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Veteran**

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Rome Free Academy High School  
Interviewers**

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**Q:** Could you please state your full name?

**SV:** Sam Villanti.

**Q:** What is the date and place of birth?

**SV:** Syracuse New York, July 14th 1932.

**Q:** What were your dates of service, and the branch that you were in?

**SV:** November 1952 through August 1954, US Army.

**Q:** What theatre was this?

**SV:** Korea

**Q:** What was the highest rank you had during this?

**SV:** PFC

**Q:** What is that?

**SV:** PFC is a very basic rank, it's the closest thing to being a civilian as there is. It means private first class. At the time when I went into the service in 1952 you went in as a private and then when you finished basic training you became private first class, and then ranks go up from there.

**Q:** So then you enlisted during the Korean War?

**SV:** I was drafted.

**Q:** Because you were drafted, did you have any feelings of the war at that time?

**SV:** Not really, I grew up during World War II. I was 10, 12, 13 during World War II and there was a lot of patriotism, so when we were drafted it was just an automatic. You went and you didn't really question anything. You just went in, and went in the service, it was a two year stint and then you could re-up. But no, I had no particular feelings about the war.

**Q:** Did you have any parents or friends that had any problems with you going?

**SV:** No, not at all. Again, it was after World War II, and that was looked on as a patriotic duty and something you did.

**Q:** Where did you go for basic training?

**SV:** Basic training was Fort Bliss, Texas.

**Q:** Was that hard for you, was it the first time you had ever been away from home?

**SV:** That was my first time, and it was a little difficult and I went in just before Thanksgiving and we were away through Christmas and those were our two important holidays. I think all of us that were away were a little homesick.

**Q:** What was basic training like, do you remember anything specific?

**SV:** Basic training was probably the first time you were forced into doing things. You know, when you're home, your parents ask you to do things, but when you go away to basic training you get what they call a drill instructor. Their purpose is to make you a man, you're 19, 20 when you go in, they teach you how to break things and kill people. I guess that's what they do.

**Q:** How does that work? Did everyone who was drafted in the Syracuse area get shipped to Texas or was this from everywhere around the nation?

**SV:** No, it's from the nation. In fact, most of the people from Syracuse, I believe, ended up in Fort Devens in Massachusetts. But for some reason, our group, and we were a whole bunch from Syracuse, were sent to Fort Bliss.

**Q:** Did that make it easier, were they friends?

**SV:** There were some acquaintances, there was no one that I knew at the time, but I got to be pretty fast friends with a lot of people.

**Q:** Did any sort of specialized training or was it all just basic stuff where everyone learns the same thing?

**SV:** Yeah, generally basic training is sixteen weeks. The first eight weeks are pure infantry training, you're learning how to fire your weapon, spend nights outdoors, and generally learn how to march, how to clean your weapon. Then you're selected after that eight weeks to go into some advanced type training. They select you to go into certain areas if you have special skills, and that is your second eight weeks of basic training.

**Q:** What was your second eight weeks, what was your special area?

**SV:** I think it's interesting, one day we were called, towards the end of our first eight weeks, to this big field and a bunch of telephone poles were up in the field, and as a young person, I had just turned professional. I was a golf professional. I turned professional when I was eighteen, so I was working on my apprenticeship.

And I tell you that because it's all part of this story. So we get to this field with all of these telephone poles, and one by one they would point to a pole and say "How far is that pole?" and because I played so much golf, I was pretty accurate. I'd say "well it looks like its a hundred yards." And then "well how far is that one?" "Well that looks like its three hundred, four hundred." and they didn't understand the relationship of the questions. Well it turned out I was selected to be a forward observer for the artillery, that's the training I went into because, as a forward observer, you're observing. You are part of the main line and you're observing enemy movements. And if you see a tank, or a truck, or a group of the enemy you call artillery. And you have to be pretty accurate, once they fire for effect, first round goes in. Then you say you have to move it two hundred yards left. It's that golf training that came in, except it ended up getting me in a- I think- rather difficult part of the army as a forward observer.

**Q:** Was that particularly more dangerous because you were at the head of the group?

**SV:** Well, one of our outposts was actually out in front of our main wing. The main troops were behind us, and we would go into the outpost and you would stay there for two weeks. For two weeks you lived out in a mountain, or in a high hill, and you slept on the ground, and then after two weeks you would get to go back for one week of rest. I can't say it was more dangerous than being in the infantry, but you were more vulnerable because you didn't have a whole bunch of people around in the event of an attack. There were just three of us on an outpost.

**Q:** So in basic training was it like everyone that was there at the fort, did they all go off to the same place? Or was everyone divided up?

**SV:** Everyone was divided up because Fort Bliss was an artillery group it pretty much stayed the same, but we all went in to MOS, your designation for your specialty. Mine was fifteen-ten, which was part of the observer intelligence group. Other guys went off to become members of a gun battery. Some people went off to learn how to cook, so that's when they broke you off after basic training. Which pretty much still stayed the same group, but during the day you would go off on different training objectives.

