

To 'Darkhorse 6,' war is not forgotten

Retired Marine colonel still can't keep his balance from frostbite he suffered in winter of 1950

By Barbara Slavin
USA TODAY

Robert Taplett would love to be at Sunday's commemoration in Washington of the 50th anniversary of the start of the Korean War. But the retired Marine colonel has trouble standing and walking because of the severe frostbite he suffered in North Korea so many years ago.

"We had rubberized boots that filled with perspiration as soon as you stopped," Taplett says. "A couple of times, I chipped ice from between my toes. It's hard to believe what we went through."

Unlike those returning from World War II, Korean War veterans were largely unappreciated. Replete with military mistakes, the 1950-53 conflict ended with the peninsula divided as it had been before the war. Most Americans, enjoying an economic boom in part fueled by the war, "didn't give a damn," Taplett says.

Hollywood produced a spate of B-movies and *The Manchurian Candidate* about a brainwashed, homicidal vet. In the 1970s, there was *M*A*S*H*, first a movie, then a sitcom, with themes inspired more by the Vietnam War than Korea.

To those who fought in what became known as "the forgotten war" or "World War II and a half," Korea deserved better. They see it as a pivotal struggle that contained communism in Asia and allowed South Korea to develop into the flourishing free-market democracy it is today.

The price was high: 4 million civilian and military lives, including 37,000 Americans; more than 8,000 are still missing in action. That's four times the number left from the Vietnam War.

Unprepared for a North Korean attack on June 25, 1950, South Korean forces, along with U.S. troops rushed in from Japan, were nearly pushed off the peninsula. An amphibious landing at Inchon restored momentum to anti-communist forces, but Gen. Douglas MacArthur, supreme U.S. commander in the Pacific, overreached. Sending his men across the 38th parallel in a race to the Yalu River border with China, he ignored China's warnings that its army would intervene.

U.S. and allied forces, instead of spending Thanksgiving in Tokyo and going home by Christmas as MacArthur had promised, remained in Korea for the cruellest winter most had ever seen.

The job of Taplett's 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, was to clear a road along the Chosin Reservoir so allied forces could retreat without being annihilated by the Chinese, who outnumbered them more than 5-1. That retreat was one of the epic struggles in Marine Corps history.

"The weather was the worst enemy," says Taplett, now 81, who grew up in Lyndall, S.D., and was no stranger to the cold.

The temperature during what was reputedly the coldest Korean winter in a century sank to 40 degrees below zero at night. That felt as if it were 80 below when the Manchurian wind was figured in, even though in those days, no one spoke of wind-chill factors.

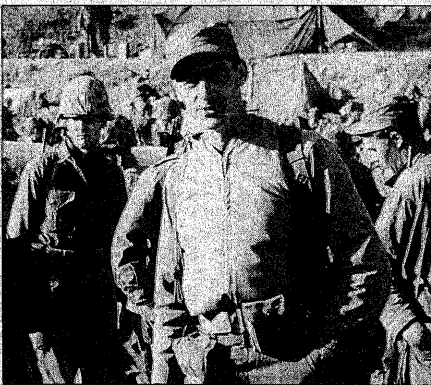
"You'd see fellows with the tips of their noses and ears that had turned white," Taplett says. "We had warming tents, but there weren't enough." Short of rations, his men subsisted on Tootsie Rolls and frozen pineapple juice. "We would cut the cans open and suck on the juice," he recalls.

From Nov. 27 to Dec. 10, he was in almost constant combat, Taplett says. "I don't think I slept two hours the whole time. You had to keep moving, or you'd freeze. I left Yudam-ni with roughly 1,300 men and got into Hagaru-ni (at the south end of the reservoir) with 326 effective Marines. Better than half of our casualties were caused by weather."

The frostbite Taplett suffered left him with progressive deadening of the nerves in the bottom of his feet



"Hard to believe what we went through": Robert Taplett's battalion suffered temperatures as low as 40 degrees below zero in Korea in 1950.



No Medal of Honor: Taplett, center, a hero of many major battles, used to question orders he thought were wrong.

Who won the war?

Did the United States win or lose the Korean War?

