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# Oral History Project/ Robert Leslie Smith

Joe S. Mixon

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**Student Interviewer's Name:** Joe Mixon

**Interviewee Name:** Robert Leslie Smith

**Time and Location of Interview:**

The interview was conducted in one session on 10/17/15 and lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. It was conducted in the home of Robert L. Smith in Rogersville, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

**About Robert L. Smith:**

Robert Leslie Smith was born in Aurora Illinois, USA in 1932 and has lived most of his life in Illinois. His education never exceeded high school. He fought in Korea with the Marine Corps, Charlie Company, First Battalion, Fifth Marines Division and was with the Marine Corps through 1954. After the war, he married and had a son and a daughter two years apart. Later, he married my grandmother, Velma Stewart. This interview covered topics ranging from his time in the military to his time back home as a veteran.

*Interviewer: Joe Mixon (JM)*

*Interviewee: Robert L. Smith (RS)*

JM: Please tell me a little bit about how you came to be involved in the Korean War. Were you drafted into the military or did you enlist into the military?

**RS: When I went into the marines, you had to join. There was no draft. And so, ah, the Korean War started and I was reading about it in the paper and back then everybody was patriotic because the Second World War was over five years earlier. And I said I didn't want to be drafted and I had heard stories of veterans coming back from the Second World War and I said I think I want to be in the Marine Corps. because they take care of their own. For whatever that's worth. So I went down and joined the Marines and I told my mother I had joined the Marines and I probably broke her heart. (says with tears in his eyes) And it was very difficult for me. It's more difficult now looking back then it was at that time. But no, I joined, I joined.**

JM: Where were you living at the time?

**RS: I was living in Aurora, Illinois. I probably was going nowhere. Ah, I probably was going nowhere. I wasn't focused in life, and so in the long run, really the marines probably saved my life. I know it's hard for some people to understand but you go into the military and least back then, you go into the Marine Corps. and it was different than it is today just trust me. They had a military code of justice that was not in effect yet. It was the "rocks and shoals" they called it and ah, I had to take a guy to the brig one day and they gave me one bullet and if he escaped, I served his time. The one bullet was to shoot him. And if I had to shoot him, I would**

**be charged for eight cents and transferred to a different base. It was a different time. The military was different back then trust me. But anyway, yeah.**

JM: So where exactly did you train?

**RS: Paris Island. The Marine Corps has two boot camp, Paris Island and San Diego. If you went to San Diego for boot camp we called you a Hollywood Marine. Paris Island is a swamp off of the Carolina coast and that's exactly what it is.**

JM: Was it vigorous then? Vigorous training?

**RS: It was as much mental as it was physical. At 18 you are in good shape. I could handle all that, in fact I was doing sit-ups one day and I said, I'm getting tired of doing it mentally, not physically. So it was ah, that's the way it was.**

JM: Did you make friends while you were in boot camp?

**RS: Yeah, Yeah, you know I've lost track of all of them. As we speak I see their faces, but when they sent us off, yeah I made a lot of friends at boot camp. And then, ah, after boot camp the Korean War was goin' real real bad. Cause the Chinese had entered it and I'll be very honest with you, they were kicking our butts. And so five months after the Korean War had started I was in combat. And I says, "momma mia I don't know about this." But it was, yeah, they had cut down the military after the Second World War and, ah they didn't have personnel and so they shipped us right off to Korea, yep.**

JM: Alright so, now that you were in Korea, did you go to a base camp area?

**RS: Okay, Charlie company, I went to Charlie company first bat fifth Marines. Okay, and if I get emotional (chokes back tears), I don't mean to. Because I look at it differently now, at 18 I didn't have any sense, lets get real. But I look back what we went through, it was insanity. But anyway, they flew me to Korea. Uh, We landed in Japan, they taxied out to the middle of the airport, out in the runway. And we stripped all our clothes off, and put cold weather combat clothing, and uh, gave us ammo, and uh, took our clothes, we put our clothes in a sea bag, and I thought, and when I put my clothes in a sea bag, I thought, "I may never see these again. And then we went over to a big airport hanger and they had on the wall when we were gonna leave for Korea and I had to leave the next morning. I was flying out of Japan to Korea. And so I was laying on my cot, we had cots everywhere in this airplane hangar, and the guy, I didn't know who he was we were all strangers, and he says uh, when you leavin'? And I said tomorrow morning and he says that's when I'm leaving. And he said, uh, let's go over to the slop shoot or something. No, slop shoot, in Marine Corps language, was a tavern. And we can see what's goin' on, just to do something. And so we went over there and we were talking to some guys and we said to ourselves, we need to pull a liberty while we were here. Well we couldn't, we were restricted and so we were talking to one of the guys that was on the base and he said**

well if you go over here, in such and such a place, there's a hole in the fence. (chuckles) We said, fine. So we went over there, crawled through the hole in the fence and there was a large empty field, ah, and they you got to a little town. And we were into that field and about that time, the SP comes driving up, short patrol. And naturally we ducked down and it was dark, it was night, and he said, ok we see you there come on out. And about a hundred marines jumped up and ran every different directions, so anyway, we came back in and, uh, next morning we flew out to Korea.