**Q:** Did you go straight to Korea after that?

**SV:** Yup, they sent us home for a week and a half around Easter time in April and then we were shipped right over to Korea from there.

**Q:** Where in Korea were you, or did you float around everywhere?

**SV:** No, I ended up in an area near this place called "Pork Chop Hill", that's where our unit was. When we landed in Korea there were probably hundreds of us, from that point on, you moved and the group just got smaller and smaller. The closer we got to the front lines, the fewer there were. I think there were only

seven of us of an original group of maybe one hundred that ended up in the front line area.

**Q:** What division were you in?

**SV:** Seventh Infantry Division.

**Q:** Are there different categories broken down so that they get smaller and smaller?

**SV:** Yeah, the 7th Infantry Division was in the central part of Korea. The folks that we were engaged with were the Chinese groups, not North Koreans necessarily. But within the 7th Infantry Division there are artillery groups, infantry groups, communications groups. There is a lot of specialties within a division.

**Q:** What was your daily routine like?

**SV:** Once we were on our outpost it was pretty boring to be honest with you because we lived in the side of a hill, it was a room that was maybe 8x10. It had two bunks that were in this room, there wasn't much room to walk around. So you had someone on the outpost and your duty, as I recall, we were two hours on, and two or four hours off. For two hours you were with your radio and observing what was going on in front of you. The other two guys were sleeping or eating. There were no other people around, just the three of us. You got pretty friendly with the three guys, but there wasn't a great deal to do. When you were on the outpost itself you were with field binoculars and you were constantly looking for any enemy movements. As soon as you do see some, you call it back and they would either send in some aircraft to bomb the area if that were necessary. If it was some movements that you wanted to handle with artillery you would call back and have them go at them. That was a decision made by someone in the rear, we just reported what we saw and then they would make the decision.

**Q:** So is forward observer most a defensive job when you report when they get close, or do you actually go out and find targets?

**SV:** No, we don't find them. We would stay in this one position for two weeks and just report what was going on. The way the perimeter was set up was that about maybe two miles from us was another forward outpost group. We were sort of overlapping, but there would be a whole string of these outposts along the perimeter. Some of them were behind the lines, and some of them were in front of the lines.

**Q:** Were you at the same outpost on Pork Chop Hill the whole time?

**SV:** No, we had two outposts that we maintained. We would stay at one for two weeks and go back for a week rest, and then go to another outpost for two weeks. We weren't actually on Pork Chop Hill. That was a hill that the Chinese were very

interested in, and we were very interested in, so there was a lot of fighting going on. We would call in artillery to Pork Chop Hill. There wasn't very much growing on that hill. It was all pretty much destroyed.

**Q:** During those four hours off did you do anything? Was there any fun time?

**SV:** Not really, because as I was saying, you couldn't leave the hill because you were always under enemy observation yourself. So you pretty much stayed in this bunker or if it was dusk or evening you could step outside. There wasn't much walking around going on outside because the enemy was watching you a lot of the time.

**Q:** Did you ever get time when you were completely off duty to go out?

**SV:** That would be in the week rest. We would go back and had very little activity assigned to us. We could pretty much just hang out and do what we want. There were some army things you had to do, but that would be our own personal time.

**Q:** So was it pretty much staying at base or did you go into a formal city?

**SV:** No we would go to a base, I was only in the city one time. I went to Panmunjom once, where they were signing the peace treaty, or preparing for that. I guess originally when we landed we went through Seoul, Korea but everything else I saw was either a very small village or nothing.

**Q:** Did you have any combat experience?

**SV:** No, I never was involved in any personal experiences because our job was really not to engage. The only time combat really occurred was when I was wounded because that was the time the Chinese decided to take our outpost from us.

**Q:** Did they?

**SV:** I guess I'd have to say they did, but I think we got it back after I was evacuated from the hill. I don't know what happened but I suspect we did get it back. It was so close to the signing of the truce. I was wounded on July seventh, the truce was signed July twenty-seventh. It was pretty close, the Americans may or may not have taken the hill back again. I don't know.

**Q:** So where were you hit and what was it by?

**SV:** I was hit. It was artillery initially. I ended up with my right leg broken first. In that couple hours I managed to break both my legs and hips and shoulders and arms. When I was evacuated I guess I must have looked like Jell-O because there was not much that I was able to move on my own.

**Q:** Were you conscious?

**SV:** I was conscious, which was I guess amazing to me. I didn't lose

consciousness, I guess I was too scared not to be. I was afraid, I didn't know what would happen if I fazed it out.

**Q:** Were you thinking at all- while you were getting hit- that wished you had never come?

**SV:** I take it back now, but I remember that in the period that the artillery rounds were coming in, not knowing where they were going to hit, knowing that a lot of things were getting busted up. I said it might not be a bad idea if one of those things hit me because this isn't any fun anymore. I knew that the Chinese were coming and I didn't want to be captured in the condition that I was in. They did not treat you very well. I kind of hoped maybe one of those things would be better off hitting me and taking me out once and for all.