Win 41%

Lose 35%

Was it a mistake to go into the war in Korea? What people said:

When the war began in 1950

Yes 29%

No 65%

When the war ended in 1953

Yes 36%

No 50%

June 6-7, 2000

Yes 34%

No 47%

Source: CNN/USA TODAY/CNN Poll of 1,059 adults June 6-7. Margin of error: ±3 percentage points. Other polls were Aug. 25-26, 1990, and Jan. 11-12, 1985.

By Bob Lutz, USA TODAY

that has made it increasingly difficult to keep his balance. His nose was frostbitten as well, leading to swelling that marred the profile of the tall, lean officer who reminded those who served with him of a racehorse.

"The man did just about everything," says Frank Meersky of the Chosin Few, an organization of Marines who survived that frigid winter. "He went in at Pusan and held the perimeter, took Wolmi-do island, the gateway to Inchon, and fought to keep the road open for escape from the reservoir. People have gotten the Medal of Honor for much less."

As for his own country, Taplett says the Korean War is "finally get-

ting the recognition it deserves." Among celebrities who served in Korea are the actor James Garner, Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, and John Glenn, an astronaut and former senator.

There is still no epic film, no *Saving Private Ryan*, to bring the war home to a younger generation. However, a memorial was finally erected on the National Mall five years ago. Across from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean site

has its own wall but no names, just ghostly faces etched in black granite and a garden with sculptures of 19 soldiers on patrol.

Three years ago, Taplett's executive officer, John Canney, killed during the Chosin retreat, was posthumously promoted to lieutenant colonel at a ceremony in Washington. As for Taplett, who has survived three heart attacks and bypass surgery since Korea, "I'm just happy to be alive," he says.

Taplett did not get that medal. Not the politically correct sort, he questioned orders he thought were wrong and was threatened with court-martial for not punishing a subordinate who went AWOL and flew to Tokyo in December 1950 to bring back liquor for the battalion.

Taplett did receive the Navy Cross and two Silver Stars. He retired from the Marines in 1960 because, he says, it was hard to support six children on the full colonel's pay of \$11,000 a year.

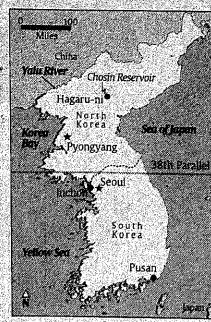
He went on to do managerial and consulting work for a variety of organizations, but his Korea experiences were clearly unmatched. He is writing his memoirs now, to be called *Darkhorse Six*, his radio call sign during the Chosin retreat.

Taplett has returned to South Korea twice, the last time in 1985. On that trip, he was moved to see the hills, once denuded of all trees, lush and green.

It is North Korea where the hill-sides are now bare as the people scrounge for firewood and food in a way reminiscent of the Korean War. Though suspicious of recent moves by North Korea to ease tensions with the South and other nations, Taplett says he feels only sympathy for the North Korean people, who gave shelter to Marines and shared meager rations with them a half-century ago.

"I hope and pray the North Korean leadership is sincere because the people there have suffered enough," he says.

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By Gary Vignelli, USA TODAY

Moments in Korean history

1895: Japanese troops invade Korea and take control.

1945: Soviet forces gain a foothold in northern Korea after Allied troops defeat Japan in World War II.

1948: The people of South Korea elect a national assembly May 10. That begins the Republic of Korea. On Sept. 9, North Korean communists establish the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Both governments claim authority over the entire country.

1949: On June 29, acting on the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said the stability of Korea posed no military threat, President Truman withdraws the substantial U.S. presence in South Korea. Five hundred so-called military advisers remain.

1950: North Korea invades South Korea on June 25; the invasion ignites the Korean War. On June 27, in response to the communist-led attack, Truman sends U.S. forces to South Korea. Communist China enters the war on North Korea's behalf on Oct. 25.

1951: As the war rages on, truce talks begin July 10 in Panmunjom, South Korea.

1953: An armistice agreement is signed in Panmunjom on July 27. The Korean War ends, but hostilities continue for decades.

Source: World Bank



By James Regley for USA TODAY

Taplett: The 81-year-old hopes North Korea's motives for a historic summit last week are good. "The people there have suffered enough."

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Bull?

Bear?

What, me worry?

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