JM: Alright, and once you went to Korea, um, did you go straight to, ...

RS: Okay, yeah okay, well Charlie Company was in reserve, they were building up because they had just come off front lines, and when you come off front lines there's casualties. And uh, I remember they came over, came off the airplane and they said uh, Harold England in fact that's who it was, he said uh you're in Charlie 1-5, follow me. It was winter by the way, and we were uh they were chow uh, they were feeding chow. And uh went through the chow line and they had a 55 gallon oil container, that's what they made their coffee in. And so you just dip your coffee cup in there and you'd get your cup of coffee or whatever you want. I've never been a coffee drinker but it was very cold so I got a cup of coffee and went over to sit down and eat. By the time I got ready to drink some of that coffee, the ice had frozen on top of it. But anyway, that was my introduction to Korea. And uh, that was not a good introduction.

JM: Alright, so, now that you're there, um, were you involved in any of the major operations that the marines took part in...

RS: Okay, yeah I was in but, now I'll be honest with you. I gotta tell you another story. All my life is stories. When, after I got out of Korea I was aboard ship for about a year. I was with the sixth fleet in the Mediterranean. And I was a squad leader, and they picked, my squad was the honor squad. And so we were out there in inspection and we had to wear our ribbons. And so they are coming up inspecting us and the Marine officer and Naval officer looked at me and he said uh, do you know what that star on your one ribbon means? And I said uh, yes sir that's five battle stars for Korea. He said no one got five battle stars in Korea. And I said you're looking at one, sir. And the gunny Sargent was there and he looked at me, and I feared the gunny Sargent more than I did an officer. It's reality. And uh, later I saw the gunny later that day, and he said, well the officer looked at your record and you've got five battle stars. So I ended up with five battle stars, not that I was any kind of a hero that's just, that's the way it was.

Now, I gotta tell you this one. One of the first things I did, and I was green as grass, we didn't have a lot of training, after boot camp they sent us over there. Fact I never pulled, I never pulled uh, mess duty in boot camp. Everybody pulled mess duty in boot camp. They ran us through. And anyway, we went on night patrol. I said what in the name of reason are we doing here? I don't care. I was scared to death. We went on night patrol to penetrate, not penetrate, but to test the enemy

lines to see where they were at. I'm gonna tell you something. I knew what fear was. Now, I will say this, the first couple weeks, I was scared to death, I was afraid at all times when I was in Korea don't miss-understand me. But I'm talking about real fear. And uh, there's always casualties, and I finally realized, I said Robert, you're not going home. They're going kill you. Because I had people killed to my right and left, you know I was no hero. And that helped me a lot. I said, you know, I'm gonna get killed, okay, so lets do your job, be faithful to your fellow man and, uh, you'll be way better off. Yeah, uh, yeah. I know some people that did bug out and that wasn't gonna be me. So I did my job the best I could. But yes, I understood what fear means. Okay, you want more, you want sea stories? I got millions of 'em.

JM: Well I got one more question actually about that. Um, did you or your unit ever cooperate or have to cooperate with any of the South Korean forces?

RS: Okay well not yes that's a yes and no. Yes and no. When we went on, they didn't have all these green berets and navy seals back then. We did what all they did in every-day line of duty. And we always had when we went on patrol we always had a couple Korean interpreters. And so we were tied in a lot of times with the Korean Marines.

I gotta tell you this story. We were on patrol; we were in the eastern mountains of Korea. We were always in the mountains (shakes head). And if you're ever in the mountains you never get to the top. You never get to the top. And we were in patrol and ran out of food. Not uncommon, and we ran into a little village of maybe six eight ten houses. And we had some Korean money with us and two Korean interpreters. We were probably about ten or fifteen, probably fifteen of us. And they said could you feed us? We said could you feed us? And they said yeah, and we said we have money. So ah, I had a bowl of fish head and rice. A bowl of rice, and I still see that fish eye looking up at me. And, ah, I ate that, I ate any, I was starving. And they told us never eat the native food because they fertilized their gardens with human waste. And our immune system wasn't ready for that. And then I had a stick of rice about that long (estimates a foot) about as thick as my thumb. And about, we moved out after that. That's, ah, the Korean interpreters took care of all this. But anyway, hour two hours later. All of us, not all of us but about 90% of us commence to get sick. Sick unto death. And I would not eat rice for ten to fifteen, or I just started eating rice eh, probably in the last five years. No way I was gonna touch that rice again. Ever. Yeah we worked with the uh, yeah with the South Koreans. Korean Marines, and we worked with Army guys too.

