

John C. Gardella
Veteran/Narrator

James Judge
Interviewer

Interviewed on September 28th, 2002
Interviewed at 9 Arden Lane
Interviewed in Commack, NY

Q: This is an interview of John Gardella who was in the army. The place of the interview is Commack Long Island. The date is September 28th, 2002 and the interviewer is James Judge. What is your full name?

JG: John C. Gardella.

Q: Where and when were you born?

JG: September 16th, 1928. Born in Brooklyn.

Q: What was your pre-service education?

JG: High school. High school. Graduated.

Q: And what was your pre-service occupation?

JG: I went from high school to the military.

Q: When did you enter service?

JG: September 7th, 1946.

Q: Were you drafted or enlisted?

JG: Enlisted.

Q: What branch of service and why?

JG: The army. I was looking for the GI Bill of Rights. If you enlist for a safe period of time, you become eligible for all the rights. The 40s.

Q: Where did you receive your basic training?

JG: I went down to Fort (unrecognizable) Virginia.

Q: Tell us your experiences

JG: During this. It was quite a change going from civilian life to military life and it was different. Something you had to adjust to living with so many fellas, but it was fun. I was young enough to enjoy everything. I was only 17 and I enjoyed it immensely.

Q: What were your dates of service?

JG: Alright, my first tour of duty was from 19 September 90 September 46 to January of 48 and the second period of service was, they extended mine on (Unrecognizable). It was called the Harry Truman year. They extended one year on my reserve time, so it became my second tour starting September of 50 went on, October of 51 called a Truman year.

Q: What was your unit?

JG: I was in the second imprint division and I served in the 23rd infantry regiment, first battalion, third platoon.

Q: How would you rate your training?

JG: It was not enough to be an infantryman. I had no background for infantry at all. I had never seen a heavy machine gun, nothing like that. We were just drafted. We pulled back in the reserve and you were put onto a boat. You were overseas as your infantry replacement. It was not good.

Q: How would you rate your equipment?

JG: The equipment was all left over from World War ii. There was nothing new. All your old rifles, old artillery, old tanks. It was already a poorly equipped army.

Q: Discuss your combat experiences in chronological order.

JG: Alrighty. I arrived in Korea sometime around December 50. By the time I got up to my unit, it was probably late into January, January of 51. Went to a replacement infantry, (unrecognizable) and I finally moved to my Charlie company in the first battalion and from there we were along the Han river and all of control actually getting used to these trying to break us in young infantry, but if fewer experienced people who we were only on patrols on river, trying to make contact with the Chinese but there was very little contact. The American army had moved so fast from up north. The Chinese come across the Yellow River, they outran Chinese, always back down south and it was a probe just to find out where the Chinese were.

It had to be like, let me think now. It was the second week I was there. There was a patrol going out to an area they called the tunnel area. Apparently the airport had spotted some troops down there so they sent on every patrol. It was a mechanized patrol. We were in Jeeps, about 60 of us. We picked up some people from the 24th division they were with and we went from approximately 40 miles from our base camp up into the mountains in the tunnel areas and we got there and it was all quiet. You could see the tunnel. Then somebody saw a Chinese rifleman and a shot was fired and before you know it, there was a full scale fight going on. The Chinese come out on the hills and shoot down into our little area.

We got off the vehicles and we ran up to the hills and set up perimeters around the place and tried to fight them off. There were tons of them. There were 60 of us that had to be maybe 400 Chinese records that one spot the battle went on most day during the night. The Chinese started running right through the union and firing their (unrecognizable) and the fighting through fellows were hit. When the morning came we sort of separated from the unit that was left. There wasn't much left at all and we went off in different directions and approximately four of us got back. It took me two days to walk back just at nighttime and I was cold and I was scared. I know I was going south, that's all I could tell. I walked across patties and so forth and I walked from a star approximately. It had been almost 30 hours of walking here in two days and I'm going down the road there and I see these soldiers on the road.

I don't know who they were or what they were and I sort of got down front, I couldn't move up to the line, had a big barrel with burning, with wood in it and I yelled out American and Apparent, didn't know they were French troopers, they were touch with our regimen, the French unit and they come out, they took me in there and they talk and nobody understood each other but we've got across house American soldiers separated and they gave me some C ration I eaten in two days and then they put me in the right direction back to where a company should be. So I started back and I got the A company and they directed me to Charlie Jeep to come over and picked me up and brought me back to Charlie. (unrecognizable). There were almost 42 people with the attachments. We had the 24th division, there were about 60. Only four actually got back and survived the entire fight. That's all that came back from that valley and they were all walking by themselves.

