

Bill Furbush
Veteran,

Interviewed by the
Baldwinsville Messenger and the Baldwinsville Public Library
Baldwinsville, NY
July 28, 1994

Q: We are here today with Bill Furbush, who is an American Legion commander and a Korean War veteran. Bill, how did you get started in the service?

BF: I was drafted in the spring after the war began, the spring of 1951.

Q: What do you remember of what was going on at that time, about the war?

BF: The war began in the June of 1950, the North Koreans has swooped down on the South Koreans and pushed them all the way to Pusan. In the meantime, the American troops stationed in Japan got over there to help but the North Koreans just had too much momentum. The Americans did stop them at the Pusan perimeter and pushed them back up to the 30th parallel, almost to the changed border, which was when President McCarthy wanted to go over and invade China because of the Chinese heading over into North Korea. This was when McCarthy got the axe.

Q: What time frame are we here now?

BF: It was in the dead of winter, the supplies of the Americans were dwindling, even though they did the best they could, thousands of men and women died before successfully pushing the North Koreans down south of Seoul to the 30th parallel. I was stationed in a town not far south of Seoul as an MP for a short while. That was where they stopped them, and by that time, the American troops were coming over in great numbers because of the drafts taking place.

Q: What year is this?

BF: This is still 1951, the beginning of winter was the big push down but by the end of 1951, they had regrouped and we were not able to hold them. They may have gotten as far as [Tay-jeung?]. I remember we had come into Tay-Jeung, I was not in combat much but we were MP so we were right behind the lines. I remember looking across the city of Tay-Jeung, nothing was standing except for bank vaults, and everything else was just flattened. There were several Russian tanks, of course the Russians and North Koreans had been operating together but the tanks were abandoned there. By that time, the United Nations forces were on the offensive and the mainland resistance was more than stabilized. It ran from north of the 30th parallel on the east to just south of the 30th parallel on the west, the Koreans had lost one city called Kay-Seung and all of the other cities in South Korea had been liberated. It was mostly farming villages north of the 30th parallel, anyway on the east coast.

Q: What was North Korea like compared to South Korea?

BF: North Korea was always the mountainous part of Korea, the southern part provided almost all of the food for Korea. The North had many mines for various natural resources which is why it was valuable to the south. The North Koreans never did very far because they had limited food and the South Koreans were not able to use the North Korean resources.

Q: So how did it end up that way?

BF: The mainline resistance ran from north to south on the east side and that was how the Demilitarized zone was established which about twenty miles wide. And of course that was when peace talks went on but I'm not sure on the follow up or whether they declared peace or not. The zone was held there, of course there were violations like a tunnel created by the North Koreans so that they may invade the south, but that was discovered before it could be used. The North Koreans were very militaristic, they had nothing up there and they wanted the south back. Up until the fall of communism, I suppose they were supplied very well by China and Russia. Kim-ill sung was a very determined leader, the people saw him as a type of godfather figure.

Q: Getting back to you personally, how did your service run over?

BF: When I was drafted, I was the sheriff of Los Angeles County. I've been in the service before because of the basic training but right away they gave me the Military Police position because of my civilian work as a police officer, I got that right on the day I was drafted. When we got into Korea, we came in through Inchon. This wasn't the famous invasion of Inchon, which had happened earlier that year. After entering, I was immediately sent to Tea-Jung where I was assigned to a military police battalion where I would patrol the military supply route, this was our main job but then we were assigned to refuge control posts. When the civilian Koreans were pushed down, they wanted to go back, of course but they would impede our interests so we had to establish checkpoints where we turned back these refugees. That was out duty, that and patrolling the military supply routes. Also, one of the main jobs of the Military Police was to control in case of deserters and for anyone who was not authorized to be behind the lines, they were detained and had to be cleared. This was a United Nations operation so there were people from many countries fighting with us, it was a very interesting atmosphere. There were all types of jobs, including black market operations that we were in charge of, Also in the cities, we had to enforce the curfew hours.

Q: What was the makeup of your unit, was it mostly people from a policing background?

BF: No, in fact, there were only a few of us, they were mostly GIs, this was called the 519th military police battalion, they were stationed in Japan, that's one reason they were over there so soon, they were over right after the first invasion, they went up north with them, just behind the lines of course. And then they were pushed back which was when I joined them in Tae-Jung.

Q: How many men were in the battalion?

BF: If I remember correctly, we had 4 operational companies, each with about 200-250 men. We were on around the clock shifts, everything had to be manned at all times. It was interesting, towards the end we were up by the 30th parallel on the east coast, we weren't too far behind the line, and we could hear the guns all the time and occasionally would have to shuttle prisoners of war back to the rear. We were not in too heavy of danger, but of course the guys behind the lines were. I remember one particular place I was at where we made a big push up on the line and the poor Korean wounded were brought up in giant trucks, piled on top of each other, moaning. I felt very bad for them because they had no facilities or care like our troops did. Occasionally, we would catch infiltrators from the north who would try to cross the line, they were all Koreans so it was difficult to distinguish who was who.

Q: Now, was the language a problem for you? Since you had to deal with so many Koreans?

BF: There were two types of policemen, national policemen who worked for the Korean government, and Korean military police. Many times we had these policemen work as interpreters and usually had 2 or more in our group.

Q: So there was always somebody there who could speak the language?

BF: Oh yeah. The Koreans knew almost no English until the Japanese left and the Koreans took over their own government, then of course they got into English as much as they could but they were very limited, since there were no teachers while the Japanese didn't want the Koreans to learn English so there was that 5 year period where they were studying English like crazy.

