



MARCHING DOWN MEMORY LANE

Past and present come to life in South Korea

text and photos by Darcy Knoll

The weather is well above 30 degrees with no signs of abating. Yet, despite the heat, a group of Canadian Korean War veterans gathered at the UN cemetery in Busan to honour their fallen comrades.

To celebrate the 55th anniversary of the war's armistice the contingent flew to South Korea on July 8th for a week-long pilgrimage to the battle sites and monuments commemorating the conflict. Hosted by Veterans Affairs Minister Greg Thompson, the delegation ventured to the grounds where Canadian troops halted the major Chinese offensive in Kapyong (now called Gapyeong) and also saw first-hand the ongoing cold war in Korea by visiting a South Korean military observation post and travelling to the Joint Security Area between the North and South in Panmunjeom.

In total the contingent consisted of more than 100 participants, including spouses and family, members of Parliament, a military guard of honour and musicians, as well as representatives from a variety of veterans organizations.

For Gatineau, Quebec resident Stuart “Jim” Gunn, the trip marked the first time he has been to the land of the morning calm since the war. A member of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Gunn headed to Korea in late 1952, where he worked as a sniper. After a

continuous barrage from the Chinese, on the night of May 2, 1953, his company faced a major attack from the enemy on what was called Hill 187. The battle was extremely intense and 26 Canadian soldiers were killed and dozens more injured — the most casualties on any one night in Korea.

During the attack Chinese soldiers captured Gunn and dragged him back to their position. “I think we walked for about 12, 14 days [after that],” he says. “They force marched us to the rear and eventually they loaded us on trucks and took us north.”

Although he still is not quite sure where he was taken, he said they were put in an unmarked prisoner of war camp. As a result, allied planes flying above did not know it was a POW site and fired down on them several times during his captivity.

“One of our biggest problems was our own planes,” he says. “We got strafed four or five times ... Our planes coming back from the Yalu [River] they would be looking for targets of opportunity — if they saw something they would drop it. They had the stuff

ABOVE: Stuart “Jim” Gunn was given a special honour: Veterans Affairs Canada managed to arrange to have the former POW actually retrace his steps on the Bridge of No Return, where he first walked to his freedom in September 1953.



The view just beyond the demilitarized zone from an observation post (inset). It was in this countryside that Canadian soldiers fought, and died, during the Korean War. The July 27, 1953 armistice established the DMZ — a four kilometre-wide strip of land straddling the 151-mile long military demarcation line — along the approximate line of ground contact between the opposing forces at the time the truce ended the Korean War. This area has remained untouched by humans since and is now overgrown with trees and lush foliage.

in the plane and they wanted to get rid of it.”

However, seeing these aircraft also let the prisoners know that the war was still going on, he added.

Looking back, Gunn says he was happy that he was held by the Chinese and not the North Koreans, who had a reputation for brutality. Throughout his captivity he said he never saw a Chinese guard beat a prisoner and they were generous with what little medical equipment they had.

Chinese officials would constantly try to get the prisoners to sign forms stating they had not been abused and blaming UN authorities for the conditions of the camps. When the inmates refused, the guards would not allow them shelter as allied planes flew overhead. In one incident, a couple of prisoners were shot from the planes, but still “nobody signed anything.”

When Gunn first entered the camp there were only a few prisoners, but as months passed the number of inmates jumped up to 450. Although the armistice was officially signed on July 27, 1953, Gunn would be held until the end of August or early September, when he was released at the so-called “Bridge of No Return” at the Joint Security Area in Panmunjeom.

Fifty-five years later, standing at a South Korean observation post overlooking the notorious Hill 187 where it all happened, Gunn says he is glad he made the trip back. With time the hill has become overgrown with trees and lush foliage. It now sits in the middle of the demilitarized zone between the North and South and has been untouched by humans since 1953. Although Gunn is not

quite sure if this is indeed the exact spot where he was captured, he says he is happy he got to see it.