After that they (unrecognizable) replaced me and I became an assistant squad leader. I had been A PFC, they gave me a corporal stripe and I was an assistant squad leader. That went on for a while. I guess probably about a month and a half. Very small actions. We were still in a place called Chipyong-ni. It turned out

to be a very big battle later on, but our division, the second infantry, was in this area a Chipyeong-ni and 11 Chinese divisions formed around us and they attempted to annihilate us. Massive artillery, massive infantry. We overrun portions of the perimeter only. I really say it was artillery fire and tank fire and the air force, they dropped in all kinds of food and amate forest, a box car, they came right over the bay area and dropped their loads of stuff down. It really saved the day.

We had the squads going on for rations and stuff like that that went on for four days. (unrecognizable) they, every attempt destroyed us and after all the airlifts and so forth, the first calvary came to our rescue, they came right down the road and set for a perimeter and they headed for the fight and we backed some chineses out there. We went out, we got out of our accident, got out and the first calvary was in that fight. We went back to refurbish to get new equipment, new supplies and then we were involved in this campaign called Operation Killer. It probably took probably around sometime in February, early late in February. In fact I had gotten a card from my wife that was the Valentine card and hopefully any sergeant to sergeant notified us that there was a shower unit down by this little stream off.

Boom, go down there, you're down, you strip down, you shower, you get all issues of new clothes, new dry, clean and then back up on the hill that night, Chinese come with massive artillery and dirt flying all over. Unbelievable how dirty I got. I just got showered up to the first hour I had the time I was there. In about two months after that we got involved with Operation Killer. They were heading towards a place called Jeonju. I believe it was a big train center and they had the main forces go down. We were operating in mountains or hills, skirting the main force and we traveled for almost seven days in deep, deep snow. Cold, cold, cold. And we could see I got our buddy down on the road, they were going on the road. We were up on the high ground but it was cold and the only way we got rations from airplanes was to come over a little pipe, a couple of tropical rations, pick them up, keep on going.

Finally got to this town, I guess it was Jeonju and they took over the town from down that hill. So they got squared away from night, took it easy for a while and after that we did watch. That was late February. Oh yeah, the regiment was going back to reserve so they put us all on trucks back to a reserve area sometime in March, off 15th march. And that was quite an experience too when you're on a line heating, sea rations, basic food cracking, stuff like that. Beans are basically sea. We went back to the reserve. They had a kitchen and they had all this delicious food. We started eating good food but everyone came down with

diarrhea, food too much to your body so a lot of sick troopers were in the area for a while.

Then they spread away and oh yeah, first I got a chance to go to a mess. It was a little church. The chaplain had set up one of our chaplains and they had a mess and I'm in there and they saw somebody from the back and I recognized him. I'm not sure his name was Anthony. I found out later and I got up to him Anthony, he had been in the original, the fifth combat regimental team and he was on his way back from the hospital up in and we had a day at the church together and then we went back from my area and got some rations and then he was gone catching transportation somewhere. But it was nice seeing him, somebody you knew from the old neighborhood.

All right, I'd covered February. Oh this is the sad part. It was very, very cold in spring except cold ones. The snow, snow, snow and everybody used to pray one day in the spring when the snow goes away, finally got to be spring and the snow went away but never thought of that would turn to (unrecognizable), come up your hole so you're sitting in (unrecognizable) most uncomfortable term. Then we go into the spring. The spring got pretty bad. We're in an area called the Iron Triangle. There's really three main towns set up like a triangle and it was called the iron triangle.

It was a pretty good defensive position. The Chinese were massing major force. They called the second defensive, second spring offensive. They came down and tank big. It was massive ground fighting positions. The fire fire fire would fall back from our position going back they would actually chase us and would fall back and set up new positions and then nighttime they'd come through again. Then we'd had the fight most of the night and then fall out and go back, set up the position went out three days like that. We were outnumbered. They had massive infantry and we killed an awful lot of them between fire.

