No End To Them"

Just after Thanksgiving, 1950, allied divisions streamed northward in two columns, east and west - separated by a spine of high mountains that splits North Korea. The Chinese army stayed hidden and let U.N. troops pass, then enveloped them and streamed out of the hills.

"They had on these quilted tan or brown uniforms," remembers Herb Dareff of the Army's 24th Division.

"I was scared," says Frank Miller of the 1st Marines. "The bugles blew and they were yelling and screaming."

Dareff remembers a dark joke that soldiers would tell later. Asked by an officer how many Chinese were coming over the hill, a grunt replies, "Well, a horde."

What's a horde? the officer asks. You mean a platoon? A battalion?

"No, a horde," Dareff says, delivering the punch line. "That means there's no end to them. There's no end to them."

The Chinese Army cut down Americans and their allies by the thousands. Mao's forces lost even more men. "It was the most depressing, extravagant use of human resources I've ever seen," says Haig, who would travel to some of the battle scenes with his boss, General Ned Almond. "The Chinese would attack against a steel wall of heavy fire over and over, and the [Chinese] bodies would be stacked up like cord wood."

As ill-clothed as the Americans were for the North Korean cold, the Chinese may have been worse off. Most had no gloves and their shoes were made of cloth with rubber, sneaker-like soles. Many simply froze to death.

But the sheer numbers of Chinese troops won the day. U.N. forces beat a long retreat, some units withdrawing more than 200 miles, back below the 38th Parallel. MacArthur's drive for the Yalu River had cost the allies 13,000 dead, wounded, captured and missing. Thousands more suffered severe frostbite.

A week after the debacle in the North Korean mountains, Vince Krepps returned from the hospital. His 2nd Division had lost almost a third of its men, 5,000 dead and wounded, fighting through a gauntlet near the village of Kunu-ri.

"They looked just like they were," Vince says of his surviving mates, "a bunch of defeated men. They call this the 'thousand-mile stare,' when guys have seen more than they can cope with.

"And I just kept looking amongst the wounded and the guys for my brother, I was just hoping and praying to…see him there somewhere. And finally it just overwhelmed me." Vince remembers leaning against an M-10 tank, crying, "when two guys came over to me and said, 'Vince, sorry we have to tell you this, but Dick didn't make it out of Kunu-ri. He's missing in action.'"

The soldiers tried to reassure Vince that some men were still straggling in, that Richard might turn up yet. And, in fact, Vince would later get encouraging news that would give him hope. But it would take him 48 years to fully learn the fate of his brother.

Truman vs. MacArthur

The scale of America's defeat by the Chinese Army sank in back home.

"Certainly [there's] nothing in the 20th century to compare with it," says historian Flint. "We were defeated! The people were shocked, the Congress was shocked, the President and his staff were shocked."

With the Chinese entry into the war, Harry Truman faced perhaps his gravest decision yet. "The future of civilization depends on what we do - on what we do now, and in the months ahead," Truman said in a speech to the nation on December 15th, 1950.

The long-running tension between the president and his aggressive commander, MacArthur, now bloomed into a confrontation. MacArthur's Inchon landing in September had been a brilliant success, his late-November march for the Yalu a catastrophe. Now MacArthur wanted to up the ante again. He asked to unleash the United States' allies in Taiwan (then known as Formosa), to bomb Chinese bases in Manchuria, and he demanded more U.S. troops to attack the Chinese. The proud general wanted to undo his humiliating defeat, says Flint. "His position in history was at stake here."

So was Truman's.

The president and his advisers wanted no part of a wider war with China - a war that, they feared, might well be joined by the Soviet Union with its superior conventional forces and its new atomic capability. The Truman administration began signaling that it would try to fight its way back to a "position of strength" - regaining lost ground south of the 38th Parallel - and then seek a negotiated end to the war.

