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Callaloo, Volume 32, Number 2, Spring 2009, pp. 404-407 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/cal.0.0445](https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0445)



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NOTES FROM A FORGOTTEN WAR, SO-CALLED

by Rolando Hinojosa-Smith

Yes, it's about Korea and that war, brief as it was, was briefer still for the 57,000 casualties. In passing, in fourteen-plus years in Vietnam, the casualties number anywhere from 57,000 to 58,000. The Korean War continues to be referred to—when it is referred to at all—as The Forgotten War. Forgotten? Oh, yes, but not by those who survived, nor for widows, parents, children, and all manner of relatives and acquaintances who lost a continuation of future bloodlines. How can they forget?

But it's forgotten by fellow-citizens who are now older and enjoying, one would hope, their golden years in retirement. As for the young, well, what experiences can they remember since the war ended in a truce more than a half-century ago? But, again, for those of us who haven't forgotten, the following notes, with some commentary somewhat abated by the passing years, may serve as a bit of history. History, by the way, which was culled from notes made beginning with a brief stay in an old Japanese artillery base in southern Honshu and followed with the invasion by the North Korean Peoples' Army who, on the day after Thanksgiving, were joined by Chinese volunteers. (We'd be home by Christmas, see? That was a given and since General Douglas MacArthur said we were, that settled it for the innocents).

The Chinese. Down they came on that freezing November day across the river and into the Korean hills and plains, bugles blaring (and no, it wasn't 300,000) although to us it seemed and looked like a million.

Our Executive Officer, Anthony John, had fought in the European War and he steadied us, as best he could, given the troops he was leading. But I'm writing from memory here, and I'll go into the notes for now:

It was the waste of it all. Phil Brodkey up and shot himself two days ago; orderly as always, the patrol found his helmet, the binocs, the paper, the pencil, two packs of Raleighs and a Japanese lighter, neatly placed, all in a row. The patrol found him face down, half in half out of his forward observer's hole.

Brodkey used to say he was a Philadelphia Jew doing time; Lt. John said that, for once, Brodkey was wrong. He was a friend; he was resourceful and kind, calm, precise, and something that most of us here are not: He was very good at his job. And yet, he cracked, as I imagine many of us will, in time.

As for the Brodkey family, their reward will consist of a telegram, (most likely stating he was wounded in action) followed by a let-

ter from our commanding officer repeating what all commanding officers say, 'A good soldier who gave his all . . .' The Purple Heart will follow, when those in charge of the mail get around to it.

We learned later that the winter of '50-'51 was the coldest, most severe, and blinding winter of the 20th century. But you had to be there to appreciate it. Beaten fair and square, although some of our men helped by running away. One outfit—and no, not forgotten by those of us who were there, abandoned their cannon, the ammo, the breech blocks and sights, and what shame they must have had at one time—as Johnny Tirpak said, 'Running and screaming for mommy and home.'

The Battle Police brought them back, of course. Where could they go? They had no idea where they were. The language? Korean? Chinese? Forget it. But they were fed, and back they came:

The word is out. Quite early this morning, under guard, the 88th Field was marched back to retrieve its guns. For the battalion's own good and discipline, it is said. Yesterday, they cut and ran; worse, they abandoned their guns and shells, their blocks and sights, and every bit of equipment to them issued and entrusted.

And where does one go in a retreat? Well, the answers are clear: not far and not for long. Yesterday, in the midst of fear and fire, Officers and Noncoms yelled themselves hoarse, to no avail. 'Stop, you sons of bitches. Hold it right there, you bastards. For Chrissakes, hold your ground.'

To no avail. They ran, and worse, they quit their guns. So, for their own good they were marched right back to the entrenched camp. From Kujang-dong, we had supplied the fire which, along that of armor, rid the Chinese and cut them to pieces. What we didn't kill, the Air Force did, and those who were left, up they scurried to Chinaman's Hat—'unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills'—abandoning their dead.

So, early this morning, the 88th Field was herded up, fed, talked to, and marched off under guard to retrieve the guns.

Years later, and now a grandfather, it's not difficult for me to think about those men. Cowards? All? No, inexperienced and green, the officers said. How true.

There are few soft jobs for ground troops. Period. The retreat in that freeze-your-butt-cold brought a surprise: we were assigned a rear guard position; a tough way to earn one's money. With Brodkey gone and Lt. John shot by a sniper (through the throat as he walked out of the latrine) the sergeants (Dumas, Hatalski, and Frazier) took over; our assignment: picking up stragglers. I remember Dumas giving me a stub of a No. 2 Eberhardt-Faber saying, 'Here you are, scribe.' Stragglers, the poorest of the poor; divorced and with no support, the old sergeants said. Picked up (saved, really) thirty and more:

Moving South, picking up stragglers and other lost souls. Yesterday evening, while we were busy checking, polishing, and babying the guns over and over, Hatalski brought in another straggler with death written all over him. 'Here's another mouth to feed,' he said.

