

## A Soldier Serving in the DMZ in the 1960s by Michele Starkey

When someone tells you that they served in the DMZ in the 1960s, you automatically assume that they were in Vietnam. In this instance, Donald Plunkett served with the Army's 532<sup>nd</sup> Military Police in the other DMZ located in Panmunjom in Korea. The Joint Security Area (JSA) of Panmunjom was used by the two Koreas for diplomatic engagements and was also the site of military negotiations between the United Nations Command and North Korea. Throughout four decades of co-existence, nothing more than a temporary truce has ever been declared between North and South Korea.

In 1965 when Plunkett enlisted in the Army, his monthly pay was \$95. Plunkett told us that he enlisted before he was drafted because he wanted to become a member of the Division of Military Police. It would provide necessary training in his later years when he served with the NYS police department until his retirement in 1988.

After Plunkett's training was complete, he was sent to Panmunjon and he would serve his time in the DMZ as a member of the Joint Security Area better known as the JSA. Panmunjom was the truce village used by the two Koreas for diplomatic engagements and was also the site of military negotiations between the United Nations Command and North Korea. Military Police provided security for the JSA with guard forces of no more than 35 security personnel on duty at any given time and Plunkett was one of those American MPs.

He jokes that, "All of the military police who served in Panmunjom were six-feet or taller (Plunkett came in at 6'3") because the North Koreans couldn't look you in the eye. It's tough to look tough if you have to look up." He told us that they often joked that the North Koreans were "rice-propelled soldiers."

On June 16, 1966, Plunkett was asked to appear before his Commanding Officer who told him that his father had perished in a tragic accident stateside. His father's tugboat, the ESSO Vermont was involved in a collision at Kill Van Kull and all hands on board the tugboat were killed when the SS Texaco Massachusetts (the boat they were accompanying) collided with the British tank ship, the Alva Cape. Plunkett was sent home immediately and would finish out his military service at Ft. Dix.

He would later discover that five members of his unit were killed just 6 weeks after he left Panmunjom in Korea. "Sometimes something good comes out of something bad. If my dad wasn't killed in the tugboat accident, I would have most likely been killed along with my fellow MPs at Panmunjom in Korea."

It would be years later while serving with the NYS State Police diving team and performing joint diving excursions with the NYC Police Department that Plunkett would encounter an officer who was a member of the team that was on duty the day of his father's tragic tugboat accident that ended Plunkett's tour of duty in Korea. The NYC

police officer said, "We have something that belongs to you." The officer handed Plunkett the bell that was on his father's tugboat. "This is for you."

Today, Plunkett has that bell mounted on a plaque and it hangs in his Plum Point home overlooking the Hudson River. He shares with us, "June 16, 1966 I lost my dad but I left Panmunjom. My father's death saved my life and sometimes something good comes from something bad."