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Oral History: The Korean War from the perspective of Bryson Johnson

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Professor Erskine

Student Interviewer's Name: Jessica Johnson

Interviewee Name: Corporal Bryson Johnson served 1952-53 in Seoul Korea

Time and Location of Interview: This interview took place over the phone on November 1 at 3:57 P.M. It was approximately 1 hour long. The Interviewee was at home in Woodbury, Tennessee and I; the interviewer was in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Only the Interviewer and the Interviewee were present over the phone

About Bryson Johnson:

Bryson Johnson was born in Bowling Green Kentucky in 1930. He is 85 years old. Bryson Johnson was drafted into the military in the year of 1952 to fight in the Korean War. He left behind his girlfriend of two years, Ann Johnson, for the service. Once he finished his time in 1953 they got married and they have been married ever since. They have 2 boys who are grown now and married now, they have three grandsons and four great grandchildren. He currently lives in Woodbury, Tennessee and plans to live out the rest of his days there.

Interviewer: Jessica Johnson (JJ)

Interviewee: Bryson Johnson (BJ)

JJ: Hi Bryson.

BJ: Yes,

JJ: This is Summer again.

BJ: Oh how are you doing there?

JJ: I'm doing good how are you doing?

BJ: I'm ok

JJ: That's great are you super busy right now?

BJ: No no I can talk with you.

JJ: Ok

BJ: Oh Sounds like were that other thing was I guess that's not it. Yeah how are you doing?

JJ: I'm doing good how are you doing.

BJ: Ok, what do you need to know.

JJ: Um hold on I got some questions for you.

BJ: Ok

JJ: Ok let's start from the beginning where you enlisted or where you drafted?

BJ: I was drafted I had worked a year at the publishing house in Nashville and all the rest of 51; I went in the service and took the basic training and went to in Korea.

JJ: What year were you drafted?

BJ: 51-53 it wasn't a full two years it was uh 21 months I think

JJ: Ok, What were your job requirements specifically?

BJ: Well I drove a truck, er and jeep a rations truck and a supply truck.

Supplies we got medical supplies and in the winter time we hauled well we hauled fuel all for the trucks and things also in the winter time we hauled I guess it was kerosene or something to it for the little stoves each little squad tent had a little stove in and it used oil and they had a 55 gallon drum outside

of the tent on a stand and the fuel dribbled into the stove and we had a place to keep warm and uh.

JJ: Can you hear that beeping ever so often?

BJ: Yes are you recording that or what

JJ: Yes I am recording it so I can reference back to our conversations I'm sorry for the beeping just ignore that I don't want it to bother this is just a side note.

BJ: That's ok I figured that's what it was I didn't know though

JJ: During your service did you receive any rewards or medals?

BJ: Ah just uh a service ribbon you know for I think its for specific theater for something like just a couple of little things. That I got a good conduct medal well it's a ribbon not a medal I earned the rank of corporal or I think they call it E5

JJ: Ok do you remember first arriving? What was it like?

BJ: Uh it was uh we actually we came in on a boat we traveled from Japan to Korea out on the harbor and we got all on to these small LC carrier boats it's a things and they put you on there were were probably 50 to a hundred people on there standing up and when they run it up on the beach the trap door goes over and then everybody scrambles out. Of course when we hit the deck everyone of us fell down on top of the other one we had to wait until the other one got up (laughs) we were like a stack of dominoes you know. When we hit the beach um everybody fell, I guess they fell forward and then we had to wait until all the ones in the back got up then we all scrambled out. But there was no fire or anything we wasn't in any danger. It was just that was the way that

the big ships couldn't come into the harbor so we got off of the big ship and got on to these little boats and the little boats came in to the shore. Then we traveled by train up to Seoul Korea and we were picked up by a truck there and was taken out to head quarters and head quarters what third medical battalion infantry division.

JJ: Do you remember the name of the boat that you traveled on?

BJ: One of them was HB Freeman and one we came on was HB Freeman and the other one was something Howel I don't remember which one was which but I know that I was on the HB freeman and it was a boat about 600 feet long and it was a small small boat it was not one of those big ones. But it was kinda big to me though (laughs) and uh we had a rough storm going over from Seattle to Japan we got the tail end of a typhoon and we got we when you get into a storm like they close all of the hatches down and water washes over the top of the deck if you'd of been up on the deck you'd of been washed off that's how rough it is when you get into these storms. And we was uh 16 days going form Seattle to um Japan and I was seasick most of the way and I lost 16 pounds going over I lost a pound a day. Which I could use right now.