“It doesn’t look like what I visualized it would look like, but I guess with the growth and everything it’s pretty hard to identify after 55 years,” he says.

Russell Cormier, a buddy of Gunn’s in the Royal Canadian Regiment, also had a difficult time trying to discern whether this was in fact the hill where he also fought. But the two vets were able to piece together that this was indeed the battle site by analyzing the various ridges and fence lines in the mountainous terrain.

As a special honour to Gunn, Veterans Affairs Canada managed to arrange to have the former POW actually retrace his steps on the Bridge of No Return, where he first walked to his freedom.

Alongside U.S. and South Korean soldiers, as well as a Canadian officer who works in the demilitarized zone, Lt.-Col. Gino Chrétien, Gunn walked to the halfway point of the bridge and proudly marched back to the applause of his fellow veterans.

For many of the vets attending this trip the most overwhelming part was simply looking at the dynamic country that South Korea has become. During the war many of the veterans took the 22-day seasick journey aboard an American troop ship to land in the city of

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Pusan (now Busan), which was loaded with refugees and suffering from abject poverty. In Seoul, for example, the city had been the site of several battles as both sides marched over the devastated South Korean capital. Much of the countryside carried similar scars, especially along the 38th parallel, where the majority of the war was fought. The development and beauty of South Korea was a theme that was discussed repeatedly by these old soldiers who could only remember a country wearing the damages of war.

“The country’s completely changed. I mean, just all of the greenery we see. In our time it was brown scrub — no cover at all,” says William MacIver of Stittsville, Ontario.

MacIver served as an infantry platoon commander when UN forces patrolled the border to ensure the North Koreans followed the terms of the armistice agreement.

From the 22nd floor of the Seoul Plaza Hotel, looking at the



city of skyscrapers, endless traffic and bright billboards, MacIver says that, after 55 years, he now thinks the people look healthier and more confident.

“When I was here there was one restaurant in Seoul and it was in a hotel and you had to be a general to use the restaurant,” he says. “[The Korean people] weren’t that sure of themselves at that point in time, but now they’ve got the confidence. You can see the way the economy is building and where it’s going.”

Noel Knockwood, a member of a special Aboriginal section of the delegation, agrees. Growing up in Nova Scotia, Knockwood endured the hardships of a residential school where he was beaten by his Catholic schoolmasters. “That’s why I’m not a Christian today,” he says.

Despite this upbringing, he said he joined the military because he “felt patriotic even after going through all that.”

As he grew up on a reserve he said he saw extreme poverty in Canada’s First Nations communities. However, it did not match the desolation he found in Korea where he served with the 1st Field Regiment of the 1st Regiment of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.

“Life on a reserve is pretty grim, but it’s not as grim as these people [had it] here,” he says.

Upon arriving in Korea he said, for the first time in his life, he saw a child that was truly starving. “I don’t think of the hard times and the battles. I think of that kid,” he says.

His tour lasted a total of 413 days because his relief was late in arriving.

William Bailey of London, Ontario, first enlisted in the military in World War Two. Underage at the time, he managed to slip past Canadian recruiters and made it as far as England before he was prevented from going further. Years later he headed to Korea and served there from October 1953 to November 1954 with the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment).

“The ceasefire was on. Our job was the protection of the demilitarized zone so we would have standing patrols just ensuring there was no people offending the line itself,” he says.

TOP: Veteran John Pederson points to the name of a Canadian soldier honoured in a memorial hall at the South Korean War Museum.

LEFT: A veteran looks at the Canadian graves at the UN Memorial Cemetery in Busan. **BELOW:** The sprawling Republic of Korea National Cemetery. More than 165,000 ROK soldiers are buried here.





In total, Bailey's military career lasted for 32 years; he also served in Germany and Egypt. This was the first time back to Korea for the 81-year-old veteran.

"The countryside is beautiful. The people are beautiful as they always were," he says with nostalgia.