Over the next several months, as fighting continued, MacArthur made a series of public statements that seemed aimed at sabotaging that goal. In press interviews, conversations with foreign diplomats, and letters to veterans' groups, MacArthur ridiculed the notion of a negotiated peace and complained of the "restrictions" and "inhibitions" being placed on him from Washington.

In late March, while Secretary of State Dean Acheson floated hints of a willingness to talk with the Chinese, MacArthur issued a statement taunting the Chinese as an overrated military force and demanding that the commander of the Chinese Army meet with him personally or risk a wider war. The statement violated an explicit administration ban on unauthorized foreign policy pronouncements.

Finally, in early April, Republican Congressman Joseph Martin read a letter from MacArthur on the House floor; in it, MacArthur deplored his bosses' decision not to use forces from Formosa against the Communist Chinese.

That did it.

"I have thought long and hard about this question of extending the war in Asia," Truman said in an address to the nation on April 11th, 1951, explaining his decision to use restraint in Korea - and to fire the legendary MacArthur. "I believe that we must try to limit the war to Korea for these vital reasons," Truman went on: "to make sure that the precious lives of our fighting men are not wasted; to see that the security of our country and the free world is not needlessly jeopardized; and to prevent a third world war. A number of events have made it evident that General MacArthur did not agree with that policy."

"I was happy," recalls Army veteran Harry Cohen, now of Boynton Beach, Florida. He was in the hospital recovering from a combat wound when he heard Truman had relieved MacArthur. Cohen had never agreed with the decision to pursue the North Koreans north of the 38th Parallel. "Of course the guy in the next bed said, 'Hey, we should go all the way and go through Moscow!' I says, 'You're crazy. They got a lot more Chinese than we have Americans.'" Cohen estimates that U.S. soldiers, "four to one," supported the firing of MacArthur.

Edwin Simmons didn't agree. He and his cohorts in the Marines, he says, were "shocked and disappointed" at MacArthur's firing. Simmons, like many other observers, thought Truman saw the Republican MacArthur as a potential rival for the presidency. "We saw this as the machinations of a politically-minded president against a leader in the field," Simmons says.

U.S. allies, led by Britain, praised Truman's firing of a general they considered a loose canon. But in the United States, the removal of the venerable MacArthur created a firestorm. The general returned from Japan to huge parades in San Francisco, Washington and New York. In his historic "old soldiers never die" speech to a joint session of Congress, the general attacked Truman's decision to rein him in in Korea.

"Once war is forced upon us," MacArthur intoned, "there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision."

But public enthusiasm for the hawkish MacArthur wouldn't last. His career was over.

A Necessary War?

Less than a year into the Korean War, Harry Truman had made a series of decisions that would frame U.S. foreign policy for the next forty years. America would try to avoid confronting the big Communist powers head-on, but it would keep its military strong and fight proxy wars to head off Communist expansion.

"I argue that the Korean War was fundamental in shaping the Cold War as we know it," says historian William Stueck of the University of Georgia. In the years just before the Korean conflict, Stueck says, the Soviet Union's vastly superior military strength made the world unstable and dangerous. Korea woke up the West; it kick-started Truman's military build-up and led to a strengthening of NATO. The result: a new balance of power that would contain the Soviet Union until its collapse four decades later, Stueck says. "So I call it in some ways a substitute for World War III, or even, perhaps, a necessary war."

Korea would also serve as a Cold War prelude to the next, far less popular war - in Vietnam.

In Korea, meanwhile, U.N. forces rallied in the spring of 1951 under their new commander, General Matthew Ridgeway. They pushed the Chinese back to slightly north of the 38th Parallel, the war's original starting line. Then both sides dug in and started to look for a way out.

Peace talks began on July 10th, 1951, but quickly bogged down in mistrust and recriminations. The talks would continue, haltingly, for more than two years. So would bloody battles for small pieces of ground with nicknames like Heartbreak Ridge and Pork Chop Hill.

