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Oral History: Charles Whidden: An Infantry Soldier in the Korean War

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Student Interviewer's Name: Jasmin Duany

Interviewee name: Charles Whidden

Time and Location of Interview: The interview was conducted in one session on October 30, 2016 and lasted approximately 35 minutes. It was conducted in the home of Charles Whidden in Ooltewah, TN. The interviewer, interviewee and the interviewee's wife were present.

About Charles Whidden:

Charles Whidden was born in Bowling Green, Florida. USA, July 28, 1931. He is 85 years old at the time of this interview. He grew up half of his life in Florida and the other half in Tennessee. For those that are close to him and his wife. He went to Korea to fight in the Korean War in 1952 as an infantry soldier, but on his way there the truce was signed. This interview will cover his life from being drafted into the war to being stationed in Korea post-war and his experience there. The interview was conducted on October 30, 2016 at his home in Ooltewah, TN.

Interviewer: Jasmin Duany (JD)

Interviewee: Charles Whidden (CW)

Spouse of Interviewee: Jewel Whidden (JW)

JD: Okay grandpa, I am going to ask you what type of soldier were you in the Korean War and what unit were you placed in?

CW: In the Korean War, I was drafted in the service and went over as a infantry soldier.

JD: Okay, so you're saying that you were drafted?

CW: Yes, I was drafted.

JD: What year was that?

CW: 1952.

JD: Once you were drafted, where were you sent?

CW: Well first I was sent to Miami to be inducted down there in Florida and then they transferred me to Camp Blanding.

JD: How do you spell that?

JW: B-L-A-N-D-I-N-G.

JD: B-L-A-N-D-I-N-G.

CW: Florida. They put me on a troop train which was a whole train of soldiers and we went to California. It took us 4 days.

JW: Camp Roberts.

CW: To reach Cali- Camp Roberts, California.

JD: How long did you stay in California?

CW: I was there for basic training plus leadership school. 8, 9, I got 10 weeks.

JW: I thought basic training was longer than that? I went out to visit you at Camp Roberts.

CW: Well, anyways, (checks his certificates from the basic training) let's see, well it says here April 11. I got two of that in April (shows certificates).

JW: You finished leadership school in June of '53.

CW: June '53. Okay, April, May and June. I was out there for 3 months. That's what I said.

JD: As a new soldier, how was basic and advanced training?

CW: I enjoyed basic training. It was hard though. I came out from the farm, I was a farm boy, and used to hard work and but that was...it was tough training. They were to put you through the mill. I learned how to march. I learned how to march men. I learned how to lead men. I learned how to follow men. And I enjoyed the training that I received.

JD: As an infantry soldier, was there anything specific that you learned that was different from other soldiers or no?

CW: No it was about the same... uhh, in leadership school we learned how to train men more, we went more in depth in the training of leading and be more aware of other people's concern.

JD: What was the name of the leadership school that you attended in California?

JW: (slides over the certificate of the completion of leadership school to Charles) I think it's that.

CW: Yes, 45th Infantry Division School of Standards.

JD: Okay, the ship that you were on to sail to Korea, was it part of the military sea transportation service?

CW: Yes.

JW: You don't remember the name?

CW: No, but I know it had three stacks. It was a steam ship. (chuckles) they didn't have coal back then I mean oil. They burnt coal. I bet you didn't know that. Anyway it was a big ship.

JD: How was life on the ship to Korea?

CW: (chuckles) it was very exciting to start with. The soldiers were the Army people and the Navy people and they had their little fun with one another. And once we learned the ship and how to find our bunk we settled down pretty quickly and had a very nice, uh, ride across the ocean. We never got into any bad weather but we got in enough weather to make several other guys seasick. (Smiles fondly) but I was one of the fortunate ones, I didn't get seasick. (chuckles) I'm proud of that.

JD: And the food?

CW: Food was good.

JW: You said they fed around the clock.

CW: Hmm?

JW: They fed around the clock.

CW: Yea they had to feed around the clock to keep everyone fed.

JW: You said they had about 12,000¹ people on that ship.