JM: Okay, Yeah that's interesting so uh, the operations that took place in Korea, you weren't just specifically with your Marine Corps group...

RS: Well yeah we were, a Marine Corps squad is thirteen men. Four fire teams = three rifle men and a BAR. Now that's all. No one knows what that talk is anymore that's Second World War/ Korean talk. But you operated in a squad fashion, and uh, yeah we had to, we worked with the limeys once in a while, the British. I will never wear shorts, you will never see me wear shorts because they wore shorts and

**those socks and their knees were all bloody (bends over and uses hand motions around the legs) from running and falling down and crawling. I'm smarter than that. I don't wear shorts I always have long trousers. I don't know when I'm gonna have to run again and jump down on my knees, my knees are gonna be safe.**

JM: Um, you mentioned some weapons there, um, what were some of the weapons that you were using throughout the war?

**RS: Okay, okay, mainly an M1. M1 Grand, 8 round clip, uh, we carried a cartridge belt full of ammo. And I usually tried to carry, carried two to four bandoliers of ammo. Ammunition was hard to get, simply because there were not a lot of roads in Korea. Period. At that time and the roads were mud and dirt. And if you and I were foxhole buddies, we'd be in attack all day long, and when we got to our objective, one of us would dig a fox hole, the other would go back after food and ammo. You may have to go back five miles. But that, to where they could get it to you. And you'd go back and get ammo and food and bring it back up. And this is how we worked in the attack. And then the uh, I forgot who did first watch. Usually when you came back the foxhole was dug. Now we had food and ammo that's good you need food and ammo. And then you, one would sleep for two hours and one would stand watch for two hours. Two on and two off. I would stay every night, I'd just about every night I was in Korea, there was 50% watch, when we were on lines. So, ah, and if something happened he'd just grab you, a lot of times we'd sleep behind the fox hole, and uh you'd just grab him and pull him in the foxhole. And that's, that's how, that was a daily experience. And usually you'd let the guy sleep as long as you can because you were tired and you were hungry. And there was no getting around about it.**

JM: Yeah so, now that we kinda know about the daily experience of a foxhole, do you have any specific stories about being on the lines in the foxhole?

**RS: Oh we got millions of them (laughs/smiles) but I won't go into all of them. Some I'll never share. Some I'll ne- (distant look in eyes, even tone) Some I'll never share. Because things happened in combat and now, uh you give an eighteen year old, and yeah, I- I've seen some things I shouldn't've seen. Anyway, yeah, talking about, yeah, in fact, we were on outpost, and, I was sleepin', it was, it had to be cold, it was cold cause I remember a sleeping bag. Usually we just slept on the ground at night. Just lay down on the ground at night. I slept on the ground for one year. So no one can tell me, you know, uh, no you slept on the ground. Anyway, I was sleeping behind the, Oh, we were on the outpost and I was sleeping behind the foxhole. And I don't I cant remember who was in the foxhole at that time with me but they let me sleep, you always let the guy sleep as long as they can. And just before they hit he grabs me and pulls me into the foxhole. Well our squad was on this little knoll and the rest of the company was over here in a bigger hill. So they see us getting hit so they started shooting flares over at the bottom of the hill so we can see the enemy comin' up at us. So ah, I wake up just bein' pulled into a foxhole. The flares are**

