

Life in Red, White, and Blue
Life as a Soldier in Korea

By

Brianna Nissley

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Mr. Mealy

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There was no sound to be heard in Fort Carson, Colorado except the chattering teeth and restless movements of Ron Wile. Shivering in his sleeping bag, Wile tried everything to keep warm. Wile believed it would be another sleepless night due to the extremely cold weather. The next morning, he wrote his mom a letter explaining the conditions and wondering how he would make it through this difficult time. A few weeks later, Wile was surprised to find a package addressed to him, containing two hand warmers. He took the hand warmers to his sleeping bag with the anticipation that he would be able to sleep that night.¹ Wile would learn that keeping warm was only one of the daily struggles in the life of a new recruit in 1967.

Months earlier Wile was drafted into the military at the age of nineteen. “[I was there] Because Uncle Sam drafted me.” Wile recalled, “I didn’t have a choice.” Draftees made up most of the United States’ Armed Forces; 66% were drafted the other 34% were volunteers.² Being in the service was not Wile’s first choice. He would rather have been at home with his family continuing with his life as a young man. Though being in the military was not Wile’s choice he made the best of it.

After he completed basic training in Jackson, South Carolina, Wile was sent to Colorado. During his time in the Rocky Mountain State he was given “busy work” with vague results. He hated this time and desired a more meaningful task. “So one morning they asked for volunteers to go to Korea with a thirty day leave,” Wile recalled “and I raised my hand and got the job.”³ This new assignment meant that he would be sent to Korea after a thirty day leave spent with his family back home. He hoped that he would escape the cold and have a job with meaning in Korea.

From the start of his time in Korea Wile remembered “.... you knew life was going to be completely different,” he recalled “and it was. But,” he added “I made the best out of it....”⁴ Wile was

¹Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

²United States War Dogs Association. “Vietnam Veterans.” Accessed October 24, 2017.
http://www.uswardogs.org/new_page_18.htm

³Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

⁴Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

not alone in his thinking. Each member of his division knew life would be completely different even before they stepped foot in Korea. For Wile it was a big change; he grew up in Mountville, Pennsylvania and had never gone any farther from home than Hershey, Pennsylvania. Not only was it a dramatic shift in the location but soldiers in Korea also had to adjust to new routines, new struggles, and changing daily tasks. Military life in Korea was a very different lifestyle than what they were used to back home.

Life as a soldier in Korea was different than life in America. Soldiers had to adjust to a new environment and living conditions. The soldiers lived in steel half moon shaped huts while, Korean people lived in mud huts with grass roofs. Korean civilian towns were built right outside of the company fence line. The citizens built their towns outside the fence line because they knew that the soldiers would buy products from them providing usable income.⁵ Living in this manner was a completely new endeavor for most new recruits.

Similar to America, large cities existed in Korea too. Seoul, the capital of Korea, was one of the larger cities. Seoul and where Wile was stationed were “like night and day” Wile recalled.⁶ In the beginning of Wile’s time in Korea he was able to get a two or three day pass to go and visit a place around his company. Wile recalled “.... when I first got there,” he remembered “it wasn’t quite as bad. So, I got one and went to Seoul.”⁷ In the city there were cars, and tall buildings. It looked a lot like an American city. Back where Wile was stationed there were no sidewalks and there were only mud huts with grass roofs. By the end of his time he was not allowed to get a pass to visit a place due to a change in the atmosphere. Paul E. Idol remembered “This is the “land of the morning calm,” he

⁵Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

⁶Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

⁷Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

thought “But in 1950-53....” recalling his time in Korea “.... were anything but calm.”⁸ It appeared to be beautiful and calm, but it was full of war. The country was full of armies and war. Though it was not very bad at the beginning of Wile’s time in Korea, things changed towards the end.

The troops trained daily while in Korea. The new recruits had to practice shooting their rifles daily to make sure that they still knew their rifles inside and out. They also had to run daily to keep in shape. “.... and every now and then we would go out overnight for practice,” Wile remembered, “like you know to different places to find out how to use our compass; read it right.”⁹ Compass skills were very important because getting lost could be a deadly mistake. If you went the wrong direction you could end up in enemy territory. Daily training was another daily task for the new recruits to get used to.

New recruits also had daily struggles to overcome. One struggle was the cold temperatures in winter and extremely hot summers. In the summers, it could reach 104 degrees Fahrenheit and in winter it could reach minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁰ Some places in the United States may have experienced extreme weather, but in Pennsylvania Wile had not experienced either. So, the temperatures were a big adjustment for him. Wile was able to escape his struggle of being cold by changing the task that he did daily. He transferred from infantry and became the mess hall sergeant. This change in duty provided a more stable environment for Wile and got him out of the cold weather.