CW: They had about 12,000 people. But it was a transport ship. They had everything organized so they made everything around clockwork. You know, with that many men they had to have close control. And if we wanted to, we could help out and then we would get special privileges. I can't remember what it was (chuckles).

JD: It's okay if you don't remember. Was it like more advantages?

¹ This number is not accurate. It is not possible for 12,000 to fit on a ship.

CW: It was like you can be first in chow line. Instead of lining up, you can go be first. Can't remember the little perks they have but you know what I am trying to say?

JD: Mhmm...How were the bunks on the ship?

CW: Made out of canvas they were very tight. Very close, but to be on the boat like that, to be on a ship like that excuse me, it was okay.

JW: You were young.

CW: Yea when you are about 21, 22 you know, you bend with the flow, go with the crowd.

JD: So, how long were you on the boat to Korea?

CW: You know I don't know... but I want to say three weeks it took to go from California to Busan. That's the bottom of Korea. Wait we went into...

JW: Incheon?

CW: No we went into...

JW: Japan?

CW: (nodding) the boat went into Japan.

JW: Then what did you do?

CW: Okay we docked in Japan, then we stayed on the boat. And then went around into Korea and then got off. That's how it was. We didn't go straight to Korea, we went to Japan and then Korea and we come off the ship and we was loaded onto trucks.

JD: What was your first reaction when you were first dropped off in Japan?

CW: You mean after we got on the trucks and was hauled into Japan?

JD: Yes.

CW: After the ship left Japan and went around Busan. We got off the ship and got on trucks. Them trucks were driving us to our base. And I kept looking out there and wondering, when we was going to see the city? At this was all places that wasn't in my mind you know, very good.

JW: Primitive.

CW: It was very primitive and when I got to camp, come to find out that we did go through town. That was the town.

JD: So what exactly did you see?

CW: Why you know, little buildings and little shacks and little... I was used to you know our houses and so on and so forth. It was very very shocking where the people lived.

JD: When you were in the trucks did you see people, the civilians?

CW: Yes, cuz we were driving along with...we had an open semi truck, it had sides on it, and there was back to back men and you had a couple of 100 people on a semi (chuckles) 100 in a way. Standing up back to back because of course you had to cover everything. But got to camp and our barracks wasn't ready when we got there.

JD: Oh...

CW: So we...we had to pitch up our pup tents for the first night.

JD: Your pup? Pup tents?

CW: That's a little tent that you carry with you. Two people can get in it and I think they did that just to get (chuckles) just to get us.

JD: Just to get you guys? Was it the...

CW: Just to harass us.

JD: The people that were there?

CW: Yea.

JD: The generals? Or the soldiers that were there?

CW: No the captains.

JD: The captains.

CW: Instead of going into the barracks they let us get out here and they get you to set up. Which makes sense. So by the time they got all us here, we pitched our tent and it was very much different to me coming out of Florida. It was snowing. It had snowed there and I

pitched my tent in the snow and all that was different and I got teased muchly about being so dumb about snow.

JD: Awe, because that was your first time seeing snow?

CW: First time, first experience. Then we got settled down in our huts and uh we file up for duty. Well I don't know how to say this, but I was always a soldier that like to be neat with creases on my pants and shoes shine. That was just me. A lot of soldiers could come along with a little less and be just as good. So when we line up to get our jobs that first day they kept sending the guys to get going to different places. When my time come I was on garbage detail, picking up garbage.

JD: Why did they place you doing garbage?

CW: Because they thought I was a sissy.

JD: (gasps and then chuckles) they did?

CW: Yea they thought so.

JD: Oh, because you know you like being umm clean.

CW: Yes, me being an old country boy, I was taught to do the very best you could no matter where. Wear your best clothes to your best thing. Of course on the field you had your field clothes, you don't understand all that but, so I picked up garbage first day just like it was any office taking notes, everything was fine. Next morning, back on garbage duty, did the garbage like it was a regular thing. Next morning I come in straight and proper again.

JD: What did you wear?

