

Fall 2016

Korean War Oral History: George M. Bush

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HIST 155, Fall 2016 / Korean War Oral History: Cheyanne Beebe

Student Interviewer's Name: Cheyanne Beebe

Interviewee's Name: George Bush

Time and Location of Interview: 2:00pm October 29, 2016 in Portland, Tennessee.

The interview was conducted on two sessions on October 22, 2016 and October 29, 2016. It lasted approximately an hour and a half. It was conducted at George Bush's home in Portland Tennessee. The interviewer, myself, interviewee, and his wife was present at the time of his interview.

About George Bush:

George Bush grew up in Makes, Iowa in 1928. He lived most of his life there. He served in the Korean War just a little short of a year. He served as a sergeant for a very short part of it, but his main job was being a gunner. George Bush went into the army with a positive outlook, never complained and took it day by day. He over saw the negatives and saw what he could do to make it into something positive.

Interviewer: Cheyanne Beebe(CB)

Interviewee: George Bush(GB)

Spouse of Interviewee: Mary Bush(MB)

CB: I would just like to start out saying thank you for serving our country. I would also like to thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your time in the service.

GB: It's my pleasure.

CB: So I would like to start out with a few basic questions. What war did you serve in?

GB: I served in the Korean War.

CB: Were you drafted or were you enlisted?

GB: I was drafted in 1950.

CB: So what does it exactly mean when you are drafted?

GB: It means the government says, "Please come and serve us." When they call you, you have to go.

CB: What were your feelings on being drafted into the war?

GB: Uh, well I had five brothers in World War II.

CB: Wow. All five brothers went to World War II? Were you the youngest?

GB: No I have one younger brother. He went in after I did into peacetime in Germany. All seven of us brothers served in the military.

CB: That is incredible. What a great family. So, where were you living at the time when you were drafted?

GB: Where was I? Working on a farm in southeastern Iowa in Makes county.

CB: I know you said were drafted, but why did you join?

GB: Why did I join? Because Uncle Sam said so. They called me, and after World War II we had to register in the service. And so later on after the Korean War they dropped that and you got to volunteer to go to the army. So, at the time that we went in to Korean War, they were still drafting people, because of World War II.

CB: What branch did you pick to go into and why did you pick the branch you did?

GB: I didn't pick any branch but I went into the army. And uh... I'm glad I went into that branch.

CB: What were your jobs and responsibilities in the Army?

GB: I was in Fort Knox, Kentucky in heavy tank. I remember one night when we were out on a training course. There was snow and stuff on the ground. And the last group of people had to take and clean up the bank when they got back in the main post. And I decided I didn't want to do it so I started going down our training trail and I did a 180 real quick and the sergeant got mad and said "Okay just for that you can walk back to camp!" So I got out of the tank, walked back to camp and I didn't have to wash that big tank (smiles really big).

CB: (chuckles) So was that your plan the whole time?

GB: No, it just happened to hit the spur of the moment. I know it was wrong of me by doing that but boy was I glad I didn't have to wash it.

CB: Well hey, at least you got out of it with little to no trouble. So did you go to boot camp?

GB: Well I went to training camp, so yeah boot camp.

CB: How was your experience?

GB: That's where I learned to run big tanks, the guns, how to operate the tank, and how to clean them.

CB: How was your time there? Did they treat you well?

GB: The treated me very well. I enjoyed my time there.

CB: Very good. How was the food?

GB: I loved it! Everything was great.

CB: Really? I hear the food isn't too good. But I'm glad you enjoyed it. So, I'm sure there were some days you did not want to be there, so what made you get through it?

GB: Well I'm the type of guy that takes life as it comes. And uh, sometimes yeah I was discouraged. We took sixty-mile hikes something like that you know, you have to get ready

for it. We would go thirty-miles out and camp and then thirty-miles back with a full fuel pack. So, it teaches you how to be on the battle field. You live out of the bag that's on your back the whole time.

CB: So how was your attitude through all of this?

GB: I was for the most part always positive.

CB: That's good. That will defiantly get you through it. So how old were you when you were drafted?

GB: 21 years old. Well actually it was twenty-two, I had just turned twenty-two.

CB: How did you stay in contact with your family when you went to training camp and when you went to the war?

GB: Letters.