The stalemate broke in 1953 after both superpowers got new leadership. In Moscow, Stalin died and was replaced by the more moderate Georgi Malenkov. President Dwight Eisenhower took office and kept a campaign promise to stop the fighting. An armistice - though not a peace treaty - was signed on July 27th, 1953.

Vince Krepps was back home with his family in Maryland. He'd been sent home more than two years earlier after his twin, Richard, went missing in action; if Richard was dead, Vince would be the sole surviving son.

"Oh, I was happy it was over," Vince recalls, "because I would soon learn that my brother might be coming home."

Vince had reason to believe that might happen. He'd learned that Richard had not been killed at Kunu-ri in December, 1950, but had been captured by the Chinese. In the spring of 1951, a relative had spotted Richard in a newspaper photograph of POWs. The photo had been released by the Chinese for propaganda purposes. Now, with the war over, "my family and I just kept looking and looking at the lists of those repatriated [POWs], and we never saw his name."

Chinese and North Korean POW camps were notorious. Some lacked food, shelter and medicine. 2,800 Americans, more a third of those taken prisoner, died in captivity during the war. Many were marched to death. Hundreds were simply executed.

Vince found a few returning men who'd been captured with Richard. They said they'd heard that Richard had died. That was all. Vince got no more solid information until December first, 1998 - exactly 48 years after Richard was captured. That day a letter arrived from one Ron Lovejoy.

Closure

Ron Lovejoy's daughter "had been reading the Internet," Vince says, "and I [had] put two messages on the Internet searching for my brother, anybody that knew what happened to him in Camp Number Five."

From his home in Nevada, Lovejoy wrote that he had been a POW in Korea - in Camp Five, a Chinese-run camp on the Yalu River in Pyongtang, North Korea. Lovejoy wrote that he knew Richard Krepps and was with him when he died.

Vince met Lovejoy a few months later at a POW reunion in Georgia. They hugged and sat down in Vince's hotel room. Lovejoy brought a picture of Richard that he'd kept since 1950. He'd also written the Krepps family's old Pennsylvania address, told to him by Richard, in a small notebook.

In Camp Five that winter, Lovejoy told Vince, Richard was ill and depressed - so sad and homesick that he seemed to give up. Lovejoy couldn't get Richard to eat his meager rations of millet and barley.

"And one morning I guess he went to talk to Richard and he didn't respond, and Richard had died," Vince says, recalling Lovejoy's story. "And the guards took [Richard] out and they stacked him on top of a bunch of other dead prisoners like cord wood. And they just laid there 'til somebody came along and buried them.

"I guess Ron put closure on the fact that somebody cared about Richard," Vince says, making no effort to fight back tears. "Somebody tried to feed him, somebody tried to make him well enough to come home. And that's all I ever asked for. I wanted to make sure he had a friend."

Vince says the war will really be finished for him if and when Richard's remains come home. Richard is one of more than 8,000 Korean War POW's and MIA's still unaccounted for.

Of the 1.8 million Americans who served in the Korean War, perhaps half are still alive.

A couple dozen of them met for breakfast one Sunday morning in March, 2003, at a firehouse in Delray Beach, Florida.

Veteran Murray Havaline, an active member of the local chapter of the Korean War Veterans Association, stands at the podium and tells the assembled men and their wives about a new national cemetery being built in nearby Wellington, Florida. He reminds the vets that they're entitled to have their wives and children buried beside them in national cemeteries, if they like. The new cemetery is still under construction, Havaline adds. "In case someone should drop dead earlier, they will plant them [in another cemetery] temporary, and then move their bodies."

Havaline speaks so breezily about the prospect of death, perhaps, because he came so close to it a half-century ago. Havaline's face - and, he says, the skin on 80% of his body - is disfigured from a "friendly" napalm attack on Heartbreak Ridge, on Christmas Eve, 1952. A 2nd Division officer called in an air strike, but in the dark the Air Force plane dropped its load on U.S. troops.

"There were 285 of us. I'm the only one that came out of it alive. My 284 buddies were all burned to death," Havaline says.