Q: Well, it wasn't enough to full understand each other?

BF: We got by, we got by. Some were better than others. I have a very interesting story about that though, towards the end when I was in Japan, I was able to go over there to Korea for a vacation, it was just before the Seoul Olympics, there was this interpreter in my outfit when I was an MP there who I became rather good friends with, he was one of those who spoke English pretty well. I had his address from way back and he had mine, he knew I lived in Baldwinsville although I wasn't living in Baldwinsville, but my mother was there and he could always send a letter there. Somewhere around the seventies, my mother said she had gotten a postcard from this guy in Korea who asked if she knew anything about me and of course she had sent it to me. He was at the time at the east-west center in Hawaii studying English, so I wrote to him and on his way back he stopped to see me in Kyoto where I was living. And so I had his address till about 15 years ago. When I went back to Korea this time recently, I still had the address, I had no idea how current it was so I went to a tourist station and asked if there was any way in the world where he could find this person. He said that it was a pretty common name, he said he would see what he could do. When I got back into the hotel, there was a knock on the door and he had said he had found the man I've been looking for on the first try.

At the time he was the head of the English department in the largest women's university in the world. Very successful, he's probably retired now but we had a great time together and since then I went back again to see him in Seoul. Seoul has since become so large and beautiful. I was travelling with a Japanese friend who was also very interested in Korea, he was about my age and just about when the war was over he was about to be sent to Seoul to the imperial university there, run by the Japanese but of course the war stopped that. He had been studying some Korean as well so he knew a great deal about it.

Q: So how long were you over there and what happened?

BF: I arrived there in the spring of 1951 and stayed until just before Christmas of 1952, I was able to come home a little early on points but I extended for three more months because I didn't want to face three months of stateside duty. By that time I was getting used to it, I had a lot of Korean friends and I think I enjoyed it much more than most of the guys did, especially not being on the lines.

Q: Now after, you ended up going back, to school, then back to Japan?

BF: That's right, I went out around the spring of 1952 then I went back to my job at the Sheriff's department and then the GI Bill, I graduated from UCLA. While I was in college I met a Japanese fellow who was a Buddhist priest, he was born in America but went back over to Japan during the war. He was sent back and was able to go back and get me a job at a Buddhist university there in Kyoto where I taught the first eight years.

Q: And you were up there until about 1991, about two years ago?

BF: Yup, then I got a job at Ashton University.

Q: Did you have family back here in Baldwinsville?

BF: Yes, my mother and father were over here but had died while I was in the war but my brother has been here the whole time.

Q: You were originally in Los Angeles, you were saying before?

BF: From 1948-1950 I was in the Peacetime army, I was discharged at Fort Louis Washington and I was going to come back home here to New York but I said that I had not been to California for I went down there to visit. I got down there and met some people and decided to stay. After a peaceful year I had been drafted in the spring of 1951 but in the meantime I had passed the civil service exam and got into the Sheriff's department.

Q: The first time you were in the army you didn't do anything like that, it was peacetime?

BF: Yes, at that time I was sent over to Fort Dix where everyone around here completed their basic training, then San Houston for x-ray technician training then back to Fort

Totten in New York then out to Fort Louis in Washington. That was a good experience, 21 months both times, so all together, I had three and a half years military experience.

Q: What was it like spending all that time in japan? Were you able to come back home at all?

BF: It took me five years to save enough to go home the first time.. on a freighter. But after that, things got better and we were able to fly instead. Toward the end, I was able to fly out every year, of course the economy helped. When I went to Japan in 1957, it was 360 yen to a dollar but the pay was so low, it was unbelievable in japan, I was getting 20,000 yen 16 times a year, they had a funny pay system back then. It took a long time to get enough at first to pay for that trip home on the freighter.

Q: Are there things over on that side of the world that people here are not aware of?

BF: Well, things have changed a lot, since 1957 was only 12 years after the war, Japan was still on their knees, and it was pretty rough there, the economy. But soon after that, of course the Korean War had helped out the Japanese economy a great deal. The Koreans had produced a lot of the products used in the war effort, the transportation, space for their hospitals and staking grounds before they went to Korea, ports and all so it really helped the Japanese economy a great deal at that time. And then of course, a big boost to Japan, I don't know how it worked exactly but I know it was about the time of the Oil crunch while Nixon was president, which was the first time the dollar had jogged down from 360 to around 320. We couldn't believe it because we thought it was going to be that way forever. Now it's less than a hundred yen to a dollar, you can imagine what that means, that means any tourist who goes to japan better take a lot of money with them.

Q: As far as working over there, were you able to make a comfortable living?

BF: Then of course, when all of this began, the raises started coming when I went to the national university, from the private university right away there's a big raise and I got bonuses, they provided me with housing, well it was much better for me than most. Even now, it's unbelievable, if you translate what some of those teachers were making when I left into dollars, many of the teachers here would turn green with envy. Even though, we didn't feel that rich because at the time we had to pay the Japanese inflated prices for things, so our money didn't go too far. That's why when Japanese come here now, they're in heaven because their money goes so far. It was just the exact reverse in 1957, very few Japanese could ever aspire to travel and spend like they do now.

Q: well, it sounds like you had quite an experience over there.

BF: Well I suppose it has been fun. I got to know the Japanese quite well. It's too bad we had the Second World War because they are good people I think. Well, you can't speak for a whole race like that but for by and large. They all treated foreigners in general quite well. A lot of people, especially in small towns like this, especially veterans like us who still have the war experience in their mind, it's very hard to forgive and forget.

Q: Okay Bill, this will wrap it up.