CB: Did you get to send letters? How many did you get to send?

GB: You could send out any number you wanted to.

CB: Did you get to send them out a lot?

GB: I did it whenever I decided to.

CB: Where were you stationed?

GB: I don't know all the names of the places because we were on the front lines. We were pulled out to Bloody Ridge and onto Heartbreak Ridge and after Heartbreak Ridge we went to 1052. That's the three or four places that we moved. That's all the places that we were. I didn't go to any cities or anything because I was in the front lines.

CB: What was your position and what did you do?

GB: First I went into the heavy weapons company. I was a gunner. Uh, in almost four months, I was put as sergeant of that platoon. Shortly after that they brought a sergeant in since I was only private first class at that time. They brought a sergeant in that was well trained. I was happy to get out of that job and back into gunner. That's also when they put me in charge of some of the vehicles and ammunition. So, from then on out, more less I was in charge of that. That's the reason why we left different places I was in charge of taking care of the food and ammunition. In fact, I thought it was a real good job. The guys on the front line said I was stupid, because I was going up and down hills, chancing ambushes, land mines and stuff that was behind the front lines. They told me it would be safer if I was up front at the front lines but I said "But I'm always on the move." (chuckles) As long as I was on the move I enjoyed it. Because many nights when you're on the front lines you'd sit there with a hand grenade, ready to pull it. If you heard a noise, you were ready to throw it and that's nerve wracking. Of course, you don't know whether it's a grasshopper or what it was making the noise. (chuckles) But I enjoyed it.

CB: Did you ever see combat?

GB: Did I see combat? Uh... yes. I got four battle stars from Korea, from four different battles in a years' time. On one of the battle fields my job was just behind the front line. It was to guard the bridge on the main MSR, which means the main supply route. If that bridge got blew up, that means we didn't get any food, ammunication supplies, or be able to get stuff to the guys on the front line. But uh... we were about probably three miles behind the front line and we had to guard that bridge. The only incident of all the time we were there guarding that bridge happened one night when I was on guard. Course in the day time we could swim in the river and stuff like that and just have a good time. So, in a way that was good but it was something that was absolutely necessary.

CB: So, did you enjoy guarding on the front lines? Was it scary at all?

GB: No, it wasn't scary at all. You just never thought about it being scary. I lived it day by day.

CB: Sounds like you are very brave. I know for myself I would be scared every minute I was on the field. So, tell me some of your most memorable experiences.

GB: (chuckles) Well my most memorable experience was a 120-mortar round that landed fourteen feet from me and hit two fifty-five gallon drums of gasoline in a fire that we had. So, really, I shouldn't be here. After it hit, it was our job to get that fire put out and stop the smoke from getting out because of the enemy. When the enemy had seen that they started shelling the whole area in there where we were at. It was a quite a day.

CB: What was your first reaction when the 120-mortar hit fourteen feet away from you?

GB: My first reaction was hit the ground. This was probably the most scary day I had ever had. Otherwise it was pretty uh... what you call a normal day. But that was hitting close to home. You don't know what a 120 mortar is do you?

CB: No sir I don't. What exactly is it?

GB: It's a rounded explosive with a lot of shrapnel that goes different directions and sets on fire. Nothing hit me at all. None of the shrapnel.

CB: Wow that's incredible, God's hand was over you.

GB: Yeah. Pretty much. So, I have another little story to tell you that relates to this. So what my job was at that time was moving our supply, ammunication, and food supply from Bloody Ridge up to the base to which was going to be called Heartbreak Ridge. And uh, I came up and unloaded one load and started back up. While unloading one load, the round hit the two drums of gas. Well after we got the fire put out and everything, I was going back to get another load to bring up and as I was going back, there was a round that landed about one-hundred yards in front of me. So, I jumped off from a vehicle and crawled down in the corner of a rice patty and just a little bit after a voice spoke to me and said, "George get out of here" and I jumped up and there was nobody near me. Probably

the closest person near me was about three-hundred yards. And so, I got out of there, and I gotten no farther than one-hundred yards until the last round came in that day was behind me. So, when I came back over and drove by and seen where that round landed, it would have hit me right there in my stomach. I mean it landed right where I was. My mother was a praying mother, putting five boys through battle fields.