A company clerk whose company abandoned him; he was left to guard cabinets crammed with shot, leave, and pay records along with the usual morning reports. He carried an unloaded carbine, and there were no rounds on his person.

'Well, Merry Christmas to you, Mr. Company Clerk', said Frazier. And with this he gets down on his knees. To a man we turn away, and it's back to the guns.

After a minute or two, softly, Frazier says, 'When you're through, Chappie, give us a hand with the elbow grease'. He keeps crying, but he's willing to work.

'How long had you been there when the Sergeant found you?'

'Since last night.'

'And they just left you there?'

'They said they'd be back . . . Where we headed now?'

'We're going South. . . to Kunu-ri.'

'But what artillery outfit is this?'

'The 219th.'

'The 219th . . . you're attached to the Second Division.'

Frazier laughed and said, 'Assigned, but not attached.'

The clerk nods and reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a Baby Ruth wrapper and takes a small bite off the frozen candy bar.

'We'll all eat soon', Frazier tells him.

He nods again. 'The Chinese saw me standing there, by the cabinets, they saw me, and walked right by. They waved. Some of them waved at me.'

'Yeah . . . they're just ahead . . .'

'Ahead?'

'Setting up roadblocks, most probably.'

'Jesus . . .'

'We'll get out; we'll just burn the hills, and them, too.'

'Jesus . . .'

At the Blue Bar, the only drinking place in my hometown now, a guy my age named Galván said, "Remember the wounded? Do you remember that old man, a Brig General? He was something." Galván would've gone on, but a youngster came up and this shut us up; this was none of his business.

I remembered the General all right. That old man picked up one of the wounded and put him in the truck all by himself. And then he waved at us and walked to the rear which was really one of the fronts.

That was the time I was helping Hatalski put a Turk in one of the trucks. I slipped on the ice and didn't want to get up. I was cold, tired, hungry, and felt sorry for myself. And Hat knew that when he said, 'Here,' as he handed me my helmet, 'you may need this.'

I also saved the following:

. . . the old looking General returned with Col. Keith and waved at us again.

'We'll move when we can. When night falls, have your men deployed and the artillerymen ready. Intelligence says the woods are full, so fire high, and we'll save our infantry. The sun's going down, Tom, but we'll get through. Pass the word.'

‘We’ll all get through,’ he repeated, and he waved at Hat and me again as we helped one more wounded man inside the truck.

Who were those men? No idea. No names. No interest in who they were. Rhode Islanders, Montanans, Carolinians, who cared? We didn’t. They were wounded and they were ours. What did they do after the war, if they survived? I’ve photos from an old 127 Kodak; me holding a cigarette, and another with me puffing away; one with Perruccio—Perch—a gunner in the 219th, writing a letter; a goofy guy named Griffin from Florida sitting with me out in a lawn in Tokyo General recovering from pieces of shrapnel no bigger than the head of a pin; in my case, imbedded in my left eye brow. Thought I’d gone blind. Some hero.

Back in the fight three weeks later; no eye operation needed. Truce talks but the fighting and the dying went on; business as usual. Spotted one of our convoys; carrying the dead for burial:

Stuffed with close friends, tighter now than ever, rid of worldly cares, each encased, snug and warm, in his private G.I. womb; from here, they look like so many mail sacks.

And then, away from combat and awaiting shipment home via Tokyo for what civilians and the uninformed bureaucrats call Rest and Recuperation, but which we, the great unwashed, call Intercourse and Intoxication, I ran into Louie Dodge at a movie house in Tokyo. Poor Louie Dodge, a half-mad career man who threw himself into the latrine dug into the backside of our forward observers’ hole. He refused to come out and none of us would go in . . . and then our new captain, Sal Bricketto, drew his .45 and fired. Poor Louie Dodge, naked with a blanket around him, was driven away from the war. And then to run into him, of all people, in a theater lobby some eight-thousand miles from home. “Can’t remember your name. But you and that red-headed Scotsman, Frazier, was it? You came through for me. Good to see you made it.”

Aboard ship; two and a half weeks to Fort Ord. Scraps of paper, neatly folded:

‘When I was at Chaffee . . .’
 ‘Shut the hell up over there.’
 ‘That wire-laying signalman is as good as dead.’
 ‘Raise those sights,’ Sergeant Kell, the forward ob, says. ‘You’re still short.’
 ‘My God, what a fire . . . Three thousand rounds. The breeches were painted black.’
 ‘They came at the infantry down there, like pigs in a chute.’
 ‘Don’t worry about the rookies; they won’t survive this shit anyway.’
 The laws of physics are then observed: Heat rises and with it the diesel fumes, and the smell of the friendly dead.
 ‘Hey! What happens if he walks this way?’
 ‘Shut up, back there.’
 ‘I’m drunk.’
 And so say all of us, ‘Hat, for you’re a jolly good fellow . . . on whom none of us can rely.’

Not much of a war, I guess, but it served, and it was enough for us who were there.