Havaline betrays no bitterness toward the Air Force pilot or the government that sent him to Korea. "I served when I had to serve and I got hurt, unfortunately. But I'm not sorry. I would have done it again if I had to."

Many Korean War vets, as boys, had watched young men just a few older than themselves go off to World War II and return as celebrated heroes. Most went to Korea with a similar sense of unquestioning duty.

But coming home in uniform in 1953 was not like it had been in 1945. Ask Korea veterans about their coming-home experience, and you get a similar story again and again. Army veteran Peter Taormina, now of Boynton Beach, went back to his old neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper East Side in 1953.

"I went to this park that we used to hang out and play ball in," Taormina remembers. "There was a couple of guys playing handball there that I knew. I hadn't seen these guys in about three years. 'Hey, Pete, where you been? I haven't seen you around in awhile!' I mean you just came back to nothing."

"I'm a little bitter," says Army veteran Al Ratner when asked about what's often called the forgotten war. "People don't give you regard for Korea."

Ratner, who's originally from Brooklyn, sometimes gives talks about the war to south Florida schoolchildren. He tells them a peace treaty was never signed, and the U.S. military never left. The two sides never stopped pointing weapons at one another across the border. "From 1953 to present, there was 218 Americans got killed."

Ratner tells the students that 37,000 U.S. troops still defend South Korea.

"Know what the kids tell us?" Ratner says, a wry glint in his eye. "Are they as old as you?'"

In 1999, President Clinton declared Korea not a police action but a war.

Korea veterans watch recent wars, like the one in Iraq, and marvel at the expectation that war won't cost but a few American lives.

Vince Krepps says he never tires of telling his story - and, especially, that of his twin brother, Richard, one of the 36,891 Americans who died in the Korean War.

"I'm just proud of him and proud of what he did," says Vince. "I would have loved to had him come home and enjoy what we have now, even though some people may think these are tough times. I don't think they really know what tough means."

The Armed Forces Integrate

Better Than the Coalmines

From the first weeks of the Korean War, the remarkably high casualty rate among American soldiers began forcing historic change inside the U.S. military. Americans were killed and wounded at double the rate in the later Vietnam War. Combats units became so short-handed, military leaders resorted to something they'd long resisted: sending large numbers of African American soldiers to fight in combat units.

According to the prejudice of the time, blacks made cowardly, undisciplined soldiers. With few exceptions, they were barred from combat in World Wars I and II. Blacks had served as cooks, truck drivers and supply clerks - usually in segregated units. In 1948, President Truman ordered the armed forces to integrate. Many senior commanders simply ignored the command. When the Korean War started, the military was still deeply segregated. Blacks signed up anyway, seeing a better chance of getting ahead in uniform than in civilian life.

Former soldiers explained their reasoning: "My name is Ike Gardner and I'm from Lynch, Kentucky. I enlisted in the Army because I didn't want to go in the coalmines."

"Eddie Wright. Everything I did in military was better than what I experienced in fields in Georgia."

"I'm William F. Peterson. Most people call me Bill. And I think I said, 'I'd rather go to Korea, because at least you issue me a rifle and I'm allowed to use it. Now, if I went to Biloxi, Mississippi, it might be used on me.'"

Unprepared Soldiers Are Overwhelmed

Newsreel: "The Americans engaged in a bitter holding action. Trading space for time in Korea. The enemy infiltrating behind our lines had to be fought where you found him..."

As Korea got underway, black troops on occupation duty in Japan were hurried into battle. Among them, the 24th Army Infantry Regiment, one of the military's most famous all-black units, and one of it's last. The 24th Infantry had a proud history, dating back to the unit's creation just after the Civil War. They were nicknamed the Buffalo Soldiers during the Indian Wars in the American West. But in the chaotic early months of combat in Korea, the 24th foundered. The North Koreans swarmed over the new infantrymen.