CB: That is a miracle. It had to have been God's voice. He was protecting you through it all. God is an awesome God. Were you awarded any medals?

GB: Let's see, if you are talking about any special medals then no. But I've got about four or five metals. I don't know what they all are now but one of them is sharp shooters and, uh, I got the battle stars. I don't know what the others are, I lost them. But I know I got about 5 of them.

CB: So the Korean War lasted about three years, correct?

GB: Yes, three or so years. I wasn't in it the whole time. It had already started the time I got there and the time we got there, got to 1052, they were starting to talk peace talk. They started to get together and try to iron things out. Who was talkin' and all that, I don't remember.

CB: What was your most frightening experience?

GB: It was the one I talked about, how the mortar was very close to me. Some of the others experiences was the night that me and Sergeant Meclesly got to take a 2-star general that we captured back to Intelligent. That was an interesting night. Him and I enjoyed getting off the front lines for a little bit. So once Sergeant Meclesly and I started back and we got part way back. Actually, blacked out for a long way, without head lights. Now we got to the top of Bloody Ridge, the MPs and they stopped us and says they have to have at least six vehicles before they'd let the convoy threw. Because they were ambushing a short way down and, uh, Sergeant Mesclesly looked at me and asked how long would it take. And I replied back with a I don't know how long it'll take to get six vehicles out here. He looked at me, both of us nobbed heads, I shoved it in gear and took off. Instead of going out throughout the route the vehicles traveled, I started down over a hill and was going to make a shortcut. The danger of doing that is hitting land mines. We got down a way and he said, "Do you have any ammunition in your weapon?" I said, "Are there any in the glove compartment because I forgot to get a clip of ammunition in my weapons." Fifty round clips they are. He said, "There's none here?" Now he had a forty-four, and he ran out of ammunition because when they had asked us to go places like we were doing at that time, we had never thought to check everything because it was at night and so we just grabbed stuff and took off. So he just took his forty-five and started to hand it to the general, I grabbed my weapon and that general stuck his hands in the air and was talking so fast because we took him back without a round of ammunition.

CB: Well that sounds pretty scary.

GB: No, no! It wasn't scary, it was just one of those things that happens. So, the next day we made sure we had ammunition. (chuckles) But you just sometimes run into those days.

CB: (chuckles) Well once again, God made sure all was well and kept you all safe. What were some things you had to do?

GB: Well ya know it's just normal routine work. We worked together. I know when we got to 1052 they took me off the front lines and took me back and put me in charge of the motor pool. And also, I was in charge of the supplies and stuff like that. So, uh, that put me back a little way from the front line.

CB: Do you have any battle wounds?

GB: Nope. I got lucky. Not a scratch that I can remember.

CB: What machines did you operate or fire? Because I remember you saying back at boot camp you were trained on tanks and things like that.

GB: When I got to Korea, the tanks that I was trained in, they put me in the 75-rifles platoon. Which normally that platoon stays behind the front lines. And with a 75-rifle you can fire pretty good range of fire. Between fifteen-miles, we would explode bunkers and stuff like that. It didn't take me but one night to learn that weapon. I learned it real quick. For quite a while I was a gunner, which is what they call on that weapon. So, you're laying there beside that thing trying to fire it and that's the reason why I'm deaf.

CB: Oh okay. From all the noise? That makes sense. Nowadays, teens go deaf from the loud music they listen to. So did you think at any time that you wouldn't survive?

GB: There was NEVER time I thought I wouldn't make it back to the United States. That was the last thing on my mind. Like I said, take it a day at a time.

CB: I'd say that's the best way you could do it. Do you keep contact with anyone from the war?

GB: I can tell you one thing that happened after we got home. I met William C. Fetty the first time over there. And he was from Morgantown, West Virginia. And so, we left there in 1952 on a ship back home. I didn't see him again until the year of 2000. My wife and I were going to up to Pennsylvania, and we found out his telephone number and we called him and told him we'd like to come see him. And so, we set up a place, I think it was Walmart. The newspaper said if they had known notified them about it that they would have had the TV channel and the newspaper would have been there to interview us. I mean, we really had a great talk from being there in Korea. He was my best friend. Him and I were put into the same platoon at the same time in the heavy weapons platoon in the 23rd infantry regiment. So, uh, the night that we were put there, him and I met and we was good friends from then on because we were put on the same gun, the same weapon.