JJ: How did you keep in touch with your loved ones? SOME TIME LATER

BJ: Uh letters there was no telephone and uh I guess emergency you could but I didn't know anything about I didn't use any telephones there was no telephones it was all by letter. No email's or anything back then. I wrote my little honey everyday while I was over there we wasn't married then while I was over there. I went with her for 2 years. We didn't get married until I came

back from Korea. Then uh I wrote her and when we got married she had saved all of my letters and she had 600 letters that I had written to her during the two years that we were together.

JJ: Was that Mrs. Ann?

BJ: Yeah the one and only!

JJ: Awe how long have y'all bee together?

BJ: We started dating a little bit before I wet into the service and then uh we wrote the whole time that I was in service. When I got back I got back in July I think it was in 53 and we got married October of 1953

BJ: Yeah it was Ann that's who I was dating then.

JJ: Ok so um how did your service and your experiences in Korea affect your life in general?

BJ: Well um can you repeat the question?

JJ: How did your service and experiences affect you life now?

BJ: Well it uh it tells you to get your things in order. You know that everything is orderly and in place and we try to do the same things now. It was a good experience. I'm glad that it's over now.

JJ: All right so back to the boat, you just landed, what area in Korea did you land exactly, I mean what was the nearest city?

BJ: We landed in uh Tulsan that's was south of Seoul then we took a train from Tulsan to Seoul Korea, sul, seoul I guess that I call it sole.

JJ: Is that were you were stationed? #00:01:59-0#

BJ: Well we went to uh farther north of Seoul. Seoul is below the 38th parallel I don't know if I talked to you about the 38th parallel. The 38th parallel is what the was the South Koreans territory and uh the north and south yeah north of the 38th parallel was North Korea and the Chinese communist were fighting with the north Koreans. But we was above the 38th parallel at least the time I was over there.

JJ: So describe the 38th parallel to me again what is that?

BJ: Well that's the dividing line the 38th parallel was uh you know south of there was South Koreans and North of the 38th parallel was uh was the North Koreans and the Communist China. Communist China was in on that war too. This is just like the dividing like um, like Florida halfway up you know you would call that North Florida and below that would be South that's like the 38th parallel was. And that's has to do with the grid on the united states and on the world the 38th parallel and I don't know where all it runs but I know its like a grid. Where else it goes I don't know.

JJ: So what was life like in the camp?

BJ: Well there wasn't a lot going on there every once in a while they'd have a movie at night uh and uh there wasn't much going on a lot of people were playing cards and uh you know in there spare time. And uh we had to stand guard almost every day two hours a night usually you walked through your yard up and down through the compound and even when we was back South of the parallel, 38th parallel we was in a camp where we had a bob wire fence

around it and the Koreans or nobody could get in and we couldn't get out. And uh and uh you know I told you about the uh little houseboy that we had.

JJ: Yea

BJ: Well when we went through the mess hall we we had trays and we would wash our own trays we had to go outside they had boilers going with hot water and we rinsed it in one and you kept going two too three till you get on back to the soap and you would soap it up. And when we was back below the 38th parallel there was a village right close by there and the GI's uh would anything that they had on there trays the little south Koreans the little boys and girls the papa's sons and the mamma's sons uh and um they had their tin buckets and they were scrambling and hollering for you "to the GI come to me, do me, if you had any extra thing on there would you scrape your leftovers" from your tray into their little bucket and that's the way they ate. You know that's all they got they were very poor

JJ: Awe and you said that you were stationed in North Korea

BJ: Well yeah it's above the 38th parallel its considered North Korea but we was never uh above the foreign line or wherever you want to call it the front line I was never stationed on the front line we might be back five miles from the front but uh they had these big uh one-o-five Houser's that shoot these large shells there were sometimes they'd be just outside our camp and they'd go Boom! Boom! All night long maybe and they were sending uh these uh shells up into the front line on the North Korean side

JJ: Yeah so how far away were you form the front line?

BJ: Uh sometime five miles sometimes two miles might be ten miles?

JJ: Did you ever have to...you said that you drove the trucks right did you ever have to drive up to the front line?

