

Bill (William) Hook
Narrator

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INT: We're back here with Bill Hook, a vet from the Korean War, a local person. He's going to share some of his memories of his service with us. How did you get started?

BH: I enlisted in the Navy in February of '48, and I went to boot camp in Great Lakes, and then I went to what they call Hospital Course Corps. I was a corpsman in the Navy, and I was stationed in the naval hospital in New York. When the Korean War started, I was ordered to the 1st Marine Division in Camp Pendleton, California. I left there with the Fleet Marines and went to Japan. Then I was assigned to the 5th Marine Regiment, and I landed in Incheon on the fifteenth of September 1950 with the 7th Marine Regiment. Then I went on from there to Seoul and back to Incheon aboard ship and went around down the coast and up, made the landing at Wonsan. The landing at Wonsan, we were out to sea for eleven days because they mined the harbor and we couldn't get in to land. After eleven days, we landed there. We landed there in October, and our next, we went aboard a train to try to get to Hungnam, Hamhung, which is south of the Chosin Reservoir. The guerillas kept blowing up the train tracks. We finally flew up, and we're up there, we set up a casualties station. Then the Chinese entered the war, and we were evacuated from Hungnam down to Pusan. We went back up to Maisan (?) and Taegu and Yeongdeungpo. I spent thirteen months there. My job essentially was as a corpsman, which is a, well the Army calls them medics; the Marine Corps calls them corpsmen. I spent four years in the Navy, sixteen months was in the Marine Corps, thirteen months was in Korea. It was a long time ago. I don't remember everything that happened.

INT: You were basically giving the first medical care (?)...

BH: Yeah, essentially, and then they went from us to a hospital ship or they were evacuated with helicopters, which I think was one of the first "wars" [BH uses finger quotes] where they used helicopters for evacuation. Then they flew them, a lot of them went to Japan and a lot of them went home.

INT: But you were on the ground for a long time.

BH: Yeah, I was Fleet Marine Force, which means I was a Navy Corpsman with the Marine Corps. I wore a Marine Corps uniform, and I carried a rifle and a pistol. Although according to the Geneva Convention you're not supposed to, but we did because everybody else did, and we got shot at, of course. I spent all of my time on the ground, even though I was in the Navy, I was on land rather than sea.

INT: As far as the worst battles or anything like that, was there any particular time when it was worse than another?

BH: Well, I think probably the first thing of course, when we landed in Incheon, I never had anybody get mad enough to shoot at me, you know, and we were going in to the beach on an LST [Landing Ship, Tank] and our gunner on our ship was killed, and then when we landed we were on the beach. One of my real good friends from the naval hospital in New York was killed in the water, and that scared me. I was nineteen, and you know, that was my first experience with violent death, if you know what I mean, but I was in no major battles because as a corpsman, I didn't do as much fighting as I did treating, you know.

INT: But you were right up there with...

BH: Like I said, at Incheon with the 5th Regiment, that's the initial... and then Wonsan, when we landed there, there was no resistance to speak of because the North Koreans had implanted all their guns on the shore, and by the time they struck the mines and we landed, everything was secure, so we didn't take any casualties at Wonsan. Incheon was, if you read the history books, Incheon was the wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong people, the wrong war, and yet it worked for [General Douglas] MacArthur because the next morning when the sun came out and we were on the beach, there was no water. The Yellow Sea was just sitting in mud. If he [MacArthur] had been a little bit off one way or the other, we wouldn't have made the landing and we'd probably have been sitting ducks. I think the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time tried to talk him out of it. I think Harry Truman tried to talk him out of it, but it turned out to be a good move because we were behind the North Koreans who had pushed down to the Pusan Perimeter and we were behind when we landed. We landed behind them. It looked like, I got all my letters that I sent home—my father saved all my letters—and every letter I said, 'Oh, I'll be home in another month', or 'I'll be home in a week', or 'I'll be home for Thanksgiving.'

INT: That's what it seemed like.

BH: It didn't work that way, you know. I thought we were going to be home very quickly and it took thirteen months while I was there, and of course the war lasted three years. A lot of corpsmen that I know got killed, a lot of them. In fact, a greater percentage of Navy people killed were... I read somewhere about the Medal of Honor. Most of the Medal of Honors given to Navy personnel were given to corpsmen, which says something for them anyway.

INT: Well, you had to be right there where people were getting injured.

BH: Yeah, yeah. In fact, Clarkie, he got shot on Saipan (?) in the elbow. He might have told you about that.

INT: Yeah.

BH: The doctor was going to take his arm off, and the corpsmen saved his arm.

INT: There must have been some other pretty awful...

BH: Oh, yeah. People were... well, horrible wounds, civilians. I know I treated one person who was a Korean civilian after the shelling, and his arm had been, they had put a

tourniquet on his arm. Whoever did it didn't know that you're supposed to release it and the arm was, well we took the arm off. The people over there were very cruel to each other. When we were going from Wonsan to Hungnam, we were on a train. I told you that the guerillas blew up the tracks. Well, there was a train ahead of us. There were some people on the box cars—we were using the box cars—and they opened the doors and they were killed by the guerillas. Then they [guerillas] went in there and they desecrated the bodies. We came up behind and our interpreter, his name was Shingle (?) by the way, he was an interpreter for our company. They grabbed a bunch of these people who were supposedly guerillas, and they lined them up and shot them all. No trial. They just said, 'He's a guerilla', and they shot him. They didn't say, well, 'Are you sure?' or anything else. They just lined them up and shot them. So they were cruel to each other as well.

INT: What were the people you encountered there like? Were they farmers?