They kept coming. Finally after three or four days they had enough to stop and then we went back over the ground. We had gone below 38 parallel. We were going back again right across the parallel about six times, three going north, three south. We went back over the car chase and they were all shot up. Most of them surrendered, picked up. They were in bad shape. A lack of, (unrecognizable), it was a lot of patrol but out walking around, different actions you look at trying to make contact with the Chinese, they fall back so fast it one area, it was pretty nice in April, the other and they come down to me, I was a sergeant first (unrecognizable). Finally contact the company. Finally square set up some kind of defense. I walking down the road, I saw my squad, there's probably nine of us

and we get some fire from the left on the road on the right of the river and we hit the ditches and each, but we get across to see area, a lot of fire coming down on us but there's a little bit of fire. We jumped down the road along the river we were going along, four men running and stopped and they set faced by and four men leapfrog four. The guys grew up and we were staying the same.

The group up, I was with us four, was running, we weren't that close together, maybe 10 feet apart. But this one guy hit a trip line on the road on the path hangar at the giant put out explosion, very big. We were pretty closely exposed, both of us and I felt something hit me in the rump, burning insertion time. I start raining, raining quite hard so I lay down, (unrecognizable). (unrecognizable) there's a little tiny white spot on my back and there's only one drop of blood in my pants. Couldn't believe it. So we managed to get out of that area back to the tank by the river. Shortly he started firing up on the train. That's what happened again, so we got back together and went back to, I had one of the guys hitting the bullet which went through his leg. Another guy lost his rifle or shot right out of his hands. We went back to our own position. Then from there we went back to the main station in the area and they gave me a shot and told me it would pop out, travel pop out by itself. They gave a penicillin shot and that was it.

There was no credible heart for that thought about it, (unrecognizable) but we reformed and battle went on and it was not a slowing down in April (unrecognizable) was cold spring sun. So later on in April they talked about my sister regiment the 30. They got beat very badly in the place they can't (unrecognizable), but it was all lost equipment. You could, anyway, that period of time I'm having trouble with my feet. Apparently something had bitten me. I tried to take my shoes off in the bunker that night if I couldn't, if we had bunk, try to get 'em off occasionally something might've been me there, a spider or maybe a rat might've been. My foot starts swelling very badly discoloration. So I went on back to a base, and went back to a bash unit.

I was treated with penicillin the day I was on my back bought with a cane, but I was eating good food there. That was a nice part. It wasn't like the mash unit you see on television. Not as nice but fun. And then I flew back, flew me back to the major hospital, set up further back and I was there for about maybe 15 days. My start getting better it was so hard to clean up and I was back to reissue the uniform boots, stuff like that. Course you have to strip down. You got to the hospital and I had lost something I had. So I got an issue and I moved up where our regimen was, this was in July, just about our regiment. My company was up on a hill, a very big hill, a very long way and didn't let the guys walk up there (unrecognizable) . So I got away for a carrying party so they bring up water every

two or three days. I hung out in the kitchen, laid around the kitchen. I had a (unrecognizable). It was absolutely beautiful, a nice part of being green (unrecognizable), beautiful good food and there was no fighting in the kitchen.

After that, we actually moved to a place called a punch bowl. It was a beautiful area but most valleys surrounded by hills cross and there is a lot of action in the area. Most patrols would walk down there. We had a cross of rivers and we had a few nieces in our office and they ran about five feet tall and they had a lot of trouble getting across these rivers to really take care of, they were strong guys though, but still it was a lot of work. Water runs pretty fast. All the ammunition to carry rifles and weapons and so forth. But after that just mostly action in that area. We set up some patrols, we set up some ambushes. Sometimes you're lucky, sometimes one of the big experiences up there though we had gone down to the valley, mortars fired up and one of the fellows was hit in the leg and they called for a medic.

They called for evacuation. So this little tiny helicopter comes in. I'd never seen one before. The time I was there was the Typikon mesh, a little bubble on it and there were two stretches on each side and this guy came in and he laid down right on inside the punch ball and with that the Chinese actually tried to hit him and dropped more mortar. She's in the area and trying to zero on them but they couldn't put the body on the helicopter and took off, gone. We had a few more rounds come in. That was it.