BJ: No I never did have to drive up to the front lines I was mostly south you know and uh the supplies were all south towards Seoul. And uh the corner master where the foods or rations were, we would go back everyday and uh give rations and uh redistribute to the different uh well we had an ambulance company and a clearing company and a head and head quarters company. I was in Head Quarters and Head Quarters Company. Head quarters and head quarters was just uh like a uh corporate Head quarters you know in the private world and uh they had um an ambulance companies was uh were stationed there. They had ambulances that went up to the front line and brought back uh the wounded and also they had helicopters there were theses pontoon things of either side of the thing that they would put the wounded in and then flew back. Have you ever watched uh *MASH* the *MASH* the old uh it was a show.

JJ: Yeah I have watch a little bit of it but I haven't I never really watched a lot.

BJ: Well that's that's what the what they did uh start of the show were they had the nurses and the doctors running out and grabbing the patients out from underneath the helicopter while its still running and then rushing them back in to the clearing company which is kind of like a hospital. They had...They did minor surgery's and things if anything uh was major they always sent them

back further south and if it was too bad they'd send them back to Japan at some hospital back there.

JJ: So what was that called again, the hospital, what was the name for that?

BJ: Well they it was called a clearing companies it was uh just like an uh well it wasn't like an AID station. An aid station is right up there on the front line.

They come back there it acts like a triage I guess they take and bring the wounded back off the line and they have a tent and things there it's call an aid station and they they you know try to bind up the wound and give them pain medicine or something that helps until they can the ambulance company comes up and gets them and then brings them back to us, back at the clearing company.

JJ: Yeah you said that it was H station like H as in hound dog?

BJ: No AID station like AID

JJ: Oh ok thank you, did you have any special skills before you went to the military?

BJ: Well I just worked in the binder I just started actually working in the seventh publishing social bindery and I uh really I started out as a janitor and I was cleaning and then eventually I started working on the machines. The main thing that we worked on back then was the Indiana magazine. We'd run a switcher and then uh we'd run the magazine and the in giving magazine its just people take out. You've been in gathering haven't you? You've been caroling like the caroling group going door-to-door and passing out these magazines.

JJ: Uh yes we call them Glow Tracts

BJ: Then also we had uh magazines and we started working on the bible stories we'd get uh and start working on the ten volume bible stories they've been around since the early fifties. And we worked on them and uh all kinds of book we did all of the spirit of prophecy books and we did the big books I don't know if you've seen them all f you've been over at my place you've seen these big books acts of the apostles, patriots and prophets, prophets and kings, bible readings, and all the Great controversy all of these books about two inches wide. I don't know if you've seen them but we did all of those. But we ran those.

JJ: Tell me more about your experiences with the front line? How often did you have to go up there?

BJ: I didn't really have to go up there at all I uh went up there one time just before we left to see my future brother in law, he was on the front line. I went up there and took a jeep they let me take a jeep up to see him. And uh but he was on the front line but yea I didn't really y have to go up there I went up there on my own. Uh drove up there to see him before I left and I was leaving to go back home just a week or two so before I went to see him.

JJ: Tell me about what it looked like on the front line?

BJ: Scary! Yeah there one that we went through is uh I may have told you and I don't know if you wrote it down or not but when you got to the valley the road is in the valley and the north Koreans are one hill on one side and on the other side was the south Koreans and when you go through that valley they had these smoke machines going so that the enemy when you were going through

that sections there so that you couldn't see otherwise they could send a uh a little I don't know what you call it rounds I can't think of it right now but they have these little bazookas like things they had these little things where you drop the thing into the hole and they fire it goes over but it's a short distance weapon or gun whatever you want to call and uh it now but they could pinpoint you and if they get a hold of you they could you know they'd blow you up . But if they had that smoke screen there they you'd go through that smoke and they couldn't see you but yet it wasn't so dense that you couldn't see going through it would go through it. You know you could see the roads and everything but they couldn't see you. And they kept that going all day anything could be moved through there. But it's kind of hard to describe they was on one hill and we were was on the other hill the valley there and going up to the front line you had to go through the valley and that's where they had the smoke machines and things If you went further on up and things you'd be in the woods and things and they couldn't see you. But then in the open that's where you'd have to have the smoke machines where the enemy couldn't see you.

JJ: Did you have any scary experiences back at camp?