CW: Just fatigues. The working uniform, but it was clean and nice. It was the third day when I came in that afternoon. The captain says...before that let me back up real quick, before that, every night you bathe in the stream. That is where most people wash their clothes. The captain says you can go down and take a shower. The officers had hot showers. And I looked at him and I said no sir, I'm with the crew and I'll take a bath with my guys. So I did. Well for some reason, that impressed my boss. When I said boss the guy that was...he was a captain, but he had made his rank. He was a lieutenant and he did some excellent fighting in a certain spot and he got promoted to captain. So he was a gone go guy like me.

JD: A gone go?

CW: Oh when I say gone go, I mean he was an aggressive person like me. (chuckles) you don't understand.

JD: This is my first time hearing a gone go guy.

CW: I mean a go getter. We are ready to go. So I come in and he says we are going to start a leadership training school in Busan and he says I want you to go down there and help around that school and if you come back here and you are the leader, number one in that thing, I will give you another stripe. And another stripe means money.

JD: Money, so you earn more money by getting more stripes.

CW: Mhmm, the higher you are the more money you make. Of course it ain't much back then. I think my wife only got \$90 a month (chuckles)

JD: But that must have been a lot back then.

CW: She couldn't live on that, she had to stay with her mother and dad, of course she (looks at his wife) got pregnant. Backing up bit, before I got on the ship to go to Korea, I thought I was making a one way trip and I told my wife to come out and spend a night with me so that I can get her pregnant and so that she may have a kid because I didn't think I was going to come back, but I didn't tell her that.

JD: Was it very emotional seeing your wife supposedly for the last time?

CW: Yes, and I had told her I wanted to have a girl and wanted her to name her Debbie. And she had a girl and named her Debbie. But praise the Lord I didn't have to fight and praise the Lord I came home. Umm, I left and came back and got my promotion and then they sent me on the parallel lines, the guard lines, between North and South Korea and I was a sergeant in charge of the guarding that line, space. Does that make sense?

JD: Mhmm.

CW: And so I did that for awhile and then see this time that made me get another stripe so that made me sergeant. So they, uh, took me out, and another reason they made me rank to sergeant that quick is that when I came, all the guys there rotated home and that left a lot of open places to work.

JD: Why did leave home? Oh because they were done with their service?

CW: Their time was up and that left a lot of open spots, so they put me in the PX, which is Post Exchange. Which is where the soldiers go to buy their cigarettes and few clothes, and a few food and cameras and whatever.

JD: Was this Post Exchange common in the military?

CW: Yes, they had them all over the state.

JW: In every post.

CW: Yea, they had them in every post and they have them today same thing. I visited my son-in-law and he was out there in California and when I went on base the Post Exchange was there. It's sort of like Walmart, but not that big.

JD: So this was like a militarized Walmart?

CW: Yea, but it wasn't that big. We buy cigarettes a dollar a carton. That would be \$8 out on the black market.

JD: How did they pay you? With Korean or American money?

CW: They payed me in Korean money.

JD: They did? And did you have to exchange it to American money?

CW: Well wait, was it Korean money or was it... you know you might put a question mark on that.

JD: Okay, of paying with Korean money?

CW: It might have been regular money. Might have been, uh, it wasn't American money.

JD: It wasn't American money, but it might not have been Korean money?

JW: It wasn't American money, it was Korean money.

CW: Because American money wasn't on the market, you can make a lot of money that way. You know what I'm saying?

JD: Yes.

CW: And I stayed in the PX until I come home.

JD: So, was your camp in the rural area or the mountainous area of Korea?

CW: Oh, you know I didn't really do anything, but we were in Busan and Incheon and you know Incheon was pretty close to the coast.

JW: I think it was near the mountains.

CW: Mountains?

JW: I thought so because you sent the pictures.

CW: Oh okay, sorry it's been so long.

JD: No its fine.

CW: She said the pictures I sent her had mountains.

JW: Remember you were a Florida boy and you never seen snow.

JD: How did you send pictures to grandma?

JW: Through the mail.

JD: So you were able to...you had a camera with you?

CW: Mhmm, I took pictures. You can take pictures everywhere you went. You had to get permission to leave base and uh go to places and I pretty much stayed on base. There was no one there with me that wanted to go out so I just never did leave base.