starting to go off, the gooks start comin' up the hill (starts to yell gibberish in an Asian-like tone). So I start shakin', I'm cold and I'm damp, the enemy is after me, I started shakin'. And uh, I said, good night I'm gonna tear my knees up. So I grabbed my sleeping bag and put it under my knees so I didn't tear up my knees. And I says where in the world is my rifle? Its leaning in the corner I says oh Lord, (puts face in palm) and by the time I got organized, yeah uh, and this happened very quickly, and uh we started shooting naturally. And I didn't get hit that night I think I got hit early the next morning (starts to mumble about when it was). Anyway, uh, I said I got that one, I don't know if I, but anyway we stopped the attack and uh I got hit earlier in the morning with a hand grenade, cause they, they threw a lot of hand grenades at us. And uh, yeah that was an interesting night, but anyway a couple of Chinese hid behind the trees down there and they surrendered in the morning. So we took credit for the, but anyway yeah that'll getcha. One night, don't ask me why, we usually slept in the foxhole and for some reason we were sleepin' on the other side of the hill. We were always on the hills. (shakes head) Unreal, it was unreal. You climbed those hills till your body just, you're just, you're tired. When I see these guys in the military now carryin all that stuff, (shakes head) we carried a pack, whatever food we could carry and as much ammo and grenades we could carry. But anyway, we were sleepin' on the other side of the hill. And every two hours, you know, we rotate, and we came over, you know, they come and woke us, and so we went out, I climbed in my foxhole and I didn't know it at the time but down the line, our foxholes were not pretty too close together cause we were always undermanned. Sometimes the foxhole would be from, oh, three, four hundred yards away. It was insanity, insanity. In fact many, if not a couple times when we were under attack they just ran through us. Couldn't do anything about it! But usually they were within a few, hundred f- maybe, I don't know, beyond those threes out there what is that fifty yards, fifty seventy five yards, that'd be, I'd be comfortable with that, I like to have them a little closer but you know. Anyway, and this, this buddy of mine was, when he got to the foxhole, and everything seemed to be quiet, so he's putting on, it started to rain, so he put on a poncho. So when he got his poncho on or halfway on, and he got it on, he opened his eyes and here's two chinamen. No three of 'em, pointing their guns at him. (Makes gesture with index figure as if asking someone to come closer) sayin' this, come on, and uh, no one knew this. There was no noise, you know on the front lines, you don't wanna be seen, you don't wanna be heard. I still don't wanna be, you will not see me on Facebook. If you see me on Facebook, someone else did it. No way do I wanna be seen like ah, loud noises, I don't want, I don't want anybody to know where I'm at. And uh, by the way, the emotions I deal with now, everybody in Charlie Company deals with the same emotions. There's things we do, and there's certain, well you say, Velma (wife of Smith) says, "you're not in Korea now," (with eyes wide) it don't leave you, it's impossible. Not if you're in the front line, most people in the military never see the enemy. I can say 95.95% never see the enemy. I saw the enemy.

But anyway, he gets his poncho on, and there's three gooks (raises finger again), so they went over to capture an American so that's what they did. Oh, man, I'll tell you another one... Anyway, so they's walking down the hill. He didn't know what to do you're scared to death you're a kid eighteen, we had a lot of seventeen

year old kids, and this gook kept punchin' him in the ribs tryin' to hurry him on with a burp gun. And he says, I'm not gonna make it, he says their gonna kill me. So, he turned around a punched the gook out and knocked him down (smiles). And he, the burp gun fell off, and he grabbed the burp gun, but it was on safety, well the two gooks in front of him come rushing back and one of them hits him in the jaw with his rifle butt and knocked him down, kinda semi-knocked him out. The other guy shot at him, or shot him! (Makes a gesture of a bullet passing his neck) missed him. (smiles) And they took off in a dead run now cause the front lines are alive and well, things are, he brought, he (makes gesture of the bullet again) it didn't hit him, he missed him. Is that insane? I don't know how he got that burp, the burp gun home, he got the burp gun home in America. Insane. It's insane!

Talkin' about, we were always undermanned, its just the way it is. And what we would do wed put out in front of the, our, the main line of resistance, we maybe put four men out there. Or five or six, and, (counts on fingers) there were six of us out in the front lines, several hundred feet, we were supposed to intercept the enemy and let them know so the main line of resistance could get ready. Okay, we were out in our foxhole, it was snowing, cold as, cold as hell (emphasis). That's exactly what it was. Twenty, thirty below zero, just common. In fact, that foot there (points to his right foot) I got frostbite and it just kills me nighty percent of the time. It just irritates me. But anyway, I came home so I have no complaints. Anyway, ah, I was in the foxhole with Harold England (smiles). And it was around midnight, and uh, I said Harold, he was sleepin', I said Harold get up, they're here (jabbing motion). I said I can smell 'em. I could smell the enemy. Cause they ate dead fish, and garlic and rice, that was their, that was their lot, and maybe some beans but I could smell the garlic smell. Well what happened, about all this happened in a pretty quick order, all of a sudden, Oh we were out there in the what we call field falls, and, Outpost 1 checking in, I don't know every fifteen twenty half hour whatever, all is well. Outpost 3 didn't check in. So everything is a hundred percent now, everybody on the lines, and Bob, Bob Young, remembered his name again. If you go to the Korean memorial you'll pull up the name Robert Young, ah, he was a good Marine, but, when dawn came, we were all, we went over to his foxhole where he was supposed to be, it was an outpost. He was gone, his buddy was layin', he never woke up, he was layin' under a poncho and there was snow on top of him so the gooks never saw him, but somehow they, I don't know what happened, you could see where they went down the hill in a trail, and we went, we sent a ah, a ah a fire team so we could over, catch 'em and find 'em, never, bottom of the hill we found his sleepin' bag, probably three four hundred yards beyond that we found his shoes. And I don't know how far we, I can't remember now. And finally they said, come on back in, we're not gonna find him. And when they had the re-patriation of the, only God knows where that man is today. And that could've been me! You know, anyway, and that was uh, that was, that was uh, that was uh, that was a bad night that was a bad night that was a bad night is all I can tell ya that was a bad night. It happened. Anyway, anyway, I gotta be careful where I go with some of this stuff because, the last bad one I had, probably a year ago, I started yelling to Velma, "get me some ammo get me some ammo I'm out of ammo!" Well, Velma knows what's goin' on, she's up, jumps out of bed and she's gone (laughs), she goes out the other