But after that punch bowl where we go from there, oh yeah, that was mostly the summer. It was a beautiful area. The (unrecognizable) was pretty good. We had a carrying pot coming up there all the time and we were mostly warm and cooked by ourselves or they carried up steaming of food, which was very good for surgery conditions. I never missed a meet no matter what. And that period of time, what else happened there? The summer was starting to pass by. It was well into August now and there was a lot of talk about a very major bowel going to be shaping up at a place called Heartbreak Bridge. And then Warrior came down to the second division that's going to go up to the Heartbreak bridge area and I guess it was late, very late. Oh yeah, early part of September we came down out of the mountains and the punchbowl area got on trucks Jeep. We were moving to a new area.

We had gotten a beer raised that day, a nice spot in the Jeep there and I had a whole case of beer there and I had a few run away to the, we pulled up the middle of the night, start the rain and put rice patties, rice patties there and attempted to lay down in the rice pad. He put down a piece of canvas, laying down how

uncomfortable it can be. But I had enough beer, so I could fall asleep that morning. I woke up, I saw this lady, first sergeant going by and he's calling me and I said, what's matter? He said, do you want to go home? I said, absolutely. He said to me, I was being rotated out. I had been there, actually been back in the service about almost a year. I called Lake part of September. This was the early part of September. In fact, the next day my birthday stepped up. The 16th I was going on a truck and going back down South Street.

We drove left there going down south was there, village was there, had a shower set up. You stripped down and took every bit of closure, had off all the stuff you put down and then you redress from the rear reissued and all a sudden they ended up weren't allow it taken away. Some people had pistols, some people had rifles, bird guns, but they were taken all the away. Really couldn't get nothing. The country, we were back there overnight, we stopped and we got bought a transport and we were in Japan and 12 hours later it was beautiful. We got rears in the uniforms. We looked like soldiers again and we had good food, good sleep, no dry duty, no nothing really a joy. We stayed about three days and transport them in and took back to the United States. It took about 15 days but it was really relaxing. Weather was still nice. September October, beautiful weather, cold. It was a good trip. See snow and there was no details in speed. Just enjoyed take and I come back, arrived in Seattle, we went to Seattle. (unrecognizable) at that time to give up my military career. It was a part of my lifetime. Glad sir I got experienced that I wouldn't want to do it again. It was a good experience overall the army. I enjoyed the army in general.

Q: How did you feel during combat?

JG: I was very scared at the beginning until you found out what's going on. I just moved up to the ranks very fast. Even inside in the first place, I caused a lot of men around. But you learn if you, along with some people, manage to survive and it's a combination of luck and a combination of doing things right. Then we got the best care of anybody. Did behave accurately as soon as possible. They lay there and died.

Q: Did you receive any medals or citations?

JG: The regiment I was with on the 23rd infant imagery received a unit citation. It was for the battle of what they call the hill operation and track so many Chinese on (unrecognizable). Half of them were responsible for it. And then I had a combat entry badge, one of my proud (unrecognizable)

Q: How did you keep in touch with those at home?

JG: Pardon?

Q: How did you keep in touch with those at home?

JG: Just mail. Was everything you had gone back and forth letters? My wife, my mother. There was never no phone call, just couldn't. Like yesterday I have cell phones.

Q: What was your most memorable experience?

JG: Think about that. Some really good times there. Some really good times. I think getting out alive, happy. When I got out, it just was the most important thing I went through. I survived. I have one little tiny shrapnel on the back, (unrecognizable).

Q: Experience left the greatest impression on you?

JG: Walking back from the ambush and taking action. I was glad to be alive but to walk back I was 30 miles and survived, which did even a pressure on my life, on me. Somebody is watching over me.

Q: How do you feel about your military experience?

JG: I felt I did my job and was rewarded for it, it changed my lifestyle a bit, it became more dependent. I enjoyed it.

Q: What were your duties and your rank?

JG: I was a sergeant first class, I was a platoon sergeant, I was in charge of 40 men. Actually the lieutenant is a commander, the sergeant was like the number two man but there's 40 people. You look at food rations, ammunition, you take care of all kinds of stories. You lie to them when you have to, tell the truth when you have to and you get the most out of them.

Q: Describe your relations with the Korean population.