**Q:** Where did you go when you were hit? Were you hospitalized?

**SV:** Yes, I was hospitalized by helicopter. We went to a mass unit and at the mass unit, NY recollection in that they pretty much put me in a full body cast to stabilize me. From there I went to a hospital in Japan for three months and then I went to Walter Reed Hospital. I was there for about a year.

**Q:** Was any of this physical therapy or were you in the body cast for the majority of it.

**SV:** I got out of the body cast after a while because most of the damage, the broken bones were healing, but I had nerve damage done to my right arm which they were not able to repair, and to my right leg which causes me to walk with a limp now. I was in a lot of physical therapy.

**Q:** So the treaty had already been signed by the time you got out of the hospital?

**SV:** Yes, in fact the treaty had already been signed by the time I left Japan. It was 20 days after I was wounded.

**Q:** So you immediately went home?

**SV:** Well, I had to stay in the hospital for just over a year trying to rehabilitate. When I was discharged from the service I was discharged from Walter Reed Hospital. I never went back in the military.

**Q:** At the end of it all, were you pretty happy to be going home?

**SV:** I was real happy to be going home, I was probably not a happy guy for a couple years. I was a golf professional, I had just started my apprenticeship and because of the damage done, I didn't think I was going to be able to play golf again. So we were in a lot of rehabilitation after that just to get back to doing some normal things. But I guess I was happy to be home, sure.

**Q:** How did your friends and family welcome you when you came back?

**SV:** They welcomed me. It was great, but one of the problems that occurred is

that when I first came home, for a couple years I wore braces on my legs and had to use crutches to get around. I felt that people were smothering me too much and not letting me do my own thing. If I got near a door somebody would open it. You kind of resented that thing, so as a result I left the Syracuse area and a lot of my friends just so I could go away somewhere and not have this baggage of being wounded and all of the stuff that went along with it. I thought people were a little too protective of me when I first came home. They were great, they just wanted to make me feel comfortable.

**Q:** Where did you go during that time when you said you needed to recover?

**SV:** I left and bummed around the country. I went down to Florida when it got cold, came back north when it got too hot down there. I spent a couple of years just kind of wandering around.

**Q:** Did you keep in touch with any of your other comrades from the war?

**SV:** No, unfortunately they didn't get off that hill.

**Q:** Did you leave with any medals, coming back?

**SV:** Nope.

**Q:** How do you think the army changed your life?

**SV:** I think all of the things that happen to change for the better. Give me a minute. I think the army changed a lot of the things that happened to us, there's life altering experiences. Frankly, I think as an 18 or 19 year old I didn't have much focus, I knew I wanted to play golf. It seemed like a great life and believe it or not, if I would have been successful at that, I don't know. I think some of the things that happened make you grow a little and you perhaps achieve more things than you might normally. I think overall it was a great experience.

**Q:** Are you satisfied with the way the war ended?

**SV:** Yeah, because again as they say I didn't think I had a dog in that fight. They drafted me, they sent me over, and you try to do what people ask you to do then you come home. Was I satisfied? I guess. You'd like to have kicked a little more butt, I'm not sure we did. As a stalemate I guess I'd say. A good conclusion would have been if we were clear winners, which we weren't.

**Q:** What did you do with your life when you got back, jobs wise?

**SV:** As I said, I kind of bummed around for a few years and then the man that was the golf professional that I worked for when I was younger invited me back. I said "I don't think I could play golf." but he said "Why don't you come back, maybe we can work it out." The outcome was he got me playing golf again and I managed to get my class A PGA card. Tried to qualify for the national PGA on two or three occasions where you had to walk 36 holes in one day. As I said I got my class A card as a PGA professional and I was pleased with that. Then I got

married and saw that I wasn't going to make a very good living playing golf. I went to work in a manufacturing company, spent 30 years there and left as president of the company. We had a plant in Kingsport Tennessee and up in Melville New York. I retired from that about three years ago. I spent most of my time in manufacturing.

**Q:** Was it a lot harder, could you still play golf with your injuries?

**SV:** I still do play golf! Humbly, I think I play okay. I am a single digit handicapper. I get little tired after 18 holes, but yeah. I've played okay.

**Q:** What advice would you give to people who are thinking about joining the armed services now?

**SV:** I think it's a great profession. I look at these guys now that are over in Iraq for example and they're such professionals. They're so highly trained and I think if I were wondering what to do with my life and maybe I wasn't quite sure. I'd give it a shot. It might be a good opportunity for a person.

**Q:** Do you have any advice for the soldiers who are going over right now in Iraq?

**SV:** No. I wish them luck, and I have a great deal of respect for what they are doing.

**Q:** Is there any time on these pictures you have? [Unclear]

**SV:** I don't know, they were just some shots of when we were in the process of going overseas. I didn't know what to bring and they said to bring something so these are just a few shots of when I was in the hospital in Japan. You guys could probably judge that better than I. You can take a look at them and see if you see anything.