side the room she says, “its alright, its alright,” and uh, I wake up, and I sit at the end of the bed, uh, and I checked my 45 to make sure just to make sure its loaded (holds hands up) I ain’t playin’ games I know what people say about guns but, I gotta interject this, at the last supper, Jesus, as they were leaving, Jesus, you can read it in your Bible, Jesus said to the disciples he said remember last time, I said when you go out don’t take clothes or money or anything, he said this time (emphasis) he said, when you go out, if you don’t have a kni- a sword, sell your clothes, or jacket or whatever, and buy one! One of the disciples said, there’s three of ‘em here, and he said that’s good enough that’s plenty. So they had three, in today’s lantry (inaudible), todays setting, they had three rifles in the communion service! (smiles) But you know we don’t read what the Bible says we read what we wanna think it says, but anyway anyway, where did I, how did I get off on this rifle thing?

JM: You were, uh, you had a dream and you said you were gonna check your .45.

**RS: Oh oh oh, yeah that’s right. So I had a .45 and I load it and I sat there, this had not, it used to happen more often cause I I, the Lord had been good to me. Anyway, I sat there for 45 minutes before I could shake it.**

(at this point the video quit unexpectedly unbeknownst to both of us and Mr. Smith kept talking)

(I remember him talking about the Lord and how He has been a good God all these years)

(I noticed the camera and turned it back on not more than three minutes later)

**RS: Is that still,**

JM: That one turned off because of battery,

**RS: Oh I gotta tell, Is that still on?**

JM: Yeah

**RS: I was gonna tell you one that,**

JM: Oh I still got loads of time.

**RS: Oh we ain’t gonna do all of ‘em.**

JM: It’s up to you but...

**RS: No I ain’t gonna, aw there’s millions of ‘em, and you forget ‘em! You forget this stuff! Well we were, we were always on the front lines. I’m just tellin’ you the way it was. We were always on line it seemed. I thought we lived there. And anyway, we**

were on a road block one night, it was my squad, and we were always short, if someone gets wounded or sick, you get sick over there! You go, you gotta go back and just, you lived like a (eyes wide), like an animal. Uh, you didn't bathe for months. See every time I think of something I think it just gets runs off, you know. I got lice! Take me back to the roadblock if I forget, say roadblock. But anyway, we were on lines Thanksgiving I remember this. And when we took a hill, from the Chinese or Koreans, the worst thing, and I I hated that, I hated that. Lord knows I hated that. You had to throw them out of their foxhole. They're dead. Their body would flop down the hill. Cause you need to get in their foxhole cause they're gonna counterattack real quick like. As soon as they can regroup and come, they're comin' right back after you. Well, I got body lice, from throwin' the, the dead, out of the...

Thanksgiving, 1951 I'll never forget that. (Makes scratching gestures) I was goin crazy. And everybody had 'em but I said I'm gonna get 'em. So I told the guys on either side of me, I said, "I'm, cover me tonight." I said, "I'm goin' take off all my clothes." It was freezing out, we're not talking cold we're talkin' cold cold. And shook my clothes and laid 'em out there. Stood out there naked as long as I could stand it. And I said, "those bedbugs are gonna freeze" (smiles). Put my clothes back on, now I didn't always sleep in my sleeping bag, cause a lot of times I sleep, slept under it (gestures pulling bag up over face). Cause if they hit you, you gotta get out of the sleeping bag and you gotta get out now. You ain't got time to, "Oh I gotta," no no no no, but (holds up hands). Most people don't know the word quickly. I know what the word quickly means. I'll say, I'll tell Velma, "lets move out." When I say lets move out I'm heading out the door, she's comin' back in the house to do something! No no no no no, they don't understand "quickly" or "movin' out." We're talkin' bout now (slams fist in palm). Yeah, I'm talkin' bout NOW.

I've seen people bayoneted in their sleeping bag. In fact, one of 'em, I never did that thank God, (raises hands and looks into the air) thank you Lord. My buddy Arthur Ash, they were on a patrol and they came upon some gooks sleeping in their sleeping bags. And the guy said, "What are we gonna do?" And the one guy says, "Let's bayonet 'em. They'll never know what hit 'em." And Arthur Ash my buddy, he, he bayoneted 'em in their sleeping bags. And uh, yeah, I know what uh, yeah. So I didn't like to sleep in my sleeping bag. I did better sleeping underneath it. Now I would get in my sleeping bag in the winter and change my shoes and stocks, socks. Get dry socks and put your socks in here (motions under armpit) so they dry out. Because when you are in the attack, you sweat. And we had those god-forsaken shoepacks back then we were not equipped. I'm just tellin' you something: we were not equipped properly. And when you stopped, your feet froze. That's how I got frostbite.