BJ: Not too much I uh I was on guard one night and I guess uh I don't know what they were but there were some people in there here and I caught them in the rations tent. You see they uh the South Koreans and things they were hungry and they know that there was food and stuff in these camps so uh they would try to sneak in at night and get food and one time I was on guard and we

caught them well we didn't catch them they ran but I hollered for the and I called the sergeant guard and he looked things over and see you know what's going on but uh that's one of the things they would well you know try to come in and get. If you're hungry you know you'd do just about anything. So Uh let's see uh oh and uh now you see uh to keep you on your toes they would I don't know what or where I'm sure that it happens but they would in the morning they would say well now down at this certain outfit the North Koreans come in and they shot all of the people in one of the tents and then they ran. Just kind of to keep you on edge. We were pretty safe most of the time I never had any problem or anyone break into the camp and do any killing or anything.

JJ: Describe to me a normal or average day at the camp?

BJ: Well we even we would get up at uh regular time I don't know I think that breakfast was at um 7:30 to 8:30 or somewhere along there. And if you would do your duties you'd go and get your supplies and um. They didn't have any actually physical exercise you know as a group you know you do PT I don't remember ever doing that uh in Korea. But uh then uh people would do whatever they were supposed to do and of course Head quarters and Head quarters would come in and uh it was more of a clerical work, a lot of clerical work that was done. And then of course we did have the trucks come in the rations truck and a jeep for the company commander. I did do a little driving for the company commander Um I'd drive him around back to different places you know and uh but we had uh these trailers that we'd pull behind our trucks and we would go back to Seoul and uh we'd bring back all kind medical

supplies. Uh the litters you know what they carry the patients on you know if folds up and they pull out and has a canvass in between and you put the patient on it we would bring some of those up for the front line you know and take it up there.

JJ: What kind of supplies did you usually cart around?

BJ: What? Uh all it was all I don't know what exactly what all it was you know bandages all kinds of bandages and I guess it was some medicines and things to. Um but um it was all in boxes and we would deliver it to um the clearing company and you know they'd unload it and everything and use it for their patients and things and I suppose they have sheets and different things that they'd have to use at the hospital.

JJ: So where was the clearing company located?

BJ: It was kind of all in our compound all kind of in a circle you know just either down the road of up the road or which ever you know. And the road is dirt everything even on the call the SR is the main supply rout and the main supply route is dirt and it was through rice paddies and you'd go up and just like you was on a roller coaster you know and dirt was high places and low places. And the speed limit for us was fifteen miles per hour. These uh stations along side if you go through there and you go towards another section you get uh the thing was they could catch you and they would say that you were speeding, it was a speed trap I guess you could call it.

JJ: What would happen if someone didn't do their duty of if they were caught in one of those speed traps?

BJ: I don't know I never did get caught or anything and I don't know if anybody did or what they did to them if they did you know. Um I really don't know. If they did they would discourage you from going fast. Actually the the roads were so bad that the fenders on your trucks a lot of them were so rough that they would shake them and the fenders would be loose and the roads were terrible really. Farther back you would go you would get gravel roads and such but the roads were built through rice paddies and you know the rice paddies would sink down and you'd get stuck on the side of the road

JJ: What experience was the most significant to you?

BJ: Well yeah uh I don't know if you remember I told you a little bit about uh the um they wanted me to go on guard on Friday night and I had always been exempt from working on Friday night but this new uh clerk came in and he had me scheduled for working of Friday night and I refused to go on duty and they was going to court marshal me. They threatened and threated to and I had to stay in my tent for I don't know how long I don't remember how many days and um finally they had some Adventist doctors and thins farther down south that came up and talked to them and that got me out of the situation and um that was kind of scary they threatened to um send you to a place I guess was uh a prison in Texas that they use these for soldiers and um you now military people that they do something and they send them to fort Leavenworth and they threated to send me there. They said that I could be shot. When you refuse a company commander to go on duty or don't do what he says in a time of war you could be shot. But I didn't get shot

Me: I'm sorry can you clarify the fort that you would have been sent to? Fort what

BJ: I think that it was fort Leavenworth or Tampa for the um the army the navy and I don't know what all the uh...it's the prison for the military

JJ: Ok

BJ: I think that it's called fort Leavenworth?

JJ: How long did you have to stay in your tent did they offer you food or water?

BJ: They brought you food and uh um I don't remember really two or three days I think maybe. I did a lot of praying and reading the bible you know because you didn't know what was going to happen you know.

