



LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR

Oral History Project

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Interview with:

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First Generation

Born in Don-am Dong

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Korean War Memories

My life before the Korean War - right after liberation I was living in Don-am Dong, so I am a native of Seoul. As soon as I started my first year of middle school, the war broke out. When the war broke out, I heard that there was some incident around the 38th parallel. The news about that came our way. Then a little while later, I could hear sounds of artillery being fired, “Kung. Kugung. Kung. Kugung.” I could hear this sound from a distance.

Since liberation, we had been living so peacefully. There were even trolleys. We kept the Japanese way of naming the streets even after the liberation such as *Gold-jung*. *Sa-jung bong*. *Jong-ro*. *Eulgiro* 4th street. We were keeping the Japanese style of naming.

And then the war broke out. We heard sounds of artillery and rumors about what was happening at the 38th Parallel. We heard that the South Korean Army was marching north. Then, the sounds of cannons approached closer, little by little. Yet we did not think to flee and take refuge. We thought that even if war did break out, the South Korean Army would just invade the North. So we did not even think to flee south. Then there was an airplane flying over us. And as it was flying by, we could hear a pre-recorded announcement being broadcast from the plane. The voice of the broadcast happened to belong to President Syngman Rhee. So we were listening to his voice. And you know, he had a unique speaking style. It sounded something like: “My fellow citizens, our army is advancing north.” It said that the South Korean Army was fighting hard and doing well, or something to that effect. The announcement said: “Citizens, do not worry, continue on with your daily activities.” We believed that message. Because we believed it, we did not think to take refuge. And we did not even imagine that the North Korean People’s Army could come close to us.

Yet, on the very day that President Rhee made this announcement, the artillery sounds were coming closer. I think it was either that evening or the day after, it started raining, forming a storm cloud. Then, as the sounds of artillery came closer to us, we noticed the South Korean soldiers were coming. I heard the bombing sounds coming close to where I live, and you know there is the valley that cuts the edge of the Miari Ridge. Yeah there is the valley. If you hike along the valley, you will be able to reach the mountain that is located right next to Korea University. All of sudden, the South Korean Army started to climbing up over the Miari Ridge. They started an encampment, and were making a blockade line. So we were wondering what was going on. We found out that with the sounds of artillery approaching, they were retreating.

So we abandoned our house and ran away to take refuge in the mountains. Since we did not have time to flee south, and the bombing sounds came closer, we just rushed to the mountains. However, we also entered a battlefield. We didn’t know the Miari Ridge had become the frontline. The mountainous area of Miari. When we went into the mountains, we had no idea that we would end up in a battlefield. We fled into the mountains only bringing blankets and bowls to make food. A little while after we settled there, soldiers came filling up the whole place. We realized that we were completely trapped in a battlefield. I saw a lot of soldiers climbing over the mountain but it seemed like they were unarmed. They weren’t even wearing a steel helmet, but just a normal helmet. I thought it weird. They were in the middle of a battlefield, but unarmed. So one of the military police admonished those unarmed soldiers – “How could you possibly come to the battlefield unarmed.?” So they told the military police that they were

sent to this battlefield in the middle of their training without having been given any weapons. They didn't have anything. Not even a gun.

So as the hell-like night passed, the South Korean soldiers started to flee from the frontline, to go into private homes and change their clothes. At that time, people wore white clothes so they [soldiers] just changed to white clothes, taking off their military uniforms and leaving their bullets behind. I saw them run away and I picked up those abandoned bullets. When the sun was beginning to rise, we could hear the sound of tanks, coming from the Miari Ridge. You could hear the loud noise reverberate, like "Dur, dur dur, dur". We looked down from where we were and saw the tanks approaching. A little while later I could hear explosions.

Later, there were dead bodies piled up everywhere in the city. And we tried looking for food, but we could not get any even though we had money, because there was nothing left. We kept searching for food around the city and I found a hospital called Metropolitan Military Hospital, but I don't recall whether it was the Metropolitan Military Hospital or a hospital attached to the Seoul National University. I think it was located in Weolnam dong, but I am not sure about it since I was really young and it has been too long.

Then, this is about after I came back to Seoul. At the time, there was an airfield called Yeouido Airfield. It was at that airfield that the Eighteenth U.S. Air Force was stationed. From there, they would deploy aircraft to attack the North and fight. I ended up staying there, working as a "houseboy". As a houseboy, all of the American pilots really liked me and I received all kinds of benefits. I received benefits like presents and a lot of good food, in a time when many people were suffering from starvation.

And when I was there, planes were deployed to go on attack. So before their departure, all those who shared a tent would say final farewells to the pilots. We had no idea whether they would die or come back safely, so we said our farewells and they left. Every time the planes prepared to depart, the houseboys would watch until the planes took off in formation. I would wish the pilots, with whom I spent time, to come back to the base safely. Usually, the fighter planes would come back an hour later, right after the attack. I would wait for the planes to land as they returned. Sometimes, if twelve planes departed, only eight of them would return. Some days, as many as three or four planes would not return. What that means is that those who did not return were shot down by anti-aircraft guns. Or sometimes some of the planes made their return a little while later because they had to make an emergency landing due to damage. It was usually not a normal landing so the planes got bumped a lot in the process of landing, and sometimes there was fire involved.

And when I was working as the houseboy for the GIs, I learned that each pilot was obligated to fulfill a certain number of flights. Any pilot who fulfilled their duty of going on 100 flights, would be allowed to head back home. There was one pilot who wanted to bring me back to the U.S. as an adopted child. He even completed the necessary procedures. At the time, I was like an orphan, without my parents. If I was with my parents or a guardian, I am sure they would have sent me off to the U.S. immediately. For my sake, they would have told me to go. At least, I could live comfortably in the U.S., instead of staying in a place where there was no food and it was uncertain whether I was going to survive. Yet in my young mind, I was still thinking about

my parents. I cried and refused to go, as I told the GI that I refuse to be separated from my mother and I would rather die with my family. There were many people who were adopted that way, but I could not go. So after that, I went back to a refugee camp and ended up going down to Daejeon, where I started attending school. It was at that point that I started my education.