But anyway, we were on front lines, roadblock. And the word was, no one comes through this roadblock. Period. That's a direct order. And, I always say midnight and I don't know where I get midnight, but it was dark, and all of a sudden we hear, shuffling. People walkin' up the road, and uh, here was some Korean villagers fleein' North Korea. And uh, here they come, little baby, oh by the way, I don't know what, if you show this, Americans are crybabies. I'm just tellin' you the way it is. I'm just tellin' you, in fact, when I see a little baby cry this high (holds hand out to measure a few feet tall). Here they come. Papa-san and Momma-

san, little kids holding their parents hands, (draws breath and lets words out slow...) not a sound. No kids (makes crying imitations). No offense people, Americans are crybabies. Deal with it. Anyway, not a sound. They said, "What are you gonna do RL?" Cause we're not supposed to let 'em through. Because a lot of times, uh, soldiers will infiltrate with them. And there must have been twenty-five to thirty maybe forty I didn't count 'em. And they said, "What are you gonna do RL?" I said, "I'm gonna let 'em through." I said, "Just let 'em through." And uh, I've never heard anything about it, you know, they just went through, I, I you know, Lord have mercy; people just don't know how lucky they are in America. I let, I violated, one of the direct (holding hands up as if guilty but at the same time making a sort of mockery of it) they could have, but anyway, they went through. And, and, that happened, that happened. See, one thing, then I think of other things and I don't know, yeah, you have to ask more questions and we'll...

JM: Unless you want to tell what those other things are...

RS: Oh no I, there's so many, there's so many sea stories in my body, you wouldn't believe it! For a year! For one year we're on, eh. You read Korean War stories and you'll read about Charlie Company First Bat 5<sup>th</sup> Marine. You will read about 'em. And uh, we were always undermanned, we NEVER had enough food, we had sea rations for a year. Lord have mercy I hate that stuff. Yeah, it was an experience. Oh I gotta get back to this, and the only thing that got me through there was my mother's prayers. No I did pray, I had three, a three-word prayer. (Holds up three fingers and counts down) Lord help me, Lord save me. It's always interesting hearing people pray. (Holds up both hands high in the air) Oh God of Abraham and Isaac, I'm not worried about Abraham and Isaac, I'm worried about my own skin! So this is a long story I'll have to, it, it, it, it has nothing to do with Korea. Well uh, yeah it did. This, anyway, I drank and smoked when I was in the Marines, uh, cursed, uh but I tried to do the right thing. And anyway, Charlie Company was coming off line one day, for two or three day rest to regroup, get more ammo and more food and then they, "right back where you belong." And we got a call from Baker Company; Baker Company was getting overrun. They were in a heavy firefight, and they said, "You gotta go help Baker Company." And uh, "We're gonna send a runner over their cause you gotta go through a mine field." And, "Oh no this is gonna be fun." And uh, before long here comes a runner, a runner is a messenger or, and uh, he said, "well we gotta go through this mine field," he said, "I know the way, stay on the path, follow me." I says, "I got that." And I can remember to this day runnin' through that mine field high p, yeah, high pore, if you know what high pore is. All of a sudden I heard KABOOM. And I dropped to my knees on the path I said, "Oh Lord have mercy on my soul, they got us zeroed in," cause they know we gotta go through this mine field to get up to Baker Company. Not the case. One of my buddies, in fact, I loaded, I helped load him in the helicopter. If you remember the Korean War they had those bell helicopters with stretchers on either side. (Nods head) He says, he was still awake cause they pumped plasma and blood in him, in fact, we had him in a poncho and when we put him in there, the blood and plasma just rolled off (motions a stream flowing off of the

poncho). And he said, “Is this my (pauses for effect) casket?” (Raises eyes up) I said, “Mercy, mercy.” Anyway, he said he only stepped that path, off the path by six inches (holds up fingers).