JD: Do you remember the name of the unit you were assigned to when you arrived. Oh well you were on garbage duty, but was there a unit?

CW: Oh yea, I was assigned to a regular unit uh (looks over his certificates) I don't see anything. It was uh...

JW: I know the serial number but I don't know that.

CW: What it was, with me being it so confusing, is that when I got over there I was assigned to a place and then when I went further up I was reassigned to a new unit. The old unit went home.

JD: Why did they go home?

CW: Because it was time for them to go.

JD: Oh yea.

CW: Some people in the new unit was assigned to a new place and the people in that place were sent home. Does that make sense?

JD: Yes.

CW: (looks at a newly found certificate) well according to this I was on the 87th division, wait no it was, wait I was on the 87th battalion of the 7th armored division. And then when I got out I was in company E of the 5th infantry regiment division.

JW: You had to be on the reserves for 6-8 years.

CW: Yes when I got out... when I was drafted for two years. I got out and I was put into the reserve for 6 years. And then after 6 years I was out. Wait a minute that wasn't right.

JW: Yes it was for 6 years.

CW: Wasn't it 4 or 6?

JW: I thought it was 6 maybe it was 4 maybe she should put in 4 just to make sure.

CW: 4 or 6 years in the reserve.

JD: (chuckles) its fine I'll just type down 4 or 6 years.

JW: It's been a long time.

CW: And I took that training and I was in Fort Benn, Georgia.

JD: And this was before you went to Korea.

CW: After.

JD: After? Oh...

CW: After I was discharged, and came home.

JW: He had to go in the summer time to Fort Ben and train.

CW: You see I was never discharged after the service, I was transferred to what you call...

JW: The reserves.

CW: The reserves, which we had to go for 6 years.

JW: And then at home you had to go to meetings.

CW: Yes, we got a paid a day's wage for every meeting we went to (chuckles) that was good. We had a meeting I think like once a month in the army reserve center. And then we went for 2 weeks in the summer for active training and I stayed there for 6 years. Did this confuse you?

JD: No I was able to follow. Even though you were not involved in fighting were there people in your unit that was involved in fighting?

CW: No.

JW: Because they signed the truce on the way over to Korea.

JD: Oh.

CW: And most of the guys well all of the guys that were in the fighting were rotated home. My job was to replace those guys as they rotated home and I didn't have to fight because there was no war. But I was right there just in case.

JW: He was on his way to fight, but they signed the truce as he was traveling over there.

CW: But when I got there, if they couldn't hold the line then I'll be ready.

JD: Okay that is really interesting actually.

CW: Both sides were still guarding. Can you believe that? (chuckles)

JD: (chuckles) you know just in case. What was the first reaction of everyone when you first heard that the truce was signed?

CW: Yay! We was all happy.

JW: I was happy.

CW: I was very happy but a little bit disappointed that I didn't get to fight and then I was glad that I was disappointed that I couldn't get to fight.

JD: (starts laughing)

CW: Does that makes sense? (chuckling)

JD: Yes.

CW: All that training and you wanna go and do the fight, but then it's really nice not doing it.

JD: Yea.

CW: My brother really did do it and got injured so I was going to go in and grr. I mean I love people from that country, but that's not the point.

JW: You didn't really want to kill anybody you just wanted to fight.

CW: I wanted to do what I was trained to do. I wanted to lead men into battle.

JD: Ah, like you were trained to do in the leadership school. Were you scared of bombings from North Korea, oh wait no because the truce was signed.

CW: It was pretty safe when I got over there. Well yes and no it was that everybody was doing what they need to be doing, on both sides so it was fine. But when we were first there, the main people, like the generals, did not leave but men from each branch was able to go home. They were replaced by us people.

JD: The camp that you were in, like the area, was there a lot of damage from previous battles?

CW: Yes, mainly the uh. Well you see I didn't go outside much. I can't recall ever going off base.

JD: Well I think that's it, you answered my questions and answered more than I expected. Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you.

CW: Hopefully I was of help to you.

JD: Yes you were.²

² A bibliography is attached for further reading.

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