Jesse Brown, a veteran who was part of the 24th, explains, "They were firing at us with everything they had. And guys, first time I had heard men hollering and crying and first time I smelled as much blood as I smelled laying there on the ground. Guys that I knew were hollering out. We couldn't see one another we were just calling out 'Who's hit? Who's hit?' and they were hollering 'medic medic medic.' "

Newsreel: "Off at the front, 30 miles north of Taejon on 7 July, United States infantrymen have been forced to withdraw before North Korean tank columns. Their routine is to dig in, fire, withdraw. Dig in, and fire again on practically an around the clock schedule."

Bugging Out

What the Army called "withdrawal" was often an outright scramble to safety. GIs fought to take a town or a hill, but didn't get enough reinforcement and had to pull back. A new term was coined in Korea for such an inglorious retreat: "bugging out." Senior Army commanders blamed the all-black 24th Infantry for bugging out more often than white units.

"They said that the deuce-four was always on the run. Well every outfit I seen in Korea was always on the run," remembers veteran James Williams. "And I fought with all-white outfit—they did the same thing the 24th did."

However, in the first weeks of the war, some units never got punished. In white units where men bugged out, officers in charge were transferred out or demoted.

End of the Buffalo Soldiers

"In the 24th Infantry, they put everybody back on the line, nothing changed. No officers were fired—it just went on like before," explains Army historian William Hammond. "Not everybody runs. Not even the majority runs. But it weakens the whole organization. The unit as a whole was not working and it was not being fixed, because nobody expected black people to do anything different."

Within a few months, the Army cracked down hard-- 60 men of the 24th Infantry regiment were court-marshalled for cowardice—a number far higher than the whites in their division. Hammond says, the outfit was snake-bit, their reputation poisoned. In October of '51, after more than a year of combat in Korea, the Army disbanded the Buffalo Soldiers.

"It hurt. It hurt. I was hurt," recalls Jesse Brown. "I was hurt because when the U.S. Army was being pushed back to the Japan Sea, they called on my regiment, me, us, I was there, we held that perimeter. We held that perimeter. And we did not fall back. And they did not push us into the Japan Sea. It was my regiment— the 24th regiment— that held that perimeter and did not fall back."

Four decades later, Army historians would review the 24th's record and find that its men, individually, fought as bravely and often as well as any others, white or black. But prejudice and poor leadership doomed the 24th. To those in the military who favored integration, the 24th was an example of why all-black units had to go: segregation was bad for morale, it was inefficient, it was outdated. As the fighting in Korea intensified, the military was under increasing pressure to integrate the ranks of officers and enlisted men.

No Bigots in Foxholes

Newsreel: "The 96 field artillery battalion is made up of negro enlisted men and white and negro officers and it's a smooth running team…"

The military brass was divided over integration. Some wanted all the troops they could get, no matter the color. Others said whites and blacks would fight each other instead of the enemy. Korea would prove that wrong.

"You've heard that there's no atheists in foxholes? There are no bigots," laughs John Cannon, who was a black paratrooper in Korea. "You want somebody! They could be polka dot and you get to love him. You get to love him. He gets to look out for you. You get to look out for him and all of that shit dies. It just dies."

On top of sharing a foxhole...integration meant sharing mess halls and showers. For many a young man - black or white - the integrated military was the first time he came so close to the other race.

Veterans John B. Jackson explains, "I came out of a segregated community in Texas. So when I went into the army, then we had to sleep with the different races. I was in shock that we were sleeping bunk-to-bunk."

Another vet, Charles Day, of Penola, Texas remembers, "I was with the Triple-9 in Korea. I was probably the second white man in A-battery. I said 'My Lord, what have I got into?' To me, they could do a more efficient job between theirselves than having some white dude interfering with them. But after I learned some of their key words, everything smoothed out, but it was rough there for two or three months."