And, when I decided to follow Jesus, I got out of the Marine Corp and I was still smoking, every night, I was smoking constantly, so I got (puts finger in mouth to symbolize a cig hanging out) and drinkin’, every night, I wasn’t a drunkard but I drank, all the time. And uh, I’m squeezing that down, I’m wore out (meaning he was tired of speaking about the past). I said, “Lord,” cause I knew, I used to bargain with the Lord, I still bargain with the Lord. Uh, I said, “Well He got me out of there.” And I said, I knew what I was doin’, I was goin’ to war. I was do, I was workin’, I bought a new car! I was a, I was hot, I was hot stuff! Hangin’ with loose women. And you know what’s right and wrong you don’t have to be a rocket science. And I said, “Lord, if you really got the power you say you do,” none of this game plan stuff, you know, we’re not playin’ church. I’m sittin’ in a tavern with a beer (holds up one hand) and a cigarette (holds up the other). “Lord, if you’ve got the power you say you do, I wanna get up right now, walk outta here, and not be bothered with it and then I know I’ve gotta follow you.” Got up, walked out and that was it. But when you read the Bible is says three things (holds up fingers). Jesus says, “follow Me, I know the way, stay on the path.” It’s really simple, really simple. And uh, I shared that with people around, when they ask me what church I go to, I never say I’m a Seventh-day Adventist. I just don’t do it because, they shut you off. I have a card in my pocket, I always have a card with me, I said, “I, I’m a follower of Jesus.” And because I’m a follower of Jesus, and as I understand it, he went to church on Saturday or Sabbath, He said, “follow me, I don’t change I know the way.” So the only people around here I know that do that are Seventh-day Adventists. I go with the Seventh-day Adventists, I said, “Why don’t you come over here and join us and follow Jesus?” (smiles) And anyway, yeah yeah, in fact I’m witnessing to a family over the mountain I gotta get some stuff ready to go visit them. And and all we can do is spread the word. Anyway, Lord thank you. I cannot believe how good He’s been to me. I, I mean that. I mean that. (Nods head)

Well that’s it unless you’ve got a question I’m I’m running out of gas.

JM: No, no you’re good, um, so this last set of questions...

**RS: How long have we been yappin’? (Looks at watch)**

JM: Um, we’ve been at it about an hour.

**RS: Oh no wonder I’m beat. (Holds hands to face)**

JM: Alright so just very general questions, um, at what age were you when you joined?

**RS: 18. 18 years old I was in combat. How old are you?**

JM: I’m 21.

**RS: Oh I've been years eh, I was still in the Marine Corp when I was 21, yeah four years, I was in the Marine Corp four years. That's right, yeah.**

JM: Um, were you in the same unit the whole time?

**RS: No, no in combat I was with Charlie 1-5, and, that was with the first marine division, when I came back to the states, they reprocess you, I ended up in the second Marine division.**

JM: And then the Mediterranean...

**RS: I was with the sixth fleet in the Mediterranean. For a year. I was over, I've been all over the world! I have been ALL over the world. It was interesting, yeah.**

JM: Alright, um, and you got married after, uh after you were released, and you had some children too?

**RS: (Nodding head) Yes, I had a son and daughter, I gotta share this with you, we were at a reunion, and Hank Miller, I spoke at his funeral. He said RL, when did you learn to talk? And I thought for a while, cause in combat (pulls finger over mouth as if zipping it closed) don't wanna be seen, don't wanna be heard. Don't wanna, I don't want a motor bike, no offense, with a loud muffler. No way. No way Jose! Anyway, and I thought about it, and I said, I had a little boy and a little girl two years apart, there down there talkin' a different language. I said you'd better get in the mix of this son, and I started talkin' and readin' and tryin' to be a proper father. I enjoyed, eh yeah, I started talkin' then. (Smiles) I haven't shut up since! (Laughs)**

JM: Um, yeah um, let's see here, now did you ever, were you ever involved with the military in any other way after the war?

**RS: Oh yeah, oh yeah, well speaking of funerals, and I belong to all military organizations. American Legion, VFW, and all them. Uh, I used to be in the firing squad at the VFW, 21-gun salute. And then I drive the DAV van from Rogersville over to Johnson City. I have a badge that says I'm uh, personnel from the hospital (smiles). Yeah, yeah, I try to give back. (Nods head)**

JM: Alright, just for the record, I need to know specifics about you as a person. Uh, so can you just say your full name?

**RS: Robert Leslie Smith.**

JM: And where were you born?

**RS: Aurora, Illinois.**

JM: In what year?

**RS: 1932! Yeah, Yeah.**

JM: And, what war did you fight in?

**RS: Korean War. Three years, I was over in Korea for one year, I was right in the middle of it. Uh, yeah, uhuh uhuh.**

JM: Alright, and...

**RS: I gotta tell you a good one while you're looking at that questions. A few months ago we were drivin' through Cookeville, and I said, I have a friend that lives here. And so I called him and met him, and we talked, seventy years ago, we were bailin', over seventy years ago we were bailin' hay together. In northern Illinois, over seventy years ago! Back then you had to work, and so I stayed in a farmer all summer, and he had a case systematic bailer. We went around the neighbors, bailin', and yeah, I probably made a dollar a week. Yeah, bailin' hay, yeah, that was, yeah, I loved that man like a father. And uh, yeah, his name was, the uh kid I was bailin' hay was Reenie Berhagey. (Smiles) I was loading hay on the wagon one day, this was when you had the square bales, and I was up front, this was when you had, I was nothing but skin and bones, never been big. These big muscular guys (makes climbing motion) don't take this wrong, in combat, you know who the guys, the thin skinny runts. (Claps hand together as if starting a race) You couldn't stop them. These big muscular guys, they can't keep up. Keep up, all that muscle didn't mean, uh one guy Victor, he could keep up, he was an animal. All these big guys, mus, (throws hands down) you couldn't make it. The little skinny rats, couldn't stop 'em. It's amazing it's amazing! But anyway, yeah, what was your question?**

JM: Actually that's all I have.