CB: That is awesome. Having a life-long friend that you bonded so well with. You both were very lucky. So I have another question, how was the food back in to war? I'm sure it wasn't very much like a thanksgiving meal.

GB: Well we had C-rations. I, uh, I'd say about three out of those four months I was there I had never had a hot meal. I just ate cold C-rations, I wouldn't heat them up. I was never hungry, I had plenty of C-rations.

CB: Did you get tired of it? Did you ever think about eating it after the war?

GB: I never ate it again after the war. (chuckles) I know on Heartbreak Ridge, to get the ammunition and food on the hill, we had to call Koreans to carry it up. And one of my friends had a group, it was of twenty-eight Koreans to make sure they'd go up the hill and come back down. Um, so he let twenty-eight of them get away from him. So, they called me back and wanted me to take charge of getting the food and ammunition on the hill. Now, getting up that hill, there was... one-hundred yards long, well not quite that but about that, you had to take yourself and pull yourself with a rope because it was that steep. And sometimes I'd make two. One day I made three trips up that hill and back with the Koreans. I never lost not one of the guys. But one night, I was coming down and there was another group that got away from their leader. And I caught them. I started yelling and grabbed my gun, my weapon, and put my bayonet on it. So, they decided to stop. They started pointing at their patches. I said, "Chogu-chovie, chogu-chovie". And I took them back to camp. From then on, my name was among that group of people. They were scared of me. I was able to handle them.

CB: Well I'd say so! So where did you sleep?

GB: Well for a long time I had slept where we sat, on a halftrack for any aircrafts. So, when an aircraft would come over, we would have that. And I slept under that vehicle, the front bumper of that vehicle for three months. If it rained, you were fine because you were under the vehicle to protect you. No animals every bothered us because of all the shooting.

CB: So was that the only place you had to sleep?

GB: No, uh, that was just for a short time while we were that at that position. Sometimes I got to stay in a fox hole, when we were there at Bloody Ridge, which was where we dug a hole in the ground, crawl down there and sleep. It was right by our mortars. It was probably about four or five feet down and, uh, and you'd have a ledge on there where you slept and could sit and stuff like that.

CB: Did you have any blankets or pillows or anything of that sort?

GB: We had our sleeping bags. That was your baby. Blankets? Never heard of them. There was one time that it was so cold, that, uh, it was ten days where I didn't have any of my shoes or clothes on. Thirty-five below zero at night, and twenty below zero during the daytime.

CB: Oh my, how did you survive that and stand being that cold?

GB: You just... did. (smiles)

CB: Did you at least get to build fires?

GB: Well yes of course. You had to keep at least a little bit warm. Then when I got back to 1052 they pulled me off the line and put me back in the motor pit and I, uh, had a little Korean boy. How he showed up I don't know, but I got him. He come there and he had the end of his fingers off to his first knuckle. Then he had webbed between the fingers. And he wanted to work for me. So I said, "Okay, you can work for me. I'll give you three-thousand won a month." And now, three-thousand won, uh, would be about three dollars in our money.

CB: So what exactly did this little boy do for you?

GB: Oh, he washed my clothes, kept things ah-going and stuff like that. Because at that time, I had a tent with a fire in it. So I was back far enough we could have tents and stuff like that. It was actually probably about six miles back from the front the lines.

CB: Was it actually aloud to have people work for you?

GB: Yeah. That was the only boy I had. And the only reason why is because we felt sorry for him and, it was cold that winter and, stuff. Also, he'd go and take and break the ice by the spring that was by us to wash my clothes in ice water.

CB: How long did you have this little boy work for you? Do you remember his name?

GB: No, I don't think I ever got a name. He worked for me for about the last three months I was over there. But he enjoyed it. I know when I left there, I gave him all the won I had, just about all the won I had. And, uh, he was so happy he said he'd go buy him a farm. (chuckles)

CB: Do you recall the day that your service ended?

GB: Uh, from over there? I don't remember exactly what day it was. But it was in April.

CB: How did you get notified?