Black veteran Samuel King also belonged to the 999th artillery, "When they brought 'white' in, I remember the first guy we got. His name was Lucas. And we had these little canvas cots and you kind of make it up like home. And Lucas had his girlfriend's picture on the thing and you know the guys would just go up and take the picture off of there and say 'she's staying with me tonight' and put it over by their bed. So Lucas looked at us and it might have been because he was the only white in the outfit with 20-some other guys - black - so maybe he didn't say anything. You know, so then the others started coming in and Lucas was kind of old hat."

Struggling to Integrate

In dozens of interviews fifty years later, black and white veterans of Korea remember integration as generally smooth and peaceful. But there were certainly problems, especially when it came to the new experience of blacks commanding whites. Mark Hannah of Wichita, Kansas was assigned to lead a white combat unit, "They didn't want me to become their squad leader, so they said, 'Well, we'll just kill the nigger. We've never had a nigger tell us what to do and we're not going to start now.'" The commander offered Hannah a choice - stay and be his jeep driver or find another unit. Hannah transferred out.

Enemy propaganda tried to exploit racial tensions among the U.S. troops. Static-filled radio broadcasts from the Chinese capital of Peking tried to stir up outrage among blacks about fighting for a segregated democracy. Combat veterans Curtis Morrow and Samuel King say the enemy would also drop leaflets into their foxholes.

"We all saw those pictures of a black man being hung and a bunch of white faces eating popcorn and little kids jeering and laughing and in the caption beneath the picture they would have 'Why are you here? Why are you fighting us? Is this what you're fighting for?'" recalls Morrow.

King says, "It was an embarrassment for us to have someone in a foreign country know how we were being treated. And we over here fighting these people to make it better for someone back home and we get back home and it's not going to be any better and we knew that, yet and still we had a job to do and we felt that we should do it."

To fight the cold war propaganda battle, the U.S. military made a proud display of integration success stories. This installment of *Time for Defense* contradicted one stereotype - that blacks were poor soldiers - while repeating another

Newsreel:"No story about the American Negro soldier would be complete without a spiritual. So let's return to the 96th for just a bit more, while some of the resting gunners sing 'I'm on the battlefield for my Lord.' "

Laying the Groundwork for Civil Rights

It would take decades for blacks to overcome blatant prejudice in the U.S. military. But President Truman's desegregation order was an historic opportunity for men like Bill Peterson.

"I went from a high-school dropout to almost a graduate degree," explains Peterson. "I don't think I would have gotten that far in civilian life. I think that history will reflect that the military led the way and is still leading the way for integration and people of color - to include women - in leadership roles."

The integrated military also meant that millions of whites went home with new knowledge about blacks. Charles Day was one of them.

"I found out they're smart, remembers Day. "Some of them are smart as whips…As a kid I just thought well, 'They're maybe not as good as me.' That opinion changed drastically after I got to Korea - after a period."

Interviewer: "Do you think it was a good thing that the army was integrated?"

"Yes, it changed some opinions - like it did me."

Historian Philip Klinkner says Korea would lay crucial groundwork for the growing civil rights movement in the U.S.

"I think it showed African Americans as well as white Americans that integrated institutions could work - that a lot of the sort of intellectual and pragmatic arguments that were made for Jim Crow institutions really were shown to be myths, that American could move toward a more integrated society without some sort of crisis setting in."

After Korea, the U.S. military became America's most integrated social institution, producing hundreds of black generals, offering education, job training and solid careers African Americans. Still, many black veterans say their service in Korea has been overlooked. They are the forgotten soldiers of a forgotten war. More than three thousand African Americans died in Korea. Veteran Nathan Street remembers helping one wounded black soldier who he says fought for a country, which at the time, scarcely deserved his sacrifice.

"He was hit in the head and the chest," recalls Street, "he was breathing heavy, like he was snoring, there was blood in his lungs. We got him down, carried him down the hill and I seen the medic later and asked how he was doing. He said he died. And I didn't know him. And I wish I could tell his family, we tried. And then I think, he gave his life for what? He probably couldn't vote where he came from. But…things like that haunt me."