JG: In general the Korean population was very very good, in South Korea up north they weren't all friendly very sad people they were they were in bad shape up north, above the power but in the south they weren't bad at all they give you rations they give you rice, they give you that national dish kimchi and stuff like that. I tried it and burnt my tongue. (laughs) but in general they were good. The uh (unrecognizable) division the Republic Korean so troops at that period of time weren't good at all, they were still in the training process. They weren't reliable if ya had them next to ya on a plank. They didn't know where they were of course, it could happen (unrecognizable). Over the years they improved tremendously but at that period of time they weren't (unrecognizable)

Q: Describe your relations with black soldiers.

JG: In that period of time our army was finely integrated and uh, our sister regimen the ninth infantry was half black and half white. Our regiment the 23rd was completely white, and the 38th was completely white. So I already had you know accepted artillery troops or some tankers you might see black but normally I didn't have any problem. I didn't work with them that often. They had a lot of truck drivers, ehh whatever they do their job like anybody else everyone did their job

Q: What was your reaction to the relief of MacArthur by Truman?

JG: Well I I sort of uh (unrecognizable) it was happening because I thought Truman was going to go too far not Truman MacArthur was going too far he was talking about dropping a bomb up on the (unrecognizable) river, and uh you drop a bomb you don't know where the hell the world would go to that you know, survival. So I was sort of glad that Truman took him out of action. I think he just got too much too powerful. Different kinds of war he wasn't ready for. He's a great man but I'm glad they took him out.

Q: What was your feelings about the election of Eisenhower

JG: I felt Eisen was a fantastic person that couldn't do no harm, he made a promise to get the troops out of Korea. While I was really poor I really didn't want to stay there longer. Korea was a bad war. Over 38,000 men were killed there and it's only in three years and actually war is still uh it's still a war, never, never declared a peace in that area it could start again tomorrow. But I did like Eisen. I thought he was a good man for the job, and as soon as he got in the war came to a conclusion. The peace talks that (unrecognizable). It was a long drawn (unrecognizable)

Q: Does the terrain and climate affect the battle?

JG: Yes it did, it was exceptionally cold mountains all over was not tank country tanks couldn't run around stay on the road artillery stuff like that. You engage mostly in infantry fights, you know. Massive Chinese attack, a lot of infantry and in the right position (unrecognizable) where you were. But there were bad times, it was awful. I used to pray that the snow would go away and spring came and the snow started going away. Never did I realize that I was going to turn to ice and (unrecognizable), I'm sitting on ice water. It was cold. The spring was as bad as the winter.

Q: How cold would it get in the winter?

JG: Uh the area up by (unrecognizable) the Marin about 44 degrees below zero I was in the area was sown to 37 and uh 34 was not uncommon you know anywhere in the 30s was quite common. Extremely cold place we were west let

me think now west of uh Chosen but not quite as far up, but wind out of Siberia cold cold place

Q: What did you do when you arrived home?

JG: First thing I did was get on the phone and call my wife, my mother tell them I'll be home in ten days and that I got discharged officially on the train right across this (unrecognizable) sleeping area. A bunk bed, the click clack of the tracks you take two clicks and I'll be sound asleep. It was beautiful getting home.

Q: What was your occupation when you returned home?

JG: Uh I went back to school for a little while, I got the GI though. Then I went out and went to work for a company called Arm Operation and I was addressed and I worked on missiles, I worked on the minute man (unrecognizable) missile. From there I went to Grumman aircraft. I worked for Grumman aircraft on different airplanes. I've worked on (unrecognizable), I worked on most of the fighters they had, they had bombers and so it was a very interesting job. I enjoyed all the years there. Now I'm 74 years old, I'm an ex Sarg first class. Just happy to be around here talking to my grandchildren tell them so many stories

Q: Do you belong to any veterans' organizations?

JG: I did belong to a veterans of war Chapter but that's that and I went to another one the American legion, and I've been to some of their parties (unrecognizable) very nice. I don't socialize all the time but I do enjoy it when I get to.

Q: Have you maintained contact with any friends you made while in the service?

JG: No, just a few fellas in the neighborhood that had me insisted in some place where I was.

Uh one fellow was in the 38th regiment, talked a lot about it. But I don't really work on keeping in touch with him anymore, that was too many years ago. Life has changed time in life has changed

Q: And the final question, how did your military experience change your life or influenced your life?

JG: I think mostly in attitude about what I thought about people, what I thought about their job and home, family, Change in that direction mostly. Met some good people and met some people I didn't care for, that's part of (unrecognizable) of friends and (unrecognizable) but overall it was good