JJ: Yeah that's scary situation. Did you ever know anyone who did get court marshaled during your service?

BJ: No I didn't

JJ: So would you say that over all things ran kind of smoothly where you were stationed?

BJ: Yeah it was everything was pretty well organized and uh they had uh in the wintertime it was cold it got down to twelve or thirteen below sometimes. And um we uh at the walls garden we had these big parkas have you seen the Eskimos they have these uh coats that uh you can pull it together over your face and all you can see is our eyes looking out through the fur. Your breath on your uh parka would freeze you know from breathing on it. And they had these uh boots that we wore we wore these uh um parka's and some insulated boots as long as you keep moving you keep pretty good it stayed pretty warm but if you tried to stand still it gets pretty cold.

JJ: How long were you there how many months did you serve?

BJ: 14 months I was stationed in Korea. And after I was there 6 months we'd get to fly back to Japan for R&R and uh I think that it was a long weekend uh and then I came back I stayed in Korea another six months and then I got to go back to Japan for another long weekend and then we came back after that and it wasn't to long and our time was up uh my time was up and my replacement came in and we went uh back to uh Japan and left from Japan on a ship back on our way home.

JJ: You said that after six months you would fly back to Japan for R&R what's R&R?

BJ: Rest and Recuperation

JJ: Oh ok rest and recuperation

BJ: And uh you mingle with the Japanese and the ones that uh were permissible... Oh what do you call it they would get these Japanese girls and stay with them at motels and hotels and things and uh I never did do that. I was faithful to my little sweet wife ☺. But these GI's would get with these girls in the hotels and sometimes we uh the girls would uh during the night while the men were uh sleeping they would get their billfolds and in the morning when the GI woke up he would be missing his uh billfold so he was out any money.

JJ: Can you think of anything else that stood out to you while you were there?

BJ: No not really I guess just how desolate the place was I mean there was nothing you'd get above the 38th parallel and some even below the 38th parallel um well they've gone through the villages and sometime you might

see a few remains of a village but most of the time everything was burned you know actually you move the troops move backwards and forwards to push the North Koreans further north and then the North would make a push and they would push the GI back and they got way back towards Seoul and I think that it went back and forth two or three times during the war. And um so they would burn the villages so that they would know that they wouldn't have to go through the village and route the people out of the villages again because if it was burned down you didn't have to worry about the people trying to go through and you see on these movies now how these people go into a building you know but there was no buildings there everything was in tents. Above the 38th parallel and even some south of the 38th two. The North Koreans had pushed us back and um but now that all happened before I was over there. When I was over there that didn't happen they didn't push us back we was always more than anything there was talk about certain hills. You know hill so and so was taken back by the United States and then maybe the North would push them off of that hill and they'd have to move back to the next hill and you know stuff like that but it it was never pushed back over where we was at

JJ: What was your rank again in the military?

BJ: Corporal but I think that it was called E5. It has two stripes.

JJ: Ok well that's all of the questions that I have prepared do you have anything else you'd like to add?

BJ: Well I was wondering if you'd gone through and looked and just go on the internet, you got the internet don't you?

JJ: Yeah

BJ: Go on the internet and you can get all kinds of information I went in there a little bit and saw when the war started and how many people were killed and um I think it was uh let me see I wrote a few notes here uh what was it it seemed like 5 or 50 thousand uh lets see 5 million casualties I guess that s on both sides during the Korean war there was 5 million killed during the war.

JJ: Yea it says that the Korean War was June 25 1950 to July 27 1953.

BJ: Right Yeah.

Me: You served 14 months and that was form 1951 to...

BJ: 52-53 I think it was probably March of 52 to July of 53 anyhow it was 14 months somewhere along there it think.

JJ: Oh so when you finished it was pretty much near the end of the war?

BJ: Yeah I think it was uh you know the pen man john they were having these peace talks going on and you know they actually after I left over there just in October I think it was they actually made the peace treaty or whatever you want to call it of Pen Man Jung. Well you may want some more information on that go on the internet and just say Korean War uh and it'll tell you all kinds of stuff when it started and how many soldiers and when they served there and all kinds of stuff.

JJ: Yeah I will well thank you so much Bryson for your time I'll call you again if I have anymore follow up questions.

BJ: Ok I got some more things that I can tell you but anyhow I'll talk to you later and have a good time Bye.

HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Professor Erskine

JJ: Ok you too Thanks Bryson Bye.