BH: A lot of farmers, and also what used to irk me a little bit in those days was when I got ready to come home, they used to protest. They didn't want us to go home and yet the people who were opposed to that thing were old enough to defend their own country. You know, that's like us standing around saying, 'Don't go home, save my bacon for me.' Most of them were farmers, in the south especially. The north was more industrialized, which was the part that was under the Russians. I don't recall ever seeing dogs or cats or birds, or for instance we take for granted things like telephone poles and street lights and mail boxes. I don't recall ever seeing them at all. Now they might very well have been there, but I don't remember seeing them. I think we saw a couple of deer, but I don't remember seeing any domesticated animals, you know, like, well maybe oxen, but I never saw any cows or horses or dogs or cats. I think they probably ate the cats. They probably ate the dogs too.

INT: What was the terrain like? Do you remember anything about that?

BH: There was a lot of hilly terrain. It was cold. It was very cold. When we were up at Hungnam, it got between thirty and forty below zero, but it was a different type of cold. Of course I was young then and maybe it didn't bother me as much, but it seemed like a dryer cold than a damp cold. There was a lot of, I think today of walking up and down those hills with all that gear on and I think I couldn't, you know. I was young then of course.

INT: Did you know anything about where you were going before you headed over there?

BH: No. When I left San Diego aboard a ship called the Marine Phoenix, I wrote to my father and said that he probably wouldn't hear from me because I'd be out to sea. We landed in Japan on the second of September. I'll never forget because a typhoon hit that day and the ship took on a lot of water. Buildings (?) blew down and everything. Then I was transferred to an LSC with the 5th Marines and I assumed we were going to Korea then, but no one ever really told you. I'm sure maybe I knew, but I don't recall.

INT: You just kind of showed up and there you were.

BH: Yeah. It was just like everybody else. I enlisted—nobody drafted me—so I did what I was told and went where I was told to go. I don't know, today, I still think it was the right thing to do, but I just wonder sometimes if I was eighteen again, would I do it again? I probably would. I probably would because like I say, I enlisted. It was my fault.

INT: When you enlisted, there wasn't anything.

BH: There was nothing, no. In 1948, there was nothing. That was right after the Berlin crisis I think with the, where they were bringing in the airlift. I think the Berlin airlift was around forty..., but there were no wars going on in '48 when I enlisted.

INT: And what made you decide to become a corpsman?

BH: Actually, when I got out of boot camp, I was supposed to go to aviation machinist mate school in Tennessee, which would make me very happy. In those days, all of a sudden they needed so many people for this or so many people for that, so they sent me to corps school. It's kind of ironic because I quit school and enlisted. I wasn't a great student. The things I liked, I was good at. The things I didn't like, I was horrible when I went to school. So I enlisted and they sent me to corps school. It was a tough course. It's physics and pharmacy and materia medica and a lot of medical knowledge. We had fifty-six people in my class, and I graduated fifth from the top, and yet I didn't go to high school. Well, I didn't graduate from high school, but I think in those days I was still young enough that when the man stood up there and said this is what you're going to do, you know, and they didn't do it in school; you just were told what your assignment was and that's it.

INT: Yeah, the discipline was more...

BH: It was disciplined. So I graduated fifth in my class, which made my father happy because I had quit school. I had my choice of duty stations so I took the naval hospital in New York. They built a new one while I was in Korea; they built a new hospital down there. I think it's a VA hospital now. When we came back, they had named all the streets for the corpsmen who had been killed in Korea that were stationed down there with me.

INT: How did you end your service?

BH: When I came home, I had five more months to do, so I left the Fleet Marines and went back into the Navy and went to St. Albans, a naval hospital, went back there again and spent my last five months there and then back to (?). I spent four years in all total.

INT: And you had family back here.

BH: My father and my stepmother and two brothers. I wasn't married at the time.

INT: Were any of your brothers in the service?

BH: My older brother was in the Army Air Corps in the Second World War. My younger brother was, he was lucky, he was going to enlist at the beginning of the Korean War. He was going to enlist and he was married at the time and his wife had a baby, so they didn't take him.

INT: Any other memories of Korea, like when you hear about it in the news now?

BH: Well, what amazes me is that I worked for General Motors for thirty-eight years. We had a GMI student who was from Korea, and he had a bunch of pictures. It amazed me, the high rises, the super highways, because I don't remember. Like I said, I don't remember any big buildings, nothing modern. Of course this is forty-four years ago when I was there.

INT: You didn't get into the cities too much, though, did you?

BH: No, I did get to Seoul, which was the capital of South Korea, but that was destroyed pretty well. Of course the capital of the north I think is Pyongyang, and I was not there. I was in no large cities other than Seoul. Incheon was a port city; Wonsan was a port city. It's funny how memories come back because Incheon was on one coast and Wonsan was on the other. Seoul, I think, was the biggest city I was in.

INT: What did it look like?

BH: I think I remember a movie theater. It was bombed out, but I don't remember any big buildings, like two or three stories even. I don't remember any. Now there very well might have been, but I don't remember. I remember the north was more brick buildings, like industrial buildings, hydroelectric plants, stuff like that. The south, I think the south was a little behind the times, compared to the north. And we took care of them while Japan was in the south and Russia was in the north after World War II.

INT: Now it's kind of the other way around.

BH: Yeah, yeah, it's very modern today. I always tell my wife I'd like to go back, but I don't know because it isn't going to be anywhere near the same, you know. Where I landed, I'm sure there's probably a summer resort or something.

INT: A lot happens in forty-five years.

BH: Yeah, it does. Next year, hopefully, they're going to do the monument in Washington for the Korean War veterans. I told my wife that I would really like to go. I'll have a shirt printed from Novel T-shirts with my name, rank, and my company. Maybe someone will say, 'Hey, I remember him!'

INT: Thanks, Bill.

BH: You're welcome.