**RS: Oh that's it?**

JM: Yeah, unless you have anything else that you wanna...

**RS: God has been very good to me, thank you Lord, thank you Lord. Uh, the only thing I'd do different, I wish I'd never cause my mother one ounce of grief. And uh, that makes me sad, when your mother is gone then you think of these things afterwards naturally. But my mother and I were the closest, we were always the closest, but I caused her a lot of grief. And uh, I look forward to seein' her (nods head) in heaven. Cause if she's not there, aint no one gonna be there. That's the end of that one. She'll be there. She will be there. And good Lord willing, I I'd like to be there too. We'll be all there and we can, "you remember that video" and I'll say, "yeah, I didn't sleep that night I'll sleep under the bed aga"... No, even to this day if I hear a sound I gotta identify it. Because you just, you just can't change that. (Says**

under breath) You just can't change that. But anyway, that's it. If you don't get an "A" on that you send the teacher to me. (Laughs)

JM: So, also, this is gonna go, I'm gonna give this to my teacher, and he, he'll probably post it in our school's library and our library is obviously goin' to be open to the public.

**RS: Well talkin' bout that, we were in San Diego, and the public television came and interviewed a bunch of us. And, they interviewed me, and, I shared a couple stories with 'em, and Elmer Neil, my, he just died. Now I'm gonna tell you something, when you put on your clothes in the morning, down at the end of the bed or, he was in his bedroom, putting his pajamas on, and he hung up his foot, you know how you hang up your foot when you, he fell over, hit his head on the tile floor, week later he was dead. He was my, he was my closest friend in combat. I thought I'd be with him when he got killed, and he thought he'd be with me when I got killed. We were very very close. But anyway, yeah you gotta sit down and uh, take care of yourself. The only thing, yeah, in life I think about my mother. And uh, (smacks lips together) by the way my kids turned out great. No fault of mine, no fault of mine. But uh, mmm mmm mmm. I I've been lucky. I'm lucky, I know I am. Cause there's no reason, that we, we we've been blessed beyond words. Beyond words! I've never had any education and I make more money in retirement than these people that are working! It's insane! That's insane! When I left Illinois, years and years ago, I was makin' eight dollars an hour! That's what their makin' now! Eight dollars an hour! Back then if you bought a truck, fifteen hundred dollars, two thousand was uh, (grimace) man, they're still makin' eight dollars an hour, cost twenty thousand dollars and it takes you ten years to pay for it. What's wrong... you see what I mean? So when you get a job make sure you make money otherwise quit school, and get a trade. I'm dead serious. Mmm, mmm, mmm. But anyway, that's it?**

JM: That's it.

**RS: We go. Let's go, hang in there son. If he don't give you an "A" lemme, oh, I was gonna tell you, my grandson has been waitin' to do this (refers to the interview) but I've just been tellin' him stories off and on. An that public television thing, my closest friend, Elmer, that's why I mentioned Elmer Neil, see this stuff comes in my brain all over, my brain never shuts down, it's always workin'. And, he didn't know it, I said Elmer, go in there and talk to that guy. And I wasn't there when he came out I think Velma was there when he came out, he'd never talked about combat. He was cryin', because uh, he hauled one of our buddies that got killed one night and buried him in the snow, and then we went back, Charlie Company went back the next day to get him. Well I could tell you about a guy getting shot in his helmet! Oh, see, I got hundreds of 'em. But see, the guy, well the guys says, they don't wanna talk about it, he may have never been there. Now, there was a time I didn't talk about it. For years. But once I got back to Charlie Company, you kinda unload all that crap. You know, it it's in you forever. But you can't you know, it's the way it works, the way it works. Anyway, if you don't get an "A" tell the teacher I'm comin' with my loaded .45 (laughs). (Jokes) Shoot up Southern! No don't say that they'll**

yeah they'll go crazy! By the way, none of this would be happening now, if people had a gun in their pocket. I think Adventists have made a serious mistake. By sayin', oh guns guns guns, that don't mean anything. When they went into that black church, and shot all those black people in prayer meeting, he had to reload, he had to take out a clip, put another clip in (goes through the motions) and start shootin' again. All one person had a gun in his pocket and shoot him and maybe one or two dead. It's insane. Insane! Nothin' wrong with a weapon, crazy! Get one, you don't have one I'll getcha one.

JM: Alright.

**RS: Want one, let me know, I'm serious!**

JM: I'll take one, I mean, ...

**RS: Okay, I got you covered.**

JM: Alright. (Laughs)



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