Answering a simple question got Wile to Korea and the job in the mess hall. One day when he was going through line to get food a guy came up to him and asked if he would want a job in the mess hall. “I said yes,” Wile remembered “it had to be better than climbing hills.” he thought.¹¹ There were a

⁸Heartland Heroes. “Memories of the Korean War: From Farm Boy to Soldier.” Accessed October 20, 2017.

http://www.accesskansas.org/kskoreanwar/stories/story_id011.html

⁹Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

¹⁰Stuart A. Kallen. *A Culture History of the United States Through the Decade: The 1950s*. (San Diego, California: Lucent Books Inc., 1999)

¹¹Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

total of three cooks for each shift in the mess hall. They cooked for 200 people at each meal. The meals in the military and the meals on the home front were very different. The type and amount of food that they cooked was very different. Wile preferred working in the mess hall because it gave him the purpose that he was looking for in the military.

Although Wile enjoyed working in the mess hall there were also struggles. One of these was that when your company was on duty guarding the DMZ (demilitarized zone) line they had to take the soldiers food to them three times a day. Wile remembered having to take food to the other soldiers. “So we were always on the go,” he recalled “and pushed...”.¹² The soldiers in the mess hall were always on the move. It was an hour trip for them from their division’s camp to the DMZ line. By the time that they delivered the meal they had to drive back and cook another meal quick to deliver it again to the DMZ. To help alleviate some of the stress and business a Korean baker came in and baked all the baked goods each night. This meant that the soldiers were not in his way and he was not in theirs. Also it made less work for the soldiers. This allowed the baker to be able to work without the soldiers getting in his way. Having a Korean baker enabled the mess hall staff to focus on the meals. For the soldiers in the mess hall time was a big obstacle to overcome.

Wile learned that a soldier’s job could quickly change. Wile was originally part of the infantry, but was then asked to work in the mess hall. Not long after he had begun working in the mess hall the mess hall sergeant went home. The “old man,” the company captain, called Wile into his office and told him that he was going to be the next mess hall sergeant because he was the cook who had been working in the mess hall the longest.¹³ The old man went over with him all of the questions that Wile would be

¹²Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

¹³Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.
To become a sergeant you have to be approved by the board.

asked. When Wile went in front of the board he was prepared and very grateful that the captain went over the questions with him prior to the interview.

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Once Wile was accepted by the board he was given the position of mess hall sergeant. As the mess hall sergeant, Wile had to write down the name of every soldier who would be eating in the mess hall. He would turn it the paper with their names so that they would be able to order the right amount of food. Upon eating, each soldier would sign his name to say that he was there. One time he was told that a rifle team from another division would be arriving for meals, but the team never showed up. “It doesn’t matter,” Wile recalled “I couldn’t say they didn’t show up.” He had to sit down and come up with names for all the people who were supposed to come, and then he signed their names for all the meals.¹⁴

The new recruits did not know upon arriving in Korea know that it would later be called the Forgotten War. When Wile was sent to Korea in 1967 the Vietnam War was also happening. Due to the overlapping of wars Americans were focused more on the Vietnam War because the demand for soldiers was greater. There were 2,709,918 soldiers in Vietnam.¹⁵ According to Wile:

Well, now when I over there the war wasn’t there. Why that was called the forgotten war was like Vietnam. To me the Vietnam War was forgotten. It’s not like it is today; everybody’s doing things for the troops overseas. Well nobody really bothered with the guys in Korea or in Vietnam. That’s why it’s call that.¹⁶

Both the Korean and the Vietnam Wars started as civil wars between the communist and non-communist parties. The Korean War did not end in a victory for either party, rather it just ended, leaving the American’s wondering why they were a part of the War at all. The Korea War quickly became unpopular among Americans on the home front.¹⁷ “.... and because only a relativity small

¹⁴Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

¹⁵United States War Dogs Association. “Vietnam Veterans.” Accessed October 24, 2017.
http://www.uswardogs.org/new_page_18.htm

¹⁶Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

¹⁷R. Conrad Stien. *The Korean War “The Forgotten War”*. (New York: Hippocrene books, 1994.)

number of men were involved, compared to the huge national effort in World War II , Korea soon became known

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as the Forgotten War.”¹⁸ According to the author he believes that the reason that the Korean War was considered to be the Forgotten War was due to fact that the Korean War followed so closely behind World War II. When vets came home they shared about World War II instead of the Korean War. Although the Korean War was called the Forgotten War for many reasons it still remains a critical part in American history.

Though life in Red, White, and Blue was a struggle for Wile in Korea he was proud to be a part of this history. “So, do I want to do it again?” Wile thought “No, but it was good for me.”¹⁹ Being drafted is not something that Wile would want to do again, but it was still something that helped him become the person that he is today. Wile and the other recruits had to deal with new situations when they enlisted or were drafted. They had to overcome new living conditions and circumstances, new struggles, and new daily tasks. Life for these new recruits was completely different than the life that they were used to back home in America. Wile made the best out of each challenge that he faced despite his lack of control. Wile persevered through the changes and challenges and ended his career in the military as an E5.²⁰

¹⁸Alexander, Brian. *The First War we Lost*. (New York: Hippocrene books, 1993)

¹⁹Wile, Ron. Personal interview with the author. Marietta, PA. October 5, 2017.

²⁰A third ranked officer in the military.

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