GB: It was on a rotation, is what they had and, uh, when you got to be the top man that's been there the longest you know you was on the rotation list. And so, you could rotate the next time they'd bring a group in. And if they didn't come, then you couldn't rotate. So, I got to leave a little before a year hit, so I wasn't there quite a full year. Cause they was bringing more people in and was bringing peace talks and stuff like that. So, I was there a little over eleven months.

CB: So, when you were notified when you could leave, where were you stationed at that time?

GB: At 1059.

CB: Once you got back, what exactly did you do and how did you feel about coming back?

GB: I was so happy. Everybody was so happy to come home. Then after I got home, it was thirty days at home, then I went back to Fort Knox and they put me in over the motor pool in the headquarters of Fort Knox, Kentucky. So, uh, the last part of my military was in the motor pool, making the vehicles were running properly.

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CB: That sounds a lot less stressful then being overseas at war.

GB: Yeah, it was a lot better.

CB: So what exactly would you do in the motor pool?

GB: Well I was in charge of making sure where all the vehicles went and making sure they was in complete repair and ready to go at all times. I was in charge of sixteen drivers to keep them on the straight and narrow. (chuckles) I can remember one incident with one of my drivers. I don't know what happened and I don't know how it happened. But he was helping the supply office where the uniforms and stuff like that came in. He went to a place where he wasn't supposed to go. The MPs caught him. So, the colonel, our colonel, called me and was telling me about where he was found and so the colonel called and I knew something was wrong so I grabbed a pen and paper and started writing. So, I checked around and saw he forgot to pick it up and take it with him. So, uh, when he came in I chewed him out like all sergeants treat people. I told him he was going to have to report to the colonel and I told him to take his trip ticket with him. He was my best driver and I protected him. (chuckles) Otherwise, uh, I don't know what the colonel would have done to him. The colonel told him since he forgot his trip ticket that he was on hard labor for a week.

CB: What did you have to do if you had hard labor?

GB: Well, you might be digging fox holes and stuff like that. (laughs) So, he put me in charge of his hard labor. (chuckles)

CB: So how long were you stationed in Fort Knox when you got back home?

GB: Uh, let's see. The last three months, or maybe it was four months. Let's see, May, June, July, and August. So it was four, the last four months. And I was a motor sergeant over the main post of the pool in Fort Knox.

CB: So what did you do after you were done at Fort Knox?

GB: Went home. Now before I came up to discharge, the colonel called me and asked if I would reenlist and stay in the army. And I told, "Yes sir I will under two conditions." He said, "Well name one of the conditions." I told him I would like to make warrant officer. He looked at my record and told me I could be a warrant officer in twenty days. I asked, "What position would I hold here at Fort Knox?" He told me I'd be over transportation in Fort Knox Kentucky which is not a bad position, but it could be a bad headache. He asked me what my other condition was and I told him if I was going to make a career out of the army I wanted to take a trip to Germany sometimes. He told me no way. If he had said yes, signed me up to become a warrant officer, that's what I would have done. I would have liked to go to Germany because that's where my ancestors, my dad's side of the family is from. Also my brothers fought over in Germany in WWII. But I mean, warrant officer was a good pay. (chuckles) It would have been well worth staying in the Army.

MB: George tell her about the story about your black cat and how it knew you were coming home.

GB: Before I went to the army, there was a little black kitten alongside of the road and, it was kind of raining that day and, I was walking. I don't know where the kitten came from so I picked it up and put it in my shirt and carried it home. And that became my cat. Well when they had my farewell party, just before I went overseas, the cat was there and the next day I left the cat wasn't there. And Mom was so concerned about that cat leaving and what it would do to me when I got back home. Two days before I got back home, that cat came back home. Mom told Dad, "George is on his way home." I was on my way home. The reason I never told my mom I was rotating home is because one guy was supposed to go back home but he was ambushed and killed. So, you know if you write and say you're on your way home and you don't make it, that would-be kind of rough on your mom. So, I never wrote and told Mom that I was rotating or getting close to come home. I just waited to come home and walk into the door. But that black cat, I don't know how it knew, but it seemed like it knew.

CB: Well what a smart cat! So, before we wrap this up I just wanted to thank you for your service. This was a great opportunity for me and I thank you for sharing this information with me.

GB: It was my pleasure. Thank you for asking me to do it, I enjoyed it just as much as you if not more. (chuckles)