

**Veteran:** RUTHERFORD, Vernon  
**Service Branch:** MARINE CORPS  
**Interviewer:** Espinoza, Joni  
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**Highlights of Service:** Korean War; Buck Sergeant; Saw combat action

Interviewer: Would you state your name please?

Veteran: My name is Vernon R. B. Rutherford.

Interviewer: What war did you participate in?

Veteran: I was in the Korean War. It began in early 1950 and lasted until approximately 1952.

Interviewer: What military branch were you involved with?

Veteran: U.S. Marine Corps.

Interviewer: What was your rank?

Veteran: I was buck sergeant.

Interviewer: How did you become involved with the war? Were you drafted, or did you just decide to go?

Veteran: As a young lad, I couldn't wait to get into the Marines. I wasn't quite 18 years old, so I volunteered.

Interviewer: Explain your training experience.

Veteran: I was trained at Camp Pendleton, California, for a period of about 18 months before I went into combat in Korea.

Interviewer: Once you completed your training, did you feel like you were prepared to go to battle?

Veteran: Yes and no. Being young, I was scared but I felt like I was prepared because I didn't know what to expect. I'll admit I was a little scared.

Interviewer: I can imagine. Upon entering the war, did you fully understand its purpose or its cause?

Veteran: Not really. Being that young and not studying politics, I had a basic understanding about why the Korean War was being fought, but really didn't give it too much concern.

Interviewer: Where were you stationed?

Veteran: I had boot camp at San Diego at the Marine Corps recruit depot, then I was transferred to Camp Pendleton, and that's where I began my tour of duty. I stayed there 18 months, and then I went to Korea. I was in Korea nine months, came back and went to the naval air station in Florida. I served as a brig chaser—I chased prisoners. Later I went to North Carolina and worked in the post office, and then later was discharged.

Interviewer: Did you have contact with any civilians at any of these places?

Veteran: Yes, especially in Korea. There were lots of civilians, and you didn't know who to trust because they would dress up like what we thought were civilians, but then they turned out to be the enemy.

Interviewer: This question is kind of a part of that. What were your feelings toward them since you weren't sure who you could trust?

Veteran: No personal feelings. If they looked like they had a weapon, we fired upon them because we didn't know whether they were part of us or part of the bad guys.

Interviewer: Could you explain how a normal day would go for you—when you'd get up, what your duties were...

Veteran: Before going overseas, a normal day is rising early in the morning around 6 a.m. then going to chow hall, which is an eating place, for folks that don't know what chow is. Then there was always the sequence of the old rifle inspections. When I was in the service, we didn't have the opportunity to get a college degree like you

do nowadays, so we spent a lot of time learning what we called squad tactics. These are tactics used in the military to try to save your life. The day went by rather fast, because we stayed busy.

Interviewer: What was your meal time like?

Veteran: Those were interesting. Usually the Marines, ironically, a lot of times are stationed at naval air stations, and the Navy and the Marines love each other but they'd ridicule us, so a lot of times we couldn't digest our food because the sailors were aggravating us. But it was fun. Other than that, the meals in the states were no problem. You got your meals on time, and the food was good. Overseas, it was different. Sometimes you would stand in line for as long as two hours for your meals because of the number of people involved.

Interviewer: You mentioned in your paper your food would even freeze before you could eat it. Is that right?

Veteran: Yes. Korea was a very cold climate. The coldest I ever experienced was 26 below zero, and you did have to get in line to get your food from the mess hall or mess tents, and a lot of time before you could find you a rock to sit down on, your food, like sliced peaches or something on that order, would actually freeze to your mess kit. A mess kit is a metal container that soldiers eat out of. This was really cold weather in Korea—very cold.

Interviewer: What were your views on the enemy at the time?

Veteran: No personal views. The main thing when you're in combat is you're just trying to stay alive and you're defending your country. Plus you're doing what you're told. You don't really have any personal animosity against the enemy. It's just a matter of doing what you're there for.

Interviewer: Do you have any particular memories that stand out that you'd like to share?

Veteran: I don't talk war too much, but one I think of in particular was on the way to Korea. The ship was heavily loaded with highly explosive material that they loaded before we left the Port of San Francisco. During the middle of the night, we encountered two unidentified submarines, and the lights went out. The

engines on the ship were shut down, and we were just a sitting duck there waiting for what we didn't know was going to happen. We hoped it didn't happen, but my personal feelings were that I kept thinking, 'if one torpedo hits this big old ship—we'll be history.' It was a very trying time, even as a young lad, not knowing what to expect, but then the lights came on, and the ship motors came on, and we went on. I think of another time in Korea when enemy soldiers were being killed and would fall off into rivers, and the bodies would come upright because the ice would freeze around them, and they looked like they were alive, but they would be dead out there, just standing up in the river. I know these memories are not pleasant ones, but it really happened.

Interviewer: I remember in your paper that there was one time when you were surrounded by the Chinese.

Veteran: Yes, the last phase of the Korean War involved Chosin Reservoir. That was a reservoir where they manufactured power that went to part of China, and China got involved in the Korean War as a result of this reservoir and started supplying soldiers to the North Koreans—not only soldiers, but equipment. Therefore, the North Koreans had all kinds of fire power and men that they were being supplied to help their cause. Where we came in, including the Marines, the Army, and the Coast Guard, there was only about 5,300 of us. We woke up one night and found out that we were completely surrounded by Koreans and North Korean forces. Our leaders estimated that we were surrounded by about 50,000, but through the braveness and the expertise of General Chesty Fuller—he was a Marine Corps general—his strategy got us out of the Chosin Reservoir and fortunately there were 2,600 of us that made it out. The Marines have a philosophy of bringing out their dead, so we brought out all dead out and stacked them on jeeps and trucks. It was quite an experience for an 18-year-old boy to go through. I don't like to reflect back on it, but it'll make a man out of you.

Interviewer: Once you returned home, how were you treated?

Veteran: When I returned home from the Korean War the bands were out, the flags were flying. America was proud. It was a war that there was some purpose for. Americans weren't in total agreement, like any war, but there was a purpose for

the Korean War. We were treated very nicely. We were proud, and when we had our parades, we could go down the street with our chest out and being proud to be an American, because we had served in what we considered something that had to be done.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the war now when you look back on it?

Veteran: The only thing is that it's not really recognized as being as significant as some of the other wars, like World War I and World War II and even the Vietnam War. Vietnam was a larger scale war and I believe lasted longer and more lives were lost, but the Vietnam War didn't really have a cause. It was a political war that even people that served there will tell you that they really didn't know why they were there. I'm proud to have been part of the Korean War, and I think our freedoms today result in us going to Korea. Like World War II, it had a very significant part in American history. Had it not been fought, we would not enjoy the freedoms that we have today.

Interviewer: Well, that's it. Thank you for taking the time to share your story.

Veteran: Thank you for allowing me to give you this interview. I'd like to end by saying that I'm proud to be an American.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}