When asked if he feels proud of his service in Korea after seeing the advancements in this country, the old man pauses as though he had never considered the fact that Canadian soldiers played a part in Korea's development. Seeming to fight back tears over the weight of this concept, Bailey says with a trembling voice, "Yes, yes I do. I feel very proud to be able to come back."

Joining Bailey on this trip was his son Bob, who served with the reserves for 23 years. "I find it very interesting," he says. "Seeing what he saw ... and him telling me stories about the country being better off and seeing it now I find it quite beautiful in many ways."

One highlight for Bob was the reception the Korean people paid to the veterans, a comment made by many of the attendees. Excited smiling flag-waving children attended several of the ceremonies and Republic of Korea soldiers often stood by to salute the Canadian vets. As an example, one vet was saying he went for a 20-minute walk when a heavy rain shower came down. With a sore knee and lacking an umbrella, the vet could not simply hustle back to the hotel. Apparently out of the blue, a random Korean man came up to him with an umbrella and walked him all the way back to his hotel out of sheer generosity.

TOP: Chinese troops stare down a Canadian Korea vet in a display at the ROK War Museum. **BELOW:** Korean children were eager to wave to the Canadian vets following a ceremony at the UN Memorial Cemetery.



The veterans of Korea are no longer the twenty-somethings who fought together (and partied pretty hard together) so many years ago. Despite this, they seemed to light up as soon as their plane touched down in Seoul. It was an extremely busy schedule for the vets, yet morale was high throughout and they all seemed quite pleased with the efforts of the Veterans Affairs staff.

Over the week, the vets covered a lot of ground. The pilgrimage began with the vets visiting the immense Republic of Korea National Cemetery, which marks the graves of 165,000 South Korean soldiers. They then strolled through the expansive Korean War Museum, which honours the names of the Canadian fallen in a massive hall and features a display for the Canadian contingent. Afterwards the group visited a South Korean observation point overlooking the demilitarized zone. Such sites as Hills 187 and 355 were clearly visible from this position and — bringing the past to the present — North Korean soldiers could be seen manning their own post across the four-kilometre gap.

The next day the vets headed to the Canadian memorial at the site of the April 1951 battle of Kapyong. Wreathes were laid at this monument as well as at a large wall honouring the Commonwealth forces in a nearby town.

The following day the vets returned to the demilitarized zone as they visited the Joint Security Area between the North and South Korea in Panmunjeom — the site of the original signing of the armistice 55 years ago. After watching the surreal exhibit of North and South Korean soldiers standing guard metres apart, the vets flew to Busan for the final leg of their journey.

For these former soldiers one of the main reasons they signed up on this trip was to visit the graves of their comrades. Venturing to the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in the city of Busan was the most poignant part of the week-long pilgrimage. This beautifully maintained cemetery has more than 2,300 soldiers buried, of which 378 are Canadian. In a moving speech during an Aboriginal ceremony, veteran Jim Eagle, who served with the 2nd Battalion of the Queens Own Rifles of Canada, noted that he wanted to visit the grave of a friend. Eagle recalled how his buddy was going for a beer and asked him if he wanted to go. He said no, but he lent his friend one dollar of his last two. The next morning he discovered that his friend had died in a car accident, leaving Eagle forever with a sense of guilt for having given his buddy that dollar.

The grounds are a testament to the sacrifices of these troops, with the majority not seeing past their early years. Strolling along these graves the veterans saluted their comrades, shared stories about their friends, planted crosses with poppies, and simply took time to reflect and pay respect as the sweltering Korean sun bore down.

In the end the veterans paused to remember the 516 Canadians with more insight than ever before. Perhaps the most rewarding part of this is that many of these old soldiers walked away from these hallowed grounds convinced that the modern, prosperous South Korea that stands today is proof such sacrifices were definitely not in vain. 🍀

Editor's note: To see more photos from Darcy Knoll's trip to South Korea go to www.espritdecorps.ca/galleries.htm